

**Is Smith College a “Local Hero”?-
Investigating Smith’s Food System**

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Environmental Science & Policy Seminar
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May 6, 2003

Abstract

This project researched Smith's food system, and attempted to learn more about the sources of the foods we eat. I wanted to investigate Smith's food values, and whether there is any commitment to supporting more environmentally or socially friendly methods of growing and distributing food. I conducted interviews, distributed a student survey, and read additional literature on local food projects. The results were encouraging: Smith has already taken some positive steps and is in a position to make many more; students are enthusiastic about local, organic foods on campus, as well as a student garden; and there is a wealth of farmers, organizations, and schools in the area to help facilitate change. The immediate significance of the findings is great; institutions of higher learning should set examples to the students they are educating. If Smith says it is committed to sustainability, then that should be evident in the way the college operates. In the next few years, Smith could lead the way in creating more ethical, more community oriented food policies. And as food is inherently connected to our lives on earth, and the sustainability of our food systems is thus a necessity for survival, the broader significance of such changes is monumental. The experiences students encounter in just four years have lasting impressions, and their life choices will reflect the values and ideas learned at Smith. Our education here does not take place solely in the classrooms.

Introduction

While there is no single definition of sustainability, in 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development in the Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as "meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This includes social, economic, and environmental needs. Food systems are an incredibly important consideration when discussing sustainability issues. The way that mainstream agriculture and food transport are practiced currently is entirely unsustainable. Some negative outcomes of modern agriculture are: high preservative, pesticide, and herbicide use, deterioration of soils, reduced diversity due to mono-cropping, pollution, desertification, compromised health of workers, and increased fossil fuel use (Valen 2001, Lee and Saal 2002). While the needs of the present are already being sacrificed in terms of human and environmental health, future generations will experience even more devastating consequences.

What role do institutions, like Smith College, play in supporting *and* implementing measures toward a more sustainable way of living and learning? I was pleased to hear Carol Christ speak on the Smith Recycles video: "Smith is committed to the sustainability of resources." I would like to further encourage such statements from Christ on behalf of Smith

College, in writing and action. Recycling is just one aspect of sustainability issues. My focus was on Smith's food system. The average distance food travels from farm to plate in the United States is 1,500 miles (Valen 2003). This not only compromises the freshness and nutritional value of the foods we eat, it also requires a lot of fossil fuel use. The use of fossil fuels (and overuse particularly in the United States) needs to be addressed and reformed, and Smith is a good place to start.

The intent of the project was to conduct a series of interviews to find out more about where Smith gets its food, and what the implications of our food choices are. Additionally, I wanted to research possibilities for change in Smith's current food system. Another extremely important part of this study was a student survey to find out students' preferences/opinions on a number of issues: local foods, organic foods, cooperative housing, and a student garden.

Methods

Interviews:

Interviews were conducted with the following people:

* **Kevin Martin** of **Resident and Dining Services**, Smith's food purchaser.

***Andrew Rodgers**, who works for the **Pioneer Valley Grower's Association (PVGA)**, a cooperative of farmers in Western Massachusetts. He is working under a grant to encourage more schools to buy directly from growers in the area.

***Mark Lattanzi**, Programs and Membership Coordinator of **Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)**. CISA is a well-known organization in Amherst that helps develop relationships between small-scale farmers and neighboring consumers. CISA's programs and services successfully enhance the local economy and influence buying habits. CISA is responsible for the "Be A Local Hero- Buy Locally Grown" campaign.

***Doug Pearson**, a representative of **Guido's**, Smith's primary produce supplier, located in Pittsfield.

***Randy Shannon**, Smith's **Housing Coordinator**.

***Maureen Mahoney, Dean of the College, also Chair of Residential Life Task Force.**

*I also attended an EcoLunch and spoke with **Ann Finley**, the Assistant Manager/Catering of **Residence & Dining Services.**

Survey:

I created a the following survey, reviewed by L. David Smith prior to distribution:

PLEASE FILL OUT SURVEY, AND PLACE IN BOXES ON CENTER TABLES OF MAILROOM
Please return survey to box within a week. Questions- X6138
Circle that which applies Y= Yes, N= No, I= Indifferent

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Would you like more Smith food to come from local sources? | Y | N | I |
| 2. Would you like more Smith food to be organic? | Y | N | I |
| 3. Would you like to have the option of purchasing your own food? | Y | N | I |
| 4. Would you like to see more coop housing on campus? | Y | N | I |
| 5. Do you like the idea of a student garden on campus? | Y | N | I |
| 6. Would you consider participating in a student garden? | Y | N | I |

1,500 surveys were randomly dispersed in the boxes of first-years, sophomores, juniors and seniors. I had been informed there were around 2,700 boxes total. Surveys were collected as they came in; the boxes were left out for about three weeks. The answers of the 570 surveys that were returned were then tallied and percentages calculated.

Other research:

Research was conducted on the internet, as well as through informational booklets and past studies sent to me from various sources.

Results

Interviews:

The interviews were an extremely important and rewarding part of the researching process. They can be grouped into the following three sections: Smith College food (Kevin Martin, Doug Pearson, Ann Finley), opportunities/resources for Smith College in the area (CISA and the Pioneer Valley Grower's Association), and Smith College residential life (Shannon, Mahoney).

The food service at Smith College is managed by self-operation; Kevin Martin deals directly with the vendors to get food, as opposed to contract operated, where a contracting company handles most orders. Martin purchases from a number of vendors. Our groceries come from Vistar (CT); our meat is mostly Midwestern meat from Dole & Bailey (Woburn, MA); we get some local fish from City Fish (Wuthersfield, CT); our ice cream comes from Westland Dairy (Boston), Borden's (New York), and Casey's (Westfield, MA); our dairy milk comes from Our Family Farm co-op (Deerfield), goes to Pioneer Valley Dairy, and is distributed to us by All Star Dairy (South Hadley, MA); we get our specialty breads from Diana's Bakery (Enfield, CT), bagels and regular breads from a bakery (Albany), distributed to us from Freihofer's (W. Springfield, MA). While we do get apples from a local farm, Outlook Farm (Westhampton, MA), our main produce supplier is Guido's (Pittsfield, Massachusetts) (Martin 2003). The interview was primarily focused on produce.

Guido's started wholesaling in the late 1990s; Smith was one of the first patrons. Guido's provides fresher, better produce than our previous provider. Martin could not provide the percentages of local produce, organic produce, or produce from small farms that Smith purchases. I began to understand that an attempt to track some of our produce to their actual sources, at the farms, was an unlikely feat (Martin 2003). Guido's goes to the Boston Market daily, although this time of year it is less frequent. They buy and transport produce for local farms in Hadley and the Berkshires, which goes to Boston and then all over, including Smith College; likewise the produce Guido's buys comes from all over. Smith serves more local food in the summer and into the fall (Martin, Pearson 2003). Smith is unique in its dining situation, and smaller businesses, like Guido's, tend to work with our individual needs. There are 19 houses with kitchens, plus the Smith Faculty Club and Davis Center. Many companies "shudder at the thought" of 21 stops. It helps though, that most of the produce comes unprocessed (Martin 2003).

The new student center will have one kitchen and one menu, as Davis does now. At the time of the interview (March, 2003) RADS was working on the menu and had not discussed

incorporating more local or organic foods; Martin said that he would mention my ideas. He then brought up the student initiative for organic, fair-trade coffee. Indigo Coffee should now be served in all houses on campus, permanently. Indigo Coffee is located in Northampton, so Smith is also supporting the local economy. In March 2002, Kevin Martin, Kathy Zieja (RADS director), and a representative from Guido's met with students to discuss food options. At the meeting, Guido's estimated a 25% increase in costs if Smith were to purchase organic produce when available and also cautioned that organic produce sometimes has a shorter shelf life (Martin 2003).

When asked about local foods, Doug Pearson of Guido's said that they purchase from Berkshire Grown, a farmer's cooperative in the Berkshire Mountains, but that due to the climate, most of the produce most of the year comes from California and Florida. The organic produce primarily comes from Cal Organics in Salina, California. Pearson said that organic farmers were scarce in Massachusetts, while in New York for example, they are more common. Pearson believes that local farmers aren't able to produce enough but that when Guido's has the ability to buy local, they do. However, he then cited cost and quality as two inhibiting factors to purchasing locally. He said that Smith considers local to be within 50 to 100 miles. When I asked what happens when the quality of the local produce is good, but the price is higher, the answer was unclear; it seems as though the cheaper option is chosen. Pearson talked a little about diesel and shipping and implied that the price of diesel fuel can prohibit long-distance transport. Their average for diesel fuel is \$2 per gallon, and 8 miles per gallon. He said that shipping costs are probably partly included in produce costs (Pearson 2003).

When asked about the farm size of those supplying produce to Guido's, Pearson said they purchase from farms of all sizes, no range or average could be provided. When asked about standards for where Guido's buys from, he mentioned that they try to avoid Mexico, citing a "whole different sanitation level." I let him know that I meant more along the lines of labor

standards, and he said he would send me some information (Pearson 2003). I received some booklets from Guido's, but there was no discussion of labor standards in the literature.

At the EcoLunch, I was delighted to hear Ann Finley speak about avenues for change in Smith's food system. She discussed the possibility of a "Farm to School" initiative and cited the following benefits: fresher produce, decreased fossil fuel use, and support for the local economy. She mentioned exploring the use of more organic foods. Another idea was sustainability meal themes using local produce. Finley became interested in working with the Pioneer Valley Grower's Association after observing a PVGA presentation at a food conference. A relationship with the Northeast Cooperative would not work due to Smith's 21 drop-off sites. Funding was stated as a big challenge. She talked about how Smith used to have a central location where all the food would be dropped, but budget cuts eliminated it, along with some employees. Since Smith is facing financial troubles, it might be difficult to get local food initiatives on the forefront, although Finley was still hopeful.

I spoke with Andrew Rodgers of the Pioneer Valley Grower's Association in order to gather more information about the 35-member cooperative of Western Massachusetts growers. Rodgers said that they would like to increase the number of farmers involved. He was hired under a Department of Food and Agricultural grant, to persuade schools to buy directly from local growers. PVGA has dedicated sales and delivery people so that farmers can concentrate on growing. He averaged 30-40 acre farms, although a few are 100+ acres while a lot are 10, 3, and 4 acres for example. Many of the farmers sell to farmer's markets or have Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, and then sell extra produce to PVGA. PVGA has 10 certified organic growers, but others grow organically without certification. While there are 35 members, PVGA ships for over 100 Massachusetts farmers (Rodgers 2003).

The current relationship between PVGA and Smith is that Rodgers has given Martin and Finley information about PVGA and the grant, as well as available produce. They sell/have sold to over 30 schools. Rodgers said these types of initiatives can succeed, but those involved have to

be motivated. While Finley cited funding as a problem, Rodgers stated that PVGA's prices are very competitive; they try keep up with the Boston Market prices. The key difference with PVGA as opposed to Guido's is that PVGA returns more money to the farmer. It is a direct exchange. Yet Rodgers stated that buying local can still hurt the farmer if his prices are forced down. For example, if a pound of tomatoes is \$10 in Western Massachusetts and \$8 in New Jersey, the buyer compels Western Mass. growers to drop to \$8 (Rodgers 2003).

Rodgers says quantity is less of an issue for PVGA than variety. PVGA can supply and deliver to 19 kitchens, but cannot offer the variety that Guido's can. However, Smith need not buy solely local, seasonal food, but supplement or augment our current produce with more local fruits and vegetables. If institutions show more an interest in locally grown food, farmers will "relearn" greenhouse use and other methods for growing out of season. The market for wholesaling in Massachusetts is continually getting smaller, and Smith and other schools in the area are just the candidates for changing that trend (Rodgers 2003).

My interview with Mark Lattanzi from CISA was brief but encouraging. Based on what I told him about my project, the fact that PVGA and Smith had begun dialoguing, and that Smith's food service is self-operated, he felt very optimistic about the success of a local food initiative. He emphasized that local food projects are customer driven and that students must express interest and potentially be willing to pay for it. He offered CISA's services in publicity and networking. Lattanzi also suggested that I pass all of my research on to younger students that can continue the project (Lattanzi 2003).

After considering student food preferences, my research led me to look into campus housing. If some students desire local or organic foods more than others, or RADS is not able to provide such foods to all of Smith campus, why not have more cooperative housing? I interviewed Randy Shannon, Smith's Housing Coordinator. There are currently two cooperative houses: Tenney and Hopkins. Tenney has a capacity of 15 students, while Hopkins has one of 18 students. Hopkins has 40 people waitlisted, and Tenney has about 30. Students living in

traditional houses at Smith pay \$4,475 for room and board; those living at Tenney or Hopkins pay \$2,255 for room only. They purchase their food on their own, as a house (Shannon 2003).

Of 30 to 40 petitions for off-campus living per semester, 5 to 10 people usually cite dietary/health concerns. Shannon thinks is an issue because rather than living off-campus, these students are steered toward the cooperative houses, but there is *always* a waitlist. Shannon said of cooperative housing: "It definitely is a need." RADS tries to meet the needs of students with food issues, especially with food allergies. One of the primary concerns about the cooperative houses that Shannon cited was upkeep/housekeeping, particularly in the kitchen. It is important that everyone receives proper training and the kitchen is sanitary. He said getting more co-op housing approved would first go to the Residential Life Task Force (Shannon 2003).

Thus, for my final interview, I met with Maureen Mahoney, the Dean of the College, who is also chairing the Residential Life Task Force, which conducted a Housing and Dining Preferences Survey at the beginning of the year. The percentages of interest in or choice of co-op living were much lower than what my survey indicated, although throughout four years at Smith, it seems students become more interested in or choose alternative housing, as well as co-op cooking or cooking one's own meals. Mahoney and I discussed differences in our surveys, but she thinks that my data is significant and would like to include it with the Task Force's proposal to the President. Mahoney said it is likely that the Task Force will recommend that about 70% of the dining stay as is, and that 30% should be more flexible for the significant minority of students expressing other preferences or dietary concerns. There has also been discussion of one vegan/vegetarian kitchen so that the menu for vegans/vegetarians is more diverse. A report/proposal will be submitted at the end of this semester and a new committee will begin next year; this is an ongoing project with broad recommendations, many of which will be years in the making, including architectural changes (Mahoney 2003).

Survey:

38% (570 out of 1,500) of the surveys distributed were returned within 3 weeks. The results, are shown in Tables 1 and 2. The results of the survey were very positive. 62.6% responded yes to #1 (local), 61.1% responded yes to #2 (organic), 66.2% responded yes to #3 (purchase own food), 46.8% responded yes to #4 (coop housing), 76.5% responded yes to #5 (student garden interest), and 57.8% responded yes to #6 (student garden participation).

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Percentages of Yes, No, and Indifferent Responses to Six Questions Focusing on Food, Cooperative Housing, and a Student Garden at Smith College.

	Yes	No	Indifferent
Would you like more Smith food to come from local sources?	62.6%	3.4%	34.2%
Would you like more Smith food to be organic?	61.1%	9.2%	29.8%
Would you like to have the option of purchasing your own food?	66.2%	17.0%	16.7%
Would you like to see more coop housing on campus?	46.8%	17.9%	35.4%
Do you like the idea of a student garden on campus?	76.5%	5.6%	17.9%
Would you consider participating in a student garden?	57.8%	27.6%	14.6%

Table 2: Raw Numbers of Yes, No, and Indifferent Responses to Six Questions Focusing on Food, Cooperative Housing, and a Student Garden at Smith College.

	Yes	No	Indifferent
Would you like more Smith food to come from local sources?	355/567	19/567	194/567
Would you like more Smith food to be organic?	347/568	52/568	169/568
Would you like to have the option of purchasing your own food?	377/569	97/569	95/569
Would you like to see more coop housing on campus?	262/560	100/560	198/560
Do you like the idea of a student garden on campus?	436/570	32/570	102/570
Would you consider participating in a student garden?	329/569	157/569	83/569

Other Research:

CISA has initiated a local food project with Hampshire College, which is buying food from PVGA, although Hampshire is not self-operated. Research shows that local food programs might be initiated with more ease at private colleges than at public institutions; therefore it seems as though the 5 colleges could be a prime market for Pioneer Valley farmers. CISA's project with Hampshire highlighted the need for an advocacy group to facilitate institutional buying (CISA How To Manual 2002). PVGA also delivers some food to UMASS on a weekly basis (Rodgers

2003), and Mount Holyoke College purchases from PVGA indirectly through their distributor, Fowler and Hunting. David Norton, Mt. Holyoke's food buyer, said that Fowler and Hunting are recognized at a national level for working with local growers throughout the Connecticut River Valley. Mt. Holyoke found Guido's to be more costly. Mt. Holyoke has 15 food sites, which will be reduced to 6 next fall (Norton 2003). Colleges in the area would be ideal places to start researching what other schools are doing to promote or purchase more local foods. However, there are other schools that have started/are starting local food projects –Tufts, Middlebury, Bates, St. Olaf, Northland, Hendrix, Cornell, Vassar – that could act as useful contacts for a budding project at Smith.

The more literature I read, the more I realized that local food projects do not simply benefit one group. As Willie Nelson, the president of FarmAid said, “The fight to save family farms isn't just about farmers. It's about making sure that there is a safe and healthy food supply for all of us. It's about jobs, from Main Street to Wall Street. It's about a better America.” Food travels an average of 1,500 miles, more than the distance from Dallas to New York. Increased transportation and growth of crops suitable for transportation generally results in a decline of not only nutritional value and taste of the food, but also of the health of the environment due to increased use of chemicals, packaging, and fossil fuels (Valen 2001, Lee and Saal 2002). In 1999, the USDA averaged that only 20 cents out of every dollar spent on food goes back to the farmer. It is estimated that only 1 to 8 percent of money spent on food remains in a particular community (Valen 2001). The majority of food production is controlled by a small number of corporations, or agribusinesses. Buying directly from the farmer requires less transportation, packaging, and marketing, and the farmer is able to earn more of his/her fair share. For each dollar spent, three dollars go into the local economy (Lee and Saal 2002). Considering the consequences our food systems have on our communities, our health, and our environment, local food initiatives seem to be a desirable alternative. (Valen 2001).

Discussion

My findings on Smith's food system, student preferences, contacts/alternatives in the area, and other local food initiatives, demonstrate that a successful local food project at Smith is an attainable feat. It is important to be aware of the fact that "food is vitally important to you, your community, other living creatures, and the Earth that is your home, and a local food project responds directly to those needs." (Valen 2001). However, local food initiatives are not by any means an easy undertaking. They require considerable coordination and cooperation of everyone involved, as well as detailed organization and serious dedication. It is also essential to respond to the unique needs of each location. There are many ways of creating successful local food projects, and "all of us can begin to participate with just a few simple acts" (Valen 2001).

It is recommended that many people be involved in a local food project. Ideally, there would be an advisory committee with a diverse membership, including some or all of the following people: Carol Christ, interested professors (perhaps from the biology, environmental science and policy, sociology, economics, or government departments), local farmer/farmers, Kevin Martin and Ann Finley of RADS, a food worker, our current/future food distributor, Joanne McMullin (the Environmental Science and Policy Program Coordinator), Smith students, a cooperative extension agent, a promoter of community development, and someone to direct the project (Valen 2001, Lee and Saal 2002).

Strategically, a project team for daily work should also be formed, and should be primarily composed of students. It might be advantageous for some of the existing groups on campus to form a local food coalition; some possible groups on campus would be Gaia, MassPIRG, the Student Labor Action Coalition, and the Student Government Association. The team should establish a timeline and a budget for the first 3 years of the project, establish a fund-raising program, write a public outreach plan, identify food products that can be linked to Smith right away, create a plan that suits local consumers and farmers. Ideally, the coalition would also

establish an office/communications center, announce/publicize their project, recruit farmers, motivate Smith's decision makers, and promote good nutrition (Lee and Saal 2002).

Some of these suggestions may seem over-ambitious. Many veterans of local food projects emphasize "Think big, act small." A Buying Local campaign is all about relationships, particularly people's relationships with their food and their community. It also involves relationships with farmers, food service staff, other students, and many others. Professor allies can play important roles in the student initiative. It is also recommended that students get in touch with alumni that are farming, or that are involved in the sustainable agriculture movement. To raise student awareness, students involved in the local food project can hold a teach-in, table with local food samples, hold local food dinners, write articles, petition, organize field trips to local farms, and so on (Lee and Saal 2002). The participants of a local food initiative might begin by asking the food service manager to offer one entrée each week that comes from local sources (Valen 2001, Lee and Sal 2002, CISA How To Manual 2002). Smith students might also try to emphasize a local foods menu at the new student center.

Considering the results of the survey, it seems as though additional cooperative housing, or larger cooperative houses, might be another good place to start incorporating more local foods at Smith. Local food project advocates also suggest a garden as a means of promoting local foods. Houses with gardening space could be investigated, as could student garden internships overseen by the Botanic Gardens. Gaia has expressed an interest in a student garden. At the EcoLunch, Ann Finley seemed enthusiastic about the idea of a student garden and internship positions, yet as of right now, the Botanic Gardens is not even mildly encouraging such proposals.

The possibility of the Pioneer Valley Grower's Association (PVGA) forming a relationship with Smith is an exciting prospect. A cooperative of farmers can provide more for an institution like Smith than can an individual farmer, in most cases. PVGA is a well-known, efficient organization of growers in the Valley. Also, the fact that Community Involved in

Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) is in such close proximity, and could act as an important contact in facilitating a closer connection between Smith and local growers, is extremely encouraging.

Resident and Dining Services should not go under-appreciated. They do a lot of work, and offer a comparably tasty and homey dining experience. They have to meet deadlines, shop resourcefully, and create a menu that attempts to meet the needs of students with a wide array of preferences. An ongoing dialogue between students involved in a local food project and RADS personnel is extremely important. One would hope that if enough students were in favor of incorporating more local foods (as the survey indicates among other things), and were willing to put in the effort necessary to work towards that goal, RADS could exhibit the flexibility and cooperation necessary to help make it happen.

My initial intentions for this research project were slightly over-ambitious. Getting answers to questions about Smith's food system, let alone coming up with solutions, is not a job for one person. And it was almost irrational to think that Kevin Martin or Doug Pearson would know where our food comes from, whether it is grown through environmentally harmful or sustainable methods, or how the farm workers are treated, where they're from, what they get paid, and so forth. Martin and Pearson are doing their jobs, quite successfully in fact, and within this country's food system that means there are many middlemen and it is very difficult (and to some unnecessary) to trace food to its source.

However, there is something inherently wrong with that disconnection because it signifies a lack of values on someone's part. It is important to truly know what we are eating, and to what we are contributing. Purchasing and eating food are not value-free acts. If we support farmers in the area, students in the future could obtain the answers to some of these questions about the sources of their food with more ease. They could visit the farms, and talk to the growers and workers; they could participate more actively in Pioneer Valley food systems. And students would begin to understand more thoroughly the importance of a healthy environment, of small-scale farming, and of community relationships in their lives.

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