

2026 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SHOWCASE

Growing Educational Pathways for Food Sovereignty

Dr. Leah Joyner, Dr. Gabbie Gonzales, Dr. Si Gao

Community Partners: Del Paso Heights Growers Alliance, Center for Land Based Learning, Luther Burbank HS & Grant Union HS Urban Agriculture Programs



Project Description

- The Growing Educational Pathways for Food Sovereignty (GEPFS) project connects high school and college students through hands-on, community-based learning in food justice and urban agriculture.
- By addressing food insecurity and promoting educational equity, the program supports pathways to higher education at CSUS and beyond, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities in Sacramento.

In Fall 2025, we launched two key phases:

- 1) implementing the Accelerated College Entrance (ACE) program at Luther Burbank HS and Grant Union HS, which enables students to earn college credit while engaging in urban agriculture
- 2) developing a Service-Learning Course that connects students from diverse fields with food justice initiatives.

Career Readiness/Civic Impact

The project was led by faculty from the interdisciplinary Food Environment and Social Transformation (FEAST) Lab: Dr. Leah Joyner from Kinesiology, Dr. Gabrielle Gonzales from Sociology, and Dr. Si Gao from Environmental Studies.

Our college students have engaged directly with our community partners through direct service volunteering on site at gardens and community centers:

- SOC students in Dr. Gonzales' Sociology of Health & Illness course participated in field days & volunteer experiences with partners like Del Paso Heights Growers Alliances & Alchemist CDC
- Recreation students in Dr. Joyner's class participated in college campus visit days
- ENVST students in Dr. Gao's class participated in college campus visit days

Experiential Learning for Career Readiness & Civic Impact

One of the primary goals of *Growing Educational Pathways for Food Sovereignty* is to create pathways to higher education for high school students from low-income, marginalized communities. Bringing these students to campus and fostering relationships among high school students, faculty, and college students is a key strategy we use to address inequities in access to experiential learning opportunities.

Additionally, we incorporate high school students into college courses as part of an asset-based approach, rather than a deficit-oriented one. This framework emphasizes and elevates the knowledge and lived experiences of high school students. For example, many of the students we bring to campus have valuable experience in urban agriculture. Through a reciprocal teaching and learning model, college students also benefit by learning directly from these high school students.



Community Impact

At Grant Union & Luther Burbank High Schools:

- 20 students in the Environmental Horticulture class were enrolled in the Accelerated College Entrance Program (ACE)
- Over 100 students participated in workshops on topics like outdoor cooking and soil science.
- Over 80 students visited CSUS campus for college visit days and field workshops.
- Dr. Si Gao spoke with 100+ students at Career Day.
- We worked alongside our community partners to plan and execute a plant and bake sale fundraising event.

A community partner said: *"I really enjoyed meeting the students and look forward to having them again soon! We got that garden cleared out too which I am so thankful and impressed with. You all made that happen."*

Campus Community Impact

- The GEPFS program has also impacted the campus community in a variety of ways. For example, students from sociology gained hands on experience working directly with local community organizations, creating stronger connections with the local community. Students were able to connect classroom concepts of food inequality to their community work.

A student said: *"It's great to be hands on in the community and to understand all the steps it takes for food we eat every day to get to our table. It makes me appreciate the hard work, particularly as I understand the inequity of access to and control of health foods within people's communities."*