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Business Sourcing
ENVS-294: Community Food Development Project
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Evidence as to why project is important:

In this day and age of fast food and mass production, local food systems are proving themselves to be a healthy and wholesome solution. The word “local,” of course, varies, but the main concept is that food grown or produced within a close proximity be available for consumption in an immediate or neighboring community. Such a system has countless benefits. First and foremost are the economy and the environment. A local foods system cuts the high cost of transportation and keeps money circulating within the town. This arrangement also supports local businesses and particularly farmers- a profession greatly in need of support these days. These farms tend to be smaller in size and usually practice sustainable agriculture. Needless to say, sustainable agriculture offers a host of environmental benefits, namely that of carbon sink, natural nitrogen cycling via crop rotation, cleaner water and less soil erosion.

Next is food security. A local food system is more affordable and stable than the large manufacturing alternative, which is prone to disruption due to its global scale and often precipitates the closing of stores in low-income neighborhoods when profits decline. The integration of local foods will also promote healthier lifestyles among residents. Furthermore, local foods have a positive impact on community health. Because there is considerably less time between source and consumption, there is no need of preservatives and chemicals, and therefore, local foods are fresher, tastier, and riper. This leads us to how local foods contribute to a community’s social wellbeing. Besides adding identity and character to a town, it also encourages more thoughtful social interactions between residents who share a common interest. Considering this long list of advantages, it becomes clear why a local foods system is so valuable. By empowering communities to make decisions in their own best interest, and not in the interest of far-away corporations or manufacturers, the integration of more locally grown food is sure to benefit any community that participates.

This is a particularly pertinent issue for the town of Oberlin, largely thanks to the heightened environmental consciousness within the college and town. There is a strong emphasis on sustainability here and a large population of people who embrace the idea of local and organic foods, as evidenced by the biannual local foods fest and the Saturday morning farmer’s markets. Besides the progressive atmosphere of Oberlin, the small size also works in our favor. Since it is such a small city, decisions are easier to reach and resident participation and input is highly encouraged. Geographically, as well, Oberlin conveniently finds itself in the heart of Northeast Ohio farmland, thereby offering a huge range of opportunities to interested students and community members.

Framework for Solution:

The business sourcing group is focused on evaluating the current amount of local foods incorporated into Oberlin restaurants and businesses and improving menu content to consist of at least 40% local food. This percentage is aimed at bringing the rest of the town up to par with Bon Appetit, De Café, and Great Lakes Restaurant and Brewery, who have done an impressive job to consistently reach this standard. The work conducted over

the past several weeks involved communicating with college and town businesses to understand strategies of how they currently work with local foods.

Our first step was to try to gauge interest by interviewing as many local food establishments as possible within our time constraints. Interviews with the local foods coordinator of OSCA, the director of De Café local purchases and the owner of the Feve shed light on Oberlin's general interest in local foods. Then, our group identified 40% as an ideal goal for restaurants to strive to meet. Clearly, this goal is voluntary and encouraged, but not mandatory. After examining several case studies, we decided that a suitable course of action would be to create a document of compiled information regarding local food availability, prices, seasonal constraints, quantities, and farmer contact information. This ultimate creation and distribution of the document would provide easier information accessibility, a crucial aspect of facilitating the purchase of local foods. Another possible idea is to create a community based "Green Team" that would function similarly to the OSCA position of local foods coordinator. This position would help Oberlin food establishments reach our goal of 40%, or more, should they choose to participate. This is our recommendation for future work to help reach our aforementioned goal.

Interviews:

Our communication with OSCA was very informative. We learned from Katie Thompson, OSCA's local foods coordinator, that the percentage of their local purchases fluctuates based on the season as well as the particular coop. Katie listed a number of farms where OSCA gets their food from, including potatoes, onions, and cabbage from the Yoder Amish family in Sullivan, eggs from Ari Keim, another Amish farmer near Sullivan, dried goods from AG access, and various produce from George Jones farm and Hickory Acres. In regards to disadvantages associated with local purchasing, Katie mainly discussed seasonal restrictions. Finally, she told us about OSCA's plans for increasing their local purchasing through developing relationships with new farmers as well as supporting canned food initiatives. Specifically, OSCA hopes to purchase local soybeans for tofu production.

We gained a similar perspective within the Oberlin community from Gina Fusco, who manages local purchases at De Café. She explained that 30-35% of their purchases are local, depending on the time of year. She defined "local" as within the state of Ohio or less than 150 miles away. Gina gave us a very long list of local establishments where they get their food, including chicken from Gerber's Amish farms in Kindred, Great Lakes cheeses from the northern Great Lakes region, Dei Fratelli tomato products from Toledo, and Amish natural pasta from Millersburg. Additionally, De Café gets their apples and apple cider from Miller's Orchards and their greens from Jones Farm. As well as both budgetary and seasonal restrictions, Gina mentioned that all of their vendors must carry a certain amount of liability insurance, meaning that De Café cannot conduct business with certain vendors who do not have the required certification. Overall, we learned that De Café is always trying to expand local purchasing, in accordance with their very respectable goal of 50%.

From a different perspective, the owner of the Feve admitted that he was less fervent about local foods. The most immediately local goods he purchases for his restaurant are maple syrup from an Amish farm near Cleveland and tomatoes and jabañeros from his father's garden in Huron. Overall, Jason claims that up to 50% of his

food purchases are from Ohio during the peak season and can fall as low as 0% during low season. He mentioned seasonal and availability restrictions that prevent him from buying local, but actually cited price as the primary drawback. He looked into buying local chicken but was shocked to discover that it cost more than twice as much as out-of-state chicken. Considering that the Feve is not a local, organic eatery, he simply cannot charge customers the consequent price. He agreed that a local food document would be a very helpful tool for promoting local foods and that it would certainly be of use to him as he, and probably other restaurant owners, are often unaware of what goods are available in and around Oberlin.

Case Studies:

The case studies we chose aim to reflect businesses who are faced with similar or identical circumstances to those in Oberlin, and who have succeeded in establishing a relationship with local food producers.

Bon Appétit, the Oberlin College dining service, purchases close to 40% of their food locally while also impacting the local food infrastructure. They have provided assistance to the George Jones Farm, helping to buy a greenhouse as well as assisting City Fresh in purchasing a diesel box truck.

Great Lakes Brewery is another business that has been successful in integrating local foods into its purchasing and production. As a brewing company and successful restaurant in Cleveland, they have managed to reach up to 40% local foods purchasing during the growing season. These also serve as a great example of a business that is engaging with its community beyond just its purchasing of local foods. The restaurant's kitchen leftovers are composted and brought to local farms, including George Jones farm, as fertilizer. Additionally, the environmental innovation at Great Lakes is prioritized and is a constant process, with a group of staff members known as the "Green Team". They develop new sustainable and cost-effective ideas for the Brewery and Restaurant. In the brewery, for example, the barley from the beer-making process is given to local dairy farmers who use it to feed their cattle, helping milk production. Some of the grains are also delivered to bakers who use it in breads and pretzels. The Great Lakes beer truck even runs exclusively on diesel oil.

It is also useful to look at examples from outside the state. In this case, a useful case study is Pizzaiolo Restaurant in Oakland, California. The importance of local foods in this region of the United States, coupled with the abundance of local foods in the area, allows for businesses to successfully incorporate local purchasing into their production process. Charlie Hallowell, the owner of Pizzaiolo, firmly believes that the simple act of feeding people is at the core of what it is to be human. He suggests that the focus of his restaurant is "on the ritual of taking life from the world around us and presenting it to you to sustain your own life." For this reason, he has established several rules regarding the food he prepares. He tries to buy 98% locally grown, organic, seasonal meat and produce. This involves establishing relationships with familiar farmers and buying whole animals from ranchers they have come to know and trust. The human aspect of the cooking process is extremely valuable to Charlie; he goes to the farmers' market personally multiple times a week, handpicking the food he wishes to use and developing a rapport with the producers. This holistic approach is extremely valuable in the local foods process. Nevertheless, accessibility is a tremendous barrier, one that does not affect Bay Area businesses in the same way it affects those in Oberlin.

With this in mind, we think that identifying a reasonable goal for restaurants to aim for, offering them an informational document, and establishing a team or person who would function as a local foods coordinator for Oberlin would be useful and necessary steps to promote sustainability and health within the community.