Lakshya Sharma:

This creative gardening workshop. The purpose for this is to support students in STEM and other fields of study to incorporate plant life into their daily lives, and not view it as something separate from the urban scape. And basically, the aim of the workshop was to enable students to be able to do some gardening in their surroundings, also to raise awareness about the mental health benefits of having plants around yourself. So, it ties into dealing with stress, dealing with mental health, and avoiding substance abuse issues and similar issues that can be a result of not effectively being able to deal with mental health.

Speaker 2:

You're listening to Further Together the ORAU Podcast. Join Michael Holtz and his guest for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU's story history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative, scientific and technical solutions for our customers, and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together the ORAU Podcast.

Michael Holtz:

Welcome to Further together the ORAU Podcast. As ever, it's me your host, Michael Holtz, from the Communications and Marketing Department at ORAU. And if you are a regular listener to the podcast, you know that I love talking about the research enterprise at ORAU, and this is one of those episodes where we're going to do just that. Today I am joined by Lakshya Sharma from Georgia Tech University and Tracy Curtright from ORAU's Research and University Partnerships Office. And we are talking about the Innovation Partnership grant that Lakshya received to do an amazing program at Georgia Tech. Tracy and Lakshya, welcome to Further Together.

Tracy Curtright:

Thank you

Lakshya Sharma:

Hi, Michael. Thank you so much.

Michael Holtz:

So, glad that you're here. Tracy, we've talked about these grants a couple of times, but just to refresh everyone's memory, talk to me about the Innovation Partnership grant program and how it works.

Tracy Curtright:

Absolutely. So, the Innovation Partnerships grant program is designed to build and/or strengthen relationships between university members and ORAU collaborators, by focusing on research and education topics that align with ORAU's expertise and current priorities. The grant applications emphasize workshops and conferences dedicated to showcasing the university's strategic growth areas in STEM research and education, as well as thought leadership In developing a national strategy for STEM education and workforce development. We strongly encourage student participation. That is a big piece of this.

A key goal. This program is to provide member universities with opportunities to broaden their networks and also find ways to seek funding through partnerships that encourage joint proposals and pave the way for future collaborations. So, each grant is valued at up to $4,000 with a maximum of two awards per year to member universities. And I have some great news. The FY '25 call for applications was sent to the ORAU counselors on September 10th. So, the call is out there, it is open. So, our FY '25 focus areas have changed from FY '24.

So, in FY '25, what we're looking for are applications centered around improving our behavioral health such as health equity, social determinants of health, stress, loneliness, stigma, substance abuse disorders, and so on. The second topic is post-pandemic world, such as remote working and learning, worker vulnerability, disease surveillance, health communication. The third topic is implementing innovative technologies such as data safety and cybersecurity privacy, the digital economy, digital divide, ethics. The fourth topic is our changing planet, where we would like to see application centered around sustainability, environmental justice, clean energy, ecosystems, water and air quality, and community resilience.

So, I'll tell you briefly a little bit about the application process. The application is available on ORAU's website and all you have to do is go up to the top to the little search bar and type in the word grant. I did it this morning and the first thing that popped up was Innovation Partnerships. So, it was wonderful to see it at the top.

Michael Holtz:

Nice.

Tracy Curtright:

So, this application has roughly 15 items, one of which is the required email of endorsement from the applicant's ORAU counselor. And you can find a list of counselors on the ORAU website as well. So, once the application is submitted, a meeting is scheduled with the applicant and one or more of ORAU's Research and University Partnerships Office, which we call ourselves RUPO, to discuss the application, just to get more ideas, talk through things, see what the applicant is planning, what the overall process is going to look like going forward from a RUPO perspective so that they know where we're coming from. And it also gives us information so that we can select the appropriate ORAU collaborator. So, once the award determination is made and collaborator is assigned, and then we do an introductory meeting so that we can get everybody together essentially in the same virtual room and talk through some things.

So, a couple of examples of recent collaborator involvement are in-person attendance at events. We actually had an FY '24, we called them subject matter experts in FY '24. So, we had one of our ORAU subject matter experts serve as a panelist on a recent grant. We've had collaborators give presentations. We have had collaborators record webinars, record podcasts. So, it's been really great. Actually, one that I'm incredibly proud of in FY '24 is a webinar that was recorded and it was based on plain language. And that one is being used by that university for their graduate students in the curriculum going forward.

There is one change to this year's application, and that is the length of the event. So, last year we didn't have a minimum amount. This year, the minimum duration for any event is at least four hours. So, you could do half day, full day, multiple day, as long as it's at least four hours. That's what we're looking for. So, speaking of FY '24, we actually awarded 15 awards to 14 member universities. And so far, for the FY '25 call, I've received three applications already, and it just opened up on September 10th. So, I strongly encourage all of our member universities to consider applying for an Innovation Partnerships grant. So, I would love to see the applications.

Michael Holtz:

I love it. And I love my brain started firing off as you were going through the list of priority areas and focus areas. And as a subject matter expert/collaborator in fiscal year '24, I hope to get to do that again. So, it was a lot of fun and we'll be talking to the folks from Meharry about that event in the coming weeks. But here today we have Lakshya Sharma from Georgia Tech University to talk about how he used one of our Innovation Partnerships grants. And Lakshya, talk about what it was that you did. And again, they're not huge grants from a dollar perspective, but you really can make a big impact with the grant dollars that you received. So, talk about what you did, and then we'll get into the details of how it worked and what drew you to do what you put together.

Lakshya Sharma:

Yeah, certainly, Michael. I mean, each dollar is worth something. And each dollar that goes towards helping students and professionals who work towards sustainability is always a useful dollar in my opinion. So, I as student coordination manager for the RCE, which I will talk more about in a bit, organized with my team, a creative gardening workshop for students across the greater Atlanta region. So, the RCE stands for a Regional Center for Expertise, and we are RCE Greater Atlanta. So, there's multiple RCEs all across the world. These are networks of professional students and scholars working to advance the United Nations SDG goals. And we are directly connected to the United Nations University based in Tokyo, Japan.

And as part of this network in greater Atlanta, we have multiple higher education students such as Georgia Tech, UGA, Georgia State, and historically Black colleges and universities, such as Moore House, and Spelman, and other universities in the ACU area in Atlanta. And as student coordination manager, me and my team try to make sure that we constantly meet and make efforts toward engaging more students across these institutions in activities that promote sustainability. And ORAU has been a consistent partner in helping us achieve those goals because before I was in this position, I know that ORAU supported the RCE Americas conference before me. So, I knew that ORAU has been a great support for that.

So, my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Hirsch from Georgia Tech, she suggested that I reach out to ORAU and inquire how I apply for this grant. And that's how I got in touch with Tracy. And she was amazingly helpful in how I go about writing the grant because I, myself, am a student and did not have a lot of experience with grant writing, but I learned a little bit and I got the gist of it from her. And then I explained to her that this creative gardening workshop, the purpose for this is to support students in STEM and other fields of study to incorporate plant life into their daily lives and not view it as something separate from the urban scape.

And basically the aim of the workshop was to enable students to be able to do some gardening in their surroundings. Also, to raise awareness about the mental health benefits of having plants around yourself. So, it ties into dealing with stress, dealing with mental health, and avoiding substance abuse issues and similar issues that can be a result of not effectively being able to deal with mental health. So, that was how we looked at it. And we were able to manage, with the support of ORAU, a three consecutive Saturday workshop on gardening. And we had guest lecturers, we had faculty and staff from Georgia Tech talking to the students, and it was a great time. And we had food provided by a community caterers. So, caterers doing a great job trying new things and trying new recipes such as, we had vegan food served every day of the workshop, and we wanted to promote and put the spotlight on these community caterers, doing a great job at making vegan food. So, we tried to hit a lot of targets and we believe that we successfully pulled it off, all thanks to ORAU.

Michael Holtz:

That sounds incredible. And just going to the food for just a second, because it was vegan food, like the students could see the connection between you're growing this thing that you can create a dish, you can feed your family with the food that you're growing in your backyard, or in your raised bed or whatever. It sounds like an amazing workshop and a lot of fun. Very interesting. How many students did you have participate?

Lakshya Sharma:

Yeah, so interestingly enough, so the numbers fluctuated, and that was one of the challenges we faced over three days because we planned this workshop for the spring semester because that is when it was a great time to teach students how to plant and get started so that if you get started now, by summer, your plants are in full bloom. However, we were cutting pretty close to exam season, so that resulted in a flaky in sort of an inconsistent partnership. But this workshop resulted in a formation of a group and a network where people are still, until date, discussing how to do urban gardening, and how to plant plants at their home and all of that. So, it did turn into a consistent thing and a consistent community of student gardeners for sure. However, participation every day fluctuated.

On the note of how the vegan food is connected to the gardening, very interestingly, the venue for this workshop was the Georgia Tech Community Garden. It's a community garden on campus. And people can ask for a garden bed and just take care of the plants on that bed. And we had fresh lettuce growing around the time when we had this workshop and we had vegan burgers served at the workshop. So, the students were taking the lettuce out of the garden straight and putting them in their burgers and eating them. And that was the point that we were trying to put across because people are so disconnected with their food in today's day and age.

There are children who think that, where do you think carrots come from? And their answer is a supermarket, but that's not true. It comes out of the ground. There's a huge disconnect there. So, bridging that gap and making people realize that you can have food, even if a certain supermarket decides to close for a week. It's something very accessible. It's something for everybody and something anybody can do by themselves. That was the message we was trying to put across.

Michael Holtz:

And I love that message that truly anyone can do this. And yes, it takes time, it takes personal energy, but it's good for your mental health. It's relaxing. As you said, you sort of get in touch with where your food comes from. And I love the idea of that there are members of the group that are still continuing to participate, and work together, and grow food and talk about, I'm assuming, best practices, and, "Here's what I've learned doing growing carrots or broccoli," or whatever it is. So, I love that.

Lakshya Sharma:

Yeah, for sure. And the staff at GT, we were supported by amazing people like Tamsin Levy, who is the GT gardening coach. Brent Wirill, who is GT staff, but a permaculture enthusiast. And he taught everybody about gardening towers, which is like a vertical structure where you can plant your plants and then the water flows very evenly around it. So, it's like a great way to conserve water while growing plants. We had Dr. Janet Yen with us. She's a professor of bio design at Georgia Tech. And she explained to the students and showed them the microscopic nitty gritties of soil and the water around it, and students peered into microscopes and saw the little critters moving around. And she explained how these guys are really integral to the growth and health of your plans.

And then we had guest lectures like Grace Kim, who is a community partner of RCE and a longtime friend, and she has been involved in community gardening in Atlanta for a very long time. We had Mr. Rashid Noori visit us, who is a pioneer in urban gardening, and he has been around the world. And he spoke about his journey with the students on how it one day clicked that food should be accessible. And then he just went on this mission to promote and support urban gardening. And students had amazing, long-standing, insightful discussion with all of these people. And it was really nice to see this culture of knowledge sharing and sharing ideas. And even the facilitators were surprised by how some students were really engaged in urban gardening for a long time, and they thought everybody knew things as well. So, knowledge can come from anywhere. It was the point of this. And it was a great time.

Michael Holtz:

It sounds like a great time. And I'm experiencing some FOMO, Tracy, I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm missed out on a great opportunity. Right?

Tracy Curtright:

Absolutely. So, I'll tell you-

Lakshya Sharma:

I'll keep you posted for next time.

Michael Holtz:

Okay.

Tracy Curtright:

So, Michael, one of the reasons I was really drawn to this application was, I realized this is centered more around gardening from a city perspective. But I grew up on a farm, so most of the food we ate, you could see where it came from. So, that was really a wonderful piece of this application to see that you do have that opportunity for people to learn that this is where the food comes from.

So, another facet of this that I'm really intrigued by was how it's tied to emotional and mental health. My home is not conducive to a garden area just simply because I such a teeny tiny backyard. There's just no space. But I have indoor plants. I didn't have indoor plants until I lost one of my three dogs. And now I am down two dogs, but I am up 54 houseplants. I'm not kidding. I have several. And there's nothing more fun than watching them grow. It really is. It's very calming. It's a very peaceful activity. I can propagate and then plant. And most of them make it. Sometimes I lose some, you win [inaudible 00:19:23]. But those are the reasons that I was really drawn to this application. I think it's just such an amazing thing because at the end of the day, you see something broke. Something is coming out of this. And it's not just knowledge, it's food. So, I think this was such a wonderful application

Michael Holtz:

And Tracy, in your house, the plants are filtering the air and there are so many benefits from a physical health perspective, but a mental health perspective. And again, lecture people understanding that food doesn't come from the supermarket, it doesn't magically appear. It comes from the ground. It comes from-

Lakshya Sharma:

Yes, sir.

Michael Holtz:

And being able to put your hands on that and wrap your mind around that there are processes, and you can be part of that for your family, for your community. I love this application and I'm so glad we've had the opportunity to talk about this.

Lakshya Sharma:

I'm glad. Yeah, just like Tracy said, I remember discussing with her for the very first time that we have this idea and we want to apply for this grant, and she was like, "I really love this. This is about people being good to each other." And yeah, I remember me and Tracy had this discussion about her house plants back then as well. And I remember you even picked up one from the side and showed it to me. That was really funny because when we did get into the workshop, indoor plans were a big theme. And exactly like you said, Michael, they filter the air, the house smells good, your room smells good if nothing else, and it just elevates the quality of a space 100%. And students discuss everything from how to have indoor plants, how to have plants in a backyard, how to find a crevice in a sidewalk, and then maybe even grow a plant there. On all scales, people were really into finding opportunities to bring a plant into this urban environment and help it elevate the environment.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Lakshya Sharma:

It was a lot of fun.

Michael Holtz:

I know for myself, it's amazing how something as simple as a plant can just elevate your mood just by seeing something alive and growing on your table or in a planter that's on the floor. Just seeing that when you walk in the house is just... I don't know, it just does something to the mood to see that something else is alive in your house in a good way and doing good things.

Lakshya Sharma:

I know.

Michael Holtz:

Lakshya, is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to make sure that we cover?

Lakshya Sharma:

Yeah, I just looked at the list of students that we also submitted in the report. And overall across the three days of the week just so that I addressed the question you asked me earlier, we had about 40 to 45 participants across the three days.

Michael Holtz:

Okay. Yeah, that's great. That's a great number. And it sounds like some of them at least, are continuing on and hopefully everybody learned something and they're putting in practice what they learned at the workshop. Tracy, anything from your perspective that we haven't talked about that you want to make sure we cover?

Tracy Curtright:

I just want to thank Lakshya and Georgia Tech for submitting this application. I think it was such a wonderful experience. And just encourage our other member universities to take a look at the website and apply for these grants. They're out there. So, thank you. This is wonderful.

Michael Holtz:

Having been part of the application process, it is not a difficult grant to apply for. And the one requirement afterward is just reporting back what took place with the dollars.

Tracy Curtright:

Michael, now that you mentioned that, starting this fiscal year, we now have a report template out there, so that... we've streamlined that down. And that is all courtesy of ORAU's communications and marketing departments. Thank you, CM. So, we've tried to make that a little bit easier for every one, so I hope to receive some really great applications in FY '25. FY '24 was such a great year, so it can only get better from here.

Michael Holtz:

I love it. I love it. Tracy Curtright and Lux Sharma, thank you so much for spending this time with me and talking about the Innovation Partnerships grant program. And Lakshya, your specific grant application, it sounds like, again, a wonderful program. And if you do it again, you may see me on the Georgia Tech campus taking your workshop.

Lakshya Sharma:

Looking forward to it.

Michael Holtz:

All right, thank you both so much. Have a great day.

Tracy Curtright:

Thank you.

Lakshya Sharma:

Thank you so much. You have a great day as well.

Speaker 2:

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