

With new ag complex, Chemeketa sets sights recruiting high school agriculture students



The new agriculture complex at Chemeketa additional classroom and lab space. Photo by Chemeketa Community College

BY RACHEL ALEXANDER
Of the Salem Reporter

Every summer, Jared Hibbard-Swanson, the farm and garden program manager at Marion-Polk Food Share, helps a few dozen middle and high schoolers farm a six-acre plot in northeast Salem.

The Marion-Polk Food Share's youth farm provides free boxes of local organic produce to about 120 Salem-area households and aims to educate local students about food systems.

Chemeketa Community College interns give the program a big boost, Hibbard-Swanson said, offering students expertise and role models.

"It's inspiring for the younger students, the teenagers ... to see a pathway forward in agriculture. There's a negative stereotype about what type of work is available in ag," Hibbard-Swanson said. "They can become technicians, they can become farm managers, they can become farm owners even."

But the program often doesn't have funding to pay interns.

That will change next summer thanks to a new Chemeketa grant aimed at encouraging more Hispanic students to pursue careers in agriculture.

The college recently received a \$274,590 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be spent over four years.

Tim Ray, Chemeketa's dean for agricultural sciences and technology, said the college plans to partner with the Gervais and Woodburn school districts to create an ambassador program "where we empower our current students at the community college to go to the high schools and talk about their experiences."

The grant is intended to get high school students to enroll at Chemeketa in agriculture-related programs, and support college students already studying. Chemeketa students who are mentors will receive tuition waivers as an incentive, Ray said.

As part of the grant, three college students will serve as interns per year. Ray said they may work with the Food Share's youth farm, as well as a smaller 1.5-acre

farm on the Chemeketa campus which is being set up near the newly constructed agriculture complex, which opened this fall.

"Chemeketa's had a fantastic horticulture program for decades, but now with the new building we're really wanting to highlight and create those partnerships with our area high schools," Ray said.

The complex, which opened this fall, sits on the east end of campus. Ray said the on-site farm will have a mix of woody ornamentals grown by horticulture students, as well as a fruit and vegetable farm.

Students will be able to learn about crop management, irrigation technology and more.

"We really have the opportunity to have a working farm," he said.

Chemeketa received the grant because it's a Hispanic Serving Institution, a federal designation for colleges and universities

with a student body that's at least 25% Hispanic.

Ray said the grant is focused on the Gervais and Woodburn districts because both have a high share of Hispanic students, though they hope to eventually expand to other area districts.

Though Chemeketa is about 28% Hispanic, just 11 to 14% of horticulture and wine studies students are Hispanic, according to the grant narrative. As the college now seeks to add more agricultural degree options, Ray said they also want to show local students that there are a variety of possible careers in agriculture.

"Part of it is the connotation of agriculture and just being a fieldworker, we're really trying hard to break that," he said. "We're training you to be a manager, a supervisor, an entrepreneur in the agricultural world."

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