

## **Cook County Green Corps African American Trainee Experience in a Green Job Training Program**

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**Abstract.** This case study describes the Cook County Green Corps program, a green job training program serving African American young adults from a low-income neighborhood. The program was implemented by an interdisciplinary organizing team to build knowledge, skills, and participation in sustainable jobs and urban agriculture among young adults. The trainees' experience was documented by a program evaluation survey, environmental knowledge survey, and 1 year reflection interview. We summarize the experiential design, implementation and evaluation of the program. We discuss the limitations and the benefits of the program for trainees and the neighborhood. We share recommendations for future green job training programs that can best serve urban neighborhoods.

**Keywords:** green job training, sustainable education, African American, community, trainee experience, experiential education, urban neighborhood



Cook County Green Corps Trainees and authors Lena Hatchett, Loretta Brown, Nancy Pollard  
photo by Susan Ask

## **Introduction**

Cook County Green Corps (CCGC) was a five-month green job training program designed to meet the needs of low-income young adults eligible for the Workforce Investment Act (1998). CCGC was developed in partnership with an organizing team of faculty, staff and trainees from Maywood Environmental Beautification Commission, Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine, University of Illinois Extension Cook County Horticultural program and Cook County Presidents Office of Employment and Training. The goal of the program was to prepare trainees for green jobs (Pinderhughes, 2006) through experiential education in environmental coursework, garden work, farm work, community outreach and field trips. The purpose of this paper is to describe the program implementation, and impact and lessons learned from the experiential education components. We offer recommendations for future green job training programs serving urban African American communities.

African American low income communities have consistent high unemployment (Austin, 2012) as well as other social determinants of health. Yet job training programs have struggled to

effectively meet the needs of young adults who may have dropped out of high school and have limited work experience (Bloom, 2010). The neighborhoods with high rates of high school drop outs are the same neighborhoods with high job losses, environmental pollution, and food insecurity. Effective green job training programs can help bridge the gap in low income communities by preparing young adults to enter green collar jobs (Pinderhughes, 2006), build awareness of social justice issues and support positive community development efforts throughout the process. To date there is little documented work on trainee experience in green job training and follow-up experience. There is a need for more policies and systems that prepare workers for green jobs (Cleary & Kopicki, 2009). To date the green job training experience and impact for the individuals and the communities needs to be documented.

### **Training program overview**

CCGC training incorporated hands-on, experiential learning and classroom-based instruction on sustainability and life skills. There was a heavy emphasis on creating learning experiences that would resonate with trainees who had mixed experience and success in traditional classroom instructional settings. The program included 3 days of outdoor, experiential learning each week and only one day of classroom instruction. One day per week was devoted to developing life skills, which included interactive instruction, writing, demonstrations and other skill-building activities. The hands-on elements of the program are described in more detail in the Implementation section.

### **Neighborhood Description**

CCGC was established in Maywood, IL which is located in the west suburbs outside Chicago. Maywood has a population of approximately 25,506 residents of which 28% are youth (18 and under); 82.7% of the population is African American, 5.5% of the population is Caucasian, and 10.5% is of Hispanic origin. 53.2% are women. 36.5% of the population is below 200% the federal poverty level. Approximately 10,914 (43%) Maywood residents are enrolled in Medicaid. Unemployment rate for 2010 was 14.9%. Education Attainment is low; the high school graduation rates are 51.9% for males and 68.8% for females (Illinois Public Health Institute, 2012). The food insecurity rate in Maywood is 23%, one of the lowest in west suburban Cook County (Greater Chicago Food Depository, 2011). Food security defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (USDA) is limited in African American communities. Low-income African American communities experience fewer full scale grocery stores, poorer quality produce, and higher prices for produce than white communities (Block & Kouba, 2006; Larson, Story, & Nelson, 2009; Zenk, Schulz et al, 2005; Zenk , Odoms-Young, et al 2011). To improve food security community organizations in partnership with government and universities across the country have created urban agriculture programs.

### **Trainee Description**

Trainees were African American, between the ages 18-24, and eligible for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Job Training Services. Thirty trainees participated in CCGG including 23 (77%) men and 7 (23%) women. Mean trainee age was 21 years (range 17-26); 30 (100%) were African-American, 4(13%) were special needs trainees. Prior to the urban agriculture program 6 (20%) had some college, 3 (10%) were high school graduates, and 2 (7%) were college graduates.

Staff generated daily reports which summarized the two groups of trainees' behavior and progress on work tasks and hands-on assignment. Through these daily reports and regular communication trainees shared some of the social and personal challenges affecting them during the program. Two trainees had unplanned pregnancies during the program. One trainee dropped out of the program early in the pregnancy and the other worked in the program until a few weeks before her due date. Two brothers became homeless and dropped out of the program in the last month as they struggled to find secure housing. One trainee missed work for several days while being investigated by police. Four other trainees were victims of violent crimes including robbery, guns, and a shooting of a family member during the 5 month program. Urban green space and initiatives have been related to local crime reduction in recent studies. (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, & Brunson, 1998).

### **Role of the Organizing Team**

The organizing team was made of four colleagues from diverse disciplines and organizations; 1 public health faculty member (LH) from Loyola Stritch School of Medicine, 2 extension educators (NP, SA) from University Illinois Extension and 1 Extension Master Gardener (LB) from Maywood Environmental Beautification Commission. Extension and short term partners provided additional education and training staff; 3 young adult supervisors, 5 guest lecturers and speakers. They covered session on life skills, job readiness and green career development. The organizing team trained together on the *Roots of Success* curriculum (Roots of Success, 2009). The team met in person and via teleconference for 6 weeks to design, plan and implement the program. During the program the organizing team was responsible for teaching, supervising and managing the diverse training activities in the program. As a result each member of the organizing team had the opportunity to work closely with trainees during experiential elements of the program.

## **Methods**

### **Data Collection**

The organizing team used three methods for collecting data: Trainee Program Evaluations, Trainee Environmental Knowledge Survey and follow-up interview. The data collection process was carried out between April 2010 and September 2011. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Loyola University Chicago.

### **Trainee Program Evaluation Survey**

Trainees were invited to give written responses to a 12 item open-ended survey at the end of the program. Questions asked trainees to describe which experiences in the program help to build their life and work skills and increase their environmental knowledge and awareness e.g. questions "Describe which experiences in the program have helped to develop your work skills".

### **Trainee Environmental Knowledge Survey**

Trainees completed an environmental knowledge survey which measures trainees' knowledge, skill, and perceived importance of local environmental issues. The 8-item survey was created for this study and included questions such as "how would you rate your knowledge of local

environmental issues” and “how important is it for you to change your everyday habits to help the local environment”.

### **One Year Reflection Interview**

One year after the program was completed two trainees were interviewed about their experience in the program. The questions were part of a larger study on African American leadership in urban agriculture. The current case focused on individual and community impact 1 year after the program was completed.

### **Planning and Timeline**

After a 1-day intensive initial planning meeting, the organizing team met regularly from April 2010 to September 2010. Planning meetings covered learning objectives, garden design, in-service topics and teachers, scheduling, field trips, budget, supplies and supervision. The project had extremely limited planning time; we began planning in April and the program launched in June.

### **Implementation**

#### **Program Schedule**

The Cook County Green Corps program integrated experiential learning with classroom instruction. The trainees were split into two groups with activities alternating by days of the week. Every week, the trainees engaged in experiential learning about sustainability that included hands-on gardening, farm work and field trips. A typical week followed this schedule and experiential learning:

Table 1: CCGC Program Schedule

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
Group A	life skills, job readiness	sustainability education in the classroom	farm work	field trips	garden Work
Group B	life skills, job readiness training	garden work	farm work	field trips	sustainability education in the classroom

### **Garden**

We wanted a beautiful garden that would be a source of pride for the trainees while also introducing trainees to many different kinds of vegetables and herbs. We wanted to include flowers to create visual delight and to draw in beneficial insects, so pesticides would not be needed. The layout had to be navigable by the many people not used to gardening and to visitors of all ages. The program was temporary, so the garden would potentially revert to a park garden, with other purposes. The trainees created a vegetable garden in an underutilized strip of park land adjacent to the Prairie Path, a paved recreational trail, which extends through the western suburbs of Chicago. The trainees built the garden on a patch of turf grass; they built raised beds,

installed wood chipped paths, planted vegetable seedlings and planted seeds for flowers and vegetables. Throughout the summer, the trainees tended the garden. They harvested their locally grown, pesticide-free vegetables and flowers which were sold at a weekly farmers market in the community.

A 40' x 40' French style ornamental kitchen garden or *potager* was chosen for its form, function and beauty. Trainees staked out the beds and painted lines on the grass where the beds would be. A removable construction fence was rented and put in place to guard the garden. To raise the planting beds, 2" x 10" pine boards were staked and joined for the exterior walls. The free chips formed the interior walls of all the raised beds. For the 10" deep planting beds, a mixture of half and half compost and garden soil was purchased. It was laid over a weed barrier of several layers of damp newspaper. Garden paths, five or six foot wide, were created using a 10" layer of woodchips, also underplayed with newspaper as a weed barrier. Wood chips were donated. Large numbers of tools for installation day were also borrowed. Municipal Public Works departments often loan tools. We obtained rain barrels from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District that the fire department agreed to refill on a weekly basis. (We have since learned that rain barrels should not be used for watering edible gardens, unless specific conditions are met because of the potential for *E. coli* and other potentially serious pathogens.) A local greenhouse grew transplants for us and delivered them on planting day, so they did mature in a timely fashion.

### **Field trips**

Field trips were taken every week, to introduce trainees to broader sustainability projects, including energy efficiency, alternative energy, food markets and more. These field trips built on the classroom instruction on sustainability and green jobs. The trainees, along with two program leaders/staff, visited green buildings, larger farms, public gardens, food markets, green businesses and natural areas in northeastern Illinois. Field trips lasted for an entire work-day and usually included visits to two or more related sites. For example, during one day's field trip, we visited a green demonstration home & garden, a public garden and a community garden. Our first stop was the Smart Home: Green + Wired, an energy efficient house and sustainable garden on display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Trainees toured the house and learned about energy efficient appliances, alternative energy, low VOC furniture and finishes, recycling, recycled materials and more. We also toured the sustainable gardens that surround the house. Trainees got to see an established vegetable garden to help them envision how their garden would look with a little more time. The display gardens included vegetables, herbs and native prairie plants. One raised bed featured vegetable plants from Africa. The next stop was the Lurie Garden, in Millennium Park in Chicago. This is 5 acre formal garden where trainees could see ecologically sensitive gardens and native plants tended on a much larger scale. The final stop was a community garden, just a little bigger than the Prairie Path garden, where trainees could see an organic vegetable production garden tended by volunteers for more than fifteen years. This garden shared much in common with the trainees' garden; it is a small garden in a densely urban environment where people learn to grow and to eat organic vegetables and fruit.



Trainees tour Lurie Gardens at Millenium Park in Chicago. Photo by Susan Ask.

Table 2: CCGC Topics and Field Trips

Topic	Field Trip
Intro to Veggies	Smart Home/Museum of Science and Industry Lurie Garden/Millennium Park Ginkgo Organic Gardens
Water	Chicago Botanic Garden
Transportation and Waste	Angelic Organics Learning Center  City college campus (Velasquez or Wright)**

Food and Agriculture	International Food Market Maywood Library Community Tour Project Uplift
Energy	World's Largest Laundromat Chicago Center for Green Technology IIT Smart Grid Center
Building & Conclusion	ILCA field day (IL Landscape Contractors Association)
Green building	Christy Webber Landscapes Garfield Park Notebaert Nature Museum Calumet
Extended program	Lincoln Marsh Natural Area
	Exelon Solar City
	Rebuilding Exchange
	Rebuilding Exchange

## Farms

The trainees spent one day each week working on small suburban farms to learn how food production scales up to larger production. The entire group of trainees worked together at a not-for-profit farm at the far western edge of the suburbs and at the farm of the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences on the south side of Chicago. Trainees travelled to the farms by bus and spent the day working on the farms; typical work included planting, harvesting and weeding vegetable crops. They were supervised by trainee leaders and farm staff.

## Program Evaluation

### Evaluation Survey

Trainees completed an open-ended survey to describe the impact of the experiential activities garden work, farm work and field trips. When trainees were asked what impacted them the most, many noted garden work and how it changed their eating and cooking habits while learning how to grow.

“I liked learning about the garden and stuff because before that I wasn’t big on eating healthy or any of that. So, it kind of made me start paying attention to my health and eating healthier.”

“Actually, learning more about the product we were growing. I liked that a lot. That was nice and actually cooking it, too”.

Trainees also described the field trips. When asked about what they learned, many trainees talked about their visit to the ‘Smart Home’ a sustainable, demonstration home at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. They learned that a ‘green home’ could be beautiful and technologically advanced. This site seemed to resonate with the trainees, who could happily imagine themselves living in a house like the one they visited.

“In the smart home [I learned] the importance of recycling”

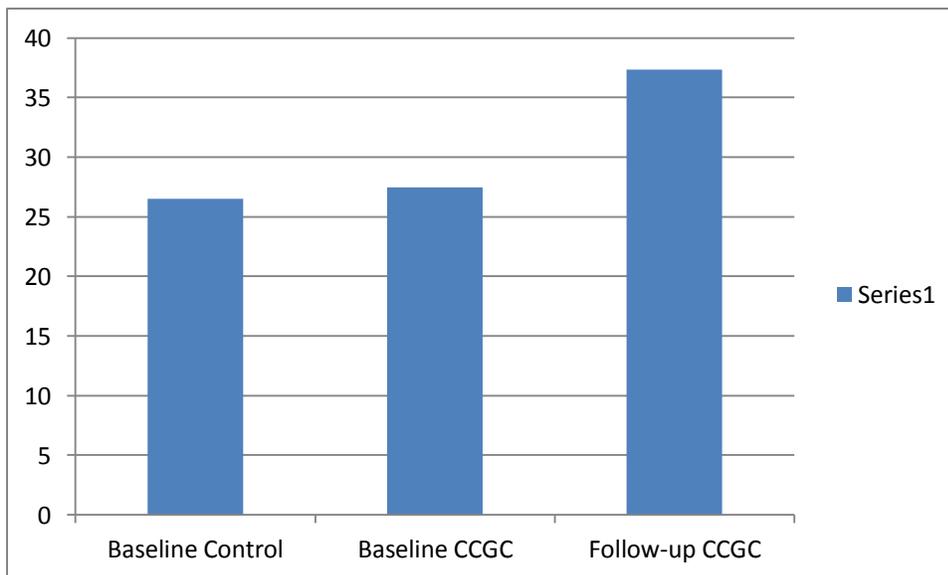
Trainees were asked to describe which experiences increased their awareness of environmental issues. Responses suggest the field trips increased the environment awareness for some trainees

“There are houses such as green houses”

### Environmental Knowledge

The environmental awareness and knowledge survey was taken at baseline and 4 month during the program to assess the change in environmental awareness and knowledge as a result of the program. The summarized data showed an increase in environmental awareness and knowledge. Figure 1 provides the average total score at baseline and follow-up for the trainee control group and the CCGC trainee group. 95% Confidence Interval for the Difference (-15.9059, -10.6241),- Value -10.3061, P-Value = < .00001

Table 3: Environmental Knowledge



## One year Reflection Interview

The follow-up survey captured trainees' reflection of the program after one year. The experiential element engaged trainees who weren't otherwise interested in a green job training program. Review of the transcript highlights four consistent themes about the impact of the program; 1) attitude change 2) community engagement, 3) heartfelt loss and 4) personal and environmental benefits.

### Trainee Engagement

"I learned a lot of things I never thought would want to do. What I liked about it is it is much more to it than just garden work or agriculture work. I mean it's a lot of other stuff that comes in like teamwork, responsibility, and meeting people.

"Damn. Boy, I never thought this much would come out of this program"

Trainees were asked what surprised them most about the program and many of them said they welcomed the program in urban agriculture as a new and different experience:

"It was different. I never would have planted no garden"

"Yeah, the Prairie Path looked bogus before but now it's straight"

### Community Engagement

Trainees discussed the positive affect the program had on the community and their engagement with their neighbors. They described the program as being an opportunity to inform and educate parents and children about sustainability and urban environmental issues.

"When we had the visitors come, we told them about things we built and ....we taught the younger kids, when they came in. We showed them the things that you showed us".

"Once people found out what we were doing, it was a lot of random people that walked up. Then, we would explain to them, yeah, we're working for such and such and we're doing this. We built this garden and we do this. As we explained the program, a lot of people were asking about it and how could they get involved or how could their children get involved."

"I can show my son, one day, like, 'We built that garden'."

Not all trainees felt that they were contributing to the community and staff had to keep their expectations of program impact realistic. I really don't feel like we're benefiting the community, we're not doing anything but putting in a few gardens and flower beds. Maybe I'll feel differently after Open House [a community open house where students provided garden tours for the community].

Feedback from the community was important to the trainees:

"We had people that used to walk passed our garden everyday on the prairie path, every day, the same group of people. They'd tell us how good the garden looked. How nice of a job we're doing"

“It gave a lot of people a different look on the youth of Maywood or Broadview because they probably think, “Oh, they just run the streets,” but when they seen a lot of kids they probably thought ran the streets doing something positive, it gave them a different look on us. Maybe he is trying to help better himself and do things. Then, they see you guys out trying to help us, that gave them, “Oh, we can help, too.”

### **Heartfelt Loss**

Trainees expressed hope that the program would continue into the future to provide opportunities for more youth and enrich the community. There was much disappointment when trainees realized the program could not be sustained in the next year. Trainees lament the loss of the program and the garden:

“It’s like we gave the people something and just when they started to reach out and grab it, we took it away from them. So, now, it’s like now they don’t care again. Once we had them. We had them on their heels.”

“You have kind of flashbacks. That was fun out there... I kind of miss it. Honestly I want to get back involved. I want the program back”.

### **Personal and Environmental Benefits**

In addition to the community impact of the program, trainees described the impact the program had on them personally through health awareness, teamwork, and caring for the community. They discussed how the program helped them to become more responsible and proud of their abilities and work.

“I liked learning about the garden and stuff because before that I wasn’t big on eating healthy or any of that. So, it kind of made me start paying attention to my health and eating healthier”

“What I liked about it is it is much more to it than just garden work or agriculture work. I mean it’s a lot of other stuff that comes in like teamwork, responsibility, and meeting people.”

“We excited because we built it”

“We actually took our stuff and grew it. We had a goal and we made it.”

“we were just looking for a paycheck but as it went along, we started to learn and memorize and when we go home, we see the things like, I remember, I just learned this in class. Or, I just seen this. Or, we see some food that we pick up in the grocery store and we remember, we grow this in our garden. This is more healthier than what this is here. It came out good because we learned more. So, my attitude changed more positive.

“I used to litter a lot and probably throw something out the window. Now I’ll hold it and wait until I see a garbage. I feel kind of funny because I never did it before, but now I feel myself holding things and wait until I see a garbage”

## **Employment and Health**

Three trainees obtained employment as a result of their participation. One in food service, two with a local park district. One participant lost significant weight and informs others about the importance of exercise, gardening, and healthy food.

## **Recommendations for Future Green Job Training Programs**

### **Supervision**

Each of the organizing team members had extensive experience in their respective fields working young adults. However, a major challenge to our program implementation was the increased enrollment size. We anticipated 15-20 trainees but when the program started we had 32 trainees with diverse educational backgrounds and needs. We had too few full time staff members to effectively supervise all activities comfortably. We recommend a 10 to 1 ratio between trainees and staff to supervise, guide, train and manage hands-on activities comfortably.

### **Youth Advisory Committee**

As a program improvement, trainees recommend establishing a young adult advisory committee which represents the neighborhood being served. This committee will help bridge gaps between faculty staff from outside neighborhoods and trainees as unique local challenges occur. The steering committee should also be involved in the outreach, recruitment, and selection process for new trainees.

### **Logistics, scheduling and Work Site Investment**

A repeated complaint from many trainees was the struggle of working daily in high temperatures. The program supplied a few shade tents, but the tents were not enough to make a comfortable, let alone inviting, experience on many hot days during the summer. We recommend future projects limit garden and farm work to the first half of the day, to taken advantage of the cooler morning temperature. This would be less stressful for the trainees and for the garden plants. We had initially intended to schedule outdoor work for the mornings, but logistical limitations made this very difficult to accomplish. In the end, we feel the program would have been better served if we had maintained or initial intent despite the logistical hurdles. Many of the trainees were not used to working outside, so this was a significant negative issue for them. In addition, adequate shade tents and sun hats would give trainees more comfortable break areas while working in the outdoors.

Additionally, we encountered several challenges installing the garden. First, the ground was heavily compacted from vehicle and foot traffic. We had a limited budget for security fencing, soil and lumber so the gardens had to be square and fairly small to limit fencing costs. There was no water on site, except a fire hydrant, which only the fire department could access. The planning time was very limited. We first heard rumors of the potential project in March, was introduced to a new curriculum in April, and met to plan in May and June. The garden was to be planted July 1, which is very late for Illinois, and provided a limited window for growing vegetable crops.

## **Future activities**

The program provided weekly field trips and community tours and an open house which were effective and memorable experiences for the trainees. Trainees recommend more community events and activities in future programs, for example bringing in a sports tournament to engage young people.

“The first thing they’re going to do is, “I don’t want to do it.” And, they’re going to wave it off. So, it’s like, we have to bring more things into it. We can bring a sport in with it that has to do with like you said extracurricular for them to get involved with it. Like maybe basketball, maybe a tournament or something like that, but it would still have to be a learning process”

Trainees recommend more opportunities for community presentation, education, and outreach. Relationships with local community partners need to be established during the program design phase for this to occur. Our trainees presented at the Department of Juvenile justice, Proviso Action Committee, and Park District organizations and programs in the west and south suburbs of Chicago.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the experiential learning, provided through hands-on work in the garden and field trips to sustainable sites, were effective elements of the CCGC program. We recommend including experiential education as a powerful strategy to engage young adults in environmental education while creating co-benefits of personal development and community engagement.

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