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Steans Center Newsletter

Steans Center
Service Learning and Environmental Stewardship

From Classrooms and Brownfields to Urban Farms and Gardens

Environmental Stewardship Taking Root at DePaul

By Dan Baron

Traveling through Chicago may not remind one of farming, but Chicago once was and is again becoming an epicenter for agriculture. Urban agriculture is not only a pastime for backyard gardeners, but an emerging industry and a tool for advancing education and career development. Ask Andrew Chae, an alum of DePaul who majored in political science and environmental studies. Chae spent many days and weeks in the last two years of his undergraduate degree at the Gary Comer Youth Center (GCYC) in the city’s Greater Grand Crossing community where he worked as an environmental stewardship community intern. Chae worked with teens at a rooftop garden and urban farm as part of GCYC’s “Green Teens” program. “The most rewarding part is having a relationship with kids and being able to share my passion for farming with them,” he says.

When Chae, a native of Waterford, Michigan, came to DePaul, he initially thought of going into law or medicine. Taking biology courses, he says, led him to environmental studies and ultimately urban agriculture. His experience suggests the great potential environmental stewardship opportunities have for students at DePaul.

The Steans Center provides support for service-learning efforts that emphasize environmental stewardship by assisting faculty to connect to community-based organizations, developing courses and internships and working with students and community partners involved in community-based environmental activities. Chae’s multiple years of involvement with GCYC were partly supported by the Harold M. and Adeline S. Morrison Family Foundation that funds the Steans Center’s Environmental Stewardship Community Internship (ESCI) program, a partnership between the Center, GCYC and DePaul’s Department of Environmental Science and Studies.

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Masters in Sustainable Urban Development

During Fall 2014, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences inaugurated a master’s program in Sustainable Urban Development (SUD). Interdisciplinary in nature, students engage with urban development issues through an array of courses relevant to the environmental, economic and social sustainability of cities. The program features an emphasis on brownfields, GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping and digital urban design, emphasizing technical skills while introducing students to sustainable development policies, data collection and analysis through practical experience. “This program will focus on the nuts and bolts of urban analysis,” says Dr. Joseph Schwieterman, Professor in DePaul’s School of Public Service and Director of the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development. “I think that what distinguishes us is that we are rooted in techniques for urban problem solving through the lens of sustainability.” Dr. Euan Hague, Chair of Geography and Co-Director of SUD with Schwieterman and the Steans Center’s Howard Rosing, states that SUD emphasizes how sustainable urban development is a three-pronged concept: “It’s about economic and environmental sustainability — and social justice. Chicago is a great place for this program.” The Steans Center plays a key role in SUD by assisting in placing second-year students in term-long internships with community development and urban planning organizations throughout Chicagoland. visit: las.depaul.edu/sud/

Community-based Research (Cbr) Faculty Fellows
Contribute to Sustaining Communities

Geography professors Win Curran and Euan Hague served as the 2012-2013 Steans Center Cbr Faculty Fellows. The fellowship promotes Cbr among faculty who involve students as researchers with community partners. “Preserving Pilsen” advanced a multi-year collaboration between DePaul University and the Pilsen Alliance in Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican-American community on Chicago’s lower west side. Pilsen has undergone gentrification since the mid-1990s and since 2004, in partnership with Pilsen Alliance, the professors have compiled an inventory of properties with students as data collectors. The project has led to publications and, more importantly, a community resource to understand the processes underlying gentrification. The Cbr fellowship project focused on redevelopment of the Fisk coal-fired power plant closed in September 2012. The Fisk site and the challenges it poses for environmental justice and sustaining community were the focus of Curran’s Justice, Inequity and the Urban Environment course. Students studied the history of environmental degradation in Pilsen to explore how social justice can be achieved in the redevelopment of the Fisk site. The project also served as the organizing theme of Curran’s Urban Planning course where students organized into groups that produced a final project tackling one aspect of community development in Pilsen with a special focus on challenges of the Fisk site. Students were guided by results of a resident survey conducted by Pilsen Alliance asking residents what they would like to see on the site and in the neighborhood more broadly. Curran and Hague expect to have publications and a website to create broader community awareness.

Also see: Contest Chicago: Pilsen and Gentrification 2006 by Euan Hague and Winifred Curran

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Chae’s work was part of an emerging university-wide effort to create environmental stewardship opportunities for students in Chicago. These efforts include service-learning courses, internships, and a student organization. A service-learning course on environmental stewardship is now offered in partnership with Chicago’s Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and plans are underway for a new curriculum on urban agriculture in Environmental Science and Studies. At the core of that curriculum are service-learning courses on urban agriculture and community food systems. These courses contribute to the Steans Center’s Community Food Systems Initiative, an effort to further DePaul’s curricular and community-based research contributions to building sustainable food systems and food justice in Chicago neighborhoods.

DePaul also hosts a concentration in sustainability management in the Dreihaus College of Business and a new Masters in Sustainable Urban Development in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (see page 2). Meanwhile, DePaul students have taken it upon themselves to create the Urban Farming Organization (UFO) which hosts the DePaul Urban Garden (DUG) located on the Lincoln Park Campus (at Belden and Bissell) producing vegetables that are donated to the Seton Food Pantry in Vincent DePaul Parish and sold at a farmstand held at Ray Meyer Fitness and Recreation Center.

DePaul’s Sustainability Initiatives Task Force published the university’s first sustainability plan in November of 2011. What makes DePaul unique is that student engagement both on and off-campus and throughout Chicago neighborhoods is central to the plan. “The idea is to get people at DePaul engaged in sustainability projects that are of interest to them,” says Dr. James Montgomery, Co-Chair of the Sustainability Initiatives Task Force and Associate Professor in the Department of Environmental Science. Montgomery, who brings GCYC high school student to DePaul to work in his soil lab, notes “in the area of community engagement, one of the big things that has come up is the need to improve curricular and co-curricular offerings that are experiential and feature service-learning.” The Task Force also called for more collaboration on sustainability – a complex and dynamic issue that can involve a wide range of disciplines. “This work can bring faculty together and have multiple disciplines weigh in on what can be significant and thorny sustainability challenges,” says Dr. Scott Kelley, Co-Chair of the Task Force since 2009 and Assistant Vice President for Vincentian Scholarship at DePaul. “There is a perception and reality that we work in silos, and people are hungry to get beyond that and focus on project-focused research.”

A key, Kelley suggests, is raising awareness about the range of efforts tied to sustainability at the university, an initiative tightly intertwined with DePaul’s Vincentian mission.

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“Sustainability is woven deeply into what DePaul is about – it is so closely related to the university’s mission,” says Kelley. DePaul educators who have been involved in efforts that feature environmental stewardship or – like the sustainability plan – help set the stage for future efforts, point to the great potential of this work. “My hope is that we’ll see more opportunities for students to participate in – and more community-based organizations we can connect to,” says Montgomery, who adds that there’s even a computerized sustainability game being developed called “The Carbonless Community” that can teach users how to make choices about the environment. “I would love to have a network of organizations in Chicago that are willing to take on our students and mentor them,” adds Dr. Judy Bramble, an ecologist and chair of the university’s Department of Environmental Science and Studies. “Curriculum can give students a foundation of knowledge. But there is no learning like there is in the community.”

Dr. Barbara Willard, Associate Professor in the College of Communications, recruits students for the GCYC internship. She also teaches a service-learning course where students gain direct experience in urban agriculture. Willard points to three elements that often define a productive service-learning experience: the desire of students to learn about a specific subject (and/or work in a community); the interests of low-income communities that are receptive to students, and a strong curricular component. These elements are all supported by the Steans Center. Willard and others add that the experience of working in economically distressed communities can also be an eye-opener for students. “People can see it as a positive to get outdoors and make a change,” she says. “When students go to places that are distressed – physically, socially and economically – you really learn who wants to do the work of urban agriculture and food justice.” In the long term, she adds, “students are also getting experience in an area where there are jobs. Students who work in urban education can have an edge when it is time to look for work.”
As Bramble notes, “that is what our curriculum is about. Service-learning comes in when you go from learning the concept of environmental issues – to giving students a taste of what they feel like in person.”

At GCYC, the current internship program was recently joined by another environmentally-focused project, Discover DePaul. New grant funds were attained by Montgomery and Dr. Christie Klimas that combine an on-campus soil science project with GCYC students with fieldwork in Greater Grand Crossing. It’s an example of how environmental stewardship is growing at DePaul. “For environmental studies students, if we are broadly educating them about nature – and the interaction of humans with nature – we need to give them tools for leaving the university and effecting change,” says Bramble. “Service-learning is key to making that happen. In fact, it’s essential.”

Andrew Chae, who is now a full-time employee of GCYC, says “the experiences have changed from day to day. In the very beginning, a lot of my time was spent cleaning up the garden and getting to know students. Later, I worked with kids on many things – like harvesting and planting.” Chae says that the experience enabled him to work on a hands-on basis – but also thinks about the broader implications of urban farming. “I’ve learned that urban farming needs to be in the hands of the community – it needs to be about food sovereignty.”

Marji Hess, GCYC Garden Manager says, “for us, the partnership with DePaul has been instrumental in our growth. The partnership has grown and speaks so clearly for our mission.”