



# Opportunities and Barriers to Greater Local Food Procurement in Vermont Higher Education Food Service

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FARM TO INSTITUTION TASK FORCE





# Key Messages .....

- ▶ **Goal 2** of the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan calls for increasing the amount of local food served in institutions, including institutions of higher education. This report is based on interviews with 13 of Vermont's 21 higher education food service operations. Interview results are compared and contrasted with recommendations gleaned from prior efforts in the region to increase institutional local food procurement.

Key results include:

- ▶ Higher education food service operations interviewed are sourcing between 14-40% local foods (self-reported). Motivations for sourcing local food center mainly around meeting student demand and supporting local farmers, local food, and the local economy.
- ▶ Local food purchases are facilitated by partnerships with external organizations, primarily Black River Produce.
- ▶ While local foods can require more labor, their presence motivates and excites staff to better promote the foods and educational mission.
- ▶ Institutions feature local foods in their marketing efforts and often highlight them with special events (e.g., tastings, visits from vendors).

Successful practices for procuring local food include:

- ▶ Communicating throughout the chain of command both which items are local and how much local food each unit (cafeteria or other administrative division) is serving to motivate agency and buy-in from staff.
- ▶ Having 100% of a certain item always be local (e.g., apples, tofu, yogurt).

Challenges to procuring local food include:

- ▶ Getting consistent quality and quantity of local product.
- ▶ Communication breakdowns from vendors, especially lack of notification of unexpected shortages or outages.

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## OVERVIEW

Institutions of higher education present an opportunity for increased procurement of locally produced<sup>1</sup> foods. This project was commissioned by The Vermont Farm to Plate Aggregation & Distribution Working Group's *Farm to Institution Task Force* as a means of achieving *Goal 2*— increasing local food served in Vermont institutions—set forth by Vermont's Farm to Plate Strategic Plan. Dr. David Conner, from the University of Vermont, conducted interviews with 13 of the 21 higher education food service operations in Vermont. The goals of the interviews were to understand current local food procurement practices, compare current practices to the best practices documented in other publications, and create recommendations for implementation and outreach strategies and technical assistance to increase local food procurement in higher education institutions. This report provides an overview of findings to date, followed by summaries of successes, innovations, and challenges. Analysis focuses on comparing and contrasting Vermont interview results with recommendations gleaned from other regional institutions' and organizations' reports. It concludes with a list of best practices for food service operations and technical assistance providers.

### *The Opportunity*

In 2016, Vermont First, an initiative of Sodexo, made \$2,823,034.21 in local food purchases for higher education institutions—that's 15.42% of their total purchases!

## METHODS

Conner first researched successful local food procurement practices at other New England universities and summarized them in a report to the project team. Specifically, Conner reviewed documents from the *University of Massachusetts*, *University of Maine*, *School Food FOCUS* and *Farm to Institution New England* (FINE). From these, he developed a set of recommendations (listed below in "Recommendations from Literature") that was vetted by the project team, which was composed of Erin Buckwalter of the *Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont* (NOFA Vermont), Caylin McKee of *Sodexo at the University of Vermont*, Abbey Willard of the *Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets* (VAAF), Sarah Waring of the *Center for an Agricultural Economy*, and Riley Neugebauer of *Farm to Institution New England* (FINE).

<sup>1</sup>Locally produced foods can mean foods that are grown, raised, and/or processed in Vermont. No definition of "local" was provided to interviewees for this research, so each interviewee may have their own definition of "local" when they talk about sourcing local foods.

Conner then developed an interview guide, which asked about the use, efficacy and feasibility of the recommendations drawn from the literature (see Appendix). He conducted interviews with individuals (some interviews were with multiple people from an institution) from 13 of Vermont's 21 higher education food service operations (see page 7 for a complete list). Additionally, he interviewed a staff person dedicated to a single food service management company's statewide local food initiative. Of the 13 institutions interviewed, 2 (15%) operate their food service independently and 11 (85%) contract a food service management company to do so. The breakdown of the food service management companies represented in the interviews, along with a comparison to the representation of food service management companies in higher education institutions statewide, is displayed below. The interviews were coded for common and emergent themes. All responses are self-reported by interviewees.

**Of a total of 21 Higher-Education Food Service Operations in Vermont, 13 Participated in Interviews:**



**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LITERATURE**

These recommendations for local food procurement were synthesized from previous efforts around New England and vetted by the Project Team.

**Vision and Values:** *Clearly articulated vision and values help build the foundation for success.*

- ▶ Engage stakeholders (in and outside of food service/institution) in the process early and often. Place food service within larger food systems goals. Use the network of partners to help refine values/goals to push the agenda forward.
- ▶ Form clear definitions of terms (e.g. "Vermont grown," "Real Food," "regional") that

inform planning/decisions and inspire participation.

- ▶ Form a vision statement that defines your values and goals.

**Organizational Structure:** *It is vital to have the right people in the right roles.*

- ▶ Project planning team to oversee process and monitor progress toward local food procurement goals.
- ▶ Data analysis team dedicated to measuring progress toward procurement goals.
- ▶ Internal staff to manage the procurement details. No matter how involved students are, professionals need to manage the procurement processes.
- ▶ Student interns to provide leadership and vision as well as do the legwork and check procurement data.

**External Stakeholders:** *Work with people outside your institution to enhance and amplify efforts.*

- ▶ Increase effective demand by buying collectively.
- ▶ Co-learning and innovation to solve problems and innovate.
- ▶ Collective marketing among stakeholders. Institutions should work with distributors, farmers and other suppliers to amplify and reinforce marketing messages that communicate the values of the foods.

**Quantitative Objectives:** *Benchmarks and baselines hold the project accountable internally and externally.*

- ▶ Create credible, achievable and meaningful targets.
- ▶ Set benchmarks both in absolute (\$) and relative (%) terms.
- ▶ Have a multi-year planning horizon with both interim and final targets.
- ▶ Clearly define what other values you want included in your purchasing (e.g., organic, humane, fair trade), ideally with quantitative commitments and goals.
- ▶ Track often and readjust as needed, keeping an eye on long term goals.

**Sourcing Foods that Work:** *Use the network of resources to deal with the complexity of local food systems in ways that fit your resources and business models.*

- ▶ Establish realistic criteria that fit your values. Products should be (ideally):
  - Sourced locally/regionally;
  - Affordable;
  - Replicable;
  - Used in large amounts (although specialty/smaller purchases from smaller farmers may be needed);
  - Handled/prepared with existing resources (for the most part, or at least without major changes);
  - Visible and high in consumer interest;
  - Culturally appropriate;
  - Humane/fair/sustainably produced; and
  - Comfortable/familiar (although taste tests and new products will hopefully stretch this).
  
- ▶ Utilize contracts and requests for proposals<sup>2</sup> (RFPs): careful crafting of bidding documents can enable effective sourcing.
  - Include preferential purchasing language in documents (ideally with quantitative commitments and goals).
  - Define what local, sustainable, etc., means, including certifications you require. Consider tiered purchasing that allows for local, state, and regional products.
  - Require a report on local product per time period (e.g., quarterly) by both weight/volume and dollars.
  - Specify items and form (e.g., whole apples or diced frozen potatoes), delivery period (e.g., Friday afternoons between 2 to 6 pm), pack size (e.g., 4 lbs bags or 20 lb bags).
  - Request the vendor provide information on how they will source across product categories, rather than achieving goals by way of only one or two categories (e.g., coffee and apples).
  - Consider asking for farm name (on box or invoice) and final price to farmer as well as traceability, safety measures and supplier contracts.
  - Criteria and scoring matrix used by reviewers for selecting a vendor should clearly indicate that the vendor's policies for the procurement of local and/or sustainable foods will influence the success of their proposal.

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<sup>2</sup> Request for proposals (RFPs) are sometimes used by institutions to seek formal bids from vendors to complete a specific task or set of tasks. These can be used for a range of tasks, such as something as simple as providing a specific amount of a certain food at a given time or something as complex as managing an institution's entire food service operation.

- Utilize shorter contract term lengths to ensure there is an opportunity to update, reflect, and change vendors if needed (i.e., 1-5 years instead of 10 years).
- ▶ Consider some on-campus food production to increase engagement and educational mission (e.g., several schools have vegetable gardens).
- ▶ Find vendors that can supply these foods and have the necessary capacity (certification, insurance, reliability, delivery, etc.). Alternatively, assess whether your requirements (e.g. insurance) are actually necessary, because they may be serving as barriers for some vendors.
- ▶ Forge relationships with and create opportunities for farmers, value-added processors, aggregators and distributors.
  - Learn what local foods can be sourced most easily.
  - Invest in infrastructure and technical assistance (e.g. food safety certification, insurance pools).
- ▶ Match production with school demand.
  - Conduct planning with farmers to guide their production efforts.
  - Create purchase orders.
  - Establish payment and delivery arrangements.
- ▶ Communicate with vendors to plan ahead and create contingency plans.
  - Inform vendors of anticipated quantities and frequencies to be purchased.
  - Have a plan (whom to contact, what will happen) when problems or changes arise.

**Create Local Foods Dining Experience:** *Integrate local foods into menu planning, food preparation, marketing, facility design, etc.*

- ▶ Make sure you get the quantity and quality you asked for.
- ▶ Integrate local items on your menu (develop, test, rework, write down recipes) but be flexible.
- ▶ Align portion sizes with healthfulness, affordability, and other goals (savings may enable greater local purchases).
- ▶ Engage staff to prepare (minimize waste) and serve local food-emphasize its importance



in operations and mission, and make sure staff is able to do so.

- ▶ Engage with gleaning and seconds market efforts, but don't do so at the expense of purchasing local. If local farms are not viable, there won't be farms to glean or purchase seconds from.
- ▶ Design facilities to highlight customer experience.

**Customer Service:** *Integrate food systems and health education into the dining experience.*

- ▶ Students seek traceability and transparency. Create data-driven reports on local food achievements.
- ▶ Conduct regular customer surveys to get feedback and measure progress of educational goals.
- ▶ Use social media/texts to solicit real time feedback.
- ▶ Create visual marketing materials to promote and educate (e.g., table tents, posters, slide shows).
- ▶ Support student ambassadors (even vocal critics) to promote efforts and solicit feedback (secret shoppers).

**Marketing:** *Stories about your efforts can inspire and transform the food service operation, bringing the needed human and financial resources.*

- ▶ Craft and disseminate short compelling stories through social and traditional media-use your data and values to tell the story.
- ▶ Enlist high profile (celebrity) guest speakers.
- ▶ Host special events and menus (e.g., ***Harvest of the Month***).
- ▶ Partner with university marketing professionals.

**Evaluation:** *Use data, customer surveys, farmer check-ins, and goals to measure and monitor progress*

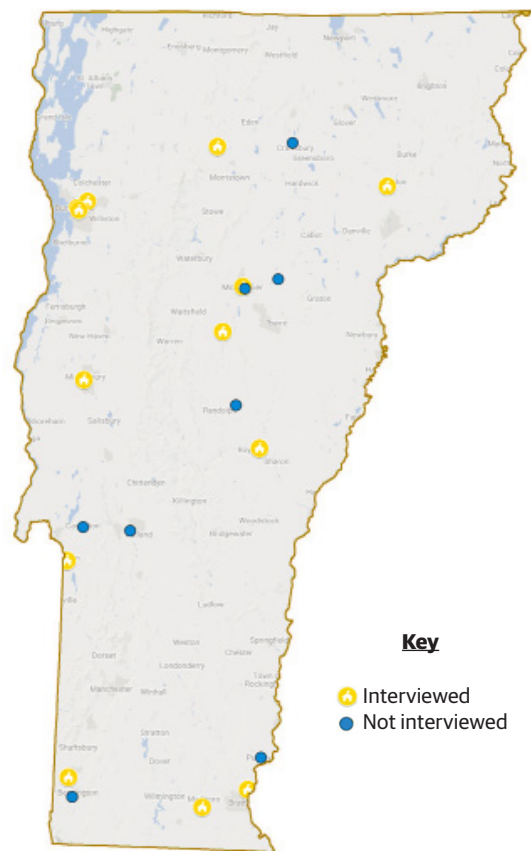
- ▶ Double check data, and if possible, triangulate with other sources to ensure accuracy.
- ▶ Compare results with procurement goals.
- ▶ Publicize procurement achievements in marketing materials.
- ▶ Continue dialogues with vendors to improve relations and solve problems as they arise.

## INTERVIEWEES

Below is a list of institutions, and the specific individuals from each, that Conner interviewed. Next to each institution listed is the food service management company that each institution contracts with to provide food service (some do not contract with an external company and are referred to as 'self-operated'). The interviewees were primarily buyers within Vermont higher education food service operations, so the results of the interview only reflect this one perspective. We recognize that other stakeholders may have different perspectives. Institutions that have signed the Real Food Campus Commitment<sup>3</sup> are denoted by a \*.

- ▶ **Bennington College**--Aramark  
Jeff Cairins, Director of Dining Services
- ▶ **Champlain College**--Sodexo  
Sandi Earle, Executive Chef  
Tom Oliver, General Manager
- ▶ **Green Mountain College**--Chartwells  
Cindi Ondria, Assistant Director
- ▶ **Johnson State College**--Sodexo  
Thomas Fondakowski, General Manager
- ▶ **Lyndon State College\***--Sodexo  
Kip Mayo, Executive Chef
- ▶ **Marlboro College\***--Metz Culinary  
Benjamin Newcomb, Chef Manager
- ▶ **Middlebury College\***--Self-operated  
Charlie Sargent, Purchasing Manager
- ▶ **New England Culinary Institute**--Self-operated  
Lyndon Virkler, Dean of Education
- ▶ **Norwich University**--Sodexo  
Rob Garcelon, Executive Chef
- ▶ **Saint Michael's College**--Sodexo  
Brian Roper, General Manager

### Vermont College & University Food Service Operations



<sup>3</sup> The Real Food Challenge is a national, student-led movement that seeks to shift \$1 billion of existing university food budgets across the country towards local/community-based, fair, ecologically sound and humane food sources—what they call “real food”—by 2020. Universities can sign the Real Food Campus Commitment, pledging to shift at least 20% of their food service budget towards “real food” by 2020.

- ▶ **University of Vermont\***--Sodexo
  - Kate Hays, Executive Chef
  - Caylin McKee, Sustainability Manager
  - Melissa Zelazny, Resident District Manager
- ▶ **World Learning Center (SIT)**--Sodexo
  - John Benouski, General Manager
- ▶ **Vermont Law School**--Fitz-Vogt
  - Jeff Jones, Chef
  - Martina Rutkovsky, Food Service Manager
- ▶ **Sodexo's VT First Initiative**
  - Annie Rowell, Vermont First Coordinator

## INTERVIEW RESULTS

Conner used an interview guide that was developed from the recommendations gleaned from the literature (see Recommendations from Literature). Below are emergent themes from the interviews. The headings emerge from questions on the interview guide (see Appendix).

### Motivations for Local

The following motivations for buying local food were pretty consistent across respondents: desire to financially support local farmers and the local economy; vocal demand from constituencies (certain segments of students/faculty and staff); and quality and freshness of food. It is “the right thing to do” and “makes sense” were common sentiments. One respondent said that promoting local foods was his “life goal.” Several respondents are part of the [\*Real Food Challenge\*](#) (RFC) and sourcing local helps them meet RFC goals. Others cited presidential or institutional mandates. A general theme emerged that when production, procurement, and sourcing all work smoothly, local foods have the highest overall quality.

### Organizational Structure and Conduct

The way the “buy local” message and directive translates from management to employees to consumers varies widely and is somewhat determined by scale. In smaller institutions, the executive chef often does the ordering of food and training of employees, so the communication is fairly straightforward. One respondent said that the chef “...IS the organizational structure.” Menus at smaller institutions tend to be more flexible and local

signage is featured on flipcharts, chalkboards or emails, for example. At the other end of the spectrum, larger institutions tend to create menus more in advance and cannot always easily predict or adjust to changes in whether an item is local or not. It can be especially difficult to provide the name of the farm where the food is grown, because distributors are often sourcing a given product from many farms at one time and can only communicate that it is local, not the farm of origin, on the ordering platform. Many higher education food service operations in Vermont are operated by [Sodexo](#), a large international food service management company, which has made buying local food a priority and has developed and staffed a Vermont First program to facilitate this process. This is widely seen as having made the process more streamlined and efficient and having increased local procurement by finding vendors, connecting them with buyers, and then tracking and reporting back sales figures.

### **External Stakeholders**

Nearly all respondents listed Black River Produce (BRP) as the single most important external stakeholder, as they are a very common provider of local produce and proteins. Often, larger institutions tell farmers interested in selling to them to contact BRP, meet BRP's supplier requirements (food safety, insurance) and get into BRP's catalogue. Since 2013, Black River has operated a slaughter and processing facility to meet the demand for local meats. It sources animals from local farmers and distributes to its various accounts. This increased meat supply is seen very positively by respondents. Reinhart Foodservice<sup>4</sup> was mentioned as a prime vendor who aids local procurement as well. Smaller institutions also have relationships with individual farmers who supply produce, usually through informal handshake agreements and often based on long standing relationships.

### **Internal Stakeholders**

Nearly all institutions have a dining committee and hold regular meetings to get feedback, discuss ideas and solve problems; all have student members and some have faculty and/or staff. The schools who are signatories of the Real Food Challenge (RFC) also work closely with these students. RFC students commonly run the Real Food Calculator<sup>5</sup> and help the institutions monitor progress towards their goal. Nearly all institutions interviewed have a vocal segment of local food lovers, but many report that the student body as a whole is less interested in local

<sup>4</sup> As of October 2016, Reinhart Foodservice purchased Black River Produce. These interviews were conducted before that took place.

<sup>5</sup> The Real Food Calculator is an online tool for tracking institutional food purchasing over time.

(more emphasis on price, quantity, and comfort foods like chicken patties and fries). There are also other vocal constituencies such as vegans and celiac sufferers.

### **Quantitative Objectives**

Some institutions state their goal for local food is “as much as possible.” Self reported estimates of current percentages range between 14 and 40%. In some cases, larger institutions are more interested in percentages and smaller institutions lean toward “as much as possible.” Large institutions are interested in communicating how each individual dining hall or unit is doing as a means of motivating success: helping each unit see the big picture and where they stand within the entire organization changes the orientation “from instruction to inclusion.” This encourages units to meet goals and solve problems, and it increases the agency of the staff. One respondent spoke of sourcing foods that are more impactful than others for a given dollar spent or volume served. Foods that are novel, contribute to the educational mission of the institution or raise good publicity for an interesting vendor may contribute more to institution’s local food procurement than those which are routine or anonymous. This respondent believes that items that are popular and provide a good story motivate broad buy-in from stakeholders.

### **Drivers of Sourcing**

Institutions will choose local as long as other criteria are met. Other criteria include (primarily) price, but also quantity, reliability, ease of use, fit with existing menus, and student preference. Items that can be purchased from a single local vendor year round are most desirable. This creates the situation where, for example, the yogurt, milk or apples are always local; in these cases, promotion is easy and no changes in signage are needed.

### **Utilizing RFPs and Contracts**

Only one respondent reported using an RFP to secure primary and secondary distributors; produce was excluded from the RFP so that the institution could source local produce more easily. One institution had a contract with a grower to source local basil; the crop failed completely due to weather and the process was not attempted again.

### **Relationships with Vendors**

Again, BRP is the most common vendor of local food products. Two practices that were commonly mentioned as helpful are (i) BRP labeling what is “native”<sup>6</sup> and (ii) having a list of

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<sup>6</sup> “Native” is BRP’s term to denote products that are produced within a 250 mile radius of their warehouse in Springfield, VT.

specials (especially meats). Meats on special often meet the needed price points of higher education food service operations. One respondent showed the BRP sales rep their menu and brainstormed ideas on how to get more local products integrated. Institutions that buy direct from farmers note the value of long term relationships (as long as 65 years!). The familiarity with each other's business greatly streamlines the planning and ordering process (i.e., as easy as telling them in spring they will order the usual quantity of squash in fall). In general, there is value in getting to know the vendors, developing mutual familiarity and trust, starting small and growing together.

### **Integration into the Dining Experience**

On the whole, it would be ideal if everyone--directors, chefs, servers, and consumers--knows what ingredients are local in every dish. That way, chefs can more easily meet goals and training needs and cooks and servers can get excited about local food and promote it (verbally) to students; as one respondent said, the "staff gets charged" about local food. In small operations this is more feasible. In large operations, there are barriers such as menus are developed far in advance and allergens must be labelled. As discussed above, it is easier if a given food is always local; it is more difficult and has less cache to track single ingredients (e.g., the carrots in today's soup are local). Larger institutions have trouble getting real time information of what is local in ways that permit labeling/promotion. In general, local food takes more effort, from ordering to preparation (does not come washed and cut, is more uneven in size). One exceptional respondent said, "food is food" and has always purchased local, stating, "that is just how we do it." Having farmers and vendors come to the dining halls to meet students is common and seen as beneficial, because it generates excitement and interest from students.

### **Evaluation**

These institutions evaluate progress through a variety of means, including the Real Food Calculator, dining committees, focus groups and surveys, town meetings, and comment cards. No mention was made of methods to understand if purchases are helping farms be more viable, increase quality of life or other broader goals.

### **WHAT WORKS**

This is a list of strategies that the institutions interviewed found to be helpful for using and procuring local food.

- ▶ Having ready-made logos and photos on a website for easy download and use. Such a repository does not exist for all institutions but those who do have these materials noted that it makes labeling and marketing more efficient.
- ▶ Everyone knowing what is local, whenever possible. When staff and consumers know what is local, staff are more enthusiastic and the educational mission of local food is enhanced. This is easiest when a given item is always local (e.g., all apples are always local). Ideally, the name of the farm/vendor is included as well, especially when that farmer/vendor has been in the cafeteria for a tasting event. Difficulty arises when the item is sourced from multiple farms, some units or stations have local but not others or when (worst case) there are unexpected outages at the last minute.
- ▶ Vendor/farmer visits, field trips, special events (Vendor Day, Earth Day). These special events are effective in increasing support and awareness for local food by students and other consumers.
- ▶ Building positive relationships and trust so that the partners know each other's practices and needs and can solve problems collaboratively. Successful partnerships are based on trust and transparency. One institution has worked with a farmer for 65 years. It is important to find partners who are ready to grow and learn beside each other, and to keep lines of communication open.
- ▶ It is easier to incorporate local foods into retail outlets and catering operations than into all-you-care-to-eat meal plans, due to price and other types of flexibility. Catering also allows for local beer and wine sales. The flexibility in price may even help subsidize more local food in dining halls.
- ▶ Farmer/vendor meetups and "speed dating" (for smaller institutions). Many smaller institutions find value in "speed dating" or meet ups with farmers and other vendors. If they cannot buy directly from the vendor they can refer them to a distributor.
- ▶ Share menus with distributor's sales representatives. Going over menus and past orders with distributors' sales representatives has many benefits. The distributor can suggest or seek out local alternatives for a variety of products.

## **CHALLENGES**

This is a list of challenges that the institutions interviewed commonly cited as making local food difficult to use or procure.

- ▶ Knowing what ingredients are local is difficult, especially for large institutions. Large institutions' need for large volumes at multiple locations often mean that different locations are sourcing food from different sources. Real time information is difficult to come by, so the default is to not label food as local unless they can be certain.
- ▶ Consistency of quantity and quality. Local vendors run out of product or go out of business more often than national ones. Few local vendors can consistently supply all year long. There were many complaints about quality, too. For example, lack of processing (wash, cut, peel), wrinkly or sprouting potatoes, dirty lettuce.
- ▶ High price of local proteins. The high price of local food was mentioned often, but most often in connection to proteins. Many said they could only buy local proteins for special occasions (e.g., local burger night) or if they are on a special promotion.
- ▶ Need for light processing and flash freezing. Many institutions demand lightly processed produce (ready to use-chopped, diced, peeled etc.) as a labor saving strategy. Few local farms have the capacity to do this. Flash freezing is seen as a way to overcome seasonality, but currently the infrastructure to do this cost effectively, and at a large volume, is limited in New England.
- ▶ Poor Communications. Too often local vendors fail to communicate outages and institutions are left with false claims or promises. As one respondent put it, "let us know if you are about to run out before it happens so we can plan."
- ▶ Heavy reliance on one distributor for local food leaves institutions vulnerable.
- ▶ No consensus of right forum for technical assistance (TA). There was no single preferred means of delivering TA and many respondents contradicted others. This makes it difficult to plan and deliver TA.



## ANALYSIS

This section compares and contrasts the Vermont interview results with the recommendations gleaned from other New England institutions.

**Vision and Values:** clearly articulated vision and values help build the foundation for success. Values were clearly stated by interviewees, with support for the local economy and farmers most commonly mentioned. Others valued local food because of consumer demand or a mandate from the university or RFC. Not one respondent specifically said local food was part of a mission or vision statement.

**Organizational Structure:** having the right people in the right roles is vital. On the whole, the respondents were very much on board as were those in leadership positions. Many stated that the staff helps to promote local when they are aware of local foods being served. Respondents who are signatories of the RFC mentioned the role of RFC students in running the Real Food Calculator and serving as liaisons between students and food service. Communication of the details (what ingredients are local) in real time was the biggest barrier.

**External Stakeholders:** working with stakeholders can enhance and amplify efforts. Distributors play a key role in the value chain for local products. In many ways, distributors can exemplify the behaviors of “first mile” (i.e., helping farmers and other producers prepare for the scale of wholesale production) and “last mile” (i.e., finding creative, proactive solutions to buyer needs). Many respondents mentioned mutually beneficial partnerships with local distributors and suppliers, which creates value as they grow together. Sodexo’s Vermont First initiative was seen as an effective coordinating body. One gap may be having a set of shared and accessible promotional materials for prominent vendors to be shared among institutions. Vermont First or another entity could take the lead at developing logos, signage, stories, and photos of prominent vendors and making them accessible to the accounts.

**Quantitative Objectives:** benchmarks and baselines hold the project accountable internally and externally. Almost all respondents had a fairly clear idea of the percentage of local food they purchased. Those who participate in the RFC also knew the proportion of other types of priority food they purchased, such as “humane.” Knowing the percentage and communicating it to food service personnel was seen as fostering agency, accountability and ownership. Most respondents had a concrete goal for local food purchasing and others said things like “as much as possible.”

**Sourcing Foods that Work:** use the network of resources to deal with the complexity of local food systems in ways that fit your resources and business models. Respondents were able to source a large variety of local foods, most notably produce, proteins, dairy and grocery. Most said they will always buy local if it is available and affordable. BRP is a major player in delivering local foods for all respondents. It is advantageous to have all of a certain food to always be local and for vendors to warn the institutions if there is a shortage. It is also helpful to share menus with distributors and ask if local product is available for menu items. Several institutions have on-campus farms that supply food to dining halls; this avoids insurance requirements of distributors and vendors, as an on-campus farm is insured by the college or university.

**Create Local Foods Dining Experience:** integrate local foods into menu planning, food preparation, marketing, facility design, etc. All respondents featured local foods in marketing and promotion. Staff are generally enthusiastic about local food and help promote it. Local vendors and farmers coming to the dining halls and talking about their products creates a lot of excitement around local food.

**Customer Service:** integrate food systems and health education into the dining experience. Respondents use a number of methods to solicit feedback, including surveys, focus groups, dining committees, and comment cards. Some use emails to students, but none mentioned social media or texting. None mentioned specific health education integration either.

**Marketing:** stories about your efforts can inspire and transform the food service operation, bringing the needed human and financial resources. Many of these recommendations are being followed, particularly Locavore/Harvest Days and vendor visits. No one mentioned crafting stories, using famous speakers or working with marketing professionals.

**Evaluation:** use data, customer surveys, farmer check-ins, data and goals to measure and monitor progress. The use of data to motivate and empower staff is discussed under Quantitative Objectives. Farmer check-ins happen often during planning in winter, but appear to be informal and ad hoc.

## **MOST FOLLOWED RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LITERATURE**

Based on results from the interviews, this is a list of recommendations from the literature that are most widely practiced by the Vermont institutions interviewed.

- ▶ Quantitative measures. All respondents have an estimate of their local food purchases as a percentage of all food purchases. RFC institutions use the RFC committee's calculations. Articulating these numbers has benefits to both internal (motivation) and external (buy-in) audiences.
- ▶ Engaging stakeholders, forming partnerships, communicating and planning. The respondents formed many partnerships, both internally (student dining teams and the RFC committees) and externally (distributors, individual vendors and farmers). These partnerships and the underlying trust and transparency are essential to problem solving.
- ▶ Use local food in marketing efforts. All respondents use local food in promotional efforts. Both students and staff are excited about local food.
- ▶ Hosting special events, such as vendor days (vendors serve food/talk to students).
- ▶ Having staff help "sell" local. As discussed above, highlighting local ingredients and dishes in communications with food preparation and serving staff increases excitement.

### **LEAST FOLLOWED RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LITERATURE**

Based on results from the interviews, this is a list of recommendations from the literature that are least practiced (or at least not mentioned) by the institutions interviewed.

- ▶ Putting "local food" in mission statements. No one mentioned local food as being in their mission statement.
- ▶ Social media. No one reported using social media (beyond emails) to market local food and dining services.
- ▶ Story telling. No one reported using marketing professionals or crafting stories around local food, farmers, vendors or dishes.
- ▶ Building capacity of small farmers. No one mentioned investing in or otherwise assisting small farmers to gain wholesale capacity.
- ▶ Doing regular and formal farmer/vendor check-ins. While a few respondents talked about planning meetings, none mentioned check-ins to see how the sales are helping farm viability or farmer quality of life.

## **BEST PRACTICES FOR FOOD SERVICE OPERATIONS & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS**

These are suggestions for food service operators and technical assistance providers that have been developed based on best practices gleaned from the literature, and reported through interviews with Vermont institutions (see full report for a detailed list of both of these). These practices, shared by many other colleges, should be widely and deeply adopted in order to increase local food procurement across Vermont's higher education institutions.

1. Develop better mechanisms for real time information/labeling of what is local that are suitable for multiple scales of food service operations.
2. Host "speed dating" sessions (especially for smaller institutions). These can help generate ideas for new products and vendors, and result in either direct sales or referrals to distributors.
3. Help institutions share menus amongst each other and with distributors. Menu ideas can spread and encourage sourcing of more local product from distributors.
4. Utilize local product specials from distributors to assist affordability (BRP's protein specials are a notable example).
5. Focus on providing 100% of selected items (e.g. eggs, milk, apples, etc.) from local sources (ideally one source) to more easily share the story with customers throughout the year.
6. Facilitate advance planning and communication with producers to maintain a steady flow of products and prevent unexpected shortages.
7. Incorporate local foods (including alcoholic beverages as appropriate) into catering and retail outlets. The price flexibility of these outlets allows for more local product and may subsidize other local purchases (e.g. for dining halls).
8. Check in with farmers and other vendors. Inquire how the sales are contributing to farm business and farmer well-being goals, and problem solve as needed.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study details current practices of local food procurement by institutes of higher education in Vermont. While all respondents expressed the value and importance of serving local food and have achieved success in doing so, challenges remain in communication and capacity throughout the food system. The strength of this study is the participation of a large number (13 of 21, or 62%) of institutions and their frankness in discussing operations. The major weakness is the lack of generalizability beyond the sample. Future research directions should focus on improving communications within operations and with vendors, and in increasing capacity to overcome quantity, seasonality, and logistical constraints.

## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. **Vision and Values.** Tell me about the values and goals underpinning your operations. How do you put these values into action?
2. **Organizational Structure.** Tell me about out the coordination among the planning team, operations staff and data analysts regarding increasing local food? How does it advance or detract from expressing your goals?
3. **External stakeholders.** How do you engage external stakeholders? What collaboration results? What outcomes?
4. **Quantitative Objectives.** How do you measure progress in local food procurement? How do you use the results?
5. **Sourcing.** What are the drivers of foods you chose to source and serve? How do you prioritize them? Tell me about your system of ordering, payment, delivery, tracking? How do they differ for local foods?
6. **Utilizing Contracts and Requests for Proposals (RFPs).** How have you used RFP/ contract language to aid procurement? What elements are most important (farm name, %, reports, pricing)?
7. **Relationships with Vendors.** How are local vendor networks different (or not) than non-local vendors? How do you communicate with local vendors? How does it differ from regular vendors (methods, frequency, content)?
8. **Create Local Foods Dining Experience.** Tell me about how you integrate local foods into menu planning, food preparation, marketing, facility design, etc.?
  - a. How do you market your local food program?
  - b. How does your local procurement influence your menu planning?
9. **Evaluation.** How do you evaluate your local food program? How do you collect and use the information?
10. **Technical Assistance.** What delivery method of technical assistance is most effective for you?

FARM TO PLATE NETWORK

# Opportunities and Barriers to Greater Local Food Procurement in Vermont Higher Education Food Service

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THE PLAN

THE NETWORK

GETTING TO 2020

THE ATLAS



## Credits

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**On the cover:** James Marsh (Johnson State College Dining Team), Tom Fondakowski (General Manager, Johnson State College), Karen Guile (Peaslee's Potatoes), Annie Rowell (Sodexo), and Corey Kelley (Johnson State College Dining Team) at Peaslee's Potatoes; sandwiches at UVM Dining Hall; Champlain College serving up local Nitty Gritty Grain Cornmeal; UVM chefs and managers visiting Catamount Farm; Middlebury College Dining Hall (photo by Bridget Besaw).