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Bringing It Home: Iowa State University to Purchase 35 Percent of Food from Local Farms

AMES, IOWA

The majority of students, alumni, staff and faculty at Iowa State University (ISU) grew up on or near farms in the state of Iowa. However, the majority of food served by ISU Dining was being imported into Iowa from an average of 1,500 miles away. In early spring of 2007, ISU Dining initiated a Farm-to-ISU program to increase its local, sustainable and organic food purchases to 35 percent by 2012.

In order to obtain this goal, ISU Dining plans to feature local, seasonal produce and local specialty meats in the dining halls, offer organic options in the cafés and convenience stores, and create an Iowa catering menu that includes local dairy and meat.



A student-run steering committee was formed and, for the first few months, met monthly to provide feedback and guidance to the Farm-to-ISU coordinators. Members of the ISU Dining staff became involved in the steering committee to create ownership in the project and awareness about the local farmer organizations. The main concerns the ISU Dining staff had about the project were the extra time and energy, in addition to the state's requirement that state institutions must take the lowest bid on products. Research showed the cost of local products is 1.5 times higher than those from the college's current distributors. ISU had to prove the value of the product to the state because of the higher cost.

The staff who develops the residential dining menus was concerned that their menus would be drastically changed to serve local foods purchased as part of this initiative. This issue was overcome when it was decided that the menus would not be changed and that the food would have to match what was already being served.

In order to create positive awareness about the Farm-to-ISU initiative, the ISU Dining staff had the opportunity to travel to see small-scale industrialized farms and interact with the farmers. Farm visits are important because they help foster relationships with area farmers.

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To further raise awareness, ISU Dining utilized several marketing strategies. A local graphic designer created the logo that was implemented on informational signs across campus. The signs list the food, farmer and location the food came from and are displayed at the point of service. Throughout fall 2007, local foods were served as a Sunday brunch for students and their families. The Farm-to-ISU signage was used in addition to pictures of farms and farmers to promote the local initiative.

Another objective of the Farm-to-ISU initiative was to understand and address the concerns that local producers face when attempting to sell to ISU Dining. A Farm-to-Institution coordinator provided information about similar programs and conducted meetings to share her wealth of knowledge. The coordinator serves as the point person in the future for all food programs in Iowa. Her role in connecting the Farm-to-College efforts across the state will strengthen the movement and provide opportunities to share experiences.

At the meeting, contact information was collected and farmers were given the institution's previous year's purchasing information regarding price, month and quantity. Many farmers were impressed that ISU Dining showed its dedication and interest in developing the program by serving locally produced food and having many ISU Dining staff attend the meeting.

In order to maintain this relationship, ISU Dining invited those who filled out the vendor application forms to tour the Food Stores facility and a residential dining facility, where they were treated to lunch with ISU Dining staff. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and the tour was considered a great benefit for the farmers.

ISU Dining began buying local foods more rigorously in August because produce was available, meat locker connections were established and students were returning to campus for the start of the school year. Two meat producers and four produce farmers sold to ISU Dining.

The initial progress that farmer organizations, student coordinators and ISU Dining staff have made in the Farm-to-ISU program will encourage distributors and local farmers to focus on supplying local, sustainable and organic foods for the university. If it continues to grow, the Farm-to-ISU program will create economic development by supporting local business, generate strong relationships between farmers and the institutions, reduce food miles and subsequently vehicle emissions, and provide fresh products to consumers.