COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ALLYSHIP: REPLACING THE “TEACH TO” WITH A “LEARN FROM” ATTITUDE
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Environmental stewardship programs have historically lacked representations of diversity, equity and inclusion. These programs, most of which are free, are seemingly accessible, but remain largely inaccessible for communities of color and low-income communities. Over the past 6 months, I interned with Tilth Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to sustainable and equitable food systems. I worked within their Soil and Water Stewardship Program which consists of classroom and hands-on project work, covering topics from food waste prevention to raingarden construction. With organization-wide goals of enhancing diversity, equity and inclusion, I was on a mission to participate in community outreach and connection with a “learn from” attitude, not a “teach to” one. As a white individual, this specific aspect of allyship is one I focused heavily on as I prepared for and moved through this project. It was vital that I first fully understand and recognize my own privilege before moving through this research from a community ally position. I interviewed 4 local stewardship program coordinators to learn how they operationalize values of diversity, equity and inclusion when recruiting program participants. I found that 75% of them do not utilize targeted recruitment methods to reach more diverse communities. Using targeted methods creates more equal access to these programs and in turn can create more environmental education opportunities for climate-vulnerable communities. Additionally, greater demographic diversity brings greater diversity of perspectives and experiences into these programs which can lead to necessary program reform to make them more accessible, culturally relevant and consequently more inclusive.