

# Earth Institute Students Help an Urban Farm Rethink Its Future

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*Students from the sustainability management program who worked on the New Haven Farms project.  
Photo credit: Tim Lyons*

By [Columbia University](http://Columbia University)

In the Fair Haven section of New Haven, Conn., rates of obesity and diabetes are high, and access to healthy fresh food can be limited. For some residents of this low-income neighborhood, New Haven Farms is just what the doctor ordered.

The small non-profit agency grows vegetables on several plots around the city, and conducts classes in basic nutrition and healthy cooking. [New Haven Farms](#) grew out of a program run by the Fair Haven Community Health Center, which serves the largely low-income, Hispanic neighborhood. Doctors actually prescribe the program as one way to help patients at risk from diet-related diseases like Diabetes 2 learn a healthier lifestyle.

Last fall, a team of students in the Earth Institute's [Master of Science in Sustainability Management program](#) traveled to Connecticut to study the New Haven Farms operation and

come up with ways to expand its growing capacity and the number of people it serves. This “Capstone Workshop” was one of several conducted by teams of students in the Master of Science in Sustainability Management program and serves in place of a thesis, giving students a hands-on experience consulting for a real-world client. This video tells the story of what the New Haven Farms team did.

Click here to watch “Students Help New Haven Farms Rethink Its Future”:

<https://youtu.be/ApSuyHJz6as>

The New Haven Farms wellness program runs for 16-20 weeks during the growing season and has served nearly 200 people since 2012. The staff cultivates a little over an acre of land, primarily at two sites. The produce goes into a community supported agriculture program that for a fee provides low- and middle-income residents with fresh vegetables weekly during the growing season. The program also runs a farm stand and sells vegetables to local restaurants.

One garden plot sits next to the Quinnipiac River just beyond Interstate 95, nestled beneath a massive wind turbine, on a quarter acre loaned by Phoenix Press. Participants come here for classes in cooking and nutrition, and to learn about farming. Some of the residents have emigrated from rural areas in Latin America where farming was a way of life; but in this urban setting, their options for using those skills are limited.

Over on Ferry Street, an abandoned lot has been turned into another lush garden. One portion is lined with rows of tomatoes and other vegetables. A second section, on loan from the New Haven Land Trust, is set aside for small, raised-bed gardens that make up the “garden incubator” program. Here the graduates of the wellness program can cultivate their own small plots of vegetables. They get farming advice from the New Haven Farms and land trust gardeners. Such partnerships have been crucial to the development of the program.

One of the goals of New Haven Farms is to keep people in the neighborhood involved in community farming, perpetuating the lessons learned in the farming and wellness program. The agency also runs a youth program to teach youngsters early on about the value of fresh produce and healthy eating. (“Cherry tomatoes are the secret to getting kids into vegetables,” advises farm manager Jacqueline Maisonpierre.)

The challenges for the students were diverse: How to create a financially sustainable model, increase the staff, grow more vegetables and expand the wellness program to more people, and build a more ongoing relationship between community members and New Haven Farms.

The 14 students in the sustainability program who took on these challenges came to Columbia from places as diverse as Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Greenwich, Conn., Toronto and Beijing, and brought to the project a range of experience—environmental consulting, sustainable farming, urbanization issues, finance, public administration, management. They interviewed New Haven Farms staff, studied New Haven's demographics, and investigated other urban farm and wellness programs. Their advisor was Thomas Abdallah, chief environmental engineer for the MTA/New York City Transit.

In the end, they came up with a detailed presentation that outlines several ways New Haven Farms could build its programs into the future. For instance, a modest investment in alternative farming techniques such as a "hightower" greenhouse and hydroponics could expand the growing season and potentially double crop yields. That could mean more produce to sell, raising more money for the program.

The students also recommended adding a third full-time staffer and suggested ways for the organization to build partnerships with other local organizations and increase financial stability.

*The Capstone Workshop is a key feature of the [M.S. in Sustainability Management program](#), co-sponsored by the Earth Institute and Columbia's [School of Professional Studies](#). The program trains students to tackle complex and pressing environmental and managerial challenges. An information session on the program will be held from 6 - 7:30 p.m., Feb. 17, at the Faculty House on Columbia's Morningside campus. For more on the event, email Allison E. Ladue at [ael2133@columbia.edu](mailto:ael2133@columbia.edu); to register, go [here](#). The next application deadline for the program is May 15.*

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