UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

May 20, 2014
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The Added Value of Local Food Hubs

As the largest purchaser of wholesale produce in Santa Barbara County, UC Santa Barbara's residential dining services provided the perfect avenue for a pilot project incorporating local pesticide-free or certified organic produce into an institutional setting.

The idea was conceived almost 10 years ago, when a group of students approached environmental studies professor David Cleveland about becoming a faculty adviser for student-led sustainable living classes. The group wanted to explore how to bring more local organic food in the dining halls. In 2010 Cleveland and a group of student researchers began documenting the process, which led to the publication of a paper in the Journal of Rural Studies.

A confluence of factors helped to support the project, including a UC-wide initiative to purchase local produce. At the same time, Santa Barbara County farmers were in need of an alternative local food hub to wholesale their produce to local institutional users. Farmer Direct Produce (FDP) — now Harvest Santa Barbara — filled that gap by serving as the wholesale link between farmers and UC Santa Barbara and other outlets.

Residential dining services at UC Santa Barbara provide about 10,000 meals a day — 2.5 million meals a year — so the task could have been daunting. Instead, the organizers started small, adding five or six local and organic items to the salad bar. Scaling up slowly turned out to be key to the project's success.

“One of the conclusions of the paper is that it is an iterative process,” Cleveland said. “You always have to begin where you are; you can’t make a total radical transformation. You figure out how to gradually move in the direction you want to go and then make incremental changes.”

While local food systems have increased in popularity in recent years, the majority of the food system is still dominated by large-scale national and global networks. “The entire food system is oriented toward large players and oriented to maximize their profit, not maximize environmental benefit or social benefit or nutritional benefit or community benefit,” Cleveland said.

The challenge for FDP and UC Santa Barbara was to create a viable operation for all parties involved, which meant moving beyond the profit-dominated mentality of the mainstream food system.

Personal relationships built on trust turned out to be important elements. FDP’s Wesley Sleight and Anna Breaux knew the farmers whose crops they purchased; the pair also developed a good working relationship with Terry Thomas, systems analyst with residential dining services, and Bonnie Crouse, assistant director of residential services, both now retired. There was commitment on both sides to reach the same goal: scaling up the amount of locally grown pesticide-free or organic produce used in the dining halls.

“It’s often not possible to maximize social, environmental and economic sustainability at the same time,” Cleveland explained. “There are tradeoffs, conflicts. The ‘triple bottom line’ in mainstream business really means that economic goals are first and they’ll work on the other ones as long as it increases their profit. The UCSB-FDP collaboration turned that upside down because it was viewed as a community project in which all of the parties valued the nonmonetary benefits of their work as much as or more than the financial benefits.”

Initially, students had minor concerns because the organic produce often didn’t look the same as its conventional counterparts in grocery stores. Education was key. The concerns diminished once the students began to understand the benefits of choosing seasonal, locally grown produce. Dining hall chefs also had to be educated so they would embrace ordering from FDP and understand the worth of the extra effort involved in using local produce. Despite these learning curves, by 2010 — five years into the project — UC Santa Barbara was buying 100,000 pounds of produce

from FDP. In 2012, FDP was sold and renamed Harvest Santa Barbara.

“We’re always striving to increase the amount of sustainable produce we purchase, and having that relationship with Harvest Santa Barbara and supporting our community is wonderful,” said Danielle Kemp, residential dining services’ dietitian, “because without them we wouldn’t be able to purchase from local farmers. Because of Harvest Santa Barbara, our student interns have formed relationships with local farmers and are able to bring back what they learn from farmers to educate their peers. These relationships and education for students are key.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.