2004

Johnson County Food Education Program

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Recommended Citation
Hunt, Carol and Jones, Wendell, "Johnson County Food Education Program" (2004). Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports. 222.
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Johnson County Food Education Program

Abstract
If consumers are better informed about access to local foods as well as ways to prepare these foods, they may be more likely to seek out locally produced food.

Keywords
Community-based food systems, Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | Environmental Education

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Abstract: If consumers are better informed about access to local foods as well as ways to prepare these foods, they may be more likely to seek out locally produced food.

Question & Answer

**Q**: If consumers are better informed about access to local foods as well as ways to prepare these foods, they may be more likely to seek out locally produced food.

**A**: What marketing tactics will make local foods more attractive to consumers? Arrowness of the strips.

Background

Greater localization of Iowa’s food supply could have profound benefits for the state’s economy, ecology, public health, food security, and quality of life. However, consumers who may support the concept of eating more sustainably, locally grown food often lack the knowledge required to shop for and prepare a quick, healthy meal from the ingredients they find at a farmers market or farm stand. The question is whether more specific consumer education about local foods will spur more purchases of local foods.

The objectives of this project were to:

- Foster greater consumer awareness of potential impacts of sustainable, local food;
- Increase consumer knowledge about how local food is grown/raised, and where to purchase it;
- Increase consumer confidence/comfort in purchasing, handling, and preparing raw and minimally processed food; and
- Increase consumer willingness to purchase and prepare more locally grown foods.

Approach and methods

The principal investigator (PI) was to develop a Food Education Program consisting of classes, demonstrations, presentations, and other activities to teach Iowans how to select, prepare, and preserve fresh and minimally-processed foods in simple, healthful ways. Emphasis was placed on Iowa-grown food and why sustainable, local food systems are important. Efforts were made to form partnerships and collaborations with Johnson County agencies, organizations, and other groups seeking to strengthen the community awareness of issues related to food use and local food systems. Several activities that were conducted included:

*Farmers Market information booth and food demonstrations/tastings at the 2002 Iowa City Farmers Market.* The PI distributed information about local food systems, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and direct marketing of food after participating in a food safety course. She also provided seasonal recipes and cooking tips; on a number of occasions she gave cooking demonstrations with food samples and recipes for what was demonstrated.

*Cooking classes.* The PI taught monthly cooking classes at New Pioneer Co-op in Coralville with an emphasis on locally grown food. Attendees received recipes and a copy of the current *Directory of Local Food Producers.* Total attendance at the classes was nearly 150. She conducted several public cooking demonstrations for hundreds of people attending New Pioneer events. She also partnered with the Johnson County/Iowa City Senior

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**Budget:**
$13,860 for year one  
$4,527 for year two
Center and Kirkwood Community College to teach local food cooking classes, but these were much less well-attended than the New Pioneer classes.

**Eat Locally, For Goodness’ Sake!** The Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) had funding for a farmers’ market education program and hired the PI to coordinate activities such as an information booth, customer survey, and cooking demonstrations and food sampling at two Iowa farmers markets in 2002. The PI resigned before the project ended, but she did complete the design and publication of an educational brochure for statewide distribution.

**Winter workshops.** During the winter of 2002-2003, the PI held several workshops highlighting how to eat locally after the growing season was over. She prepared a handout with information on food availability and storage in the off-season, as well as recipes using some of these ingredients. These workshops were presented at the Iowa Organic Conference, and for Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Environmental Advocates of Johnson County.

Other presentations on local food systems were given to various community groups, and several newsletter articles were written.

**Results and discussion**

*Farmers Market information booth and food demonstrations/tastings at the 2002 Iowa City Farmers Market.* Several dozen contacts were made weekly. When there was a food preparation demonstration, attendance at the booth increased to 50-75 people. Many people reported that they used the local food recipes at home. A written survey was unsuccessful because people were in a hurry and had their hands full. The combination of food samples and recipes seemed to be effective in engaging consumer interest.

*Cooking classes.* These monthly classes at New Pioneer Co-op proved to be extremely popular with attendance growing over time. Written and verbal feedback was very positive. It is possible to transfer a good deal of information about local food during a two-hour class, however, the number of class participants must be limited, so this is a time-intensive activity. The cooking classes at Kirkwood’s Senior Center were poorly attended, but those who did participate had favorable reactions.

**Eat Locally, For Goodness’ Sake!** Karie Wilshire, an ISU graduate student in sustainable agriculture, was able to complete the portions of the project that the PI was unable to finish.

**Winter workshops.** At three of these events, 60 participants submitted evaluations that were very positive. Participants at two workshops (Iowa Organic Conference and Practical Farmers of Iowa) were required to work with and if necessary, “teach” each other about preparing dishes with local food. The level of communication and cooperation in these workshops was impressive.

**Conclusions**

Overall results from the grant activities indicate that practical education about local food and exposure to that food can be effective in increasing consumers’ knowledge about the impact of sustainable local foods and about ways to use locally grown foods in the home kitchen. The survey that was included in the project wasn’t designed to be subjected to statistical analysis, so the results are not presented as “data”, but they clearly show an increase in perceived knowledge (and in willingness to buy more food locally in the future).

Many different kinds of educational activities of varying degrees of complexity appear to be effective and can be conducted by or in partnership with a variety of community groups, organizations, and agencies. Tailoring the activities to the skill sets of the participants can be important.

**Impact of results**

Participants in the educational activities responded overwhelmingly, by questionnaire and verbal feedback, that they had gained knowledge about local foods and would be more likely to buy them in the future. Education about local foods can potentially result in increased market share for locally grown foods. Educational activities need not be complicated or time-consuming to be effective. An individual farmer, such as a farmers market vendor, could educate customers and perhaps increase market sales simply by providing samples along with recipes and some general information about the potential benefits of sustainable agriculture. Potentially, further study could consider the statistical effects of food sample opportunities on future food purchases.
Evaluation results and other feedback suggest an unanticipated impact of the project: It may be possible to educate members of the community who already exhibit a fair amount of knowledge about and willingness to use locally grown good, and in doing so, not only enhance their knowledge but also increase the chance that they may become more active in building a stronger local food system. Local food education may act as a catalyst to action and create a "ripple effect" throughout the community.

**Education and outreach**

Nearly all of the grant activities could be classified as education or outreach in nature. The PI prepared a number of publications ranging from newspaper and newsletter articles to educational handouts and class/workshop recipes. A videotape was made of “Local Food Use: Eating Our Way to a Better Future,” the PI’s presentation to the Environmental Advocates group in February 2002 and it has aired on local community television. In April 2003, the PI spoke about local foods at the Poweshiek Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program and at the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program.

For more information, contact
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