

Down on the farm: Pierce College ag program slowly changes direction

By Jason
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To Leland Shapiro, a tour of the Pierce College campus is heavy on memories.

"This is where the 6,000 chickens used to be," he says, pointing at what is now a parking lot.

"This is where the flowers were," he says as he passes an abandoned building.

"We used to fatten the pigs here." He points to an empty structure.

Shapiro is a throwback to an earlier time for both Los Angeles and the community college in Woodland Hills. He learned to milk a cow in a dairy near the corner of 3rd Street and La Cienega in the early 1960s and began farming on lots in Watts and Gardena before attending Pierce. He joined the faculty there in the 1970s, when agriculture was among the school's biggest programs.

Leland Shapiro lectures at Pierce College, once known for its agricultural program. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

But the college has cut back on its trademark field of study, selling land once used for farming and letting the agriculture staff dwindle. Shapiro, 61, is the last full-time department member who still teaches students how to grow crops; the rest are either veterinary or landscaping professors.

Throughout the country, agricultural colleges have undergone similar changes as fewer students are studying farming, which increasingly is dominated by multinational companies. Instead, undergraduates are concentrating on related fields.

"Every institution has to be relevant, and it's more sexy to talk about nutrition than sows, cows and plows," said Keith Barber, president of the National Agricultural Alumni Development Assn., an advocacy group based in St. Paul, Minn.

As a result, some schools have changed their names to fit with the times. The University of Kentucky School of Agriculture became the School of Agriculture, Food and Environment in 2013.

"The old name didn't seem to fit anymore," said Nancy Cox, the campus' dean.

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Shapiro knew he wanted to be a farmer when he began working with animals as a child. When he went to Pierce, nearly 2,000 students were enrolled in the agricultural program.

Later, as one of 18 full-time instructors, he taught students how to care for cattle, make butter and ice cream, and raise feed.

"Everyone had a specialty; there was a vet guy, a horse guy, a crop guy. I was the cow guy," Shapiro said.

Since then, the program has slowly shrunk. Professors and staff who left weren't replaced, Shapiro said. Now there are only four other full-time faculty and about 3,000 students in the program, which is the eighth largest at the campus.

Pierce administrators also began selling land for housing or converting it to such uses as athletic fields.

In the late 1980s, administrators allowed development on about 17 acres that had been used to grow alfalfa to feed the hundreds of animals on campus. "It was a financial win in the short term, but we never found a way to feed the cows as cheaply again," said Shapiro, a vocal critic of some development.

In the late 1990s, when the administration considered selling a parcel of land that could have become a driving range, Shapiro sent a letter to the student newspaper accusing administrators of "raping" the farm.

The letter led to a faculty ethics committee investigation, but Shapiro was not punished, and he doesn't regret his actions.

"We have a right to freedom of speech," he said. "No one's going to tell me I can't voice my opinion, especially if I'm telling the truth."

The latest controversy occurred when administrators decided to cancel the lease for the popular Farm Center, which had operated on 18 acres for the last decade. The stand operators sold fruits and vegetables and had a pumpkin patch and games and shows aimed at children.

The Farm Center also employed up to 200 Pierce students a year and provided feed and other materials to the agriculture program. "They've been good partners," Shapiro said.

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In a mediation agreement signed by Pierce and the owners of the Farm Center, college officials said they "can no longer financially support an entertainment venue on the premises" and ordered the operators to vacate the premises by April 15.

Pierce officials declined to say how much money the move would save and how much they spent to support the farm. Thousands of people have signed a petition asking for an investigation into the Farm Center's eviction.

The land "will revert to direct college control for use in our instructional programs," Pierce President Kathleen F. Burke said in statement. She declined an interview request.

Robert McBroom, who operates the Farm Center, said that he has spent nearly \$3.5 million on the center and that he paid most, if not all, of the operating expenses for the business.

Shapiro said that the Farm Center closing "feels like I'm losing a friend" but that Burke has been more supportive of the school's agricultural program than recent administrators.

"A lot of them knew nothing about farming and really just cared about the bottom line," Shapiro said.

Some would try to cut costs by not paying people to care for the animals over holidays or weekends, he said. "I finally had to tell them that when they could go three days without drinking or flushing the toilet, then so could the animals."

Shapiro said he's considered retiring, especially since he now has to get around using a golf cart and a cane following surgery to remove a cyst in his brain.

He and other faculty have been negotiating with administrators to find new uses for the remaining open space, including a sustainable vegetable garden, avocado and citrus orchards, and even a vineyard.

Many students said they are hopeful the agricultural part of the program will grow. Stacy Carpio was raised in Panorama City and said she had barely gardened, much less worked on a farm, before arriving at Pierce. But now she helps manage the farm, doing everything from planting crops to helping animals give birth.

"At first, I thought the farm was so strange, even the smell was bad," she said. "But now everything smells so sweet. I can't live without it."

Shapiro said that he would like to solicit money or partner with businesses to preserve the land but that outside groups are reluctant to commit unless they are sure the land will be used for farming.

"No one's going to donate money unless they are sure that the money will be used in the way they envision," Shapiro said.

He also is trying to find another professor who can take over his classes when he retires, hoping that will be a sign that the college remains dedicated to teaching farming.

"Otherwise, when I leave, the whole program will go with me," Shapiro says. "And I can't stand that idea."

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