

Brown University Implements Farm-to-Fork Program With Help From Students

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

In the fall of 2002, a group of students at Brown University in Providence, R.I., approached Brown Dining Services and asked for fair-trade coffee to be served in their dining halls. As staff members began researching ways in which to fulfill this request, they soon learned about Farm-to-Fork programs. At that moment, the Brown University Community Harvest Program was born.



Brown University decided to start small with its new project by beginning with a pilot program to determine if buying locally would work for them. Their first project included buying apples from a local orchard. Right away, students could taste the difference and fresh apples became popular. The following fall, the Community Harvest Program had grown significantly with help from students. Brown Dining Services began buying other local products such as tomatoes, peaches and corn to accommodate the wishes of those interested in eating locally grown food.

The students' growing interest in the Community Harvest Program prompted Brown Dining Services to develop a Farmers' Market in the quadrangle outside the dining hall. The market provided students, faculty and staff the opportunity to meet local farmers and better understand the importance of supporting local agriculture. Brown University formed relationships with local farmers and quickly became a trendsetter in the area of Farm-to-College programs, working with more than 25 farmers, fair-trade providers and countless other local producers.



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Students involved in the Community Harvest Program began organizing weekly harvest crews to help local farmers in the fields during harvest season. The students traveled to nearby farms and picked produce from the fields to bring back to the dining hall for dinner. Brown Dining Services paid the farmers fair-market value for the produce.

The growth of the Community Harvest Program allowed Brown Dining Services to become a founding partner in Farm Fresh Rhode Island. Farm Fresh Rhode Island is an organization that works to connect small farms and producers from Rhode Island with consumers, restaurants, schools and foodservice institutions.

Students already involved in the Community Harvest Program petitioned the university to start their own sustainability organization with funding from student council. As a result, the Sustainable Food Initiative (SuFI) was set into place. SuFI allows students and staff to be involved in food-related projects that are environmentally and socially sound on campus, in the community and within the region.



Members of SuFI designated the first Monday of every month as Community Harvest lunch day. Representatives from SuFI, Brown Dining Services and anyone with an interest in the cause were welcome to assemble and discuss recent successes and future goals for the program. These lunches produced beneficial projects such as Roots and Shoots, Local Food Forum and the After the Harvest program.



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Roots and Shoots consisted of a line in the cafeteria that was dedicated to a healthy selection of fruits, vegetables, grains and more. The Local Food Forum is an annual networking event for Rhode Island food producers and buyers. The event brings farmers, chefs, school foodservice employees, restaurateurs and institutions together to share best practices for local sourcing and ways to continue to develop a local food system. After the Harvest aims to address where leftovers, food scraps and waste go. The program operates several initiatives, ranging from food drives, to organizing composting projects, to working with Providence's homeless population.



Brown Dining Services and the students of the Community Harvest Program have implemented several policy changes on campus such as switching from bleached white paper napkins to recycled natural fiber napkins. In addition, they have replaced all of the incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs. The university also offers greenware containers that are made from sugarcane, grass and reed plasma instead of plastic and Styrofoam. Perhaps one of the most striking accomplishments the university has made is the act of recycling fryolator grease and turning it into biodiesel fuel.

Brown University Dining Services continues to offer entire meals made from locally grown ingredients and grow their own herbs as part of the Garden Project. In an ongoing effort to reduce waste, the university ships post-consumer food to local pig farms to use as feedstock, and they ship pre-consumer food waste to local apple orchards to be turned into compost.



The students and dining hall staff of Brown University created the Community Harvest Program to help build solid relationships with local farmers, to provide high-quality food to its students, to decrease Brown University's damaging effects on the environment and to educate themselves and others about the benefits of supporting local agriculture.