



NEWS

El Camino College Compton Center
Public Relations Department | 16007 Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance, CA 90506
Telephone: (310) 660-3406 | FAX: (310) 660-3946 | Contact: Ann M. Garten

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A FRUITFUL PARTNERSHIP **El Camino College Compton Center Garden Project** **Puts Students in Touch with Nature and Mentors**

When Dr. August Hoffman, a professor of psychology and avid gardener, joined the faculty at the Compton campus in 2000, he planted a few flowers outside of his office. In 2003, when an open lot (originally slated for a campus park) became available, he started a vegetable garden. Today, Dr. Hoffman heads the El Camino College Compton Center's Garden Project, nearly three acres brimming with vegetables, fruit and citrus trees, grape arbors, and flowers.

Maintaining the garden is an all-volunteer effort that benefits the students, the campus, and the community. A key component of the project is its mentor program, which pairs students from Dr. Hoffman's classes with students from California State University, Northridge. Together, they cultivate the soil, as well as friendships.

Dr. Hoffman notes that the experience is a win-win situation. The Northridge students learn leadership skills, while the Compton Center students learn about life at a four-year university. They gain confidence and become more motivated to transfer – findings that Dr. Hoffman has published in academic journals.

"It's amazing what people can do when they work together," said Dr. Hoffman. "It's a lesson in positive psychology."

The benefits of the garden project go well beyond the potential to boost transfer rates. They include:

- Reinforcing strong work ethics: Students see the result of their labor and feel a sense of accomplishment.
- Promoting good nutrition: Dr. Hoffman says that many of the students didn't know about basic vegetables like eggplants or artichokes. Now, they not only know them, they know how to cook them and so do their families.
- Giving back to the community: The project beautifies the campus, and its produce is often donated to the community.

Work on the garden takes place every Saturday morning. About 50 students gather at the garden from 7 a.m. to noon. Eight Northridge psychology students meet with Dr. Hoffman in advance to review the day's work plan. Next, each Northridge student is paired with a group of students from the Compton Center. The Northridge students earn college credit by serving as mentors. Compton Center students earn community service hours for their participation. The work ends with a potluck style barbecue, often with extended family members and former students joining the fun.

The program is funded by a Community Service-Learning Grant from California State University, Northridge. Donations for plants, tools, and other supplies also come from students, faculty, and corporations, including the Tree People, Home Depot, and Armstrong's Nursery.

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