

Building student awareness and involvement in the Farm to ISU program

Abstract: Iowa State University Dining Services initiated the Farm to ISU program to increase purchases of local foods by 35 percent by 2012. This project sought to boost the awareness of ISU students about Farm to ISU and the importance of buying locally-produced foods.

Principal Investigator:

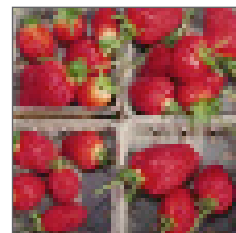
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Budget:
\$5,468 for year one

Q The project asked students: Are you aware of Farm to ISU and the benefit to Iowa by purchasing locally?

A During that year as we saw a growth in the knowledge, mostly through table tents and posters in the dining halls. Every year we get 5-8,000 new students, so we will continue to do this, but have seen a decline in willingness to pay more for this benefit due to the value proposition of keeping their debt down.



MARKETING

Background

When ISU Dining initiated the Farm to ISU program in 2007 to enhance its local food purchasing efforts, it had tremendous support from the director of ISU Dining, farmer organizations and sustainable agriculture researchers. An early program concern was that support from ISU students, faculty and staff was not as strong as it needed to be in order to sustain the program. This project sought to answer the question of whether or not increased knowledge of the Farm to ISU program would encourage students and the ISU community to provide social and financial support for local food systems including the ISU Dining efforts.

The specific objectives of this project were to:

- Build student interest in and awareness of local food systems;
- Educate the student community about local food systems; and
- Increase the involvement of students in the Farm to ISU Program.

Overall, these activities encouraged a greater connection between ISU Dining and the student community, campus sustainability committees, student volunteers and collaboration with ISU professors and integration into their classes.

The long-term goals of the project were:

- Continuous growth in student support and involvement in the Farm to ISU program,
- Ten students active within Farm to ISU at the end of the project period, and
- A greater relationship with, and added produce purchases from, the ISU Student Organic Farm.

Approach and methods

These strategies were used to increase student awareness of and education about Farm to ISU throughout the project period:

- Marketing and education campaign (including posters, table tents and stickers)
- Seven class presentations on Farm to ISU and the importance of local food



Farm to ISU Information Booth

- Three undergraduate focus groups
- Fourteen campus-wide information booths
- VEISHEA booth/event celebrating local farmers
- Creation of student opportunities to serve on the Farm to ISU Steering Committee
- Establishment of student volunteering opportunities
- Purchase of food from ISU Student Organic Farm
- Student survey (n=1051)

The strength of the marketing/educational programs and the project activities were determined by the number of students engaged and involved with Farm to ISU at the end of the project period, the change in student knowledge about Farm to ISU as gauged through initial focus groups and the concluding student survey, and a stronger relationship with and purchases made through ISU's Student Organic Farm.

Results and discussion

The strategies for increasing awareness and involvement in the Farm to ISU program were effective at gaining student support for local food systems. The most effective aspects of this project were: marketing campaigns to garner more attention, collaborating with ISU faculty to integrate local food system topics with curriculum, and informational booths held in residential dining centers. Of the most effective strategies mentioned, the most meaningful and lasting result from this project was the collaboration with ISU faculty to educate students about local food.

Through this collaboration, ISU professors were able to more effectively incorporate local food system concepts into their lessons, offer additional learning opportunities in the form of community service, and provide ways for student growth through team projects. More local food advocates were recruited through this form of education than informational booths because of direct engagement in local food issues.

The class presentations provided only a modest increase in awareness of Farm to ISU and local food systems. In order to make the class presentations more effective, it would be necessary to integrate Farm to ISU into the class curriculum and provide firsthand opportunities for students to witness local food issues. Examples could be class readings surrounding local food systems and decreasing farm diversity, and group projects centered on ways of simplifying the complex U.S. food system. In this way, a class presentation about Farm to ISU would serve to simplify even further the necessity of sourcing food locally. Students understood the concept of buying locally. As one student put it so eloquently, "If there is a local food source, why would we go further away to get it?" But students were not sure why ISU Dining should be doing this if it cost them more. ISU Dining staff will work with students at the College of Design –Marketing department to share more information about this program.

Conclusions

Overall, this project revealed that with strong marketing campaigns, integrated learn-



Brochure on Farm to ISU

ing opportunities, firsthand experiences, and quality data, students will be more willing to support a local food program on ISU's campus. Recommendations for future Farm to ISU success include narrowing project focus to quality over quantity.

With enough emphasis on quality rather than quantity for information booths and presentations, students are more willing to take notice and appreciate the benefits of supporting local farmers by buying local food. With opportunities to tour local farms that supply ISU Dining with food, students have the ability to understand the connection that they have with agriculture in Iowa. In order to further integrate students, it is recommended that local food programs create steering committees with positions for student representatives. This connection would allow students to make wiser food purchasing decisions during and after their college careers.

Impact of results

The results of this project will serve to assist the future advancement of local food programs for ISU Dining, and those of other colleges and universities. The success of local food programs on college and university campuses depends greatly on student social and financial support. In order to instill a sense of student ownership, local food projects must be able to effectively incorporate student opinions and suggestions into goals and strategies. In this way, students will take pride in understanding and connecting to Iowa and U.S. agriculture, either as consumers or producers.

However, student interest in paying a premium for local/organic food choices is not strong. Surveying showed that they do not want to pay very much more for these products, and they actually feel it should be fresher and cheaper due to lower transportation costs and time.

Leveraged funds

The investigators received an Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship grant to do GAP Training for the farmers and some staff and students.

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