

Sustainability grows as college major in Valley



Unrecognizable person picking carrots on field, close-up, low section [Purchase photo reprints »](#)

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For students in western Massachusetts, green is the new black.

Majors and certificates in different areas of sustainability are becoming increasingly popular at local colleges. Some are creating entire new programs to meet the rising demand.

In the fall, Greenfield Community College plans to introduce a program called SAGE, for Sustainable Agriculture and Green Energy — a collaboration of existing energy-efficiency and farm and food systems programs at the college, said Peter Rosnick, the college dean.

“The reason why there is so much interest in both of these programs is

because (students) want to find solutions for climate change, they want to find solutions around energy and heating homes and finding means of transportation past oil,” he said.

“There is also a recognition that we need to be more self-reliant. If you are concerned about climate change, if you are concerned about the state of our environment, we need to figure out how to produce our own food,” he said.

Energy efficiency and farm and food systems are both degree programs at GCC that are more related than one might think, said Abrah Dresdale, coordinator of the farm and food systems program.

“The global industrial agriculture system is the No. 1 consumer of fossil fuels, expending more carbon than any other industry, including war,” she said. “There’s a huge implication on our food availability and the whole way the system works, from the machinery used on the farm, to the plastic used in the packaging to the transportation of the food thousands of miles.”

SAGE will be the first program of its kind at GCC, and will provide opportunities not only for students, but for faculty and kindergarten through Grade 12 educators to learn ways of incorporating these issues into their curricula, Dresdale said.

Students who go through the program will have greater access to local jobs at all levels of the agriculture industry, from farming to processing to distribution, Rosnick said.

Even the campus itself is becoming more sustainable, with the addition of an almost zero net energy greenhouse and a permaculture garden, Dresdale said. The college already produces renewable energy from solar and geothermal

power sources, she said.

“A big part of (SAGE) is that we wanted to build out the campus as a sustainable laboratory, have our infrastructure and campus grounds embodying the values that we’re teaching about,” Dresdale said. “Not only are we teaching about it, but people can come and actually experience the structures and activities related to SAGE on our campus.”

UMass projects

Sustainability is becoming increasingly popular at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as well. The sustainable agriculture major grew from only five students in 2003 to 85 in 2013, said John Gerber, a professor in the major.

UMass offers a four-year bachelor’s degree in sustainable agriculture as well as a 15-credit online certificate program, Gerber said.

The program focuses on three main areas: local food production and marketing, farm-based education and public policy and advocacy, he said.

“The culture is changing,” he said. “Local foods, sustainable food production, have a buzz nationwide, particularly in New England. Going down to the local farmers market once a week is a trend that is very popular in New England. Local food has become almost routine.”

The sustainable agriculture program at UMass includes reducing the carbon footprint of the food industry, Gerber added, noting the major impact agriculture has on climate change.

“Climate change is one of the things we need to be concerned about, certainly

the end of accessible fossil fuels,” he said. “This gives local food more of an opportunity. It doesn’t have to be shipped as far and it can be grown in a way that is much more ecological.” For example, using manure as fertilizer is an ecological farming practice that may not be possible on a thousand-acre farm, but is very practical at the local level, Gerber said.

“It’s probably not the whole answer, but it’s part of how we’re going to manage our food systems in the future,” he said. “An increasing percentage of our food will be grown locally.”

Older students studying at the University Without Walls, an adult bachelor’s degree completion program affiliated with UMass, can design their own concentrations in sustainability, said Melanie DeSilva, the program’s marketing and recruitment manager.

Areas of study include food and farming, sustainable entrepreneurship, sustainable public health and sustainability in journalism and communications, she said.

Many students at UWW work full time and can get class credit for their past professional experience, like owning their own farm or running an environmental nonprofit, DeSilva said.

Kari Bremer, 45, is studying sustainability through UWW and owns her own sustainable design company called Natural & Green Design.

“I’m hoping that the combination of my life experience combined with the academic investigation in sustainability, when I get my degree, I’m going to be that much more informed in my career,” Bremer said. “My reason for going into it is to really explore all the areas that affect our life (to which) sustainability can be applied. As a designer, I looked at how I can create more

sustainable design.”

These areas of study are important in today’s world and can lead to careers that are satisfying and give back to the community, Gerber said.

“What students tell me is that it’s real, it’s fulfilling,” he said. “These students want to do more than moving money around, they want to do something that’s a service to the larger community. They want to make sure good food is in people’s hands at a reasonable cost.”