

STEP 3: Five team members answered the Gainesville questions (Steps 1 & 2 are outlined on pp 5–10)

Would you go to Gainesville?

If NO, why not?

If YES, what would you do? How long would you stay?

Tyler—Weekend

"I'd definitely schedule my trip to coincide with a sporting event, probably not football since I'd never get a ticket. It looks like there are some cool bars and restaurants and even some live music options. Timing would be everything."

Betsy—3 to 4 days

"I'd stay several days in Gainesville. It seems like there are enough activity options to keep us all occupied, although I do wish there were more directed specifically at kids. The *Visit Gainesville* website was very helpful. Everything was available in one place.

Bivens Arm Nature Park, Paynes Prairie and the Botanical Gardens seem to be places I would take my family. There are several historic sites and homesteads in the area and I would try to get to as many as possible since they all seem different from one another."

Charles—2 days

"Two days and nights would be enough for me to see the historic sites in Gainesville and the area. I'd stay longer if I could get a tee time at a few of the local golf courses but the best courses all appear to be private."

Denise—Weekend

"I'd be there for the Natural Science Museum at UF, the Bat Houses, the Butterfly Rainforest and the Kanapaha Gardens. I've always thought the Haile Homestead sounded interesting but the tour times are limited so I'd probably go to Dudley Farm instead. Some friends went and they loved it."

Carol—4 to 5 days

"I'd look at historic districts and the architecture—hopefully I can find a walking tour. Local restaurants look interesting with a good variety. I'm also intrigued by the surrounding towns and would probably use Gainesville as my home base."



Search Terms Used

Things to do Gainesville Florida
Gainesville FL
Kid-friendly Gainesville
Where to stay Gainesville FL
Outdoor recreation Gainesville
Things to do downtown Gainesville
Hotels downtown Gainesville
Quirky Gainesville
University of Florida athletics
Gainesville History

Websites Visited

[tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g34242-Gainesville_Florida-Hotels.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g34242-Gainesville_Florida-Hotels.html)
[gainesville.com](https://www.gainesville.com)
[visitgainesville.com](https://www.visitgainesville.com)
[tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g34242-Gainesville_Florida-Vacations.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g34242-Gainesville_Florida-Vacations.html)
www.flmnh.ufl.edu/index.php/exhibits/always-on-display/butterfly-rainforest/visitor-info/
www.flmn.ufl.edu/index.php/bats/home
www.hailehomestead.org
www.mathesonmuseum.org
www.airbnb.com/gainesville
[visitgainesville.com/stay/hotels-motels-inns/](https://www.visitgainesville.com/stay/hotels-motels-inns/)
www.visitgainesville.com/downtown
www.gainesville.com/article/20081221/news/812200215
www.tripadvisor.com/HotelsList-Gainesville-Downtown-Hotels-zfp3078.html
[yelp.com](https://www.yelp.com)
[pinterest.com/gainesvillefl](https://www.pinterest.com/gainesvillefl/) (this was hard to find)
[instagram.com/visitgainesville](https://www.instagram.com/visitgainesville)
gatorzone.com



Onsite Assessment

A team of six conducted the on-site assessment of Alachua County on October 4–13, 2014 and November 8–12, 2014. The purpose of this phase was to experience the community the same way a first-time visitor might. No one knew who we were (even the *Visit Gainesville* staff).

Team members visited Gainesville multiple times to understand what visitors experience. These visits took place on various days and at different times of day. We took pictures, explored, visited attractions, made purchases, ate in restaurants and talked to business owners, residents and other visitors.

Finding Gainesville

Finding Gainesville is easy. With three exits off I-75, signage on I-10 and other roadways, Gainesville is hard to miss. However, once people exit I-75, unless they have a specific destination, there isn't much to help them navigate to downtown, the University campus, or other attractions. In fact, most of the team agreed that if we hadn't been working in the area, they might have stopped for gas but wouldn't have been enticed to explore further and would have missed experiencing what Gainesville has to offer.

This is easy to fix. Some basic directional signage from the interstate and main arterials for campus, downtown, major attractions, and any other places frequented by visitors will be worth the money and effort. Using signs to direct visitors to other areas and attractions encourages them to explore or come back and spend more time experiencing what Gainesville has to offer.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Gateways are the community's front door. They say "We're glad you're here. Let us show you around." Most of the communities in the county have some type of gateway and it's surprising that Gainesville doesn't.

Gateways should always go where you make your best first impression and they should reflect your identity and character. They let people know you're proud of your city.

The streets themselves with the landscaping and parkways were a pleasant surprise and softened the generic feel of the strip malls in commercial areas.



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

This walkway became a landmark for us as we navigated around the city. It was a sign that we were on the right track or that we'd gone too far, depending upon our destination.

Functional public art should be incorporated whenever possible. It's fun, it's distinctive and it provides iconic photo opportunities for residents and visitors.



Downtown was nothing like we expected—the brick streets, the trees, the historic buildings—were all a surprise. In talking with residents that we met in other parts of the city, we learned that many hadn't been downtown in a long time and met a few who had lived in Gainesville for a while and didn't even know downtown existed.

Encouraging residents to have fun and explore the city will keep downtown and other areas top-of-mind when friends and family come to visit them.

The downtown pedestrian wayfinding is well done and helpful for residents. Directions to off-street parking areas were great and the addition of vehicular signage in the downtown and throughout the city would be a strong complement.

Parking rules were easy to understand and well communicated. The only suggestion we have is to add streetside information about where people can find longer-term parking options (in addition to the existing parking directionals).



WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION?

Making information available to visitors when and where they need it is a tough job. Digital marketing has made it easier in some respects, but not everyone is looking online.

Both the downtown and the airport visitor information centers are well-stocked with relevant, current information and the map and events board at the entrance to the downtown location help to provide 24/7 information.

Adding information kiosks at the campus museums area and other popular locations would encourage visitors and residents to explore more.

[The brochures shown to the right were gathered at places other than the visitor centers and demonstrate the excellent distribution network Visit Gainesville has established]



Visit Gainesville's website is extensive, easy-to-navigate, and visually pleasing on a variety of devices. We liked the amount of detail in the events calendar and our only suggestion is that the "view all events" button be moved up under the "Upcoming" ribbon to make it easier for people to find future events.

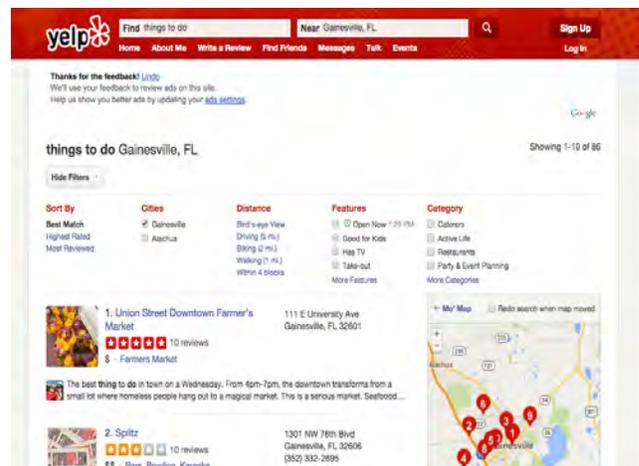
WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION?

The cell phone tours and interpretive content enhanced many experiences—from the Paynes Prairie boardwalk to downtown. We stumbled upon the information on these tours in a variety of places and suggest that there also be an easier way to find them on the website. We didn't discover the downtown and historic district ones until toward the end of our visit and didn't get to experience them fully because we ran out of time.

In addition to the *Visit Gainesville* website, Gainesville has a strong presence on TripAdvisor and we pulled several suggestions from there along with recommendations from Yelp and other review sites. Yelp was good for restaurants and experiences, while TripAdvisor helped with itinerary planning.

The online presence of local businesses varies a great deal and we encourage you to schedule some digital marketing training for restaurants and other small business owners.

Our favorite resource is always asking others. In Gainesville we encountered friendly people who were quite helpful in providing directions and making suggestions.



WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

Every person's reason for traveling is different. Their process for selecting a destination or activities may be deliberate and well researched with detailed itineraries or it may be totally spontaneous. Their interests are diverse and the core question is: "What do you offer that interests me that I can't get closer to home?"

Not every destination or activity will appeal to everyone. Trying to be all things to all people is an exercise in futility. Building upon who you are as a community and the experiences you already provide will be more successful in the long run.

Don't be like Las Vegas when they tried to add "family-friendly" to what they offered. They spent millions but because it conflicted with an already well-defined identity, it was ineffective and a waste of time and money.

Strengthening and improving your experiences instead of trying to completely change who you are as a community builds a future based upon your existing strong foundation. New opportunities should complement, not create a disconnect with, current offerings.



The Kanapaha Botanical Gardens was a delightful experience, despite it being off-season. We did have some people discourage us from visiting but they were wrong about there not being anything to see. We were glad we ignored them.

More information on the plant signage would be nice since there wasn't anyone to ask and directional signage on the paths would help since the map was difficult to understand for some members of the team.



Visiting the Haile Homestead was a bit confusing. We took three different tours and everyone's experience was different. There was so much information compressed into the tour that some members of the team felt overwhelmed. They even thought about going back to catch the things they missed.

Once the visitor center is open and additional interpretation is provided, it will help. Consider giving different types of tours to allow for in-depth information without pressure to cover every aspect of the story.

WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

Devil's Millhopper State Park was a place several people suggested. After visiting (and climbing the 220 stairs back up) we understood why it was referred to as "Big Hole in the Ground State Park."

Closed-captioned video provided a good overview of the geology and climate found as visitors descend, especially for those not able to go all the way down, and demonstrated the park's commitment to providing alternative experiences.



We attempted to visit the Morningside Living History Farm but it was closed. Although we subsequently found out through online research that it was closed on Sunday and Monday, we didn't see anything at the park—at the entrance or the beginning of the trail—providing this information.

Overall, the city park system is a strong asset and an excellent example of what can be accomplished based upon priorities.

The Solar Walk was something we drove past on our way to Alachua. It was one of those "Hey, wait, what was that?" moments.

A few days later we tried to find it again and couldn't. But we were determined and after asking for directions and pulling out a map, we found Pluto.

Walking the path was a different experience from driving past but both did their job of putting the solar system into perspective. The science geeks on the team loved it.



WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

We visited the Harn Museum of Art both during the day and for an evening event. This is one of the friendliest and most inviting art museums we've encountered. The stories on the expanded object labels brought the pieces to life and the staff was approachable and knowledgeable.

The Engineering and Art event taught us, delighted us and challenged our perceptions. It is exactly the type of experience visitors are seeking. Be sure they're well-publicized.



The butterfly rainforest is a primary draw and a relaxing oasis on weekday mornings. On our second visit we saw butterflies hatching in the lab and the meticulous mounting and preservation process before wandering through the rest of the exhibits.

We left with a solid understanding of Florida's natural history and were awed by the magnitude of what we hadn't known.

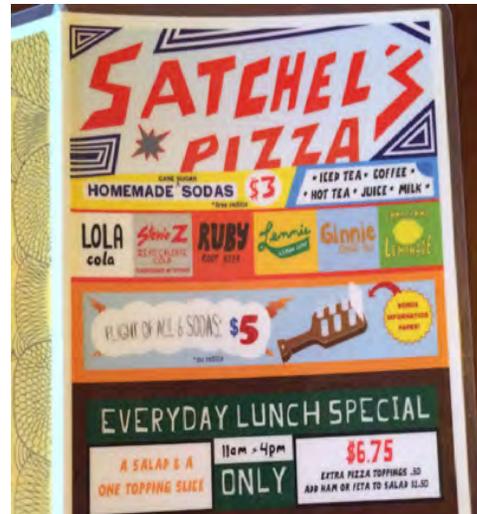
The encouragement of social media posts on this sign near the entrance is good. Repeating the message in other areas, like the lab, might increase engagement



WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

Restaurants and bars are one of your strengths, both downtown and throughout the city. We found outstanding options in the most unexpected places—strip malls, parking garages and tucked alongside the road.

The number of websites and references to Gainesville drinking and dining was impressive. We split up to try as many as we could and concluded that your reputation is well-deserved and rivals much larger cities.



Non-chain retail in a pedestrian-friendly setting is limited but the few shops that do exist form a good foundation. From our conversations it appears that retail comes and goes downtown, often faster than the restaurants, and no one has uncovered the combination that successfully drives enough critical mass to make downtown a shopping destination.

Finding an anchor, probably arts-related, and recruiting complementary shops would build upon the existing tenants.

The 352 Arts Roadmap survey results should provide ways to bolster support for the arts community. One key component will be a centralized calendar to replace the individual ones maintained by organizations, University departments and other entities.

The calendar would have helped when we tried to find things to do in the evening. It was difficult to access the smaller University events or to find details about cultural events held at places other than major venues.



WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Learning about and understanding Gainesville's story was not easy. We found bits and pieces at the various museums (and later learned that we missed the interpretive signs in the park adjacent to the Matheson that might have filled in some missing pieces about the area's history).

We loved the way the family's story was integrated throughout the Thomas Center. It put the family into context with the community and within the historical timeline. It's also a stellar example of adaptive reuse and strong public-private collaboration.

We could see the historic architecture in the downtown area but were at a loss when it came to finding information. Eventually we found that the cell phone tours extended throughout the various neighborhoods.

Having the Historic Gainesville cell phone tour brochures at restaurants and locations other than museums and the visitor centers will encourage both residents and visitors to explore. When friends and family come to visit, it will become one more option on the things-to-do list.



STEP BACK TO
Historic Gainesville
WITH YOUR CELL PHONE

Dial your cell phone for a free* insightful, self-paced tour of the Historic Gainesville, Florida. You control what you hear, when and what order. Enjoy fascinating details and recollections of the homes and buildings in the area. The tour includes the Thomas Center, Northeast Historic District, Matheson Museum Campus, Bed & Breakfast Inns, and Southeast Historic District.

**Free & Easy
Tour Instructions**

HOW WERE WE TREATED?

In nearly every situation—asking for directions, eating in restaurants, walking down the street, visiting shops and attractions—we were treated with kindness, respect and sincere friendliness. Well done!

No one made us feel like we were an imposition or annoyance and that's unusual. Generally, there are at least a few residents or staff members who are curt, disinterested or downright rude but we didn't encounter any. We felt safe and welcome wherever we went.

WAS OUR #1 NEED MET?

Clean, accessible restrooms are the #1 need for visitors. When we were at a museum, attraction, park or restaurant, they were available. When we were walking around or doing small segments of the historic district cell phone tour, there were none to be found.

Some businesses were accommodating even if we were not paying customers, while others apologized and said they had no public facilities. Even the visitor center had to direct us across the street to City Hall.

When visitors need to use a restroom and can't find one they're likely to get in their car and drive somewhere else. Once they've left, they're unlikely to return. If building and maintaining public restrooms is not in the budget, try to find alternatives and

THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. Visitors are on vacation.

They want things to be easy, they want to enjoy themselves. They're looking for experiences and opportunities that they can't get closer to home.

2. Not everyone uses a smartphone.

Even if your visitors have smartphones, they're not necessarily using them for anything other than phone calls, texting, taking pictures and checking email. Don't assume they'll be looking online for information, be sure to provide alternatives that are available beyond business hours on weekdays.

3. You love your town but visitors don't know your town like you do.

It can be difficult to see your community through fresh eyes. Can visitors navigate easily? Do they feel welcome? Are your "hidden gems" too well hidden?

Shop and restaurant owners should stand across the street from their businesses at least once a week and look at the impression their business makes. Are the windows clean? Are displays (including menus) fresh, attractive and inviting? Can people tell you're open?

4. Your visitors have interesting places and cool shops and restaurants in their towns too.

People travel—whether for the afternoon or the week—to see and experience something different. Every community has its own sense of place, its own personality. Help visitors experience and appreciate what makes your community different, what makes it worth their time and money. Don't try to be everything to everyone and don't create experiential expectations that you can't meet. Not every town will appeal to everyone and that's okay.

5. A number of your visitors may have disabilities related to vision, hearing or mobility.

There are little things you can do to provide accessibility. Making sure the videos are closed-captioned and that written materials can be accessed in auditory format goes a long way toward providing a rich experience.

Historic buildings and communities often have uneven surfaces and awkward transitions. Do what you can to mitigate these or provide alternatives.



GAINESVILLE AS A VISITOR DESTINATION TODAY

Strengths & Opportunities

- Friendliness
- Downtown dining district
- Lack of chains downtown
- Cultural offerings/352 Arts Roadmap
- Pedestrian and bike friendly
- Easy access to state parks
- Range of city parks and facilities
- Historic architecture
- Cell phone tour
- Partnership with University
- Proximity to other communities
- Breadth of culinary options
- Access to transportation corridors
- Excellent shoulder season weather
- Student population brings visitors

Challenges & Threats

- No identity other than U-Florida
- Minimal shopping downtown
- Limited non-chain breakfast options
- Historical interpretation
- Hard to navigate and find places
- Incomplete vehicular signage
- Lack of public restrooms downtown
- Expensive to fly into Gainesville
- Limited downtown lodging options
- Summer slowdown due to heat
- Limited public golf opportunities



NEXT STEPS

RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED WITHIN THE REPORT

- Functional public art
- Long term parking directionals
- Visit Gainesville Events Calendar viewing
- Cell phone tour information availability
- Directional signage on Kanapaha paths/map
- Volume of information at Haile Homestead
- Days and hours for Morningside Farm
- Publicity for on-campus events
- Social media reminders at Florida Museum of Natural History
- Downtown retail anchor
- Broader cultural and events calendar
- Distribution of cell phone tour brochures

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Identify Who You Are

This process will be the foundation for everything as you move forward. This isn't about a logo or a tagline. It isn't the marketing strategic plan that *Visit Gainesville* has planned for 2015. It's stepping back and thinking about who Gainesville is, at its core.

- Why would anyone want to visit?
- Why should a business locate here?
- What needs to be preserved?

There are many ways of approaching this including traditional visioning and planning or innovative processes that begin with mapping your sense of place and building upon it. It's important to embrace a process that provides the greatest opportunity for participation and collaboration in a format best suited for Gainesville.

Once the community has a defined identity everything else should be positioned to support and enhance that identity. This is why most branding plans can't be successfully implemented. The brand seeks to create a new persona and often fails to build upon the existing authenticity and assets.

Over time one of two things happen. Either (1) the brand implementation significantly diminishes the sense of place and quality of life for residents by

creating an entirely different look and feel or (2) the strength of the community's core character prevents implementation of the "new and improved" identity.

Gainesville and the entire Alachua County area felt like "Old Florida" to us. Charming, friendly and relaxed with a vintage appeal. You're not Orlando or South Beach or Tampa and that's okay. It's the Florida experience Baby Boomers remember from their childhood and an option that families and couples seek.

Work with what you have and embrace it!

Public Restrooms

If building public restrooms isn't feasible, identify public restrooms for use in the downtown area - especially after 5 and on weekends when City Hall is closed. This may be a challenge but might be as simple as an informal agreement with downtown businesses to allow visitors to use their restrooms when requested. They don't have to publicize the availability and they may be pleasantly surprised by the impulse purchases that occur.



NEXT STEPS

Digital Presence

Helping small businesses and restaurants create websites, claim local listings, verify their accounts on review sites and determine which, if any, social media platforms make sense for their business is a critical first step.

Small, hands-on sessions aren't expensive, but providing the tools and basic knowledge will be extremely valuable. Owners don't need more sessions about why they need to be on-line, they need help with HOW to be on-line.

Monthly workshops, email tips, and technical follow up can be used to create a stronger overall presence. Collectively hiring a consultant to provide the training and assistance would reduce the overall cost. For example, you provide monthly workshops where owners walk through:

- Website basics
- Setting up/updating the website
- Claiming local and review site listings
- Creating a dedicated email address
- Email marketing basics

A second level could include social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) and newsletters. There could be follow up support for questions and the option to have the consultant "do it all" for an additional fee.

This model helps small businesses who don't know where to start while helping them to pace themselves so they don't get overwhelmed.

Many communities attempt to use students and interns to do this and that usually doesn't work. Just because someone uses a platform, doesn't mean they understand how to utilize it for a small business or that they are able to effectively train and provide support.

Business Recruitment/Critical Mass Development

Once an identity is clearly defined it will be easier to recruit businesses for downtown and elsewhere. Owners look at communities as a place for themselves and their employees to live. Making it easy for them to understand who Gainesville is (other than the home of the Gators) will help attract businesses that are a good fit for the community.

For example, if you decided that your identity was all about sports— outdoor recreation, team sports, individual sports — and your sense of place backed that up, you could recruit related manufacturing, service and retail. This would give you a critical mass that would be worth the trip. The greater the critical mass the longer the distances people will travel.

If there are activities, events, retail, and restaurants that support the identity, Gainesville becomes the place to go for that particular experience. This doesn't mean that everything has to be related to your identity but new businesses should at least be complementary.

Wayfinding/Kiosks

Welcoming visitors with gateways and helping visitors navigate to and through Gainesville is important. Providing information about what's nearby and how to get there gives them options that encourage longer stays and potentially more revenue for the community. Kiosks are an easy place to start and should include locator maps and upcoming events. Placing them in areas where people gather: on campus, near the museums, at the Raceway or even at the mall, provides quick, easily understood information about what else there is to see and do.

