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Paine College announces partnership with farming group

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The college is partnering with Boggs Rural Life Center in Keysville to educate farmers on organic options and cultivate land.

Paine College invited local farmers to campus on Wednesday to discuss a partnership with the Boggs Rural Life Center.

The partnership focuses on organic farming methods and increasing community engagement regarding local food sources.

Paine College has been working with the Boggs Rural Life Center for more than a year to organize the Green Cross Collective, a farmer-owned cooperative. Through the partnership, the college and local farmers will help develop the 1,250 acres of land the rural life center sits on in Keysville.

Ovita Thornton, president of the center, said the land will be developed to house a greenhouse and aquaculture facilities. The farmers will help produce organic foods, which will then be sold to restaurants and school systems to provide healthier options at a lower cost.

Kevin Howard, chief financial officer of Paine and organizer of the Green Cross Collective, said the project will provide greater food security for the local community.

"It will affect people by bringing locally-grown food produced right here in the CSRA," Howard said. "People will know where their produce came from. We saw recently in the news with the outbreak in the romaine lettuce, food security is a national security risk and it's one of the things we take seriously."



The partnership will also allow the center to provide the farmers with certifications and training in organic farming and sustainable farming techniques, which should attract more talent. About 10 farmers currently belong to the co-op. Thornton said Paine will also offer some legitimacy to the project.

"The certification is going to be what's going to attract people because people do community gardens everywhere, but I think the certification with Paine is really going to make this project more sustainable and more appealing," Thornton said. "We have the interest and even the skills but there has to be a structured group and that's where I think Paine is going to help us."

Thornton said she hopes Paine serves as a role model in the community for other schools to get involved in the community and sustainable farming. She envisions the Boggs Rural Life Center as a food hub, with farmer training, food distribution and apprenticeships.

Howard said he estimates that the land will have its first harvest sometime next year. The food that's harvested by the local farmers will also be served at the college.

"Being able to source food from a local provider right now is a big deal in terms of food security and people right now are increasing their awareness with where their food is coming from and we have a solution for that in terms of our partnership," Howard said. "The farmers that have already expressed an interest, and those that we haven't met yet that we'll meet through continued conferences like this."

The project is largely funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Howard said. He expects there to be continued meetings between the college and farmers in the future.

Wednesday's meeting Wednesday also included a panel on the local food system. Scott Richardson, director of nutrition for Warren County Public Schools, said he hopes the project encourages young people to take an interest in agriculture.

Richardson said the average age of a farmer is over 55 years old, and there's not much growth in the industry from younger generations.

"If we don't educate our young people on how to do this we're missing out on something that's going to keep the sustainability of us going because the sustainability of us as people relies on the sustainability of farming," Richardson said. "We can't continue to grow without good nutritious food that comes from the soil and if the soil doesn't get worked we're going to have a problem in this country and in the world."