

Pierce College Ag Program Veering Away From Farming



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Goats graze on the 426-acre campus of Los Angeles Pierce College, a two-year community college and part of the Los Angeles Community College District Gary Leonard/LA Public Library

The 6,000 chickens are gone, so is the alfalfa field and most of the agriculture department's faculty at the college born nearly 70 years ago as an agricultural institution.



When it was founded in 1947, Los Angeles Pierce College was a big-city school tucked into a still-rural, far-flung corner of the city's San Fernando Valley.

As the years passed, the city grew up around the campus, with buildings sprouting where alfalfa once was grown to feed the campus cattle herd. A parking lot replaced the area where the chickens roamed.

As times have changed, so has the two-year community college. The [Los Angeles Times reported Wednesday that its agriculture department's full-time faculty has shrunk](#) from 18 instructors to just four.

Experts say that reflects a trend at colleges across the country, where agricultural programs are putting less emphasis on farming and more on such related fields as food science, farming technology and nutrition.

"Every institution has to be relevant, and it's more sexy to talk about nutrition than sows, cows and plows," Keith Barber, president of the National Agricultural Alumni Development Association, told the Times.

The University of California, Davis, which boasts that its College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences is a national leader, states that its programs address "critical issues related to agriculture, food systems, the environment, and human and social sciences through

cutting-edge research, top-ranked undergraduate and graduate education, and internationally recognized outreach programs."

Pierce, meanwhile, is ending its lease with a private operator that administers its popular Farm Center, which sells fruits and vegetables, has a pumpkin patch, and farm-related games and shows for children.

When the lease expires in April the 18 acres "will revert to direct college control for use in our instructional programs," Pierce's president, Kathleen F. Burke, said in statement.

Pierce says on its website that it has remained true to its beginnings, maintaining a 226-acre farm that includes small herds of cattle, sheep and goats. But it also cites its mission as providing occupational training, life-long learning programs and transfer opportunities to four-year colleges.

Veteran faculty member Leland Shapiro isn't happy to see the changes.

Shapiro, 61, learned to milk cows as a child, a time when Los Angeles was still dotted with dairy farms. He's the school's only full-time instructor who still teaches how to grow crops, and he worries that when he retires he won't be replaced.

"And I can't stand that idea," he says.