

## **Strategic Planning of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture Outdoor Classrooms**

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### **Food System Leadership Institute Project Summary**

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**Background:** I started as an FSLI fellow shortly after I became the Head of the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture (HLA). This largest (in terms of undergraduate enrollment) HLA department in the country has the largest horticulture major (244 resident and the 196 online horticulture major in Spring 2024) in the nation, in addition to 116 Landscape Architecture majors. The HLA department has quite a few experiential learning facilities providing valuable hands-on learning opportunities for the students:

1. ARDEC South provides space for outdoor classroom space for the Landscape Design and Contract program, produce safety research, turf research, organic certified field, agrivoltaics and high tunnel research, among others.
2. CSU Trial Gardens is the largest public trial gardens west of Mississippi River. We evaluate 1,200+ cultivars every year on 7+ acres managed aesthetically and it is the top destination in the City of Fort Collins.
3. Hort Center, on the south side of CSU campus, is a 30,000 sqft greenhouse complex completed in August 2015. In addition, research, education and extension activities are carried out in the ~15 acres outdoor space south of the greenhouse space.
4. Heritage Arboretum is the 'Central Park' of CSU, locating right on the west side of the football stadium complex, and has the largest collections of woody plants in the region with over 1,100 different taxa represented.
5. The Heritage Gardens is right next to Heritage Arboretum and showcase the agricultural heritage from six major regions in Colorado. Sometimes, the Heritage Gardens may be considered as part of the Heritage Arboretum.

Faculty members having responsibilities at these facilities are all looking for opportunities to improve student learning. The ARDEC South ground is currently managed by the Ag. Experiment Station with HLA faculty coordinating with AES staff on research, teaching and extension. One HLA faculty serves as the Director of CSU Trial Gardens, the Director of Hort Center, and the Director of Heritage Arboretum, respectively.

With limited or no state budget allocating to facilities like these, we need to be creative and proactive in fundraising and be ready when funds become available. Each of these spaces/facilities has their uniqueness and share one thing in common-----they all have greater potential to enhance experiential learning and hands-on experiences for HLA students.

**Goal:** Enhance experiential learning and hands-on experiences for Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture students, through strategic planning of HLA outdoor classrooms.

**Process:** We have started many of the following steps and the consensus from the faculty and staff involved was that the piece meal approach providing a la carte menu under the umbrella of 'HLA Outdoor Classrooms' to potential donors might be our best approach for fundraising for this goal.

- Visioning and Goal Setting----Establish a clear vision for what the outdoor classrooms should achieve in terms of experiential learning.
- Stakeholder Engagement----Identify all parties who have a vested interest in the outdoor classrooms, including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, community members, and local experts.
- Needs Assessment and Curriculum Integration----Conduct a thorough assessment of the curriculum to identify areas where experiential learning can be most beneficial.
- Site Analysis-----Assess available outdoor spaces for their suitability based on size, location, accessibility, and environmental conditions.
- Design and Development----- Develop conceptual designs for the outdoor classrooms that incorporate learning zones, pathways, and areas for specific activities.
- Resource Planning---- Create a detailed budget that covers all costs associated with developing and maintaining the outdoor classrooms.
- Implementation---- Consider implementing the outdoor classrooms in phases, starting with areas that offer the most immediate benefits or are easiest to complete.
- Community and Educational Outreach---- Engage the community in the outdoor classrooms through events, community projects, and volunteer opportunities.

**Progress:** A donor approached us and we quickly matched donor's intention with our needs. A significant improvement is ongoing in the Heritage Arboretum. This was a small but very meaningful step.

**FSLI experience:** Through FSLI, we were provided and our cohort ourselves created the opportunities to network with visionary leaders, who were willing to share their experience and leadership journey with no reservation. We learned tools to be better leaders and implement those tools in our daily job. What I treasure the most is our cohort and the relationship we've built through learning together in FSLI. The peer mentoring process brought us even closer. No doubt, we believe that we are the best cohort.