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Using Community Food Assessments to Improve Local Food Systems

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Cover Page Footnote

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Using Community Food Assessments to Improve Local Food Systems

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Abstract. Community Food Assessments (CFAs) can be used to identify resources and gaps in how food is grown and distributed in a community, and to develop action plans for improvement. This article shares the process for conducting these assessments and draws lessons from CFAs conducted across Oregon. Key themes and innovative projects are highlighted to share potential programming ideas. Extension can play a role in partnership development and networking that helps create sustainable projects that improve local food systems.

INTRODUCTION

A community food assessment (CFA) is a data gathering process that combines social science research methods with community organizing principles to produce an action plan for a community (Oregon Food Bank, 2019). There are a variety of reasons to conduct CFAs. As described by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (2012), CFAs can be used to determine areas with limited access to healthy and fresh food so that decision-makers within those areas can begin to address those needs. Pothukuchi (2004) states that CFAs “constitute a first step in planning for community food security” (p. 356). The organization WhyHunger (2013, para. 3) states that a CFA can be used to develop programming and policies that address food system needs, noting “the shape and scope of a CFA is as diverse as the communities that carry them out.” According to The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (2019), the CFA “gathers information about residents’ perceptions of the food environment and their food shopping behaviors” (para.1) with the goal of increasing access to healthy food. In short, the CFA is a tool that can be used by community leaders to identify food-related needs and develop programs to address them.

From 2008 to 2018, the Oregon Food Bank (OFB) coordinated 25 CFAs that gathered information from all 36 Oregon counties (OFB, 2020). The assessments were conducted by members of the Resource Assistance for Rural Communities (RARE) AmeriCorps program administered by the University of Oregon. These RARE members were sponsored by local organizations and assigned to work with one or two counties for 11 months to complete the assessments. The

assessments were compiled using both qualitative and quantitative data gathered through interviews, surveys, informal conversations, focus groups, community meetings, and a review of existing research.

As an example, the CFA for Union and Baker Counties used information from 53 interviews and 72 surveys conducted with producers, consumers, farmers market managers, grocery store and restaurant owners, public health officials, school administrators, and food pantry managers. In addition, the assessment used a process called FEAST, “Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together,” which invited participants from the above mentioned groups as well as social service agencies, non-profit organizations, and local universities to meet together and talk about challenges and opportunities in their food systems (OFB, 2016). The RARE member for Union and Baker Counties then compiled the information gathered through the above activities into the CFA report (Krampien & Maille, 2017). The assessment is a community resource that documents existing programs and practices and identifies opportunities to improve food access and overall community health.

The CFA process involves listening to rural communities, learning about their needs, and identifying ways to make positive changes in their local food system. Since Extension educators often provide programs that improve food systems through better nutrition, healthier cooking skills, improved gardening skills, or safe food-preservation techniques, conducting a CFA can help determine which activities are a priority for the community.

The Oregon CFAs document a wide variety of programs and initiatives that address concerns within local food sys-

tems. This article provides an overview of the CFA process from a statewide perspective and provides examples of activities that could help other states improve their own local food systems.

METHODOLOGY FOR REVIEWING CFA DATA

In summer 2018 a group of faculty and other personnel from Oregon State University Extension and Oregon Food Bank began working together with the goal of reviewing the Oregon CFAs. The group sought to identify common themes and innovative projects described in the 25 reports conducted by that time with the goal of telling the story of community food systems in Oregon. Gillespie et al. (2003) write, “the most effective partnerships around food bring diverse individuals together, creating a need to balance multiple interests. Goals must be consonant with the goals of the organizations represented in the partnership” (p. 3). OFB staff developed a working project charter and shared documents via Google drive. Each group member read six reports and identified common themes, challenges, and opportunities within the reports. Together, we identified 56 themes from the CFAs and distilled them into seven over-arching themes (challenge areas) through consensus. Finally, we highlighted innovative and successful projects that could serve as models for replication within those different theme areas. We organized and sorted this information using Microsoft Excel spread sheets.

RESULTS

There is a wealth of data within the CFA reports that can be used to tell the story of Oregon food systems. Table 1 summarizes key themes (challenges) from the CFAs and provides examples (opportunities) of programs that help improve local food systems.

We identified a wide variety of innovative projects and responses that have both local and statewide impacts affecting policies, systems, and the overall food environment. Some examples of these include:

- The Willamette Women’s Farm Network is a cooperative formed in 2008 that supports women farmers and ranchers. It is an active group that promotes training and job opportunities, and provides support and encouragement to fellow farmers (<https://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/smallfarms/osu-women-farmer-networks>).
- Double Up Food Bucks helps low-income families buy more fruits and vegetables at farmers markets during the market season and provides an incentive to shop at farmers markets, helping to boost local economies. This program is supported by the Oregon Legislature as well as a host of community organizations (<https://doubleuporegon.org>).
- Rogue Farm Corps (RFC) offers Beginning Farmer Training that includes internship and apprenticeship programs that provide mentoring for the next generation of farmers. RFC also has a Changing Hands Program which focuses on land access and intergenerational succession (<https://www.roguefarmcorps.org>).
- Gorge Grown Food Network links producers and consumers in five counties in the Columbia River Gorge region. The network provides support to a wide variety of food system projects including producer working groups, gleaning projects, and a food security coalition, and maintains a website with information links to food resources and farmers markets (<https://www.gorgegrown.com>).
- The Healthy Traditions Project of the Siletz Tribe hosts educational activities that encourage tribal members and their families to grow, harvest and prepare traditional foods using traditional practices. Activities and information are posted via their Facebook page, @CTSIHealthyTraditions.
- The Grant County Local Food Guide connects community members with local food and provides information about producers, processors, food banks, farmers markets, and more (<https://gced100.wixsite.com/gcfoodguide>).
- Food for Lane County is a regional food bank with over 150 distribution sites. They work with partners to provide nutrition education and garden programs and also sponsor summer food-service program sites. They were a key part of the CFA process for rural Lane County (<https://foodforlanecounty.org>).
- Ranchers Feeding Kids, initiated in Malheur County in 2009, connects local cattle producer organizations with school districts to arrange for donation of beef for school meals. As of 2013 nearly 5,500 students in 13 school districts had benefited from the program, and partnerships were developed with Extension programs across state lines, including Food Bank and Farm Bureau partners (Brody et al., 2014).
- The Oregon Legislature has approved a variety of different bills that work to improve the food system including the Poultry Bill, Cottage Food/Farm Direct Marketing Bill, Home Baking Bill, and Aggie Bonds (Oregon Department of Agriculture, 2014 and 2018; Gwin, 2018; Business Oregon, 2021). Data and stories from the CFAs helped garner increased funding from the Legislature for Oregon Farm to School programs and Double Up Food Bucks programs around the state.

Using Community Food Assessments to Improve Local Food Systems

Table 1. Common Challenges and Opportunities Found Across 25 Oregon CFAs

Challenges	Details about challenges	Opportunities
Change in farm size and focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small farms are not economically viable without off-farm income • Loss of farmland to home and business development or to large-scale monocropping • Change in farming practices resulting from natural and economic forces • Increased price for land impacts who can farm. Median farm size is less than 50 acres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA/NRCS grants to help small farmers • Beginning Farmer Training
Gaps in food supply chain marketing, sales, and transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing and sales of farm, ranch, and ocean products • Infrastructure for processing, storage and, transport of products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative food marketing groups and shared processing facilities • Local food and farm guides • Mobile processing for meat • Commercial kitchen rental
Need for improved food literacy and access to decrease food insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition education, school meals, and garden programs • Food access and availability are related to housing, employment, and transportation as well to food costs and stocking of grocery stores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OSU Extension SNAP Ed/Food Hero • USDA Child Nutrition Programs • AmeriCorps/FoodCorps • Veggie Rx • Oregon Harvest for Schools • Gleaning Programs • School and community gardens • Use of SNAP and WIC benefits at farmers markets • Healthy corner stores
Need to acknowledge the importance of hunting, fishing, gathering, and food sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of trade, barter, and family food sharing • Loss of access to traditional land for hunting and gathering • Loss of fish habitat and obstacles to migration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeland and First Foods Programs offered by Oregon Native American tribes • Salmon and trout habitat enhancement work
Insufficient labor force and low wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of reliable labor force and ability to pay adequate wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising the minimum wage • Providing benefits for farm workers
Economic and social importance of collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for networking and collaboration to achieve goals and for emergency preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farming networks • Seed Exchanges • Agri-tourism farm loops
Role of policies and legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for policy changes and additional funding at local and state levels to encourage local food production and consumption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double Up Food Bucks • State and national Farm to School Programs and Grants • Oregon Home Baking Bill

DISCUSSION

The CFAs highlighted innovative programs that successfully engaged people within the counties and identified areas for improvement. All the innovative projects noted in this article are still active and successful; however, many others that were highlighted in the CFAs are not. Communities learn from these efforts, and initial projects often lay the groundwork for other projects, movements, or policies that improve the local food system or help create a common vocabulary and dialogue about food production and food security. The ideas and relationships created through these projects constitute

major contributions. Those projects that have flourished over the years can serve as models for food system development in other locations. In a future publication, it would be valuable to explore common elements that led to the success or failure of these projects and programs.

As we move ahead with supporting innovative projects, it is important to ensure they are culturally responsive to and inclusive of different populations in the community. We can look at programs and policies designed to improve the food system through different lenses such as equity and empowerment (Balajee, 2012) or family impact (Bogenschneider et al.,

2015). Applying these lenses to a project in the design phase can result in a more sustainable project that truly meets the needs of the community. In the USDA Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit, a valuable CFA design resource, the author states, “diverse representation in the planning phase is key to a successful outcome” (Cohen, 2002, p. 10).

The FEAST process strengthens partnerships and helps individuals and organizations make commitments to improving their local food systems. Participants develop action plans that specify who will do what, which helps increase the likelihood that follow-up activities take place. For example, the regional food bank in Union and Baker Counties submitted a successful application to host another AmeriCorps RARE member to work more specifically on food security issues. This person developed a Food Resource Guide for Union County and expanded Harvest Share sites around the county. These food system discussions also led to a local school district applying to host a Food Corps volunteer, only the second position offered in eastern Oregon. Finally, CFA work in the Columbia River Gorge was foundational to setting up programs that resulted in that region being awarded the 2016 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health Award (RWJF, 2016).

The different themes we identified in this initial process could be explored more fully through further research on the projects’ innovations and the communities where they are found. Future research could examine the roles of collaboration and networking in sharing information and resources, the roles of education and public health in addressing systemic inequalities in food systems, or the role of food systems in reducing incidences of chronic disease. One could also look at how programs within Native American communities focus on “first foods” as a way to strengthen cultural belonging by embracing traditional methods for gathering and preparing foods from the wild. Researchers could also identify the impact of policy changes meant to improve access to local foods in schools, backyards, farmers markets, and rural grocery stores.

CONCLUSIONS

Extension can play a role in connecting different food system players so that they share resources more efficiently and work together to address challenges and promote opportunities. Morgan and Fitzgerald (2014) discuss how Extension can be involved in healthy, sustainable food systems. One of their recommendations is to “explore community-wide and cross-sectoral collaborations to be able to address the system-wide issues” (p. 4). Networks play an important role in supporting the community food system movement. As one CFA noted, “there are many resources that already exist in the community that need to be harnessed, connected, or highlighted in a certain way to better support the local food

system” (Rico, 2010, p. 53). In Union and Baker Counties, Extension served as the sponsor and supervisor for the AmeriCorps RARE member who conducted the CFA. However, in other counties a variety of other community organizations served this role and were responsible for identifying funding to support the monthly stipend, travel, and office support for this position. The greater the community investment in the CFA, the more likely it will be used as a resource for food system planning. The CFA process in Union and Baker Counties helped to percolate ideas, develop partnerships, and hold people more accountable for improvements in their food system. A variety of educational programs, funding opportunities, and new ways to access fruits and vegetables can be directly linked to this CFA. Based on this review, the CFA process is an effective way to do this.

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