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PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOODS IN OBERLIN

Statement of Purpose

While many of our surveyed informants displayed a basic knowledge of what organic and local food meant and felt that it satisfied their concerns over food nutrition and quality, they felt that the cost (in the case of organic) and convenience (in the case of local) were prohibitive. These issues make up the common perceptions of local and organic food, and education and awareness are closely linked with issues of access. Our public education program will thus seek to highlight the social, environmental, economic, and personally relevant benefits of local and organic food, hopefully in conjunction with a concerted effort to make such food more readily available.

Recommendations

In order to reach the goals that twenty percent of food sold/served in Oberlin establishments will be local and/or organic in five years and forty percent of it will be local and/or organic in ten years due to consumer demand based on educated awareness of organic and local food processes, we propose the following actions be taken:

1. Educational placards and signs should be placed in Oberlin grocery stores to inform consumers what terms such as *organic*, *local*, *free-range*, and *hormone-free* really mean and how the processes behind these words affect the consumer.
2. Signs and educational menu sections should be put into restaurants and grocery stores that already carry a high percentage of local and/or organic food that explain the same terms as above but also go into the life histories of the products at the specific establishments so consumers know where the food they are eating comes from.
3. The "Shop Oberlin – Preferred Customer" card should be able to be used for discounts at the farmers' market and for organic and/or local products at Oberlin establishments that already carry these kinds of items.
4. Stores and restaurants that carry a high percentage of local and/or organic products should be given a decal to display in their window labeling them as such. A brochure should also be distributed to inform consumers about which stores and restaurants have this decal and thus have a certain percentage of local and/or organic food.

Background and Identification of the Problem

We asked informants, a group of twenty members of First Church in Oberlin, a series of questions about their definitions of local and organic food as well as their grocery purchasing patterns (priorities when getting groceries, most frequent source of groceries, and frequency of organic and local purchasing.)

Most respondents guessed that they purchased about 10% organic at the most, though there was some variation. As for local there was a little more variation, from 10% to 30% being most common. Some didn't identify proportions, but made it clear that the meat, eggs, or fruit they purchased was primarily local. Quite a few acknowledged that they bought local with much greater frequency in the summer, and when the farmer's market was in operation. We also had respondents identify their priorities when purchasing groceries and where they got most of their groceries. Quality, nutrition, and

cost were the major priorities with convenience, especially the desire to get all groceries from the same source, also a significant concern. Most respondents' primary source of groceries is IGA, though Giant Eagle and the Jones and Hickory Acre farms were also mentioned a few times.

From these first surveys and from conversations with respondents it seems clear that most had a general understanding of what it means for food to be organic and local. Their eating priorities (that food be high-quality and healthful) could be an argument employed in the material for purchasing more organic and local. The perceived high cost and inconvenience of organic and local food are the primary obstacles. High cost is not often associated with local food however, and the argument could be made for local purchasing keeping money in the community.

In our estimation the major issue is one of access. Respondents said they didn't think IGA offered much if any local food, and it was by far the major source of groceries across the board. IGA should be addressed in some way in the course of a public education campaign either by addressing consumers at IGA or encouraging them to request particular products and services from the store. Working with IGA there is the greatest potential to reach most of the population and it is there that demand for local and organic food could cause the greatest changes in local patterns.

Additionally, there was a perception that there simply isn't much food produced locally besides corn and soybeans, which aren't suitable as the basis for real meals. Concerns that a locally-based diet would be unsuitable and not diverse were considerable. During the growing season, many informants claimed that they purchased local more frequently, but that during the winter and early spring it was not accessible. This could possibly be addressed if matched with a community canning/preservation capacity, which would allow surplus to provide local products beyond the growing season.

Case Studies

Vermont, always considered a forerunner in the movement toward sustainability, is home to numerous examples of successful local food initiatives. Perhaps one of the most enticing is the Burlington School Food Project (BSFP). Community members, parents, local businesses and organizations joined together to create a program to bring local food into children's every day lives by creating a hands-on agricultural education system that involves class-based teaching as well as a better ratio of local to non-local foods in the cafeteria.

The USDA Community Food Project grant kick-started the program, which is now also funded by a recent state legislature bill that offers mini grants to encourage similar projects as well as larger green corporations like Ben & Jerry's and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. The program was created with the participation of the school district and was developed using an action plan rather than a policy in order to make the program capable of withstanding changes in school administration over time. The School Food Action Plan has an open-door policy which allows any person or organization to participate for as long as desired, and the group that heads the program operates as an "informal coalition operating by consensus and led by a skillful facilitator... we've got the flexibility to problem solve easily and quickly."

The BSFP has worked with other educational organizations to educate teachers on the issues and help them to design curriculums that incorporate community resources. There are summer and extracurricular programs available to the students to keep them engaged year round, and the cafeteria has been conducting taste tests to introduce students to local produce and allow them to be directly involved in what they are eating. Because this program is run by anyone and everyone, students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and disciplines, allowing them to connect with each other and the community on a deeper level. This program does not only benefit students, however. The local Food Service has tremendously increased the amount of local produce purchased over the last 6 years.

Perhaps the best aspect of such school-focused programs is the fact that as children learn, they are more likely to pass on what they learn to parents and friends. As these young students are educated

about local foods, they will take those values home with them, and talk to their parents about them, encouraging this topic to flourish at home as well as at school.

Across the country in Mesa Verde, Colorado, the town is brimming with local food initiatives which have been compiled into a brochure on the City Council website. Among these initiatives are: a group that is aiding local producers in how to appropriately price their produce; a local food team that maintains an organic demonstration garden and greenhouse where they provide education on topics such as food security and organic vs. local; a group working to ensure that all local producers have the same access to local resources including financial assistance, advertising and business skills; a coalition of health and wellness professionals working to encourage active, sustainable lifestyles that is working to provide fresh local produce to poor families, students, and senior citizens. Mesa Verde's local food initiatives are all local, community-based organizations that are using their individual skills and resources toward one specific goal – encouraging the sustainable growth of the local food movement. What is so encouraging about this study is that local businesses and groups are encouraging each other. Such an interconnected support system is important for the growth and survival of small farmers and nonprofit organizations. This community has such a variety of initiatives that appeal to a wide range of people, and this brochure has made them particularly accessible.

Another great example is blogging. There are more and more local and organic food-related blogs on the web each day, and lately they are rapidly gaining popularity. Appealing to the internet-using community, which these days is a pretty substantial percent of the population, is a quick and easy way to get lots of information out to the world. One example is gulfcoastlocalfood.org, a blog created by a woman who recently moved to Mobile, Alabama and is documenting the various local food initiatives in the town online so that community members can be updated and educated. The site is fairly new, and very frequently updated. The editor, Angela, writes in great detail on a broad range of issues related to the local foods movement. There are few comments on the articles, but the ones that are there are written by town members who seem very appreciative of the information that Angela is providing.

Two more popular local foods blogs are Sustainable Food Blog and Local Food Challenge. Both of these sites are only two or three years old, and have a large number of daily readers. The latter is a group blog “written by authors who are interested in the benefits of eating food grown in their local foodshed... committed to challenging themselves to eat mainly local food during a specific period of time during the year.” The former is written by a woman who is just interested in the topic and wants to share “everything having to do with sustainability from farm to kitchen and beyond.” Her blog has more practical value – gardening tips, recipes, information on how to find your local CSA.

Blogs can be tremendously useful in spreading information. Students and adults alike often spend more time online than reading books and magazines. Angela's blog is dedicated to her own community's education, whereas SFB and LFC are more determined to educate the masses.

These case studies represent a wide variety of public education options. The first educates only children; the second only a community; the third the web. These options span generations, medias, communities and businesses, all with the same purpose – to change how people think of food, and how people define “local”.

Summaries of Interviews

Diana, Store Manager, Oberlin IGA:

IGA is generally supportive of local and organic foods, however, customer demands make it difficult to continually stock local products. Education is needed about products the costs and benefits of local and organic foods (for example, some foods “not being in season,” not looking perfect, and having short shelf-lives). Also, local distributors tend to be disorganized. With smaller distributors it is difficult to get the quantity of products needed on time. In general, many barriers in consumer demand

must be overcome to make the switch to more local products. Oberlin IGA does not have the resources or time to have a staff member focus on picking up and constantly stocking local foods.

Employee, Gibson's:

The store owner/food buyer was too busy for an interview at this time. We were able to speak with a store employee who informed us that local milk is sold at Gibson's, and that the employee had been out to the milk farm to check the pH of the soil. Gibson's would be in support of local produce, but long-shelf life is needed at good prices. In general, the store is currently too busy to focus on changing inventory.

Leeza Ramsey, Store Owner, The Oberlin Market:

Oberlin Market sells mostly local and organic produce. They've had trouble with local distributors in the past, finding that they've often been disorganized and/or gone out of business. Currently they are working with Summit Select Provisions, and thus far the relationship has been organized and efficient. Oberlin Market already has signs indicating if products are local or organic (also "spray free" for some local but not certified organic products). A lot of their meat comes from Hickory Acres farm, who distributes for themselves. Ms. Ramsey says Hickory Acres is one of the best and most organized local sellers she works with. It was suggested that we partner with the City of Oberlin's Business Advisory Services to get the signage into all local businesses selling local produce. She says the local and organic movement is slow to catch on, and that it takes time for people to recognize that spending extra for better practices is worth the money. She also encouraged us to work with the school system to try to buy from local farmers. It takes pro-activity to change the way we buy (someone to pick up the phone, write a letter to the editor, or publish a story in the paper, to connect the businesses and farmers). It was expressed that larger food distributors are easier to order from and that their online ordering systems are user friendly and they always have products in stock. This makes them easy and reliable-good for business-even if not in line with local values. In order for more local businesses to buy local foods, local food distributors will have to maintain a high level of organization and reliability.

Framework for Solution

Based on preliminary surveys of Oberlin residents and interviews with vendor owners and managers we have chosen to set two goals for the results of our public food education project. The first is that twenty percent of products in all Oberlin grocery stores and a large proportion of Oberlin restaurants will be local and/or organic five years from now due to demand from consumers. The second is that forty percent of products will be local and/or organic ten years from now due to the same reason. While the processes and health/environmental effects of organic practices may be very different from those of local practices and thus these two terms are in no way synonymous, we feel that fulfilling the set goal percentages with either local, organic, or a conglomerate of both would be progress for the food community of Oberlin. This is why they are not separated in the current goals. These goals seem reasonable if a multitude of steps are taken so as to approach the issue from a variety of angles.

Firstly, educational placards and signs should be placed wherever there are currently organic products. For stores like IGA where there are not many local products yet, signage will be focused on organic products that are currently on the shelves such as organic pasta, applesauce, milk, soup, tomato sauce, and free-range/cage-free eggs. These educational signs will inform the consumer of what words like *organic*, *free-range*, and *cage-free* really mean and what the advantages are of buying organic, local, cage-free, etc., including both environmental factors and health effects for the consumer. With this educational campaign, we hope to increase demand for IGA to stock more organic, and eventually, local foods, such as milk, apples, honey, jam, maple syrup, eggs, grapes/grape juice/wine, which are

easily accessible within Ohio. For institutions like Agave and Black River Café, where local and organic foods are already more prevalent in the daily offerings, the educational placards will go into a little more depth on the back-story of the food that customers put into their mouths. The specific farms where the food items come from can be detailed as well as the practices of these farms and how it all affects the consumer. Posters and placards can be placed around the restaurants and information can be put on the menus.

In addition to educational information in grocery stores and restaurants for the *consumers*, there should be something that drives the *institutions* themselves to get on-board the local/organic food movement. Currently there is a “Shop Oberlin - Preferred Customer” program that many stores and restaurants participate in. Consumers can cheaply purchase a card that gives them deals at participating merchants. If this card also was able to be used at the Farmers’ Market or especially with local/organic food in Oberlin vendors, there would be more of a drive for the consumers to purchase these things. Additionally, merchants that have a certain percentage of local and/or organic products would receive a decal to put in their window to show that they are an establishment that supports local and organic products as part of a new program to be titled Oberlin Organic and Local. The merchants with decals would be listed in an Oberlin Organic and Local pamphlet available at a variety of locations so that consumers would be able to see at a glance which local stores and restaurants have local and organic products, and especially which ones have special deals for holders of Oberlin Preferred Customer cards.

With education in grocery stores for consumers, motivation for merchants to increase the percentage of local and/or organic in order to be a part of the Oberlin Organic and Local, and better financial deals on organic and local products with the Preferred Customer card, the aforementioned goals should be able to be achieved.