Every public garden has its own special genius—a dramatic setting, a special collection, a special link with the surrounding environment. A unique feature of the UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden may be the way that our garden emerged, grew, was nurtured, and continues to prosper. From the start, our success has depended on the power of collaboration and the energy of co-creation.

Our leadership style—highly adaptive, experimental, and very inclusive—seeks to harness the energy of collaboration. We leverage funds, goodwill, and external help into projects and programs that have real impact. Without direct control over the multiple complex systems upon which we depend, we have learned to harness more subtle forces: what projects “want” to happen; where is the energy in the system; how can we influence our collaborative partners to deliver wins across an entire campus and a natural system; and how can partnership, vision, in-kind support, and student and community engagement leverage funding to have a big impact? To accomplish these goals, we have had to learn about entirely new fields and disciplines: systems thinking, chaos and complexity, and design thinking.

Collaboration—It’s in our DNA
The tradition of collaboration at the UC Davis Arboretum began in 1936. Some of the most prestigious of UC Davis faculty in botany and landscape horticulture received campus approval to establish a collection of plants to support the research and teaching in the biological sciences at UC Davis. These distinguished faculty members not only founded and led the UC Davis Arboretum for decades, as directors or as unpaid professionals, but also trained staff, taught volunteer docent classes, led tours to natural areas throughout northern California, and collected plants for the collection as they conducted field research around the world.

In the 1960s, the undergraduate students at UC Davis, inspired by the work of the faculty, stepped up as collaborative partners to help the Arboretum. With support from student recreation funds, the Associated Students of UC Davis (ASUCD) funded major site improvements: clearing trash from old creek beds, building new path networks,
and opening up new garden areas. Much of the current “look and feel” of the Arboretum landscape—and many of our large trees—date back to this student-collaboration era.

Student funds dwindled and campus support vanished in the 1970s. As severe budget cuts threatened and all Arboretum staff was laid off, the community was suddenly galvanized. A new support group, the Friends of the UC Davis Arboretum, organized volunteer programs to keep the collections alive; plant sales to raise money to maintain and improve the collections; and educational programs to share the richness of the collection with visitors and school programs. For years, the Friends of the UC Davis Arboretum acted as a decision-making board, and stabilized the staff and programs of the Arboretum during these difficult years.

But as the UC Davis campus grew during the 1980s and 1990s, what had been “the back forty” gradually became central campus: the once-remote UC Davis Arboretum was now a southern boundary for UC Davis. The outstanding success of the long collaborative efforts led by faculty, students, and the community had built a strong, grassroots organization that was actively serving over one hundred UC Davis courses. Meanwhile, a new southern “front door” for campus was imagined and the Arboretum stretched along the length of the new entry. UC Davis then funded the first full-time director for the UC Davis Arboretum. A new vision for the future of the UC Davis Arboretum was needed.

**Co-Creating the Future—Strategic Planning**

Necessity drove the next step: clearly, our long-term collaborators, whether they had a formal or informal role wanted help to create the new plan. Many people had a sense of ownership and ideas, crafted during years of volunteer service, about what the UC Davis Arboretum might become. Thus, in 2001, the Arboretum launched a long-term planning process that involved the entire community.

The Drucker Self-Assessment Tool, designed by management expert Peter Drucker, is a highly structured method that allows nonprofits to rapidly assess what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what they must do to improve their organization’s performance. The leadership team included staff and volunteers from the start. Nearly eighty stakeholders attended a kick-off meeting and offered to help staff conduct interviews, run focus groups, and gather information about our institution and our campus (internal scan), as well as develop executive summaries on trends about our region and the critical scientific and social issues that were likely to have an impact in the coming ten years (environmental scan).

Working side-by-side, gathering information, considering and discussing solutions, and working to understand important issues created a powerful “feedback loop” that transformed conversations. Together, we listened to the “voice of the customer”: four thousand people responded to a survey about our programs and our place to tell us where they thought we were doing well, and where we needed improvement. In addition, teams of volunteers and staff conducted sixty in-depth interviews, ten focus groups, and two community meetings. Through both the interviews and the research needed to conduct the two “scans,” for the first time in the history of the UC Davis Arboretum, leadership, staff, and supporters all had the same trusted information.

From this experience of deep engagement, a broad consensus emerged: as a unit of UC Davis, with its mission of teaching, research, and public service, we agreed that we could contribute most effectively to university outreach and engagement. Our primary customer, then, was the VISITOR. Our supporting customers, who work alongside the staff to serve the visitor; included students, staff, faculty, and administrators of UC Davis; alumni; members, volunteers, donor and board members; and community members. The needs of these “supporting customers” are best met as all stakeholders work together to serve the primary customer. As time has gone on, we have seen the wisdom of this ideal. Often solutions that truly work for everyone emerge from breakthroughs that are the result of careful listening, built into everyday meetings and processes.

The first framework to emerge from the Drucker Self-Assessment Process was a strategic Ten-Year Plan. We focused first on “repairing” the gaps our customers had highlighted by creating more visitor safety and comfort features in the garden (benches, restrooms, shade, etc.), building new gardens with a renewed focus on regionally appropriate plants, and providing new opportunities for visitor learning.
We were inspired by the Kellogg Commission’s idea that “engagement” could be combined with “student learning” and developed our first “big idea”—transforming outdoor spaces near academic buildings into plazas and gardens where the UC Davis students, under faculty direction, could meet with visitors to explain the value of work underway in that department or academic center. With a unifying concept in mind, we turned our attention to the one hundred acres of the UC Davis Arboretum to “build out” this idea in our real world. We visited departments and colleges with a hand-drawn map, meeting with deans, faculty, and students to explain the concept. When departments were nearby and shared a focus, we grouped them into “neighborhoods”—and the neighborhoods were organized into several major GATEways (entry points). For example, visitors could decide to visit the “City Arts GATEways”, the “University GATEway,” or the “Arboretum Discovery GATEway.” Collectively, we hoped that one day, visitors will have an integrated and engaging series of experiences, from the moment they arrive to when they reach their destination in the Arboretum or central campus.

We quickly realized that students will always be the best possible ambassadors for UC Davis—they are happy to share their authentic enthusiasm and new understandings, gained in the classroom, the studio, or the lab, with our visitors and families. Best of all, this effort on their part greatly accelerates learning. Students develop new leadership skills and work experience as they work beside faculty partners and professional staff to develop and lead the GATEways projects and public programs. In this GATEways vision, the Arboretum will increasingly function as an open door into the campus, a physical pathway and thematic framework uniting existing and proposed outreach centers along the length of the Arboretum, and a leadership academy. It will provide a welcoming and engaging experience for visitors, a vital experiential learning laboratory for undergraduate and graduate students, an innovative means for disseminating the work of campus researchers, and a powerful public relations vehicle for the university.

**Upsizing the Arboretum to Include the Entire Campus**

In June 2011, after many successes, the University launched the UC Davis Public Garden Initiative to extend the ideas and best practices tested at the UC Davis Arboretum out to the entire five-thousand-plus-acre campus. Sustainability is a special focus of the new expanded team: environmental sustainability, organizational sustainability, and financial sustainability. The GATEways educational mission was also upsized: departments across campus were eager to partner with us to share their scholarship, purpose, and findings with the public at teaching landscapes near their buildings.

New teams assembled—from Arboretum, Grounds Division, Campus Reserve, Civil and Industrial Services staff and Campus Planning and Community Resources staff—to test concepts with pilot projects that replaced water-intensive lawns with native bunchgrasses, built new gardens for the Geology and Animal Science Departments, and enhanced the visitor experience by providing new campus way-finding signage, and developing GIS maps and building signs that ensured faster emergency response.

With a renewed focus on the visitor, and a new team of partners to build the vision, we believe that we are in a good position to build a new future for UC Davis. It is critical that the scholarship and excellence of UC Davis—in the arts, the humanities, and the sciences— not be locked in an ivory tower. Opening up the landscapes of the UC Davis campus to create lively spaces for teaching, conversation, and spontaneous events with each other and with the whole community seems like a good place to start.

**Co-Creating the Future—Master Planning**

With a solid Ten-Year Plan now in place, work began on a Master Plan. As we explored ideas on how to best “translate the work of UC Davis to the public,” we reached out to the obvious academic partner: the UC Davis School of Education. Experts in learning in outdoor settings, they educated us about national conversation already underway on the future of land grant colleges. “The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities—The Engaged University” called for renewal of land grant colleges’ commitment to deliver both accessibility and lifelong learning, an “unfinished agenda” for the nation.

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