

Het 'College Beekeeper' Initiatief.



Eén van de studenten van Bijen@wur is Michael Smith uit Panama. Michael is enkele jaren geleden zelfstandig begonnen met het opzetten van studentenverenigingen over de hele wereld die zich bezighouden met bijenhouden. De verenigingen houden gezamenlijk een aantal bijenkasten waar ze al doende leren voor bijen te zorgen. Michael zet de vereniging op, zorgt voor sponsors, materiaal, wat startvolkjes, en hij zorgt dat er lokaal mensen zijn waarop de vereniging kan terug vallen met vragen of voor hulp. In het onderstaande artikel vertelt Michael meer over het 'College Beekeeper' initiatief en de achtergronden.

College Beekeeper-

Helping students initiate beekeeping programs at their place of education

"Oh, you keep bees? I've heard they're not doing so well..." – It's a comment I often hear, and I'm sure you have too.

The plethora of problems facing honeybees today is a hot topic. It's the first thing anyone brings up when you mention that you keep bees. However, one of the problems that needs more attention is the dwindling number of beekeepers, and their advancing age. Quite frankly, beekeepers are getting old, and we need a new generation of younger beekeepers to take up the reins. Regardless of any disorder, fewer beekeepers means fewer beehives to go around.

Beekeeping is a hobby largely dominated by older males. That's good news for me, because one day I'll be old, and I'm relatively sure my gender will remain the same. But for now, I'm a young beekeeper, and a student. And being a student tends to complicate being a beekeeper: I don't have fixed housing, I don't have much income, and I'm always busy. In my case, I have it somewhat easier, because I already know how to keep bees, but imagine the difficulty a newbie beekeeper would face if they also happened to be a student! Clearly, learning beekeeping, and keeping bees, while a student, seems to be an insurmountable challenge. And that's what College Beekeeper is all about.

The idea is simple: get bees on college campuses so students can collectively learn beekeeping by doing it. As a group, they learn from local beekeepers, and gradually become independent as their skills increase. Soon they're just like any other student club, with new students entering to learn, and older ones instructing. With most colleges lasting four years or more, even the busiest student will get to see the full gamut of beekeeping. Upon graduating, they can choose whether to continue beekeeping on their own, and they're more likely to succeed because they've had a longer period of training.

Using college campuses for beekeeping provides some serious advantages. For one, you have access to a huge number of young people, from a wide range of studies. It's easy to find 10 very interested students without any effort, and normal to have groups of 40 students or more. In the US, colleges give financial support to student clubs, so a wisely worded proposal can cover start-up costs. Alternatively, costs can be spread throughout the group as a membership fee. But most importantly, local beekeepers are more willing

to donate their time, and sometimes old equipment, when they know it's going to an educational student group.

College Beekeeper is both a blueprint and a support system for students. On the website, they can see the methods used to get student beekeeping programs flourishing, and which schools already have programs running. It's also a way for me to keep all the useful information in one place, as a reference for new students who are interested in these ventures. The idea for College Beekeeper was rooted in my first experiences with bees, when I was at boarding school at the United World College of the Atlantic, in Wales. With the invaluable help of a local friend and beekeeper, Chris Adam, we were able to start a student beekeeping initiative. The hives were brought onto campus, students learned beekeeping, and they're still thriving seven years later.

At Princeton, doing my bachelors, I wanted to start another beekeeping activity. But concerns from the administration kept me at bay. They were unsure about having bees on campus, for safety reasons, and continuity. After much discussion, and a few tricks, we got the bees in my senior year. Upon arriving to the Netherlands on a Rotary Scholarship, I travelled down to the newly formed United World College of Maastricht. I met with some of the administration, and within a couple of hours, we had approval, and some start-up funds. So quick! Why the huge difference between one school and the other?: Because I arrived with all the answers to their lingering questions and doubts. Clearly, knowing how it worked in one place made it easier to start it somewhere new. That was the first driving force behind creating College Beekeeper: if students can see how other programs got started, then, like dominoes, it'll make it easier for them to start their own program.

The second driving force for creating College Beekeeper came from an unexpected source: a student studying in New Mexico that I've never met. He had been a student beekeeper at the United World College of the Atlantic (where I started my first beekeeping program), and wanted to start one of his own at St. John's College. Coincidentally, I had just spoken with the students at Maastricht, so while I was speaking with him, I realized I was repeating the exact same information to two different groups. So compiling the information became a necessity, not only to keep from repeating myself, but also so that any student, anywhere, can have all the cards in their hand if they decide to start beekeeping at their place of education. So, with extremely limited web-skills, I started up the College Beekeeper website, as a way to let students know how to start their own initiatives.

Personally, keeping bees in a communal setting of students started as a necessity, but grew into a passion. As a student, it's much easier to approach the administration saying WE want bees, than ME wants bees (grammatical errors aside). And using bees as a source of education for other students is an obvious selling point at any academic institution. But since I was lucky enough to have an awesome beekeeping mentor, Chris Adam, I wanted other students to have the same opportunities, by connecting students with local beekeepers via these college programs. For the beekeeping mentors, the graduating students move all over the world, so their reach is more impressive than you would have imagined.

Living and working in Wageningen, it was clear that the students here could benefit from a student beekeeping initiative. City of Life Sciences, Wageningen University, so connected to agriculture, I was almost surprised there wasn't a group for this already!

Like any program, we modified our plans to fit the scene, and the Wageningen BEE Team was born. Although the program has only just started, it's quickly developed with lots of local help. We've received equipment donations from Tjeerd Blacquiére of the WUR Bijen Group at Plant Research International, as well as from local beekeepers. We've also had Tineke Brascamp, from the NBV, provide invaluable instruction at the practical lessons, and a theory class from Bram Cornelissen, from the WUR Bijen Group. We have an enthusiastic group of student participants and organizers, and with the support we've already received from locals, it's sure to become a long-lasting addition for students at Wageningen University.

If you're a beekeeper, and you're interested in more about beekeeping programs for students, I encourage you to check out our (very basic) website at: <https://sites.google.com/site/collegebeekeeper/>. Of course, it's probably just easier to just

Google "College Beekeeper", and we're the first hit. If you'd like to see the Wageningen BEE Team website, a work in progress, check out: <https://sites.google.com/site/beeteamwageningen/>. You can also find it by going to the College Beekeeper website, and clicking on the Wageningen logo on the college programs page. Most importantly, if you're a beekeeper, and you think you might be interested in starting up a student beekeeping program at a nearby University/College/Secondary School, then I encourage you to check out our website, think about it, and then, most importantly: do it. It's not as much work as you might think, and you'll be passing on your beekeeping skills to eager learners. You will need plenty of patience, and flexibility, but if you've ever wanted an apprentice, then here's a way to do it, and you'll get many more than just one!



Michael's College Beekeepers Wageningen 2011. © by Tineke Brascamp