

ORANGE COUNTY NEWS

Cal State Fullerton students help foster kids grow produce and skills

The flitting of bees and butterflies from flower to flower isn't the only cross-pollination going on at the Fullerton Arboretum.

Cal State Fullerton students work at the campus arboretum alongside teens and young adults emancipating out of the foster care system to grow produce that is then incorporated into meals served at an off-campus cafe.

The program, called I-CAN, gives the young people marketable skills before they leave the foster system and provides the students a chance to see how their research has an effect in the community.

For both groups, the experience has been eye-opening, said Sara Johnson, professor of anthropology who oversees the program.



Sara Johnson is a professor of anthropology and project director for Cal State Fullerton's Urban Agriculture Community-based Research Experience program. (Photo courtesy of Cal State Fullerton)

"It was a big aha moment," said Johnson, when students realize the satisfaction of being actively engaged in something outside campus.

"I think it motivated them to get through college faster, to get out in the community."

Likewise, the young people learn food skills that go beyond what a server or busser in a typical restaurant acquires, calculating the volume of food harvested, for example, or analyzing nutrients.

"If we want these young adults to get good jobs where they're promotable, these are good skills," Johnson said.

The collaboration between CSUF and Monkey Business Cafe, a nonprofit social enterprise, is part of the university's Urban Agriculture Community-based Research Experience program, supported by U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute for Food and Agriculture Hispanic-Serving Institutions grants, which aim to produce graduates who can enhance the nation's food and agricultural scientific and professional workforce. Other CSUF projects under U-ACRE include organic waste diversion with Ladera Vista Junior High School, an urban garden at New Vista Transitional Living Center and the Seeds of Hope garden at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, all in Fullerton.

Last year, the partnership was spun off into I-CAN, which stands for Integrating Culinary, Agriculture and Nutrition, with the receipt of a four-year, \$400,000 USDA NIFA Community Food Project grant. The funding is allowing more food to be planted, more youths to participate in the program, and more staff to plan and supervise.

Such service learning projects, which combine learning goals and community service, have become more popular in recent years at all levels of education. Service learning organizations, including the National Service Learning Clearinghouse, have sprung up to offer project ideas and other resources to educators. Students respond to the chance to work on real-world problems that make classroom learning relevant while building their social skills and career experience. According to the National Research Council, the result is more engaged students and boosted learning.

Service learning provides a practical application of classroom learning, said Johnson, who started U-ACRE in 2011.

"They have to adjust their thinking on the fly," she said. "That apple core could make your crops grow" – augmentation coming from waste. "They hadn't thought of that."



Cal State Fullerton students and participants in the Monkey Business Cafe program for youths transitioning out of the foster system work at the I-CAN farm on campus. (Photo courtesy of Cal State Fullerton)

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Cal State Fullerton student Miguel Aguayo checks a water meter at the farm at the Fullerton Arboretum where CSUF students help youths transitioning from the foster system learn to grow produce. (Photo courtesy of Cal State Fullerton)

I-CAN students learn how the farm can integrate with the restaurant.

“If you want this much kale for the kale salad next winter, how much do you need to plant now?” Johnson gave as a typical question the students have learned to solve.

The CSUF students and the Monkey Business youths plant, weed and water; record water usage; keep track of planting dates and pest damage; and track plant growth. They document input of water, seeds, compost and human capital (time allocation of personnel collected using Toggl) vs. output of the harvest by weight and the increased human capital of CSUF and Monkey Business participants. Challenges include gopher and aphid management.

Miguel Aguayo, a Cal State Fullerton anthropology student, was impressed with how the team can figure out crop yield with an app called Canopeo developed by Oklahoma State.

Students take a photo of a row of plants with the app, which then compares the percent of plant cover vs. soil. That allows the students to figure out how much the harvest will yield.

“That’s cool. That excites students,” Johnson said.

The garden is now producing onions, carrots, bell peppers and peaches that go into Monkey Business menu items. Soon, tomatoes, tomatillos, cucumbers and other varieties of peppers will be ready to harvest.

Meanwhile, the Monkey Business youths create their own recipes for the café based on what’s grown on the half-acre farm at the Fullerton Arboretum, including their nutritional value determined with ESHA food processor nutrition analysis software.

If a dish needs more potassium, for example, they learn they can add beans. “It gives them a skill set,” Johnson said. “We want them to think about the recipes they are making in the restaurant.”

The project is partly supported by the Fullerton nonprofit Hart Community Homes, which provides residential treatment for boys ages 13 to 18 in the foster care system. The youths go through a six-month paid job training program and work with a job coach to map out a path to success.

At the cafe, which opened in 2005, the youths learn kitchen and front-of-house skills, such as knife safety and the importance of keeping a clean kitchen.

“From working there I was able to save money to support myself, to buy my first vehicle,” said Randy Johnson, an alum of the program, in a video on the cafe’s website. “I could not even explain how much that place has done for me.”



Service learning students from an anthropology class on culture and nutrition work at the farm on the Cal State Fullerton campus. (Photo courtesy of Cal State Fullerton)



Wendy Fawthrop

Reporting on the interesting research and stimulating events at Cal State Fullerton is right up Wendy's journalistic alley. A San Francisco native, Wendy earned a bachelor's degree in biology from Stanford and a master's in journalism from UC Berkeley. After working in the news offices at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and UC San Francisco Medical Center, she became a business/technology reporter for the Puget Sound Business Journal and served as business editor at the Daily Breeze before moving to copy editing and working for the Seattle Times. She joined the Register in 2003, where she was a team leader on the copy desk until early 2017. She teaches copy editing at Chapman University part time, has two grown children and lives in downtown Anaheim, where she can walk to yoga and good coffee.