ONE-PAGE BRIEF: Competitive Grant Report M2007-22

Strengthening the regional and local food systems in the Iowa Valley: Enhancing the sustainability of the University of Iowa food system, a Factor-10 approach

Abstract: Promoting local food systems and products can be challenging when dealing with a large university purchasing and procurement system, as shown by efforts at the University of Iowa.

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This research is based on the premise that local food systems thrive in a culture of sustainability. A culture of sustainability values where and how food is grown and supports sustainable farmers. This project examined ways that a diverse group of participants could encourage a more sustainable food system at the University of Iowa.

What was done and why?

Nearly 30,000 students attend the University of Iowa (UI). The university spends an estimated $6 to 7 million per year on food served in the residence halls and the Iowa Memorial Union alone. The impact of this expenditure for regional farmers and the local food economy is not insignificant, and the potential impact of shifting even a small percentage of that total to local, sustainable food sales could be substantial.

Objectives were to:

1. Convene five meetings for a working group that consisted of at least 20 key university members, farmer networks and supporting organizations willing to look at the UI food system.
2. Draft a five-year strategic plan and a preliminary set of indicators for the UI that would take measurable steps toward improving the food system in several key areas.
3. Sustain the work by using the working group to devise strategies for achieving the goals in the five-year plan.

What did we learn?

The Sustainable Food Systems Project created a working group of individuals representing different groups to entertain the question of sustainability within the food system at the UI. This group assessed and improved the system for providing food at the UI in the key areas of 1) human health and well being, 2) ecological health and 3) regional prosperity, using both a systems and Factor 10 approach.

The project produced a vision document for the UI food system, new data that assessed its sustainability, new connections among stakeholders on campus and in the community, and a curriculum to encourage student learning on topics of sustainability. (See the curriculum at www.jclfa.org.) It also invigorated a broader discussion of sustainability that has led to new activities and goals for the university. Some key players remained skeptical of the project. This was partly due to lack of direction from upper administration and the absence of strong, organized student demand. Students, faculty, and staff sometimes had very different ways of framing, understanding, and working through issues.