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An internship program to help institutional food buyers develop links to local farms in northeast Iowa

Abstract

Iowa college interns worked with the UNI Local Food Project, food buyers, and farmers to improve local food purchasing processes.

Keywords

Business management, distribution and marketing, Community-based food systems, Food miles, food pathways, food system assessments

Disciplines

Agricultural Education | Environmental Education



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Abstract: Iowa college interns worked with the UNI Local Food Project, food buyers, and farmers to improve local food purchasing processes.

Question & Answer

Q: How can we improve the marketing of local food products?

A: We have documented that we have expanded local markets for locally grown agricultural products significantly by organizing around one metro area, by working with all players in the food system, and by articulating the multiple benefits of having farmers near us who grow the food we eat.

Background

Building on earlier work with institutional food buyers in northeast Iowa, it was deemed important to streamline the ordering process in a way that would aid both the food buyers and the farmers from whom they purchase food products. There also was an opportunity to involve university students in local food systems work. Objectives for this project were to:

- Work with several northeast Iowa hospitals, nursing homes, and other large food buyers so that they would purchase a greater portion of their food supplies from local farmers and processors,
- Develop an internship program where trained interns will be networking with participating institutions to be of assistance to the foodservice staff in establishing a local food buying process, and
- Continue to develop a clearer understanding of the barriers to and opportunities for a variety of institutions to buy a greater portion of their food locally, and disseminate widely the lessons learned among farmers, processors, and institutional food buyers.

Approach and methods

Student interns, primarily from the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) and Iowa State University, were recruited and trained in all aspects of the UNI Local Food Project. The interns worked with farmers, food buyers, and restaurant owners, and participated in educational and outreach events.

The interns were assigned to a cluster of institutions to make sure the ordering and delivery process went smoothly and that the project was being publicized properly. The interns arranged special events, staffed the UNI Local Food Project booth at educational events, and assisted in planning local farm tours. Each week the interns checked with participating farmers and prepared lists of the available produce and farmer contact information to e-mail or fax to the buyers. In addition, the interns made sure that each institution they worked with kept good records of their food purchases. The local food purchase data was assembled and analyzed at the end of the growing season.

Results and discussion

Local food expenditures in 2000 were \$173,400 and involved five institutions. In 2003, the UNI Local Food Project, staffed mainly by student interns, had been extended to 14 institutions and sales were in excess of \$226,000. The 2001 growing season was the first year of a formal internship program for the project with options for training sessions, presentations, discussions, and field trips. Letters that have been received from past interns attest to the value of the experience.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$17,000 for year one
\$17,000 for year two
\$17,000 for year three

The project staff maintains close communication with food buyers and farmers to make the adjustments necessary to keep the local buying process running smoothly. The institutions with the highest interest and commitment have been the most successful within the project. But challenges to the process still exist. Among them are distributor contracts (which prevent buyers from making any significant local purchases), limited local supply of fruits and vegetables, limited local processing infrastructure, some delivery problems, the pervasive culture of pre-processed foods, and pricing issues.

Conclusions

This was an education and outreach project, so there were no scientific conclusions to report. The UNI Local Food Project continues to document its experiences with the barriers and opportunities for expanding interest in local markets among institutional buyers. They will share their findings at local, state, and national meetings, conferences, and media venues.

Impact of results

The most important outcomes have been the development of an informal network of institutional food buyers, farmers, and processors who now know each other and that these relationships are growing stronger as this work continues.

Ten of the participating farmers interviewed rated their level of satisfaction with the project at a 4.7 on a scale of 0 to 5.

This project has inspired similar efforts in Iowa and around the country. The principal investigator has shared project experiences with several other entities interested in starting a local buying process. Among them were Berea College, Oberlin College, the School Sisters of Notre Dame (Mankato, Minnesota), and Northern Arizona University.

The internship program in northeast Iowa will continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of local food buyers and sellers. It also provides college students with first-hand exposure to food, farming, agriculture, and direct marketing.

Education and outreach

The principal investigator published a commentary on local food and local security in the *Journal of Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*. Popular press coverage included several stories in the *Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier*. There is a web site displaying many results from the project, www.uni.edu/ceee/foodproject. "Market to Market," a PBS program shown in 26 states, aired a program on the UNI Local Food Project in November 2002.

The principal investigator has given presentations on the work of the project in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Jefferson City, Missouri; Freeport, Illinois; East Troy, Wisconsin; Berea, Kentucky; Mankato, Minnesota; Grinnell, Iowa; Oberlin, Ohio; Flagstaff, Arizona; Salina, Kansas, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

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