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El Camino College Compton Center Garden Project Honors Martin Luther King, Jr.

The legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is honored at El Camino College Compton Center with a new grape arbor installed in the Compton Center's Garden Project.

Compton Center psychology Professor Dr. August Hoffman recently announced the latest addition to the garden, helped by a grant from California State University Northridge, which supplied the necessary materials. Students from both Compton Center and CSU Northridge pitched in to provide the labor.

The new arbor features a trellis that connects to an arbor completed the previous semester in honor of Cesar Chavez. The newly planted grapevines will eventually climb each arbor and meet over the trellis – shading a sidewalk while creating beauty and meaning on campus.

"The arbors symbolize the coming together of blacks and Hispanics, which is exactly how the arbors came to be," said Dr. Hoffman. "They were built by students of both backgrounds, working side-by-side in our garden."

The Garden Project began in 2003 when an open lot (originally slated for a campus park) became available and Dr. Hoffman volunteered to plant a vegetable garden. Today, it spans nearly three acres brimming with vegetables, flowers, and fruit and citrus trees.

A key component of the project is its mentor program, which pairs students from Dr. Hoffman's classes with students from CSU Northridge. It's a win-win situation, according to Hoffman. Northridge students learn leadership skills, while Compton Center students learn about life at a four-year university. They gain confidence and become more motivated to transfer.

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 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 Compton Center. The Northridge students earn college credit by serving as mentors. Compton 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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