

Community Assistantship Program

Northland Food and Farming Initiative Report

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Introduction

The Northland Food & Farming Initiative (NFFI) is a community organization that works to strengthen food systems in northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. Food products that are produced, processed, distributed, marketed, consumed and the generated waste are parts of a food system. Many of these processes travel thousands of miles. This has become a concern among community members who want to create a more sustainable food system. Supporting a sustainable food system means supporting local farmers, allowing community members to know more about where their food comes from and how it is grown.

The objectives of the NFFI are to restore the connections between community members who play a role in food and farming. This coalition building includes farmers and consumers, processors and restaurateurs, environmentalist and anti-hunger advocates, agricultural, food and nutrition educators, and elected officials. Another focus is educating the community through presentations and school curricula. This objective allows the NFFI to reach out with information about community food systems. The NFFI's final objective focuses on policy questions and issues through the help of local officials, government and institutions concerning community food systems.

Pre-Interviews

As the NFFI's undergraduate research assistant, my duties were to collect primary data in the form of interviews. For the NFFI, the interviews were used to gather insight and helpful information regarding a sustainable food system in northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. The initial goals for the pre-interviews were twelve contacts. Due to scheduling conflicts, only seven persons were interviewed. The pre-interviews took place wherever was convenient for the interviewees. Most pre-interviews were however at the interviewees place of business and were aimed to be an hour long. The purpose of the twelve pre-interviews was used to further develop future interviews with a broader group of people, test the interview questions, and gain insight from the interviewees regarding sustainable food systems in the region.

At the beginning of the interviews, the NFFI project was introduced and the idea of a local food system. From that point, a set of questions was introduced. The questions were as follows:

- Describe what you do?
- What do you think is a local, sustainable food system?
- What parts of a local food system do we already have?
- What do you see as the barriers to developing a more local food system?
- What should we be thinking about that we aren't?

Although not all twelve persons were interviewed, the seven conducted produced

helpful insight to the feasibility of a local food system in the region. Participants in the pre-interviews were residents of northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin and have some connection or interest in food and farming. A diversity of occupations among the interviewees creates a wide range of findings and opinions. Because of this a local business owner, berry producer and processor, produce manager, restaurant owner, extensions educator, business executive director, and a professor were interviewed. All were asked the same questions; their responses were recorded in detailed notes.

Pre-Interview Results

From the set of pre-interview questions the question that was most useful to the NFFI is "What do you see are the barriers to developing a more local food system?" In order to create a sustainable food system, recognizing the barriers opens pathways for movement toward that goal. From all the pre-interviews a report was written up summarizing the barriers. A few reoccurring barriers that people saw to the developments of a local food system were: lack of education, consumer habits, money, accessibility, lack of assistance, and lack of assured markets. With these barriers in mind, each participant explained what they would like to see from the NFFI's project. Vast ideas emerged but the NFFI focused on the most do-able. The most do-able included creating more community gardens, a local produce broker, more farmers' markets strategically placed on accessible days, cooking and canning education, fairs, starting a newspaper, and creating a farm intern program. Two of the ideas were then considered for action: developing a local produce broker or creating a farm intern program. In the end, creating a farm intern program was chosen.

Interviews

Now that the NFFI set a goal, more research needed to be done. The next step was setting up interviews with other organizations that had farm intern programs in place and farmers. Three organizations were contacted by phone and explained the NFFI is looking into the feasibility of setting up a farm intern program in northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. They were then asked the following questions:

- What would be involved in creating a farm intern program?
- Tips and advice?
- Mistakes to avoid?
- Do you have any materials on your farm intern programs and could you send copies?

Next, four farmers were interviewed and asked the following questions:

- Do you feel internships are useful to farmers?
- Would it interest you to establish a program on your farm?
- Have you experienced an internship on your farm? If you have, did you feel it helped?
- Do internships benefit the two parties?
- Why might you not be interested in internships?

Interview Results

The NFFI received information and copies of material from the organizations. The purpose of receiving materials from the organizations was to give the NFFI an idea of what materials they needed to get started. Enclosed in the materials was a pamphlet of the organizations internship service, intern application, intern application instructions,

farmers-gardeners application, a synopsis form to be filled out by the farmers-gardeners, and interview suggestions for both the intern and the farmer-gardener. The response from the farmers' interview questions was welcoming. Three of the four farmers use interns, and expressed an interest in the NFFI's project.

From all interviews and materials received, the next step was writing a report, "Steps Recommended In Setting Up A Farm Intern Program." From that point the NFFI was ready to set up the farm intern program. Because the NFFI had interviewed farmers in the region that expressed interest and received materials from organizations, the last step was to find a place to affiliate the farm intern program. The NFFI then looked into setting up the farm intern program with the University of Minnesota – Duluth and the Extensions Northeast District Office. Then a meeting was set up with the District Director and the NFFI's farm intern program idea was discussed. The northeast District Director welcomed the idea of the NFFI's farm intern program and decided to take the project from there.