Survey of Local Food Purchasing Among Wisconsin Colleges

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Introduction

In Western Wisconsin there is a strong push to develop a more robust local/regional food system for economic development as well as for environmental and health reasons. There are many reasons to buy locally grown food. You’ll get exceptional taste and freshness, strengthen your local economy, support family farms, safeguard your family’s health, and protect the environment.

The UWEC Chippewa Valley Center for Economic Research and Development (CVCERD) has recently partnered with UW-Extension Baron/Chippewa Counties on a very timely research project. A $10,000 grant was secured through UW-Extension to develop an applied local food research project. The intent of the project is to document the degree to which local food is produced and consumed in Western Wisconsin. In addition, we seek to contribute to existing efforts aimed at increasing local food purchasing and consumption in the region. This project will provide basic data and information as well as research analysis and outreach to support and tie together these efforts.

Farm to College Survey

College food service departments have an important influence on students’ eating habits and health. For many college students, the dining hall provides the majority of their meals. For this reason, we conducted surveys of colleges to examine the degree to which they purchase and serve locally raised food products in their cafeterias and dining facilities. Of 33 colleges surveyed, 28 responded. We defined having a farm to college program as buying some amount of locally raised food. Eight colleges responded saying they did have a program, 20 said they did not.

Our results show that very little local food is currently purchased and served in Wisconsin colleges and universities. Although only 1.4% of the total food budgets across the 28 institutions surveyed was spent on local products, there were several exceptions of schools making significant use of local foods. In fact, one two-year public institution spent 11.9% of their food budget on local foods. Similarly, the largest local food budgets among four-year schools were 9.0% and 10.5% for private and public institutions respectively.

Limitations and Benefits

Comparing Limitations

- Supporting local farmers
- Supporting local economy
- Higher quality food
- Lower environmental impact
- Student/Employee Research Opportunities
- Community Relations
- Meeting student dietary needs

Comparing Benefits

Management Type

- 0.0
- 0.5
- 1.0
- 1.5
- 2.0
- 2.5
- 3.0
- 3.5
- 4.0

Discussion

Among 4-year private schools because they have the highest percentage of students living in residence halls. The smallest opportunities lie with the 2-year public schools because they have the fewest meals.

On the other hand, those that do use local foods have overcome these barriers to some degree. These institutions see the substantive barriers as seasonality, coordinating purchase and delivery, product quality, and price. Perhaps the most important finding of our survey is that most of the local food purchases by Wisconsin colleges and universities is done through their regular food distributors, while very little comes from local farms, co-ops and farmer’s markets.

This suggests that there are two paths for increasing local food use. The first is to expand local markets by connecting institutions to local farmers and co-ops. The second is to increase the degree to which major food distributors are able to provide local food options.

On a one to four scale, one being not at all and four being a lot, colleges were asked, “Please indicate to what degree you see the following as benefits of farm to college programs.”

On a one to four scale, one being not beneficial and four being very beneficial, colleges were asked: “Please indicate to what degree you see the following as limitations of farm to college programs.”

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