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Inmates to learn organic gardening

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Thanks to a new \$15,000 federal grant, inmates at the Franklin County House of Correction will be learning about organic gardening and sustainability issues as part of Greenfield Community College's Farm and Food Systems program.

The college, which applied for the grant along with the jail's human services director, will begin offering the first of its farming classes at the Elm Street jail next spring, and also is gearing up to eventually offer three courses to inmates sitting alongside other GCC students at the jail.

Inmates in the jail's lowest security level re-entry house have already been planting peas and harvesting kale at the Just Roots Community Garden off Leyden Road as volunteers, but before long they will also be able to receive internship college credits that they can apply at GCC after they're released.

The first Organic Gardening class at the jail will allow a dozen inmates to earn college credit while installing an organic garden in the jail yard that can also be used to feed inmates and in teaching them culinary skills.

"A few different positive things can come out of it," said Edmund Hayes, the director of inmate programs in the Franklin County Sheriff's Department. Apart from the fact that inmates can learn skills they can apply in finding work after they're released, they're also being exposed to college-level courses and the chance to succeed at them on a par with other GCC students."

And some of those GCC students will also be taking courses in the college's Farm and Food Systems program right alongside the inmates in the jail, as part of a second iteration of the new grant.

Modeled after a GCC sociology course, “Crime and Punishment in the US,” which is being taught for the fourth time at the jail as part of an “Inside-Out” course that splits the in-jail class between incarcerated and other GCC students.

The grant includes funding for two GCC Farm and Food Systems instructors to receive specialized training next summer in teaching using the “Inside Out” approach, which will allow for not only the Organic Gardening class to be offered there to a mixed class in the following year, but also “Issues in Sustainability” along with a one-credit class, “Creating Farm and Food Co-operatives.”

“Exposure to college-level courses has been shown to reduce recidivism,” said GCC’s Abrah Dresdale, who said the idea for the grant came from Revan Schendler, who teaches the “Inside-Out” sociology course. “If these men come out of the jail and are interested in going to GCC in Farming and Food Systems, or Environmental Sciences or Renewable Energy, these courses can help them get on that path and also offer job-training skills.”

The course in starting co-ops could be especially helpful for inmates who are released and face the challenge of trying to overcome the stigma to get hired.

“If folks are interested in creating their own business,” she says, “it makes sense to go in cooperatively with other men who’ve been inside (the jail) previously, so they could be worker-owners, they could control the business and not have to worry about getting hired or fired.”

A student in the Farm and Food Systems program, Joshua Friend, took the “inside-out” sociology class in the jail and has served as an escort for low-risk inmates in the jail’s “Kimball House” program volunteering at Stone Soup Cafe. Next spring, he’ll intern at the jail to help the gardening class instructor in getting materials and siting a garden, as well as setting up a composting system at the jail, presenting workshops on composting and permaculture, and escorting inmates to Stone Soup Cafe and to the Just Roots community farm to do internships for which they’ll receive credit to add to class credit they’ll also be earning, to encourage them to follow up at GCC after they’re released.

Friend was a high-school dropout who struggled with drug and alcohol problems as well as criminal behavior before he “found organic farming as an avenue out of that, to connect me with a meaningful, purposeful way of life and to community and the earth,” he explained. “My passion’s really been to help create systems in my community that can offer that to other people who may be heading down a similar path.”

Even if the classes don’t lead to jobs, he said, the practice of “slowing down” to prepare the soil, plant, tend and then harvesting can encourage a nurturing that’s rewarding in itself.

Especially for inmates who may have been violent and disruptive, there’s a realization “you can’t be that way to a plant. You have to be tender, you have to be patient. There are all of these qualities inherent in behaving around plants in order for them to grow properly that you have to adhere to, and it really forces us to come down to a different level of life, to that level of relationship with earth.”

Friend noted that jails are designed to be sterile environments “devoid of life and color, with restriction to outdoors. For a person who’s been in a sterile environment like that for a week, a month, 10 months, two years, to be able to connect and actually put your hands into the earth to not only watch something grow, but know you’re stewarding that growth can be life-changing.”

Dresdale said that students in GCC’s recently organized Farming and Food Systems program are interested in issues of food justice and access to healthful food and are “particularly driven by their values” and want to provide ways for people who may have never savored a fresh beet or squash, for example, to have that opportunity, while also bringing back to life what once was a working farm on the jail grounds.

“Isn’t that exciting?” she asked. “There’s massive potential there.”

There’s also the potential of introducing inmates to the idea of taking courses alongside community college students, and learning — maybe most importantly — that they can succeed.

“It’s important to introduce our population to a community of individuals that’s willing to work with them,” said Hayes, adding that half a dozen inmates have already been volunteering at the community farm, where people have been supportive. “We want to expose students in our program to community members outside, and it’s very positive for them to see that the same expectations for students on the outside are held for students on the inside.”

Even if inmates decide after they’re released not to get a college certificate or degree, Hayes said, “It’s valuable for them to learn to do something valuable in their free time, whether it’s gardening or just working with people.”

On the Web:

www.gcc.mass.edu/academics/programs/farm-and-food-systems

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