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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

Rex Honey  
*University of Iowa*

Leah Wilson  
*University of Iowa*

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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.

Keywords
Community-based food systems, Farm to institution, Food miles food pathways food system assessments

Disciplines
Agribusiness | Operations and Supply Chain Management

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What tactics can be used to promote local foods within a large institution?

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. Therefore, this research examined ways that a diverse group of participants could encourage a more sustainable food system at the University of Iowa.

Background

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.

Issues such as purchasing contracts, vendor requirement and pricing are all more difficult to resolve in an environment that lacks sustainability goals. Investigators asked how the University of Iowa food system could become more sustainable, thereby creating a climate more receptive to working with local food producers.

Objectives for the project 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 university that would take measurable steps toward improving the UI 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.

Approach and methods

A diverse working group of individuals was gathered from inside and outside the UI community, including faculty, students, dining services and other university staff, area farmers, non-profit organizations and others. The group examined the UI food system in terms of human health, ecological health, and regional economics. The members used a systems approach to assess the food system from food inputs to waste outputs. They also employed an approach to resource efficiency called Factor 10, which is used as a tool to move from a high-waste economy to a low-waste economy. The Factor 10 approach analyzes a given system of production and looks for
ways to reduce inefficiencies within that system. Here, efficiency is defined broadly and includes measures such as the cost of pollution paid by society, decline of rural communities, loss of soil fertility, increase in obesity, etc.

**Results and discussion**

Over 11 months, the participants produced a vision document that described the ideal characteristics of a sustainable university food system and articulated a group mission and guiding values. (See the vision document at www.jclfa.org.) The group identified goals, activities and next steps to move toward a more efficient food system. They suggested a list of sustainability indicators that can be used to track progress toward goals, including:

- Nutritional content of foods served,
- Price of nutritious meals,
- Customer satisfaction with nutritious meals,
- Percentage of food sourced from Johnson (home of UI) and contiguous counties,
- Percentage of total food waste recycled or composted, and
- Diversity of audience reached through activities and events.

Two original research papers were prepared by graduate students and service learning experiences were provided for six undergraduate students.

**Conclusions**

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 University of Iowa 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. (The curriculum can be seen 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.

**Impact of results**

While the project produced some gains, the University of Iowa has not advanced as far as some of its peers in development and adoption of policies and practices to improve the sustainability of its system for providing food at a wide variety of university venues. However, this baseline work fueled a growing enthusiasm that could move the UI forward in this area. Strong leadership and support from the university administration, students and faculty, and better organization on the part of all constituents will be necessary. Stronger networks among university affiliates and community members also are critical.
Education and outreach
The project was concerned with assembling a planning group and a set of objectives. The hope is that outreach and education will emerge from future group activities.

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For more information, contact:
Leah Wilson, (319) 621-3009, email wilson.leah.m@gmail.com.