

Local Food On Campus: Farmers, Colleges Collaborate

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This past year, the Pennsylvania Association For Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) kicked off a Farm-to-College program to link farmers and college food service programs across the state.

Heather House, program coordinator, hosted a meeting of farmers and college food directors this week at West Chester University. A total of about 40 people attended the meeting. Food purchasers were on hand from a number of institutions, including Millersville University, West Chester University, Muhlenberg College, Ursinus College, and Swarthmore.

House discussed some farm-to-college projects she has been working on, including one at Slippery Rock University, Butler County, where she earned a master's degree this past spring.

While a student in the Sustainable Systems Program, House coordinated a relationship between local farmers and ARAMARK, Slippery Rock University's food service supplier.

ARAMARK agreed to buy at least 10 percent of the food served at the university from local farmers.

Seven area farmers formed a cooperative to provide the food for the university. Logistics were worked out between ARAMARK and the farmers.

"A lot of excitement was generated from that," House said.

There were obstacles to overcome and a lot of learning in the process.

"The very first (local) order we got had slugs in the lettuce," House said. "It was exactly what had to go wrong for us to become committed to the project."

According to House, the program was working well until recently, when ARAMARK lost the university's food service contract. At this point, it will likely take some time for the university to adjust to a new food provider before trying to buy local again, House said.

Farmers at the meeting assured food directors that the products they sell are high quality, safe, and can be delivered to the satisfaction of the college.



College food purchasers meet with farmers to discuss local food buying options.

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Jim Stauffer, beef producer and direct-marketer from Lancaster, said that all of his beef can be "source-verified" because calves are raised on the farm and the finished cattle are processed at a local facility.

William Leshar, dairyman and milk bottler from Way-Har Farms, Berk County, said that on-farm processors are subject to the same regulations as large processors.

"We're inspected with the same laws that apply to the biggest dairy in the country," Leshar said.

Leshar said his advantage is in providing a fresher product.

"It's in the cow today and it's in your cooler tomorrow," he said.

House noted ways that colleges can benefit from buying local. Students tend to like the food. Also, good public relations are generated by the college supporting the local economy.

Other schools that are developing farm-to-college markets are Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport and Allegheny College in the northwest part of the state.

The Pennsylvania College of Technology conducted student taste tests comparing milk from a typical university supplier with milk from Milky Way Farms, a dairy farm and bottling operation in Bradford County. Students preferred the milk that came straight from the farm, and boosted their consumption by 30 percent, according to House.

House urged farmers to develop relationships with food directors and staff, and be professional, organized and reliable.

One way to get started, House said, is that farmers can introduce themselves to a food service director and share product samples. They

can plan a local food dinner on the campus, feature a local product once a week during harvest, or conduct comparison taste tests.

"Make a commitment and be patient," House said.

House recommended "making a fuss" about local products, getting students excited so that the idea of local food "permeates the culture of the university."

Farmers interested in direct marketing should also make sure they are listed on the Website www.localharvest.org, a resource for purchasers looking for local products.

Scott Bailey, food purchasing manager at Millersville University, coordinates occasional events on campus featuring local food, and is interested in buying more from area farmers.

Educational institutions are reliable customers, he told farmers at the meeting.

"College food services tend to pay their bills, where if you sell to restaurants, you're rolling the dice," Bailey said.

Kassab of Swarthmore noted that college food purchasers do not base their buying decisions on price alone. Quality and timeliness of delivery are also considerations, she said.



Heather House coordinates farm-to-college food marketing. Photos by Dave Lefever

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