



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Growing Farm to ISU: The first five months

Abstract: Working together, ISU Dining and local producers seek to improve communications and sales of local food products.

Question & Answer

Q: What did farmers learn about selling their products directly?

A: They learned about the consumer and institutional side of local food systems, how one institution attempted to work with local producers and why this type of program is being established to support the growing demand for local products.

Background

Although many Iowa State University students, staff, and faculty come from farm backgrounds, the majority of the food served by ISU Dining on campus is obtained from outside Iowa. This outsourcing of the food supply results in the loss of food sales revenue in the state, fosters an unsustainable agricultural system, and leaves people disconnected from their food when they do not know where or how it is produced.

In early 2007 ISU Dining initiated the Farm to ISU program with the hope of providing a market for Iowa farmers, processors, and food entrepreneurs, and serving fresh, seasonal foods to customers. A student coordinator for the project was funded by the Leopold Center. Farm to ISU sought to increase the sales of organic (USDA-certified),

local (grown within 200 miles of ISU), and sustainable (Food Alliance-certified) food to 35 percent of all ISU dining purchases in 2012. ISU Dining plans to feature local, seasonal produce and local specialty meats in the dining halls, offer organic options (milk, honey and other processed items) in the cafes and convenience stores, and create an Iowa catering menu that includes local dairy and meat products.

Objectives of this project were to:

- Build infrastructure to support ISU Dining's Farm to ISU goal of increasing its local, sustainable, and organic food purchases to 35 percent in 2012, and
- Understand the issues local producers face when attempting to sell products to ISU Dining.



Deal's Orchard apples featured at the residential hall

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Budget:
\$4,000 for year one



ISU Dining staff eating lunch with producer and extension staff

The Farm to ISU project not only aimed to expand use of local food beyond catering (and to include organic and sustainable products), but also to create an ongoing program that will be sustainable beyond the period of the grant.

Results and discussion

A steering committee was established consisting of representatives from local farmer organizations (Iowa Network for Community Agriculture, Iowa Farmers Union, and Practical Farmers of Iowa), the Leopold Center, Drake University Ag Law Center, the ISU director of dining, a farm-to-institution coordinator, and the Farm to ISU coordinator. Later more ISU Dining staff, including the executive chef, menu planner, and four senior managers, were added to the committee, along with an ISU faculty member in Hotel, Restaurant and Institution Management.

As a beginning to working successfully with ISU Dining staff, a two-page survey was given to 12 managers and



Karen Rodekamp (produce buyer) and Letha DeMoss (pumpkin farmer)

You wouldn't buy a new car with high miles, so why eat food with high miles?

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Fresh produce travels on average 1500 miles from a U.S. farm to an Iowa table. ISU Dining strives to purchase more local products.



assistant directors. Nine were returned. Benefits of local and organic foods cited by staff were freshness and quality, supporting the local economy, and healthier communities and animals because pesticides and fertilizers are not used. The most often-noted disadvantages for local foods were seasonality, and extra time and effort to purchase and process the food. The ability of local farmers to provide the quantity of food that ISU buys also was questioned. For organic foods, respondents expressed concerns about the higher costs of those products.

Creating awareness of local/organic food options and resources was another task for the project coordinator. A representative from Food Alliance Midwest joined local farmers and ISU Dining staff for an informational meeting. The Food Alliance process of certifying farms, ranches, and processors is based on environmental and social criteria. The ISU Dining staff also met with a food purchaser from an Iowa retirement community who buys local foods (including whole beef from a local meat locker), and the staff visited a Niman Ranch Pork Company farm in Thornton. The project coordinator researched what other institutions and universities were doing to procure local/organic food and shared



Local meat served at residential hall for Family Weekend Brunch, October 2007

information with ISU Dining staff, but it was even more helpful when dining staff came from other universities in July to share their experiences.

Working with farmers was another component of the program, and a part-time farm-to-institution coordinator hired at this time through the Iowa Farmers Union was able to transfer information to and from the farmers attempting to build ties with ISU Dining. Farmers were interested in learning about the university's purchasing guidelines. Several farmers who filed vendor application forms visited ISU to see how their products would be used.

Many hurdles existed for farmers wanting to sell to ISU Dining. Some were operational, related to communication, or focused on differing needs and expectations. Having contracts between the farmers and the dining service may alleviate some of the problems.

Conclusions

The initial steps made in the Farm to ISU program will encourage distributors and local farmers to focus on supplying local, sustainable, and organic foods for the university. If it continues to grow, the Farm to ISU program will encour-

age economic development by supporting local businesses, engender stronger relationships between farmers and the institution, reduce food miles and subsequently vehicle emissions, and provide fresh products to consumers. Currently the Iowa supply of local, organic, and sustainable foods from either distributors or farmers is low, but the Farm to ISU program provides a market to encourage an increase in the supplies. ISU Dining will continue to be connected to farm organizations that help farmers develop and serve these markets. Its growing purchases of these foods also will pressure large distributors to carry and promote local products.

Impact of results

Key things learned:

- Communication is vital between farmers and ISU Dining (regarding farm sales arrangements).
- Communication is equally important within ISU Dining (between departments and the student coordinator).
- Better results are achieved by sharing information with staff through presentations about other farm-to-institution programs rather than relying on printed materials.

The Farm to ISU coordinator continued to work on the project through funding from an assistantship in the 2007-2008 school year.

Leveraged funds

During the 2008-2009 school year, the program coordinator will continue to work through a graduate student grant from the USDA-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program.

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page 44, top and bottom left, by Sue Deblieck

page 44, top right, poster developed by ISU graphic design students, displayed around campus

page 45, top left, by Brittney Rutherford

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