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'Full circle:' WKU farm-to-campus program feeds, educates campus

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From left, students Robbie Anderson, Rachel Bunner and Ben Benton break up cheese curds as they work for Hilltopper Creamery in 2017 at the Taylor Center on the WKU Ag Farm.

Daily News File

Soon, Western Kentucky University students might notice a difference in the quality of campus food.

After several years of preparation, the university has launched a farm-to-campus program, which transfers meat, produce and dairy products from the WKU Farm to students' plates.

While the program is starting small, the goal is to include these locally sourced products in every campus restaurant, said Jace Lux, WKU spokesperson. He added that it's the first program of its kind in Kentucky to offer three different products.

"It's ambitious but worthwhile," Lux said.

WKU had three steps to bring the program from an idea to a reality, said Dr. Paul Woosley, director of WKU's Agricultural Education and Research Center and agronomy professor.

First, it needed facilities that would allow students to grow vegetables year-round, because the summer vegetable season harvest wouldn't last through the fall and spring semesters. An anonymous donation this year provided the funds to build more greenhouses and high tunnels.

Second, WKU had to hire a horticulture technician to oversee student vegetable production.

Third, WKU filled out paperwork with Aramark, the campus dining partner, to ensure food safety standards and get its Good Agricultural Practices certification.



After all the preparation, Woosley said he was glad that the program is now in motion.

“It’s one of those moments when you sit back and exhale,” he said. “But now it comes to the real work of getting students involved.”

The farm-to-campus program is run by 30 to 50 students enrolled in horticulture and agriculture sustainability each semester. The amount of locally sourced campus food will increase in the spring after these students begin greenhouse planting, Woosley said.

It gives students the opportunity for “applied, hands-on learning,” Lux said.

“It actually produces something that will not only help them out but also will benefit the entire campus community,” he said.

The program also contributes to WKU’s sustainability goals in several ways. Control over food production allows students to get produce in the “safest, most nutritious and environmentally-sound way,” Woosley said, especially when considering the region’s unique karst environment. Using best management practices concerning fertilizer, pesticide and water use allows WKU to control its carbon footprint.

Additionally, leftover campus scraps will be returned to the WKU Farm, where they are composted. This compost is used for future vegetable production or sold to the community, with the proceeds adding to the WKU scholarship fund.

“We call it a farm-to-campus program,” Woosley said. “But it could also be called a farm-to-campus-to-farm program because it’s kind of full circle.”

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