

Colleges shine spotlight on nutrition

BRENDA WARD, bward@i35targetmedia.com

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There's something to be said for joining forces to create a more healthy and educated community, and that's just what students at St. Olaf and Carleton colleges are in the process of setting into motion.

Thanks to a one-year, \$25,000 grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service through the Learn and Serve America Program, the St. Olaf Center for Experiential Learning, Carleton College and various community partners have begun the Food and Nutrition Service Learning Collaborative.

“The project is designed to leverage the energy and skills of college students involved with service learning courses at St. Olaf and Carleton to increase awareness of healthy eating among K-12 students and other community members,” including those most at risk for obesity-related illnesses, said Nate Jacobi, associate director of civic engagement.

Jacobi and Carleton coordinator Adrienne Falcon recognized the “tremendous interest in food and health issues by students at both campuses” as being an opportunity to work with the community and schools on a large-scale project. College students involved from both campuses number around 140.

Ultimately, the projects are designed to create and implement curriculum activities around nutrition, healthy eating, plant biology, plant growth, Northfield-area farms and agriculture. Still in the early stages of the collaborative, details of the program are being hashed out, with students soon to apply their education to develop interactive activities within the community.

So far, one project has been set into motion.

Last fall, St. Olaf student Anne Daily began working with fifth grade students at St. Dominic School to create a school garden on the north side of the school property. Currently, St. Dominic students are planting lettuce in bins indoors, a continuous project from which they have already reaped benefits, having harvested the lettuce four times and using it for the school lunch program.

“I think that giving the students an opportunity to work with St. Olaf and Carleton students is a benefit,” said Vicki Marvin, St. Dominic School principal. “It gives the college students an opportunity to be mentors to our students and our students to think about what they might want to do in college and how they can impact the community.”

In addition, already some students have been encouraged to eat more salad and to think differently about what they eat, said Marvin.

The school is also in the early stages of planning gardening activities with the third grade teacher and potentially other grades, as well as choosing which plants to grow in their garden this spring.



Students from Lori Beumer's fifth grade class at St. Dominic School plant lettuce as part of the Food and Nutrition Service Learning Collaborative, a project of St. Olaf and Carleton colleges. (Photo courtesy of St. Olaf College)

“At St. Dominic we really are trying to do a lot more education of the entire child, more than just academics, and that includes nutrition and how students impact the community and the rest of the world,” Marvin said. “Doing things like growing our own garden is helpful to the environment and to our own health. Schools have an opportunity to teach a lot of things, but it’s also important to help develop values and beliefs that will carry on through the rest of the students’ lives.”

OTHER PROJECTS

Greenvale Park Elementary School plant growth

Facilitators: Tony Seidl’s third grade class and students from St. Olaf Assistant Professor of Biology Diane Angell’s Environmental Health classes

The plan: Third grade students will grow edible plants while learning about the science of plant growth, the nutritional aspects of those plants, and how they contribute to healthy eating. The project is tentatively planned to continue through the summer by transitioning plants to the Community Garden next door and harvesting them through the summer and fall.

Environmental Studies Senior Seminar

Facilitators: Pam Haupt of the Northfield Public Schools Child Nutrition Services and students from St. Olaf Associate Professor of Chemistry and Environmental Studies Paul Jackson’s classes

The plan: Northfield Public Schools has joined the Farm to School Initiative (connecting local farms with schools for improved nutrition), though the program has not yet been widely promoted. St. Olaf students will develop educational and marketing materials for the Northfield Public School’s Child and Nutrition Services to promote the positive personal and environmental benefits of the program and of eating healthy.

Puravida Program microbes study

Facilitators: HealthFinders Collaborative and students from Carleton Associate Professor of Biology Debbie Walser-Kuntz’s microbiology classes

The plan: HealthFinders Collaborative has begun a new health and nutrition program called Puravida. Through microbiology labs, Carleton students will study gut microbes to determine how diet may influence those microbes and how microbes in turn influence obesity or health, later reporting on their findings.

Ecosystems ecology

Facilitator: Greenvale Park Elementary School and students from Carleton Assistant Professor of Biology Daniel Hernandez’s classes

The plan: Returning to the Greenvale Park gardening project, students from Carleton will likely teach Greenvale students about the final cycles of gardening: Composting to enrich the soil and preparing for the next growing season.

Survey evaluations

Facilitator: Students from St. Olaf Professor of Psychology Dana Gross’s Research Methods Course

The plan: To evaluate the impact that the above activities may have on the community.

— *Brenda Ward can be reached at 645-1134.*