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College Students’ Use of Farmers’ Markets in Lincoln, Nebraska

By

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of college students’ use of local farmers’ markets in Lincoln, Nebraska and the barriers that prevent college students from attending farmers’ markets, and noting the incentives that could motivate them to attend.

Currently there are no research articles about college students and their attendance at farmers' markets. There are, however, articles pertaining to getting students on the farm, school gardens, low income families and making farmers' markets more accessible and affordable, health benefits for customers who shop locally, and environmental, economic, and societal benefits of local farm operations.

Literary Review

Amidst economic crises, oil shocks, and apprehension of global climate change in an already resource constrained, conflict-ridden world, food security has become one of humankind's most pressing problems (Reid, N, Gatrell, J. D., & Ross, 2012). As defined in 1996 at the World Food Summit, food security as:

“...Exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life... [the definition recognizes that poverty is a major cause of food insecurity and that] poverty eradication is essential to improve access to food.” (Tranchina, 2012)
In 2009, hunger and poverty statistics for the United States demonstrate that 50.2 million Americans lived in food insecure households. (Finn, 2012) With the aforementioned definition of food security, it is clear that the food system in the United States does not supply adequate access to safe and nutritious food to its citizens.

One known problem with food insecurity is the widespread presence of “food deserts” and grocery gaps, particularly in low-income neighborhoods (Tranchina, 2012). Food deserts are defined as a geographic area where affordable and healthy food is difficult to obtain. In these areas, residents have decreased access to produce and fresh foods, and are left with the options at their local convenience store or fast food restaurant. Food deserts’ negative impacts are compounded, however, as the processed foods sold in these stores tend to be less healthy and more expensive than produce and fresh foods in a traditional grocery store. If the option for produce is available, however, the price per calorie between the fresh versus processed food makes the processed item a seemingly more logical choice (Opalka, 2012). Therefore, those living in food desert zones often make food dietary choices results from the insufficient availability, affordability, and lack of information about healthy food. Poor food choices (i.e., processed and packaged foods, and food from fast-food restaurants) have been shown to contribute to the rise of major chronic diseases, including obesity (Kyureghian, G. & Nayga, R. 2012).

While already facing difficulties with the growing presence of food deserts, and millions of Americans living in food insecure households, the world's food, water, and energy resources are experiencing significant stresses and shortfalls. In addition, the
demand for these resources is projected to increase significantly as populations, economies, and consumption rates grow in the next twenty years. The world appears ill-equipped for the changes, investments, and trade-offs that will be required to meet that demand. Meeting our future food, water, and energy needs presents a growth challenge (Home & Sale, 2010).

The primary problem with our food system today is the level of industrialization in how it is produced, processed, and transported, and how these processes cause ill effects on consumers and the environment (Opalka, 2012). Conventional agriculture, as opposed to organic agriculture, is a linear, streamlined formula: a production line, factory-farm system, favoring efficiency over ecological and social reality. From the start, rampant use of pesticides and fertilizers in the fields threaten the surrounding ecosystem. These chemicals leach into groundwater or the excess nitrogen goes into waterways and the health of the environment is further threatened. Unsanitary living conditions for feedlot animals and overuse of antibiotics pose a health risk for consumers. The transportation, packaging, and processing of food also emits large amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, further fueling climate change. This is a very brief description of the myriad and serious problems happening from the seed to the grocery store (Opalka, 2012).

Food systems and cities around the U.S. need to return to natural and sustainable production methods that deliver higher quality food, enhance the environment, and improve human health. Food needs to become the central focus in family and community life as it was for most of human history. Before industrialization
and conventional farming, food was produced within walking distance of where it was consumed, resulting in a direct connection between man, land, and food (Bryant, 2012).

There is growing interest in the local food movement, with more consumers interested in sourcing locally to support local farmers while minimizing resource consumption in the transportation of food products (Finn, 2012). More often, local food systems establish the shortest chain of people involved from production to consumption, allowing the connection between producer and consumer to be as free and natural as possible. Also, many people believe that the direct transfer of goods from producer to consumer is healthier, more environmentally friendly, and more sustainable (Viens, 2012).

There has been an increased consumer interest in local food systems. Some factors that have contributed to this increase include people’s environmental concerns resulting from an integrated and profit driven agricultural industry. People now desire a more sustainable system of production. Consumers are also changing their opinion about what qualities a product must have to be desirable. Qualities such as organically grown and freshness are replacing the qualities of perfection and availability. Lastly, appreciation for food security and trust in the producer has increased the desire for a closer relationship with the producer. The consumers have to have a demand for what is being produced and people are beginning to demand more local and sustainable food (Viens, 2012).

Local food has been a hot topic in popular culture in recent years, but the motivations are not just sentimental. There has been a recent push to have community
gardens and farmers’ markets on or near university campuses that are starting to get people talking about seasonal food and regional farming (Carlson, 2008).

More commonly, colleges and universities have begun to increase the amount of local produce available in dining halls; this is sometimes used as a gauge for a college’s overall commitment to sustainability. For colleges, especially land-grant institutions and rurally situated colleges, buying organic, humanely grown, or local food has practical benefits. When colleges support local farmers and sustainable practices, the colleges’ choices have a large impact on the local economy. Although food expenditures can be a small part of the budget, food is a highly visible symbol of a college’s amenities and priorities (Carlson, 2008).

Colleges that were established on land-grants are on the cutting edge of agricultural research and solutions, as well as other sciences. By building interest in local food systems to replace the current industrial agriculture, land-grant universities should continue to research and involve themselves more intentionally in sustainable local agricultural fields (Viens, 2012).

The University of Nebraska – Lincoln was chartered in 1869 as a land-grant university. While the university is involved in various agriculture studies, primarily in large production agriculture such as corn, wheat and soybean, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, the University of Nebraska – Lincoln’s city and east campus is considered a food desert. Both campuses are classified as a low income and low access between .5 and 10 miles of adequate food sources (Breneman, V. & Nulph, D., 2014). See figure 1 on page 8
There are various challenges to eating healthy in college. Waldron and Dieser of Project Muse found that students believe eating healthy, balanced meals is important but being at a university limits healthy eating. Students in the study expressed that they missed the abundance of vegetables and fruits that were available in their parent’s home and that being at the university has increased their consumption of fatty foods like hamburgers and deep-fried foods (Waldron, J. & Dieser, R. 2010).

Access to healthy, fresh, and local food is one barrier to eating healthy, but knowledge is often cited as a barrier, as well. For example, people can learn how to make educated food purchases—for example, shopping locally and eating seasonally, which is better for the environment and to reduce obesity. Helping to establish food security within the community could be as simple as educating college students about sustainable food production and consumption. Universities can better serve students by implementing programs that meet their needs. Those needs being budget friendly, convenient to make, and easily accessed. Only about one-third of students have reported receiving information about nutrition from their college or university, (Waldron, J. & Dieser, R. 2010) which is unfortunate because colleges and universities are in ideal position to promote and encourage physical activity and a balanced diet.

Although university students understood the importance of healthy eating, it was difficult for them to establish and maintain these eating habits within the context of university life. Inadequate money, inexperience with cooking, and the fact that inexpensive foods are typically high calorie and high fat, were cited as common barriers that make it difficult for many students to eat healthfully (Waldron, J. & Dieser, R. 2010).
Methods

The research was conducted through an online survey, hosted by Qualtrics, which took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. I collected 135 surveys from students in the Environmental Studies Program, a Chemistry 105 class, and the UNL Psychology department’s Mass Screening. The average age of the participant was 21.24 years. 61.4% were female and 37.9% were male.
How Many Farmers' Markets College Students are Aware of in Lincoln, NE

What College Students Buy at Farmers' Markets

- Produce: 38.5%
- Pastries: 24.4%
- Meats: 5.9%
- Canned Goods: 13.3%
- Flowers: 5.2%
- Crafts: 13.3%
- Sweets: 20%
- Prepared Food: 20.7%
- Artisanal Cheeses: 11.9%
- Other: 0.7%
Why College Students Choose Not to Go to Farmers' Markets

Knowledge of Market Location 29%
Knowledge of Market Hours 29%
Inconvenience 11%
Food Availability 2%
Knowledge of Food Prep / Recipes 9%
Distance 5%
Price 7%
Other 8%

What College Students Would Like to See at Farmers' Markets

Music 24%
Crafts 15%
Alcohol 11%
How-to-workshops 17%
Wifi 7%
College Organizations 5%
Cooking Demos 21%
Discussion

Encouraging college students to shop at farmers’ markets would build a connection for students between farmers and food, while supporting a healthy lifestyle and sustainable practices. There are economic, environmental, and social benefits of introducing college students to farmers’ markets. It is important to encourage college students toward shopping at farmers’ markets because they are entering a time in their life that requires them to make their own food decisions, particularly for those students who do not live in the residence halls with a structured meal plan and/or limited access to cooking facilities. Farmers’ markets can provide affordable, local, and organic food for students who have access to preparing their own food.

The results found that college students lack information about Lincoln farmers’ markets, so markets should consider advertising on campus. As students become
familiar with the markets, they may be more apt to frequent and use them. Farmers’
markets should incorporate food demonstrations and provide simple recipes for small
portions as incentives to get students to attend.

In order to get a better understanding I would have asked these two additional
questions; how often do you prepare meals at home each week? And when shopping
for food what is important to you, for example, food safety, nutrition, prices,
atmosphere, organic, local, or variety?

This research would benefit from having a larger pool of students from various
majors and age groups. Additionally, interviews with a random sample of students
would be helpful to understand personal opinions and perspective on farmers’ markets
and local food.

Conclusion

Females are more likely to attend farmers’ markets than males. Students who
shop at farmers’ markets are those who have a kitchen and prepare a majority of
their own meals. Students surveyed primarily do not go to farmers’ markets
because they are not aware of the markets. To get students interested in markets,
they want to see music (24%), cooking demos (21%), and how-to workshops (17%)
at markets.
Bibliography


Bryant, J. R. (2012). Urban Farming in Atlanta, Georgia: The Seed of Neoliberal Contestation or Hybridized Compromise?


