VCSU freshmen pick fresh produce for food bank

Spread over about 2 acres of farm land, nearly 200 freshmen from Valley City State University spent their Tuesday morning harvesting fresh produce for a good cause.

By: Brian Willhide, The Jamestown Sun

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VALLEY CITY, N.D. — Spread over about 2 acres of farm land, nearly 200 freshmen from Valley City State University spent their Tuesday morning harvesting fresh produce for a good cause.

Picking and gathering nearly 19 tons of produce, the students harvested primarily squash from an area farm that will be distributed to 278 food shelves, soup kitchens, shelters and other charitable feeding programs supplied by the Great Plains Food Bank.

“What’s so great about doing this here is that it shows something that can be done in all other communities in this state,” said Linda Sailer, director of product resources for Lutheran Social Services, about Tuesday’s project.

It marks the second year in a row the VCSU freshmen class has participated in the community service project at retired pastor Don Faust’s produce farm about 10 miles northwest of Valley City.

“The whole idea started about four years ago when I heard farmers were being asked to grow a little more produce, as they were anticipating a greater need for food in the community,” Faust said. “Last year, I got word that the university here in town (VCSU) had a program that was looking for an opportunity to help out somewhere, so I offered up my farm.”

Each fall semester, all new VCSU students take part in an orientation program called Learning to Live-Living to Learn (L2L) which encompasses topics including team building, adjusting to college and stress management.
One component of the program is having a community service project that allows the freshmen to make a contribution to the city and region.

“It was fun — it really didn’t even feel like work,” said Alex Conlon, a freshman math major at VCSU from Mandan, N.D.

For Conlon and other students, knowing the fruits of their labor were going toward a good cause made it worth sacrificing their Tuesday morning.

“It feels really good, especially knowing all of that work and that produce we harvested is going to go to the people that really need it,” he said.

Being able to make a difference in the community makes this type of project worth an early morning wake-up call, freshman Ashten Edinger said.

“My first thought was that this wasn’t going to be much fun, especially getting up really early to go work. But just being out there with friends and students I’ve never met before and knowing that you’re making a difference made it a really cool thing that we got to do today,” said Edinger, an elementary education major from Valley City.

Last year’s project yielded approximately 25 tons of produce over about 3 acres and received great feedback from students, according to Kari Stricklin, director of student activities at VCSU.

“At first, they would grumble, but once they got out there and, as a group realize how much they have actually picked, I’ve heard them say ‘This is fun,’ and knowing where that food is going kind of makes them feel really good about why they’re out here,” Stricklin said.

Tuesday’s community service project also gives the entire freshmen class an opportunity to take their education outside the classroom, according to VCSU President Dr. Steve Shirley.

“That’s one of the most powerful parts of this entire experience is seeing these students in action, some of whom have never been out in an environment like this before,” Shirley said. “If it can be a model for other schools and other communities to do something similar, then that’s great for everybody.”

During the project, students often worked together, forming assembly lines in the fields to pick the squash and subsequently get it into the boxes, where it would then be hauled over to the loading truck. That type of teamwork is the essence of the L2L program, according to Doug Anderson, director of marketing and communications at VCSU.

“It’s quite the experience for them, and really gives them a bridge for making the adjustment to college, meeting their classmates and doing things like team building as part of the L2L program. It’s gone quite well,” he said.

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