

Incubate Dat: The Innovative Partnership between Grow Dat Youth Farm and

Tulane University

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Case Study

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Nestled beneath droopy Spanish oak trees, the headquarters of Grow Dat Youth Farm look like a secret tree house sprouting out of the swamp of City Park in New Orleans. The bright green storage containers are somehow both modern and appear as if they have been here all along. The fields are in a stage of regeneration, with cover crops to protect and nourish the soil in the off-season, and little seedlings nurtured in a nursery by a lake. All this work is in preparation for the next group of New Orleans high school students who will come to work on the farm in January. The students are what make Grow Dat come alive and are what make founder Johanna Gilligan's vision become a reality. Just like any new seedling, Johanna's idea for youth leadership through food also needs nurturing and protection in order to grow. Tulane University served as a nursery and cover crop for Grow Dat in its formative stages. Now that it has grown into a more hardy organization, Grow Dat is in a position to look at its organizational structure and the future of its relationship with Tulane. Is the model that Tulane and Grow Dat have created a sustainable and healthy one for both parties? Can and should Grow Dat separate from Tulane? Can such a model be scaled and replicated at other institutions?

Grow Dat Youth Farm

Whenever Johanna is describing Grow Dat, she will almost always begin with the mission: "to nurture a diverse group of young leaders through the meaningful work of growing food."¹ The idea behind this mission had been brewing in Johanna's mind for some time before she established Grow Dat. Johanna has a gift for teaching and a love for nature that she has applied in various settings throughout her career. After graduating from Tulane University in 2003,

Johanna began her career in education outreach for the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. She moved back to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2006 to work with the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN) as their Education Programs Manager. Her inspiration for the Grow Dat program came from these work experiences as well as programmatic role models such as Urban Roots in Austin, Texas and The Food Project in Boston.

Grow Dat Youth Farm hires students from New Orleans partner high schools to work on its urban farm in City Park as ‘crew members’. The internship program includes leadership and teamwork development and emphasizes the importance of service to one’s community, communication, environmental responsibility, and nutrition. The students spend the duration of their internship growing, selling, and cooking organic produce in conjunction with the Grow Dat curriculum. The students sell sixty percent of the total food production to local restaurants, at farmers markets, or at their new farm stand on-site at City Park. They donate the remaining forty percent to food banks or families in need as a part of their Shared Harvest component. Grow Dat staff select crew members based in-part on their achievement level in school: sixty percent are average achievers, twenty percent have demonstrated leadership and are excelling in school, and the remaining twenty percent are performing poorly academically. This breakdown furthers Grow Dat’s mission of growing a group of diverse leaders, and helps foster communication and friendship among types of students that might not otherwise interact. Staff members hold all crew members to the same behavioral standards such as consistent

attendance and appropriate language, and expect crew members to improve both farm productivity and their own personal communication and leadership growth.

Urban Farming and Youth Leadership

Community and urban gardening has been popular in the United States since the turn of the 20th century. Wealthy white women largely were the orchestrator of the gardens as part of their charity work towards the urban poor. The race and class conflicts present in these charity gardens are still a part of criticism of many modern day urban farms. The movement gained followers as well as government support during the Great Depression and World War II, where ‘victory’ gardens were seen as both patriotic and thrifty. In the 1970s the expansion of community gardens was due to an activist and political movement. Citizens in urban neighborhoods began fighting back against urban decay caused by perceived government neglect and the suburban flight phenomenon. Community gardens were a way of reclaiming community land, though local governments view many community gardens as impermanent placeholders than can be replaced when a more profitable option presents itself. Today over 11 million Americans participate in urban farming, which could include a personal flower or vegetable garden or a shared community growing space. Urban farming today includes more comprehensive initiatives, with many new programs that combine urban farming with for-profit microenterprises, hunger relief, advocacy work, community action and empowerment programs, youth components, or leadership development activities. The modern day urban farming movement is a part of a larger community action initiative, and focuses on food justice, public health, sustainability, and community leadership.

Grow Dat's Impact

In 2013, Grow Dat's third programmatic season, the twenty-five Grow Dat crew members grew eight thousand pounds of food, which brings the program's total to twenty thousand pounds since Grow Dat began in 2011. They made \$17,000 from the food they sold and donated 2,400 pounds to various organizations as part of their Shared Harvest program. The organization recently started its own farm stand for selling produce and began working on strengthening its alumni network to provide employment and engagement opportunities for past graduates.

Josh Schoop is a Tulane PhD candidate at the Payson Center for International Development who has conducted exit interviews with all Grow Dat crew members to try to determine the impacts on students of Grow Dat's curriculum and model.² The results of such a program are difficult to measure, much less to quantify. Patterns have yet to emerge from the interviews, but Josh believes the model will not reach maximum impact for several years. Currently he is evaluating types of thinking among crew members and qualities such as stability, self-discovery, and trust. Because students start out at different achievement levels and come from different backgrounds, another challenge is trying to control for changes caused by external factors after students leave the program. According to Grow Dat's post-graduation self-assessments, 100% of crew members felt their communication skills had improved, 81% saw growth in their leadership abilities and most had spread their knowledge about food and nutrition to their communities as a result of the program.

Tulane University post-Katrina

As with so many aspects of New Orleans life, the pre-Katrina era and post-Katrina era divide Tulane's history. After flooding caused by the levee breach shut down Tulane's operations for the fall semester of 2005, University President Scott Cowen set forth his Renewal Plan for New Orleans. One of the hallmarks of the new vision was an increase in community engagement and partnership. Tulane established new community-minded institutes, including a Center for Public Service to coordinate the new service learning graduation requirement, the Tulane City Center in the School of Architecture to conduct public interest design work in the city, and what would be come to be known as the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, a think tank to focus K-12 education in New Orleans and elsewhere.

Tulane's newly constructed identity as a leader in civic engagement and community partnerships in higher education inspired a focus on social entrepreneurship programming. Stephanie Barksdale, who was working in non-profit management at the time, was hired to coordinate new initiatives such as a speaker series and an incubator for student social ventures. Tulane's goal with hiring Stephanie and supporting these programs was to cultivate a culture at Tulane around social entrepreneurship, creating innovative, sustainable and ethical solutions to pressing social issues. Part of this movement was a desire from Tulane's administration to move beyond community partnerships and cooperation towards something more collaborative and cross-disciplinary. Stephanie, who speaks with a clear loyalty to Tulane and to President Cowen, is both passionate

and knowledgeable about the nonprofit and social entrepreneurship climate of New Orleans. According to Stephanie, the purpose of creating a social venture was to create something that was both, “birthed out of the university [and] into the community.”³ Tulane was eager for a flagship project that would show the higher education community that it had not only recovered from Hurricane Katrina, but was thriving in its aftermath as a progressive leader in community engagement.

The initial meeting to discuss such a collaborative effort was held in late 2009, and included members of the Cowen Institute, the President’s Office, the Center for Public Service, Tulane School of Medicine, and Tulane City Center. Each of the institutions present at the meeting were conducting their own “pockets of innovation” in the community in architecture, public health, community service, or education. These different organizations were coming together with the goal of creating a showcase of Tulane’s work in an interdisciplinary fashion. President Cowen was pushing for the focus of the initiative to be on food, influenced partially by food pioneer Alice Waters, who had a branch of her Edible Schoolyard food education program in New Orleans. The interdisciplinary nature of food justice and urban agriculture would engage all of the different sectors that were present at the meeting as well as highlight Tulane’s new focus areas. Johanna Gilligan’s name came up at this first meeting through Dan Etheridge, associate director of the Tulane City Center and a friend of Johanna’s through NOFFN. Dan knew of Johanna’s idea and her passion around this topic, as well as her relationship to the university and New Orleans, and it was soon decided that she would be the perfect person to start this new initiative.

University-Nonprofit Relationships

Tulane's relationship with Grow Dat Youth Farm may be unique, but it is not the only partnership between a nonprofit social enterprise and a university. Many higher education institutions interact with local community organizations in various ways. Regan Harwell Shaffer writes that partnerships from a service-learning perspective serve a dual purpose of providing necessary services to community organizations while providing skill building and experience for students in the service-learning program. Students can take advantage of opportunities for volunteering, service learning, or interning with partner nonprofits, and the community organizations can take advantage of expertise and consulting services, as well as assistance fundraising in some cases. Universities also have an incentive to interact with community organizations because it grants them greater connection and insight into the surrounding community, and helps to break down the 'Ivory Tower' stereotypes that many universities try to dispel. Most relationships are formed between an existing or early-stage nonprofit or social entrepreneur; the partnerships are not usually made before the creation of the nonprofit or social enterprise. Some universities, including Tulane, have student business or social venture accelerator programs for new or early stage venture and social venture ideas. In Tulane's case, students who apply and are accepted into the Changemaker Institute accelerator go through a program where they have access to some Tulane resources and workshops, and then have the opportunity to compete for funding for their project.

Hanover Research has established some best practices that universities and nonprofits should follow when seeking out and forming a relationship. At the beginning of the partnership, both parties should establish a shared mission and goals

for the relationship or shared project and divide responsibilities to create a balance of power. Partnerships that develop slowly and organically, instead of relationships that are forced by time or budget, are more likely to be sustainable. Some of the barriers to a partnership's success include the mission's failure to inspire stakeholders, a lack of clarity of purpose, differences in work style, an unequal balance of power, a lack of commitment, or when the costs outweigh the benefits of a partnership.

The Partnership

Dan Etheridge and the Tulane City Center, which had been interested in doing an agricultural project, approached Johanna with the idea of starting an urban youth farm with Tulane's guidance and support. Johanna would be responsible for programming, but Tulane would build the site through Tulane City Center and the Tulane School of Architecture, while the Cowen Institute would help to identify student interns and facilitate partnerships with local high schools and the Center for Public Service would facilitate Tulane student involvement and internship opportunities.

Just as Grow Dat was forming, Stephanie was starting an Urban Innovation Fellows Program, which was housed under Tulane's Social Entrepreneurship Initiatives, and Johanna was immediately accepted into the pilot class. The fellowship offered Johanna as well as three other social entrepreneurs the opportunity to work on their ideas and have the support of the university as they did it. Johanna's fellowship allowed for an even deeper connection with the university, with Grow Dat both coming out of and being embedded in the university.

Stephanie cites Johanna's understanding of the politics of interacting with Tulane as a key to Grow Dat's success. Johanna is personable and able to build relationships quickly and maintain them. These skills have served her well in keeping various departments at Tulane engaged in Grow Dat, as well as recruiting donors and other partnerships outside of the university. Johanna recognizes the value of a partnership with Tulane and therefore has shaped programming and made decisions that, in Stephanie's words, "make Tulane happy." Johanna is still able to carry out her dream through Grow Dat with Tulane's support, but she also understands that such support hinged on a continued alignment with Tulane's objectives for the partnership. Johanna never mentioned any tense moments between Grow Dat and Tulane except for a few "culture clashes;" the overall peaceful dynamic is likely due in part to her compassionate, flexible and perceptive nature. Furthermore, she is able to present herself as simultaneously authentic and sophisticated to donors; it is easy to picture her in overalls up to her knees in compost even while she wears a dress and high heels. As a female leader, she has so far navigated the various double standards and the two worlds, the boardroom and the farm, that she inhabits. If Tulane had selected someone with less of an understanding of the importance of satisfying Tulane or with stubborn personal goals for the project, there might have been more conflict. Johanna, her acceptance by and positive relationship with the Tulane community have been essential components to the partnership.

Johanna left her job at NOFFN in May 2010 to start her own LLC, Clean Plate Projects. NOFFN then funded her to work as a consultant for the Tulane City

Center until she received funding from the Urban Innovation Challenge Fellowship in early 2011. By Fall 2010, Johanna and her new team members that she had hired through AmeriCorps VISTA, Jabari Brown and Jeanne Firth, had secured permission to use City Park as a future site and had built a partnership with their first school, New Orleans Charter Math and Science High School. In this early stage of the organization, Johanna praised Tulane City Center for “sticking its neck out, [and saying that] even though there’s no resources for this yet, we believe this can go.” Their support gave her the freedom to commit time and planning to Grow Dat while City Center worked on putting together a studio for architecture students to work on the City Park site. Johanna, Jabari and Jeanne were able to put the program together in time to launch in January of 2011 at Hollygrove Market and Farm. At Hollygrove, Grow Dat was able to solidify its programmatic elements while City Center began work on the City Park campus. Tulane facilitated transportation for the crew members to Hollygrove, a convenience that would otherwise not have been possible were it not for President Cowen’s investment in the project. Since its inception, Grow Dat has had the support of the most powerful figure at Tulane, and therefore one of the most powerful figures in New Orleans. Steps to starting a business that might otherwise have taken months—acquiring startup funding, securing permits, finding partners—were expedited with the help of President Cowen and the support of the administration.

NOFFN ran out of money to continue paying Johanna as a consultant at the same time that the Urban Innovation Fellows program accepted her. As a fellow, Johanna was able to access resources from the School of Medicine, the Levy-

Rosenblum Institute for Entrepreneurship, Tulane City Center, and the Cowen Institute. As the Urban Innovation Fellowship was allowing Johanna to build the program, Tulane City Center was raising money to build the Grow Dat campus. Initial capital came from President Cowen, former Tulane Board Chair Cathy Pierson, the Rockefeller Foundation, and BlueCross BlueShield through the Tulane School of Medicine. Stephanie Barksdale and her husband David contributed \$25,000 that allowed Johanna to hire both of her top candidates for the AmeriCorps VISTA position. Tulane's Development Office also began fundraising for Grow Dat. Melissa Erekson, the Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations at Tulane, was instrumental in reaching out to foundations and key donors in Grow Dat's early years. According to Johanna, she was able to send logic models to Melissa to look over and then together they would work on grant proposals and prospect donors. "Our relationship with the Corporate Giving and Foundations office has probably been the most valuable for us," says

Johanna, estimating that the office has donated the equivalent of a part to full time highly-skilled employee in time and energy. Though Johanna still spends a lot of time thinking about fundraising, the partnership with Melissa and the development office has been a huge boon for the organization. Instead of needing to focus primarily on grant writing and fundraising, Grow Dat has been able to throw more of its energy behind programmatic elements.

Three years after that first initial meeting of the different innovative Tulane departments that came together to create Grow Dat, the connections that bind Tulane and Grow Dat have strengthened and expanded. Tulane students have provided and

continue to provide essential services to the creation and growth of Grow Dat. Tulane School of Architecture students designed and built the City Park campus as part of a studio class. Several classes have service learning partnerships with Grow Dat, including courses in the recent Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship minor. Students from the business school worked on creating a business plan for Grow Dat, and the School of Medicine's Office of Community Affairs and Health Policy has designed nutrition programs and provided health services for Grow Dat graduates and their families. Masters students from the schools of Social Work and Public Health & Tropical Medicine have completed practicums on the site, assisting with social services availability and program evaluation, respectively. The evaluation data that Josh has collected are a part of his dissertation at Tulane's Payson Center for International Development. While many of the graduate students relationships have been successful, the business students never completed the business plan, and one of the public health practicum students did not fulfill the requirements, though staff did not have problems with any of the other public health students.

Benefits and Limitations

Overall the relationship between Grow Dat and Tulane University has brought gains to both parties. Tulane has provided Grow Dat with the time and space it needed to grow and strengthen in its early stages. Grow Dat would never have been able to start running its organization so quickly and to keep it in operation without the financial and human capital available through multiple departments within the university. Johanna estimates that overall Tulane saves them about \$200,000 each year in the services it delivers. The legitimacy that the Tulane name

affords Grow Dat has also been valuable in its programmatic and structural elements, and has allowed Grow Dat to, as Johanna puts it, “create a kind of quality that a lot of nonprofits don’t have the audacity to imagine they can create, because they’re always trying to cobble things together.” Organizing transportation and securing the City Park site were made much easier with Tulane as a backer, and President Cowen lowered many bureaucratic hurdles because of his investment and passion for the project. Johanna feared at the beginning that Tulane might smother Grow Dat with its own branding, but has found that the Tulane brand has been very minimal on the farm. The Grow Dat crew members are able feel ownership over the space as a result, something Johanna has deemed essential since the beginning. She has loved that, “when youth come here they really can tell that they’re valued and being taken seriously, you know, because they’re coming to a really beautiful space...they maybe live in housing that hasn’t been cared for...to have that experience [at Grow Dat] I think says a lot about how we think about them and feel about them.”

The impact of Grow Dat on Tulane has been advantageous as well. Tulane has been able to use Grow Dat for real-world applications of learning for students. The client-based relationship, exemplified by Tulane City Center, has been the basis for the interactions with other Tulane Departments such as the Center for Public Service and the School of Medicine. Tulane students and faculty have translated Grow Dat’s work into academic settings: in student projects, dissertation research, and even a chapter in President Cowen’s upcoming memoir. The academic writings that will continue to center around Grow Dat both help the Grow Dat model to spread and be seen as a best practice. Grow Dat also provides a constant source of

inspiration for student projects (including this author, who is writing this case study for a seminar course at Tulane). Grow Dat has brought in research grants and foundation dollars that are counted as Tulane fundraising efforts even if they go to fund Grow Dat, which is registered as a separate entity. Perhaps most importantly, Grow Dat is a tangible representation of Tulane's values and agenda for the university, and Tulane's support is publicly practicing what they preach in terms of community engagement and development.

Tulane student involvement has not been without challenges. While Grow Dat staff members have had mostly positive experiences with Tulane service learning students, they have had problems with foul language around the high school interns and poor work ethic on the Grow Dat campus. The power dynamics inherent in students from a largely white, upper-class institution working with largely lower class, African-American teenagers have hindered truly reciprocal service-learning relationships. Stephanie believes that Tulane students working on the farm sometimes come in with a mindset that they have something to teach the Grow Dat interns, rather than having something to learn. "I think Tulane freshmen probably need the program just as much as a 16 year old" from a New Orleans high school, says Stephanie, who believes that Tulane students need to understand that there is a level playing field before they begin their involvement with Grow Dat. Due to the inherently fluctuating nature of the university population, quality will naturally vary as different classes come and go. The impermanence of the semester schedule and four-year time frame presents potential barriers to students maintaining meaningful and long-term relationships with the farm.

Grow Dat is poised to enter its fourth programmatic year. The size of its leadership cohort, the acreage of its campus, the poundage of produce grown, and the operating budget will all increase. Tulane has not made any promises concerning how long they will continue to financially support Grow Dat. As of now, Grow Dat has no intention of becoming completely financially sustainable, which would compromise their ability to focus on non-revenue-generating activities such as the Shared Harvest program. Though Grow Dat has many donors and grants outside of Tulane, its financial feasibility depends on the support Tulane provides. Should Grow Dat decide to not accept Service Learning students anymore or expand in a direction that conflicted with Tulane's interests in some way, that support could be withdrawn. Grow Dat might not be able to afford, financially or otherwise, to lose the resources Tulane provides, but Tulane might also not be willing to support the organization in the same way as it grows and its financial needs increase or its priorities change. This double bind has the potential to turn a closely intertwined relationship into a tangled and unhealthy one.

Grow Dat's programmatic peers, Urban Roots and The Food Project, could provide lessons moving forward. Urban Roots was started as a project of YouthLaunch, an umbrella nonprofit that ran programs relating to youth and service. YouthLaunch did not have nearly the amount of resources that Tulane has, but it was able to provide support to Urban Roots from its foundation in 2007. In 2011, YouthLaunch suffered from financial troubles, and was forced to shut down. It closed many of its programs, but because Urban Roots was growing ever more successful, YouthLaunch supported Urban Roots in transitioning to an

independent non-profit agency and phased out the resources it had been supplying. Urban Roots reached out to supporters to ask for donations to keep the program in operation, and continues to rely on donations and grant funding.

Farmer and activist Ward Cheney founded the Food Project, a much larger and older organization than both Urban Roots and Grow Dat, in 1991. The project is described as self-funded, but in its early years was a pilot project of the Massachusetts Audubon Society before it was able to expand in size and scope. Though no longer reliant on the Audubon Society for land, The Food Project will always be dependent on donations and grants for its funding. Urban Roots and The Food Project began as pilot projects but were both able to make smooth transitions to independent organizations. Grow Dat also is considered a pilot program, but its transition to independence, should it ever want or need separate from Tulane, will likely be more difficult. The unique structure of the partnership with its parent organization is what sets Grow Dat apart from programmatically similar nonprofits.

Tulane and Grow Dat have formed an innovative university-nonprofit relationship. Though the partnership might change as Grow Dat evolves, the interdisciplinary and collaborative way that Grow Dat began and that Tulane continues to support Grow Dat could act as a model for other institutions. Several universities and corporations have reached out to Johanna and Tulane looking for advice on how to start a nonprofit from within their institution. However, to its advantage and detriment, Tulane has fostered a partnership that is perhaps impossible to replicate. The timing, mission, resources and leadership all came together at once to create Grow Dat, which may have made it into a successful yet singular mutation.

According to Stephanie, everyone who participated in the founding of Grow Dat felt like they were “sliding under the radar... and waiting for someone to tell us we can’t do it. And no one ever said no.”

Future Partnership/Epilogue

As a still-fledgling organization, Grow Dat is constantly adapting and shifting, and its relationship with Tulane will likely shift as well. For now, both parties appear eager to expand the partnership even farther as time goes on. For Tulane, this means finding additional places in the university that will be able to interact with Grow Dat in the same authentic way as existing partners. Neither Grow Dat nor Tulane appears to have any intention of separating as long as the relationship continues to be mutually beneficial and their goals are still in alignment. The mutual respect and admiration that Grow Dat and Tulane have for the other is clear, and it seems that neither has any intention of letting go any time soon.

Questions for Discussion

- Can Grow Dat exist without Tulane’s help?
- What are the pros and cons of the partnership?
- Can the model be replicated in other situations?
- What are the key components to replicating the partnership?

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Notes

¹ Gilligan, Johanna. Personal Interview. Grow Dat Youth Farm. October 5, 2013.

² Schoop, Joshua. Personal Interview. Tulane University. October 7, 2013.

³ Barksdale, Stephanie. Personal Interview. Tulane University. October 22, 2013.