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## **Implementing a Farm-to-College Program at UC**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Some of the major issues concerning environmental planners today are sprawl, watershed destruction, water and air quality/pollution, waste, depletion of natural resources, energy consumption and loss of biodiversity. All these issues are impacted by the modern system of food production, distribution, and consumption. The major contributing factor to this relationship is movement away from traditional food systems.

When civilizations first began, they developed in areas conducive to food production. Fresh produce that once traveled a short distance, from the back yard/field to the kitchen table, now travels thousands of miles before it reaches your mouth. Today, in the US, farmers account for less than 1% of the population yet they are able to sufficiently feed the nations population as well as export millions of dollars in agricultural goods to people in other countries. Unfortunately, this unprecedented yield increase was not achieved without negative ecological and socio-economical consequences.

A paradigm shift is beginning to occur in agriculture. This paradigm's emphasis is focused on concepts of sustainability instead of increases in production. One alternative initiative to promote sustainability is the farm-to-college program. These programs encourage campus cafeterias or other food service operations to purchase local farm products instead of buying from nationwide food service vendors.

There are a number of motivating reasons for implementing a farm-to-school program; the program can benefit the university, the farmers, and the students. Such benefits include connecting the community to the school, providing a market for local farmers, sustaining the local economy, providing higher quality food and educational opportunities for students, and minimizing negative environmental factors associated with food transportation and packaging. Additional benefits of the program include the possibility of encouraging healthier eating among students, and increasing the number of students participating in the cafeteria program.

In attempt to promote a more sustainable food system at the University of Cincinnati's, I conducted study to determine the feasibility of implementing a farm-to-college program at the University of Cincinnati's main campus dining facilities. The general implementation requirements of a farm-to-college program can be divided into on-campus and off-campus areas of focus. On-campus areas of focus include the dining service operation, administration, and students. The off-campus areas of focus include suppliers of local food products, such as food distributing companies and local farmers. The feasibility study was concerned with the latter of these two areas of focus. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to determine the feasibility of implementing a farm-to-college program with regard to the on-campus areas of focus at the University of Cincinnati's main campus dining facilities.

Answering this primary thesis question depended on whether or not the current UC food service operation would be able to support a farm-to-college program, and, if the administration and students would be interested/supportive of the program. To find this information, the following three sub-questions were asked.

1. Can a farm-to-college program be incorporated into the current UC food service operation and logistical structure?
2. Are the UC food service and campus administration interested/supportive of having more locally grown produce incorporated into the campus dining halls?
3. Are UC students interested/supportive of having more locally grown produce incorporated into the campus dining halls?

The results of the study showed that the current food service operation and logistical structure could support a farm-to-college program as long as the contracted food service company could find a local food distributor that offers competitive prices, meets food safety regulations, supply the high quantity of product demand, and provide reliable delivery of goods. Additionally, the UC food service department administration and students were interested and supportive of having more locally grown produce incorporated into the campus dining halls. In conclusion, the study showed that it is feasible to implement a farm-to-college program at the University of Cincinnati's main campus dining facilities.

With this data, a window of opportunity was opened to the possibility of implementing a farm-to-college program at UC. The next step in the implementation process was to share the data from the feasibility study back to interested students and food service and campus administrators. Although the data from the feasibility study showed that students and administrators were interested in seeing more locally grown food implemented into the campus dining halls, there was no confirmation as to whether or not they would agree to go through with its implementation. Being interested and supportive of a program one thing, taking the time and effort to carry the program through is another.

The information about the feasibility study needed to be shared amongst these people in order to educate them further about the need, importance, and benefits of implementing a farm-to-college program at UC; inform them of the results of the study; determine what questions or concerns they have about implementing the program; find out what additional information needs to be researched in order to implement the program; and determine whether or not the food service department and Aramark will agree to implement the program. Additionally, and most importantly, a champion for the program needed to be found. Research has shown that success of local food initiative require a champion for the project (Johnson & Stevenson, 1998). One of the key reasons that schools that have failed at their attempt to establish these programs, is attributed to a lack of a champion. I have taken the initiative to start the program and would be more than willing to champion it, however, I will be graduating in June and will no longer be able to see the project through. It is important for me to pass on my information before I leave.

In attempt to use the data from the feasibility study to further promote the implementation of a farm-to-college program at UC, I signed up for this independent study which has allowed me the time needed to present the feasibility study information to key people, find a champion for the program, and do additional research. Over the past two months, I have made several formal presentations followed by numerous small group and individual meetings to pass on this information. Details of these presentations and meetings are discussed in the following section of this paper.

## **PRESENTATION**

### Environmental Sustainable Committee

The first presentation I made was to the Environmental Sustainable Committee (ESC), one of the two active campus environmental organizations at UC. ESC is comprised of administration from all the major service divisions, faculty from multiple colleges within UC, and both undergraduate and graduate students. ESC aims to make the university holistically more sustainable. They are trying to accomplish this by promoting sustainable programs and projects undertaken by the University as well as act as a focal point for information for all sustainable programs and projects undertaken by the University. Finally they aimed to assess how the University affected the local and regional community in regards to the environment.

I presented my information to ESC first because several of their student members had expressed interest in the farm-to-college program throughout the time I was conducting the feasibility study. Upon completion of the study, those students invited me to present my findings to the committee. I was allotted a 15 minute presentation time during one of their monthly meetings and prepared a PowerPoint presentation that defined farm-to-college programs and described their benefits, very briefly explained my methodology, and highlighted the findings. Since I was presenting to an environmental group, and in light of the short presentation time allotted, I did not describe any of the environmental problems leading to the need for the program; it was assumed members of this committee were already aware of these problems.

After the presentation, a short discussion took place in which the president of the committee expressed particular interest working to not only have Aramark support the

program, but take it one step further and have the program institutionalized by the food service department. By doing this, it would protect the program in the future if the food service department decided to change food service contractors. At the end of the presentation several students from this committee approached me to let me know they were very supportive of the program and would offer additional help in moving the program forward. Contact information was exchanged with the intent of scheduling future meetings.

#### Student and Administration Presentation

After the ESC presentation, I scheduled a second presentation targeting key administrators both from the campus administration, food service department, and Aramark. I met with one of the ESC members to create a list of key campus administrators who we thought needed to be informed of the farm-to-college program. The ESC member, being affiliated with an organization that is comprised of administrators from all the major service divisions and faculty from multiple colleges within UC was able to provide me with important names and contact information. In addition, this student made the first contact with these people to inform them and invite them to the presentation. The reason for this, is because we felt that those administrators would be more likely to attend the presentation if they were invited by somebody they knew as opposed to someone they did not know. The purpose of this second presentation was to educate the campus and food service. In addition to key administrators, students from several campus environmental groups were also invited. Invitations to the presentation were sent out via email.

The presentation was held in a conference room in the Aronoff building on UC's campus. The meeting was held on a Thursday from 4:00pm until 5:00pm. The following people attended the meeting: five students, three faculty members, three Aramark representatives (General Manager, Board of Directors, and Manager of CenterCourt Dining Hall), and four campus administrators (Senior Associate Director of Campus Services, Director of Environmental Health and Safety, Director of Housing and Food Services, and Director of Auxiliary Services).

I gave a thirty minute PowerPoint presentation that focused on the environmental concerns leading to the need for local food initiatives, farm-to-college programs (definition and benefits), and the findings of the feasibility study. Following my PowerPoint presentation, the floor was opened for discussion. The discussion was predominately led by a series of question and concerns by the Senior Associate of Director of Campus Services and the Director of Housing and Food Services. Responses to these questions and comments came from students, faculty members and me.

One of the primary concerns was related to one of the benefits of the program, increasing participation in the food service program. The administrators focused only on the increase of participation of students eating in the dining halls who already had plans. This would be a negative factor of the program because it would mean more loss than gain. This concern was mollified, by indicating that the level of participation would not only come from students who already have plans, but from students who don't already have plans. The program has the potential to attract more students and faculty members to eat more often at the dining hall for independent meals, or to attract more incoming freshman and sophomores to also buy into some plans.

The second concern was that they felt seasonality of products may cause a problem for the customers, in regards to quality of food. They felt that if they provided students with locally grown, better tasting food in the summer and fall, then switched back to food purchased from distant vendors, the students would complain about the quality change. Responses to this concern were that, it is better to provide the students with the best food when it is available then not at all. Providing the food coupled with education about locally grown foods and seasonal availability would eliminate the complaints about not having the better tasting food when it is not available. Additionally, providing the students with the opportunity to realize the difference in food quality would only reinforce the need, importance, and benefits of buying locally grown food. This in turn, may encourage students to purchase locally grown food on their own when they are not eating at the dining halls.

The third concern was related to marketing. The administrators were curious as to how the program would be marketed. The answers to this question were: to create an educational page about farm-to-college programs on the UC food service website, to add nutritional and educational information to the dining hall Kiosks, to put up fliers and other informational posters around the campus dining halls and dorms, and to have special tables set out in the dining halls with fresh locally grown produce and farm information. Additionally, administrators from Aramark suggested having taste testing tables outside the dining hall, where they would provide students with conventional, local, and organic food to taste, and let them choose what food was the best.

The final question and concern was related to cost and safety. The administrators and Aramark representatives were concerned that the locally grown produce would cost

more and would not fit into the budget. Additionally, they were curious as to what local produce was available, in what quantities, and how it could be procured. I explained to them that these specific questions would need to be further researched. Originally, the feasibility study I conducted included finding local farmers and local produce, however, due to time constraints, I was not able to do this.

Overall the presentation and discussion went very well. The key administrators all expressed interest in the program and said they would consider doing more research or information gathering to see how the program could be implemented. The general manager of Aramark was extremely supportive and informed us that Aramark was interested in supporting sustainability within its company and was interested to find a way to make the program work at UC. The top administrators did say that the food service budget and program plans had already been determined, so the farm-to-college program would be something that would be considered in the 2009 budget and plan.

## **MEETINGS**

### Food Service Department

Following the presentation I contacted John Hautz, Director of Auxiliary Service, to follow-up on his reaction to the presentation. I had worked with Hautz in the feasibility study; he completed several of the questionnaires and provided me with a majority of the information regarding the food service operation and logistics.

Unfortunately, Hautz was extremely busy preparing for the end of the school year, and did not have much time to meet with me. However, he did mention that he had been

instructed by his supervisor to looking into farm-to-college programs in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

I was able to supply Hautz with both program information and contact information for his use in doing his own research. One of the sections of the feasibility study report was a literature review of information pertaining to farm-to-college programs. One of the areas of review was the current farm-to-college program in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. The study reported seven universities located within the OKI region had farm to college programs: Case Western Reserve University (Oh), Gambier College (Oh), Kenyon College (Oh), Oberlin College (Oh), Ohio University (Oh), Otterbein College (Oh), Tri-State University (In), and Wabash College (In).

To get information about these programs, I sent out a questionnaire to each of the farm-to-college program directors. This questionnaire was based off of the already existing survey on the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), farm-to-college webpage. In 2004, CSFC sent out an online survey to key individuals at a number of schools with farm-to-college programs in order to create a comprehensive list of active farm-to-college programs in the United States and Canada. The results of the survey were available on the CFSC website, however, some of the survey answers from the programs were not complete. Additionally while the questions on the CFSC survey were very thorough and included both school characteristics and program specific information, it did not include information regarding how the local food was procured (who provided the local food and how it was delivered). For this reason, I added several questions to my survey before sending it out (to see the survey see Appendix A). I sent this survey out to each of the universities listed above via email. Not all surveys were returned, and some

were returned with more detailed information than other. Non-the-less, the information and contact names have provided Hautz with information and resources to continue his research. He plans to work on this over the summer when he has more time. I also supplied Hautz with a copy of the complete feasibility study to use as a resource for future questions, research needs, or as a guide to implementing the program at UC.

### Aramark

After the presentation finished, I stayed a little longer to talk to two of the Aramark representatives, Spyros (Director of Board of Operation) and Ian (Manager of CenterCourt Dining Hall). Spyros had been very involved in answering questionnaires and providing me with food service operation and logistical information for the feasibility study and has shown support for the farm-to-college program throughout the study. We talked briefly after the presentation about possible next steps, and arranged to meet in the near future.

Several weeks after the presentation, I met with Spyros to discuss next steps to implementing the program. He had just returned from an administrator meeting in which one of the topics of discussion was the farm-to-college program. He told me that the discussion was positive, and that there was an interest amongst administration to implement this project. They decided that the best way to implement the project, as I suggested in the presentation, was small. Instead of trying to buy produce to supply the dining hall with *all* of its produce, focus on getting only a few items and providing them as “special dishes.” Aramark would try to find a few farms that could supply produce to the dining hall. Aramark would buy the produce they have available, and incorporate that

into the menu. By doing this, it would eliminate the pressure and worry of not getting specific needed products for main menu items. Spyros suggested making special meals with all locally grown or organic produce which would be created upon arrival of the locally food. Special notices of these meals would be advertised in the dining halls.

One of the topics of our discussion was how to procure the local food. As mentioned in the literature review in the feasibility study, there are two options for procuring local food, from a distributor or from a farmer. Buying local produce from a distributor would be the easiest approach for a large university to incorporating local produce (Rimkus, Jones, & Ona, 2004). The benefit of this approach is that the school would continue working within a preexisting infrastructure that includes an easy ordering system, refrigeration, trucks, and the flexible delivery times.

The other option of Aramark buying local produce directly from farmers, co-operations, or CSA's, is also possible, but does present more challenges. Farmers would need to sell their produce at an affordable price, be able meet the quantity demand of UC, meet all FDA regulations, and deliver the produce. As noted in the literature review, buying directly from the farmers would also require Aramark to establish a good, strong relationship with farmers. The farmers would need to be able to guarantee that UC would get the quantity and quality of produce they asked for when they need it. In order to determine what supply options are available, the following steps should be taken.

Spyros and I decided that the first option to look into should be buying local produce from a distributor. He thought that one of the produce vendors he was looking to contract would be able to arrange to pick up produce from a local farmer at Spyros's suggestion. If this is possible, this would be the best option and the next step would be to

find and contact a few local farmers in the area to establish a relationship with and agreement to buy their produce. This option is currently being looking into by Spyros.

Spyros also mentioned that he would like some help to promote and market the local food initiative. After hearing about the environmental groups on campus during the presentation, he was interested in working with them to set up taste testing booths on campus, designing fliers, and an educational site on the dining hall webpage. I told him that I would put him in contact with several students who had expressed interest in the program and could help with the process.

Overall, Spyros was very interested in incorporating local food into the dining hall. He said that he would have more time over the summer to look for farmers, or vendors to procure the local food. He also suggested on way to advertise the program next fall would be to have several farmers come to the campus and sell their produce outside the dining halls. This would show students that the dining hall is not interested and supportive of locally grown food. At the end of the day, the dining hall would buy all the produce that was not sold to students and use it for menu items. This would be a promotional method that he thought some of the environmental groups on campus could help organize.

#### Student- Key Champion

Although several administrators had announced that they were looking into implementing the farm-to-college program, I still felt uncertain about the future implementation of the project. Without me to follow-up and promote its implementation, I was not sure what direction the program would take during the summer and into next

year. Fortunately, I came in contact with, Meagan Laurer, a DAAP student, and ESC member who has taken the initiative to champion this program. After the second presentation, I sent out an email to the students who attended informing them that I would be soon leaving the school and was looking for someone who would be interested in taking the lead on the program. Meagan was the motivated student who has committed to this task.

Since her reply, Meagan and I have met several times to discuss the feasibility study findings in more detail and plans for future research and work. She has been looking for students who are interested in the program that will be staying in Cincinnati over the summer to help Spyros find local farmers to work with. There may be a chance that she will be here in the summer, and if so, she would help with this research.

I put together a binder for her that contains important information on farm-to-college programs I had collected over the past year during the time I worked on the feasibility study. The folder also contains a copy of the final study and a list of names and contact information of the important food service administrators with who she will be working with in the future. I have already told these administrators about Meagan and plan on introducing her to them before I leave. In addition, I told her that I would be available to help answer questions or provided suggestions over the summer as the process continues.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past two months, I have been working to present the information and findings of the farm-to-college feasibility study completed in March. Through a variety

of presentations and meetings, I have been able to inform key campus and food service administrators about the environmental issues our society is faced with resulting in the need for a more sustainable food system. I explained to them what a farm-to-college program is and how it could benefit the university, students, and environment.

Additionally, I showed them the results and findings of the feasibility study and asked for responses to the possibility of moving this program forward.

In general, all administrators, faculty, and students, who attended the presentations and meetings have shown interest in the program. There are some questions that need to be answered through conducting further research. This research includes finding out more information about current farm-to-college programs in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana; finding out what produce is available in this area, at what quantities, and when it is available; determining and creating a method to market and advertise the program on campus; determining if any of the commercial vendors would be able to sell local produce to the school.

Although top administrators don't think it is possible to put this program into effect until 2009, Spyros, believes it could be done next fall. He understands that the program can be implemented in small gradual steps, and the first step can be as small as buying some local products from one farmer and incorporating that food into "special dishes" available in the dining halls. He is interested in working with environmental students to locate local farmers to work with and begin brainstorming ideas for promoting and marketing the program. In addition, Meagan Laurer, has expressed interest in being the Champion for the project and is now working to find students to help Spyros with research over the summer.

Implementing a farm-to-college program takes time and effort. Although a majority of both students and administrators indicated that they are interested in having more locally grown produce incorporated into the dining halls, not everybody is willing to take the time and effort to make it happen. For this reason, it has been crucial to find several people who are willing to take on this responsibility. From discussions I have had with both Spyros, and Meagan, I believe that there is a chance that local food may be served in the dining hall next year. The key to remember is to keep it small, and work with the resources that are available. Once the initial foundation is established, the program can grow from there.

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## APPENDIX A

### Questions for farm-to-college programs in the OKI Region

Questions	Answers
<b>Name of School</b>	
Location (city, State)	
Name of contact person Position	
Phone number	
Email	
Program Website	
Type of School	
Number of Students	
Type of service operation and contractor is any.	
Type of meal plan	
Number of Meals served a day	
What year did the program begin?	
Who Initiated the Program	
Who runs/is primarily responsible for the program?	
Where do the majority of locally purchased products come from (distance)?	
What are the primary local farm products purchased?	
Local food products are used in...	
Do local products cost more on average	

How do you deal with seasonal availability?	
What types of policies or regulations did you encounter when implementing the program?	
How did you locate local producers and get them involved in the program?	
What are the most significant barriers to starting or sustaining farm-to-college programs?	
What strategies or recommendations do you have for making farm-to-college programs work?	

**Questions about locally grown products are on the next page.**



