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Policy Brief: Connecting Farmers and Consumers

A. Importance of Connecting Farmers and Consumers

Many communities struggle to eat locally. For these communities local foods (although grown much closer to the consumer than say, bananas in the local grocery store) are difficult to access, and often involve hassle or extra work.   It is this issue that we aim to eliminate or (at least reduce) with our easily accessible local farmer directory. Often times, lacking local foods systems stem from lack of access and communication, and we aim to increase both of these things with our project. It will not only facilitate communication between consumer and producer, but also between local farmers and local businesses. By increasing communication between local farms, businesses, and residents, it is our hope that the directory will help to increase the profitability of local foods. We aim to assist the larger effort to keep small-scale independent farms competitive in an agricultural industry dominated by massive commercial conglomerates.

Based on our limited research and conversations with local residents, we have come to the conclusion that this is a project worth exploring. The farmer directory we are proposing will serve as a mechanism for businesses and individuals to engage with local producers more efficiently, and in doing so, will bridge the gap between Oberlin residents and the people producing our food. This will establish a mutual awareness between farmer and consumer, an important factor in establishing a local network of this sort. It will also help to develop a greater sense of community with Oberlin and its surroundings and will help to enhance general appreciation of local farmers.

B. Framework for a Solution

As a part of the farmer connect group, we are faced with the problem of having a lack of access to information about where the farmers are located and how they feel about connecting with the college and surrounding Oberlin community. Without the knowledge, it is ultimately impossible to increase the amount of local foods eaten within the Oberlin Community. Even if we then have access to these local farmers, we need to build a bridge between the consumers and the farmers. That bridge comes in the form of working cohesively with the Business Sourcing group, enabling local foods to be in direct supply at IGA, Gibson's and other downtown eateries.

Thus, part of the framework for fixing this problem would be to create a local farmer online collective where information about farms and local businesses who use local foods can be easily accessed by the community. To go along with that, we want to create a hard

copy, or some sort of pamphlet that could be given to members of the community that would inform them and give them access to these local farms so we can reach our goal of having 20% of the food eaten in Oberlin to come from local sources. This source of information would give phone numbers and descriptions of the types of farms in the local 50-mile radius. If people were then able to car pool or have a local foods buyer for a group in the community that could travel to the farm to buy goods our goals would be on the way to being met. With knowledge about the local farmers comes increased access.

Another aspect that has not been discussed by the group in great detail is to increase the amount of local foods fairs held by the college. There was one held last semester that I judged as quite successful and if we were able to duplicate that success and bring more information about the movement to the local community it would be great.

C. Case Studies

One of the most basic tactics for connecting farmers and consumers is the farm directory – a compiled list of farmers in the area and their products. As local food systems rely on decentralized farms and distributions systems that can't be as easily located as the corner store down the street, these directories are essential for gathering the information needed to develop local foods systems. Though directories obviously do not by themselves overcome issues of food deserts or inadequate distributional infrastructure, they can act as useful tools for those trying to overcome these problems, and help develop local foods markets so they expand and subsequently become more accessible to those who have difficulty accessing them. We were inspired by the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service's online directory, which allows users to search their state for the appropriate farmer directories. The sheer number of directories available for different regions indicates that this idea has taken off in many other places.[1] Basing a food directory out of Oberlin will generate a directory specific for the town of Oberlin, including many sources that can be overlooked in these larger, statewide directories.

One example especially relevant to us is the Southern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership, which is supported by the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. The Partnership receives technical assistance from the college, allowing them to undertake projects like the Online Farm guide, a directory that allows users to search for farms by their distance from any location in Massachusetts, products available, distribution method, etc.[2] This directory demonstrates such a project could be supported by an institution such as Oberlin College.

Another example we found that seemed relevant to our project was the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm association. The OEFFA publishes the Good Earth Guide, a directory of farms in Ohio organized by products and location. Especially useful is the directory's online future, which features a search-by-county map. However, the actual farms included in the directory seem not to reflect the actual number of farms operating,

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[1] http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/local_food/
[2] http://www.umassd.edu/semap/

or at least not around Oberlin (OSCA buys from several farms that aren't listed). This could be a reflection of inclusion in the directory being a condition of joining OEFFA, which entails membership fees and participation in OEFFA programs. Many farmers might not want to join an umbrella organization. This reflects a gap a directory like ours could fill - while OEFFA is certainly a valuable organization for its educational and political activities and the community it provides to farmers, its directory can't be comprehensive because it includes only members of OEFFA. Our directory would simply offer farmers the opportunity to be listed, reducing the obligations they face and thus increasing participation.[3]

D. Interviews

In a community based project it is vital to communicate with the all of the involved parties. Therefore, when the goal of a third party is to connect farmers with potential markets, the third party must talk to farmers, buyers, and sellers. The interviews presented here attempt to gauge feelings surrounding the creation of a directory of local farmers. This will facilitate the connectivity of farmers to their local consumers. Interviewees provide ideas in terms of feasibility of this project and potential impacts on their consumption habits, as well as potential improvements to our action plan.

The first interview conducted was with Katie Thompson, one of OSCA's Local Food Coordinators. Her perspective is understandably based in what OSCA can and cannot achieve. Her job is to help OSCA supply more local food options to the people who depend on dining co-ops for food. She is actively involved with area farmers, and negotiates with them to supply food that OSCA is potentially interested in buying. Katie believes that local foods are a good way to support farmers in an area and that an online directory of local farmers would be beneficial to those wishing to procure local produce. However, she is skeptical that major local foods consumption patterns will change with our current infrastructure. She believes that the ordinary consumer has neither the time nor the resources to buy locally without the aid of a centralized system like a farmer's market or a program like City Fresh provides.

I also interviewed a farmer I've worked with in my hometown of Meadville, PA. Meadville is a similar town to Oberlin. It is home to Allegheny College, and the students represent a large portion of the affluent community in the town. Local foods are slowly being integrated into the college campus, and the Vines Farm is at a point where it is financially capable of expansion and ready to enter a new market, namely the rest of the town. However, the Vines face the same problem that farmers in the Oberlin area are confronted with: namely, a lack of connectivity to the consumers. The Vines agreed with our idea that a directory of farmers, to be supplied to local consumers, help remedy the problems that stem from a lack of knowledge about suppliers. The Vines also believe in a twofold approach that pairs the simple directory with an educational program. Their theory is that teaching about where food comes from increases probability of consumers

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http://www.oeffa.org/search-geg.php

deciding to buy local produce. They believe strongly in the increased nutritional value of food consumed close to its production site, and they agreed that a directory would help buyers to realize local options for getting their nourishment.