

**Sustainable Food Systems – Sustainable Diets Conference Submission  
May 30, 2019**

***University Food Procurement and Growing a Regional, Sustainable Food System:  
The Case of Ohio University***

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There is growing interest among colleges and universities in providing more fresh, regional, and local food to campus communities. This interest is driven by a number of factors including stakeholder demands for more sustainable food such as lowering food miles and lessening campus dining's carbon footprint and national conversations on health linkages with the consequences of diets based on ultra-processed food. More and more these days, having a truly fresh, regionally sourced meal on campus is perceived as enhancing, and demonstrating, the priority of "the student experience" on university campuses. In the challenge to recruit students amidst declining demographics and rising consternation over the worth and value of higher education, campus dining is increasingly viewed as a wedge issue to attract and retain students.

Against this backdrop of national campus concern with sustainable local food, recent research findings funded through the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Reserve of Bank of St. Louis, and published in the 2015 *Harvesting Opportunity: The Power of Regional Food System Investments to Transform Communities*, indicate that institutional purchasing is the strongest, surest, most sustainable way to grow a regional food system. Universities, K-12 school systems, hospitals and prisons are described as entities with the purchasing powers to shape, for better or worse, food systems across the United States.

This presentation discusses an on-going case study on how institutional food purchasing can strengthen a regional food system. Specifically, the research that will be presented documents how Ohio University (OHIO), a higher education institution with a student body of over 29,000 situated in Athens, Ohio, through faculty and student engagement and partnerships with local not-for-profits, is attempting to use food procurement to improve its sustainability metrics and

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grow food production capacity in its region.

This case study addresses the feasibility of using sustainability's triple-bottom line purchasing analysis in a university's institutional food procurement setting. It also examines the tensions inherent in aligning a public university's academic objectives and social mission and the profit-driven campus dining units. It investigates the role of student advocacy efforts in driving more sustainable and local food choices on campus. The case study also examines how the agricultural production capacity to meet institutional food procurement needs can be encouraged and supported by institutions. Employing the tools of qualitative analysis, the case study charts how significant changes in perceptions regarding campus dining and procurement processes governing purchasing produce are necessary in order to incorporate regional, local food into institutional food systems.

OHIO, the site of the case study, was founded in 1804. The university is in southeastern Appalachian Ohio, an area beset by food insecurity and environmental and social devastation from generational poverty and consequences of extractive industries such as coal, timber, and hydraulic fracturing. The university is the region's major employer and serves four million campus meals yearly. OHIO prides itself on its commitment to "local food." Its definition of "local" is food procured within 250 miles and/or the state of Ohio. In effect, this means that "local" campus food can be from as far away as Canada.

The case study examines the results of the university's Farm to OHIO Working Group (FOWG). The FOWG is an initiative working to mobilize support for institutional food procurement change at Ohio University. Established in Fall 2018 with membership from campus culinary units' senior staff, senior sustainability staff, student leadership, food producers and local food focused not-for-profit organizations, the FOWG set out an ambitious set of year one goals: a) map out

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steps and hurdles for regional food producers to sell to OHIO; b) develop a procurement toolkit for small food producers to enter the OHIO food system; and c) refine the university definition of “local” purchasing. The FOWG also set specific university purchasing goals for the 2019 summer growing season and the presentation will include data on that purchasing.

This case study relates how the existing community and campus assets of a robust local food system, a diverse range of farmers and food producers, nonprofit advocates and specialists, OHIO’s strong food processing infrastructure and buying power, and forward thinking university leadership were harnessed together to address the region’s economic and social needs and create a more sustainable institutional food system. Along with the benefits to the university in terms of its sustainability goals and in terms of providing local food offerings for students, the university’s commitment to local food procurement is providing rationale for investments to grow the capacity to supply the university. These investments will foster agricultural and community resilience in the face of Southeast Ohio’s slow economic growth and multi-generational poverty.

In fact, recent research has pointed out that the current food system in Ohio does not function to provide for locally accessible foods nor is it developing the farming capacity needed to feed the population. Strengthening food systems in Ohio should be of highest concern at the policy level. The 2011 study, funded by the University of Toledo (Meter 2011) and titled *Ohio Food Systems—Farms at the Heart of it All*, unequivocally points to the urgent need to grow farming capacity in the state and to invest in sustainability to create resilient food systems. This particular research study also stresses investment in building “relationships of trust” among food producers. In the context of the case study, the FOWG aims to weave a connective web between OHIO’s Culinary Services staff and local farmers creating “relationships of trust” to benefit the whole region.

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The FOWG case study demonstrates how a university can be an agent for growth in reviving a regional economy's historical strength in small, diversified agriculture. The case study further demonstrates that by enhancing the sustainability of its food system through local procurement, an institution can better serve its customer base and reap additional benefits in terms of community relations while fostering a larger discussion about the value of local food.

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