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Developing Internal Partnerships to Enhance a Local Foods Campaign

Abstract

The Connecticut 10% Campaign teaches consumers about local foods and garden opportunities while supporting communities by promoting relevant changes in behavior. It was hypothesized that several Extension programs have similar goals and could partner to increase impact. A survey of University of Connecticut Extension personnel gauged knowledge of programs administered by the 10% Campaign team and interest in future collaboration. Results are being used to strategically plan for future programming. Extension systems addressing challenges and opportunities related to local foods elsewhere may face challenges to internal collaboration and benefit from knowledge of the findings from Connecticut.

Keywords: [local foods](#), [locally grown](#), [food systems](#), [economic development](#)

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Introduction

Local foods systems benefit communities through social, economic, health, and environmental impacts (Thomson, Radhakrishna, Maretzki, & Inciong, 2006). Demand for local foods and the number of farmers participating in direct-to-consumer sales have both continually increased on a national level since the 1990s (Tropp, 2014). One aspect of Extension's role in local foods systems is community economic development that advances businesses and increases numbers of local jobs (Sharp, Clark, Davis, Smith, & McCutcheon, 2011). Research has shown that there may be local economic benefits for agriculture and businesses from retention of local foods dollars (Martinez et al., 2010). However, an exact calculation of local foods production and use is not available on state or regional levels (Timmons, Wang, & Lass, 2008).

In Connecticut, the state government has recognized the importance of the local foods movement and taken action accordingly. Connecticut residents currently spend about 2.5% of their food expenditures per household on locally grown (in-state) agricultural products (Warner, Lopez, Rabinowitz, Campbell, & Martin, 2012). Public Act 11-189 was approved in Connecticut in July 2011 and states that by 2020 the Governor's Council for Agricultural Development will increase the amount spent by residents on locally grown farm products to 5% or greater (Connecticut Department of Agriculture, 2011).

Because of the importance of the local foods movement and the particular emphasis in Connecticut on local foods expenditures, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension (UConn Extension) has initiated relevant programming. To increase the percentage of local foods expenditures, UConn Extension began the Connecticut 10% Campaign (also referred to herein as the 10% Campaign), collaborating with nonprofit organizational partners in doing so. The campaign teaches consumers about "buy local" agricultural opportunities while supporting communities economically by encouraging changes in consumer behavior. Ultimately, the goal for the campaign is to raise Connecticut household expenditures on local agricultural products to 10% or greater. The goal aligns with Public Act 11-189 and the concurrent work of the Governor's Council for Agricultural Development.

The audiences for the Connecticut 10% Campaign (i.e., consumers, farmers, institutions, and businesses) are broad and diverse. The multifaceted approach needed to reach these groups has led to limited resources for each audience and lower overall impact. In considering the problems of limited resources and lower impact, our team hypothesized that collaboration with other UConn Extension programs could increase project effectiveness.

This hypothesis is supported by the idea that some local foods initiatives across the country already involve collaboration among Extension programs (Stearns, 2017). Additionally, food system–centered concerns and efforts span Extension program areas. For example, previous research has shown that Extension programming efforts in other states related to 4-H, families, gardening, and agriculture have centered on food system–related education (Morgan & Fitzgerald, 2014; Perez & Howard, 2007). Moreover, collaboration within Extension more generally has been shown to be effective. Extension educators in other disciplines have used working groups and shared resources to avoid duplication of efforts and maximize available resources (Hirnyck & Daniels, 2009). Planning groups in Extension that have diverse backgrounds have access to larger networks of clientele that might not be available otherwise (Ober, Giuliano, Sheftall, Byrne, & Dillard, 2012).

One idea for local foods–related collaboration within UConn Extension centered on commonalities between the Connecticut 10% Campaign and the UConn Extension Home Grown Collaborative. The Home Grown Collaborative is a loosely defined grouping of existing UConn Extension programs. All are related to improving health and nutrition of families and increasing community sustainability through educating consumers on the growing, buying, and eating of local foods. The Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative have several of the same team members, and those individuals considered conjoining the two entities under the more broadly inclusive name *Live Local*. This new entity would then collaborate additionally with other UConn Extension programs (J. Martin, personal communication, August 31, 2015).

Purpose and Objectives

To explore potential for such internal collaboration among Extension programs at UConn, I conducted applicable survey research. The Connecticut 10% Campaign team served in an advisory role on the research. The study design was intended to answer the following question (guided by Owen [2006]): How can the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative teams collaborate with other UConn Extension programs on the umbrella program *Live Local*? The approach I used to discover opportunities for and barriers to collaboration among Extension programs in Connecticut could be adapted by other Extension systems to explore the potential for leveraging internal resources and networks. Additionally, the study findings may provide Extension personnel with insights about what issues to address when considering collaborations related to local foods programming.

Methods

I developed a survey for UConn Extension personnel that was reviewed by members of the Connecticut 10% Campaign team. The UConn Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness determined that institutional review board approval was not required. I administered the survey to a census sample using Qualtrics, a statistical analysis software suite (Qualtrics Research Suite, 2015).

There were 12 questions on the survey that gauged (a) knowledge of programs administered by the Connecticut 10% Campaign team, (b) interest in future collaboration, and (c) areas for improvement of 10% Campaign programming. Questions addressed knowledge of the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative, the Extension program of the respondent, the target audience of the respondent, and willingness of the respondent to collaborate on Live Local if the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative programs were combined. The final questions asked respondents to identify areas needing improvement and to enter their email addresses if they were interested in the proposed collaboration. Questions were open-ended, closed-ended, and scaled. The response options for the scaled items ranged from 0 (*never heard of the program*) to 10 (*completely aware of the program*).

Surveys were emailed to 134 UConn Extension personnel. An email reminder was sent to nonresponders after 1 week. There were 49 responses, for a 37% response rate.

Results

Target audiences of respondents varied. These included families, municipal officials, commercial and noncommercial fruit and vegetable growers, gardeners, private woodland owners, youths, low-income families, at-risk communities, farmers, and the general public.

Respondents demonstrated awareness of the Connecticut 10% Campaign, with only 2% stating that they had never heard of it (Table 1). However, many respondents were unaware of the Home Grown Collaborative (Table 1).

Table 1.

Awareness Among UConn Extension Personnel of the 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative

Program	Never heard of the program	Aware the program exists	Aware of some details of the program	Aware of many details of the program	Completely aware of the program
10% Campaign	2%	22%	24%	37%	15%
Home Grown Collaborative	38%	28%	28%	5%	0%

Of the respondents, 54% were already promoting the Connecticut 10% Campaign. The majority of respondents (74%) cited a need for more information to promote the proposed collaborative Live Local program that would include the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative (Table 2).

Table 2.

Resources Needed by UConn Extension Personnel to Promote the Proposed Live Local Program

Resource	Percentage of respondents requesting resource
Information on the goals and available materials	74%
Promotional materials—handouts/brochures	49%
Electronic materials—handouts/brochures	43%

Personnel involved in programs with goals similar to those of the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative comprised 44% of the respondents. An additional 44% stated that they were not sure whether the goals of their programs aligned with those of the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative, and only 12% were involved in programs with no goals similar to those of the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative.

A survey question asked whether respondents would be more likely to promote the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative if the two efforts were combined under one program as Live Local. Only 33% of respondents were more likely to promote the programs if they were combined, whereas 47% of respondents were not sure whether they would be more likely to promote the programs if they were combined.

An open-ended question at the end of the survey asked respondents for their suggestions on improving the collaborative idea of Live Local and the individual programs it would consist of, the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative. Responses to this question were varied. Many respondents were not in favor of the name *Live Local* and were confused by multiple program names and goals. One respondent stated that it would be easy to incorporate the programs into master gardener outreach efforts. Another indicated that existing programming was targeting niche agriculture, without reaching community development and planning audiences, who likely would be receptive to collaborating. A different respondent recommended considering low-income consumers when designing materials and including bilingual options. This practice is used by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program with their audiences. Partnering with the Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and Eat Right Connecticut for volunteers and word-of-mouth marketing also were recommended. Additionally, one respondent suggested considering a program addressing local wood products as a potential partner.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study objective was to determine how the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative teams could collaborate with other UConn Extension programs under one Live Local program. The Connecticut 10% Campaign team is using the study results to strategically plan future programming. Many of the respondents within Extension have similar target audiences. Survey responses showed confusion surrounding multiple program names and goals. Expansion is hindered by internal confusion and lack of clear communication with potential partners. Streamlining programming and communication could develop the capacity of internal

audiences and facilitate collaboration on a community level (Ingerson, Jayaratne, Wymore, & Creamer, 2014). Extension systems seeking to build a community of practice around local foods should clearly define their goal and the expertise that each Extension program could contribute to the collaboration.

Several UConn Extension programs represented by the survey respondents have similar goals but reach different audiences, thereby offering viable options for expanding programming and leveraging resources. Similar opportunities are available for Extension programs in other states. Examples of options for the Connecticut local foods campaign that might be duplicated in or adapted to contexts outside the state include

- partnering with Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program personnel, who educate families on nutrition, cooking, and grocery shopping;
- developing bilingual resources that are disseminated to Extension educators, facilitating seamless adoption of materials into their programs;
- incorporating programming into master gardener outreach efforts; and
- reaching non-Extension volunteers through the Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

There are limitations to the research and study results. Response rate and validity threats through self-selection by the group surveyed were considered as Extension employees who are not expected partners of the local foods initiative were included in the sample (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010). It is also possible that potential key collaborators did not participate.

Summary

Adopting new frameworks within Extension, whether in local foods or another discipline, connects educational outreach to new audiences (Raison, 2014). Partnering with other Extension programs introduces audiences who were previously unavailable or who may not have participated in a program. Local foods initiatives have the potential to grow through development of internal capacity. The team at UConn Extension is using the results of the internal survey to determine whether combining the Connecticut 10% Campaign and Home Grown Collaborative under the Live Local program will have the intended results. Clear communication with internal Extension audiences will increase their ability and willingness to collaborate.

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