

Supporting Farm To Institution in SW Colorado

3 July 2018, Jim Dyer, HCFS

Opportunities for Producers: Farm to Institution (FTI) offers solid but varied opportunities for different producers of various scales. For example, preschools are often small enough that a single producer can supply them, and many are open in the summer in contrast to most K-12s. Colleges offer special opportunities for producers to market the “fairness” and social justice aspects of their products. Hospitals may start by offering better food in the public cafeteria, which then can be leveraged to better staff and then patient food (seems backwards of course).

Combining Demand in Rural Areas: FTI can create a critical mass of demand to support distribution to smaller rural communities. In rural SW Colorado, looking at all the potential institutional markets (including restaurants and retail) can be necessary to justify food hub delivery routes.

Cross-sector Collaboration Can Help in Rural Areas: Different types of institutions working together can help build enough demand to justify distribution as well. For example, preschools can piggy-back procurement, receiving, and storage with area preschools. We have a local case of a Senior Center providing meals to a child care center (both types of institutions fall under the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program).

Sustainability is Paramount: Sustainability of production practices, producer viability, and of purchasing are the keys to a better future. If we ignore this aspect, we are missing the boat.

Institutional Gardens Can Support FTI as They:

- Can raise awareness among staff, clients, & the public of:
 - The value of healthy foods, whole foods, sustainable foods
 - The need to reward producers’ hard work with fair prices
- For greatest impact:
 - Highly visible to workers and the public
 - Signage that relates the food grown to the institution’s mission
 - Linked to any café, cafeteria, or restaurant at the site

Preschool Opportunities:

- **For Children & Parents:**
 - Healthy, fresh, sustainably produced meals and snacks
 - Time outside in the garden learning about food and nature
 - Improved learning and behavior
- **For Preschool Centers & Homes:**
 - A fresh local approach to better nutrition
 - Improved learning and behavior
 - Improved excellence ratings and community support
- **For Local Producers:**
 - A more stable institutional market in nearly all communities
 - Variety of preschool sizes to match smaller producers
 - A school market more often open in the summer
- **For Healthy Food & Local Food Advocates:**
 - Ability to reach our youngest kids and their families
 - Low income populations accessible especially through Head Start

- An additional set of funders for your work

Colleges & Universities: If a college is encountering obstacles with their contracted food service provider, we recommend that they look for cases of success at other colleges with the same provider for insights and to highlight the precedent.

Urban versus Rural Opportunities: We recommend considering urban and rural FTI separately due to striking differences. Beyond the obvious scale of procurement, there often are differences in 1) the feasibility of having close relationships with very local producers, 2) the formality of arrangements between the institution and the grower, 3) the skill sets of food service workers from the community in some cases, and 4) the need for distributors.

CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) Have a Role: We have had some success in preschools taking out CSAs as an entry into local food purchasing. The smaller size of many preschools makes this a viable strategy for some. We have worked with local producers to be flexible in contents, payment options, and delivery options for preschools and they have been quite receptive. It does take us being the go-between initially. In some cases several parents took out CSAs as well.

Meat Products: Although reducing meat is important, it can help spur on local food procurement in that 1) the food safety requirements are pretty straightforward 2) there is good local meat available or potentially available in most western communities even with short growing seasons, 3) it is available year-round, and 4) the strategy of buying higher quality meats by utilizing less expensive alternative proteins like beans to offset costs is illustrative of the thinking required for success. Restricting purchases to only highly sustainable meats in fact will often lead to less meat consumption, which is what should be happening anyway.

Confronting Cheap Food Tendencies: We always seem to be "pushing the rope" in getting people to be willing to spend more money, if necessary, and time in sourcing quality local food. This is a societal problem, but must be cracked if local is to go to any reasonable scale.

- In case our potential customers forget, we must continually articulate the need for viable alternatives to unsustainable industrial foods for health, social, and environmental reasons (ie, we need to judiciously remind folks of the problems with industrial agriculture as needed). These local/regional producers and their products are the alternatives we seek.
- Fair prices for producers and affordable prices for consumers is the responsibility of our society, not producers alone. We may not have the answers for how to make food affordable for all, but we can say that 1) the producer should not bear the responsibility alone, and 2) if a customer can pay a fair price to the producer, they definitely should.
- We believe that in addition to education as to the facts about local food, actual experience in growing food can be an excellent experiential learning process about the value of whole foods, sustainably produced foods, and the hard work of producers that should be rewarded.