

Skidmore Supported Agriculture: Bringing More Local Food to the Skidmore College
Community

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	Section Title
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Abstract:

The current industrial agriculture system in the United States has damaged the environment and distanced people from their food and farms. The organic and local food movements have arisen in response to this system's flaws. Through programs such as Community Supported Agriculture, people are gaining access to wholesome, local food while reconnecting with their food and communities. This project seeks to provide the benefits of this service to the greater Skidmore College community.

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 Historical Context of Farming: Industrial and Green Revolutions

Agriculture in the United States began by necessity as a vast network of small, independent, labor-intensive farms. These small farms employed and were home to more than half of the population of the country. In the post-World War II era, however, the advent of new mechanized farming infrastructure and technology instigated a shift away from model. The myriad small farms were replaced by a much smaller number of large, mechanized, monoculture farms that today employ only around 2 percent of the Unites States workforce (Dimitri 2005).

1.2.1 – *Organics*

From an ecological perspective, the shift to organic and ecologically sustainable forms of agriculture has profound beneficial effects on the soil quality, land conservation and water quality in the local environment. The United States Department of Agriculture defines organic agriculture as employing methods that “integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity” (USDA National Organic Program). Additionally, the use of synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, chemical pesticides and herbicides and genetic engineering is strictly prohibited. Various techniques such as low-till farming, cover cropping, and the use of animal manure and compost as fertilizer are used to reduce soil erosion, limit chemical input and maintain the nutrient content and overall health and longevity of the soil (Bilalis 2010, Golabi 2007, Jackson 2004).

Farms of all sizes and across the world have been started with or have made the shift over to organic practices to meet the growing level of environmental concern and consumer demand (Best 2010, Greene 2003). In fact, in the European Union, the number of organic farms rose 21 percent between 2005 and 2008 (Arthurson 2011). In the United States, the acreage of certified organic cropland doubled between 1993 and 1997 to 1.3 billion acres and continues to rise (Dimitri 2005).

1.2.2 - *Biodynamics*

Another alternative method of agriculture, though not nearly as popular in the United States, is biodynamic agriculture. Through a deeply holistic approach, biodynamic practices seek to strengthen the connection between people and the land to promote optimal health and balance of the natural ecosystem. Many of the methods and practices between

organic and biodynamic agriculture are similar, but biodynamic beliefs reflect the idea that the farm is a dynamic, living being that is directly affected and respondent to celestial rhythms and complex natural cycles. In this sense some of the methods are more holistic, such as detailed direction for manure and compost production and homeopathic animal husbandry. According to Demeter-International, an international biodynamic certifier, there were 142,482 biodynamic hectares worldwide and that number continues to grow (Paull 2011).

1.2.3 – Local Movements

The more economic realm of sustainable agricultural development incorporates alternative and locally focused means of connecting the consumer with their food and where it comes from. With substantial implications for climate change benefits with reduced

recognizable connection between the consumer and their source of food. In a lot of cases,

administration has shown that they are willing to seek out and provide local food to the Skidmore community. In the sustainability section of their website, Skidmore Dining Services advertises 24 partnerships with local distributors, farmers and processors and a study done by Jesse Moy and Maranda Duval in 2011 showed that sustainability is a priority within the dining services.

1.5.2 On-Campus Garden or Farm

Something that Skidmore has only recently adopted is the use of an on-campus agricultural operation to supply produce to the dining hall and provide experiential learning for students. The Skidmore Student Garden, started by student Laura Fralich in the Spring of 2009, is a modest 40 by 60 foot plot of land located on campus that produced 1000 pounds of organically grown produce for the dining hall in its first year of production (Duvall 2011). While Skidmore efforts with the student garden are not in vain, the garden is not at the level of size or productivity where it can be considered a viable major source of produce for the school.

1.5.3 Campus CSA

Though not in all cases, most colleges that have a functional farm on campus

Tremblay 2009). This included directors and managers involved in Dining Services, particularly Mark Miller, who is a proponent of the idea, as well as the potential and current partners involved in supplying the food that would go into the CSA. These partners also included the directors at various distributions companies.

2.3 Community Survey:

Another crucial aspect of the project was gauging the level of interest in a CSA program within the targeted Skidmore community. This was done with a student survey through SurveyMonkey.com, a public Facebook event advertising the survey, an appearance in the student announcements, and the distribution of the survey through the all-student email lists and the all faculty/staff email lists.

3. RESULTS:

3.1 Contextual Information and Stakeholder Involvement:

While gathering my contextual information and interviewing the stakeholders in the project, my interviews became less formal and more conversation based and the stakeholders I initially anticipated as being ancillary additions to the project data quickly became clear supporters, promoters and actors in the staging of the CSA-type project on campus. In other words, the imagined interviewees became active participants and help move develop the project in real time. Mark Miller, the head of Dining Services and chief proponent of the idea, immediately supported the project and was open to suggestions and facilitating any development. Several successive meetings with Mark throughout the semester were integral in establishing the idea of the project in the administration and getting people to think seriously and take action on implementing the proposed options.

In my search for active stakeholders in the project, I discovered Riley Neugebauer, the Campus Sustainability Coordinator, Monica Raveret-Richter, a professor in the Biology Department, and their team of Dining Hall Interns, whose main objectives revolve around the increased sustainability of Skidmore's Dining Services Program. I began meeting with them on a weekly basis to generally discuss sustainability in Dining Services and how my project could be realized with their help. Riley also brought to my attention several interesting off campus meetings and events that aided in a deeper understanding of my project.

The first of these was the Cornell Cooperative Extension Small Farms Summit, which took place in Voorheesville, NY on Wednesday the 29th of February. This meeting consisted of local farmers and distributors getting together and communicating with similar groups all over the state via teleconference. Though no solid connections were made at this conference, it was nonetheless an educational experience that broadened my understanding of the concerns of farmers with the efficient distribution of their products. The second event was also organized through the Cornell Cooperative Extension, but was more focused on establishing CSAs at the workplace. There was a variety of farmers, distributors and business owners there discussing the merits of a CSA and how to best go about implementing them for employees at their place of work. Though the conversation was geared

Markristo Farm in Hillsdale, NY, and The Farm at Miller's Crossing near Hudson, NY. The pre-ordered number of bags would be delivered by Donna Williams, the founder of the company, to the Atrium Cafe in the Murray-Aikins Dining Hall every Friday. There will be volunteers and Dining Hall Interns available to receive, organize and distribute the shares at the table throughout the day. The bags would cost the shareholder \$22.00, \$27.50 or \$33.00 for a small, medium or large bag, respectively. Skidmore Dining Services would take a 10 percent commission on this price for providing the space for the pick up as well as the necessary promotion and advertisement of the service. Also available to the participants picking up their shares would be local products provided by Dining Services including a dozen eggs from Thomas' Poultry Farm in Schuylerville, NY for \$2.00, a half pound of Vermont cheeses

Figure 1

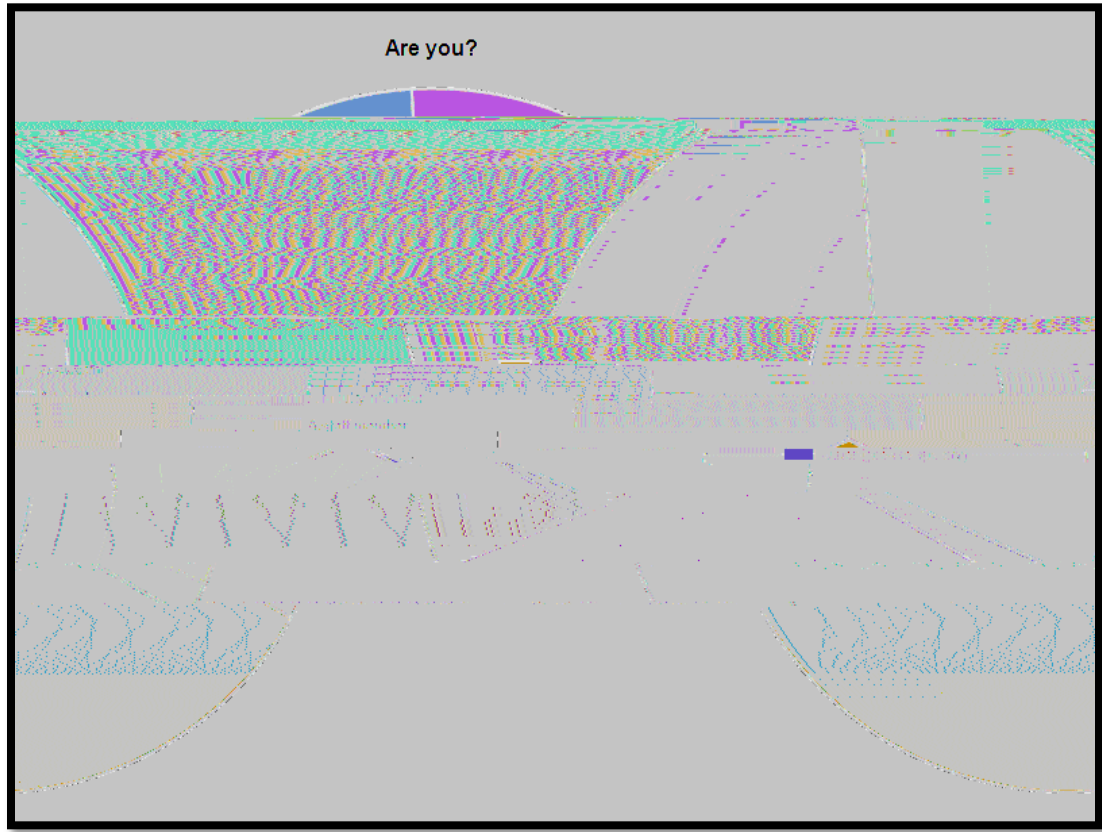
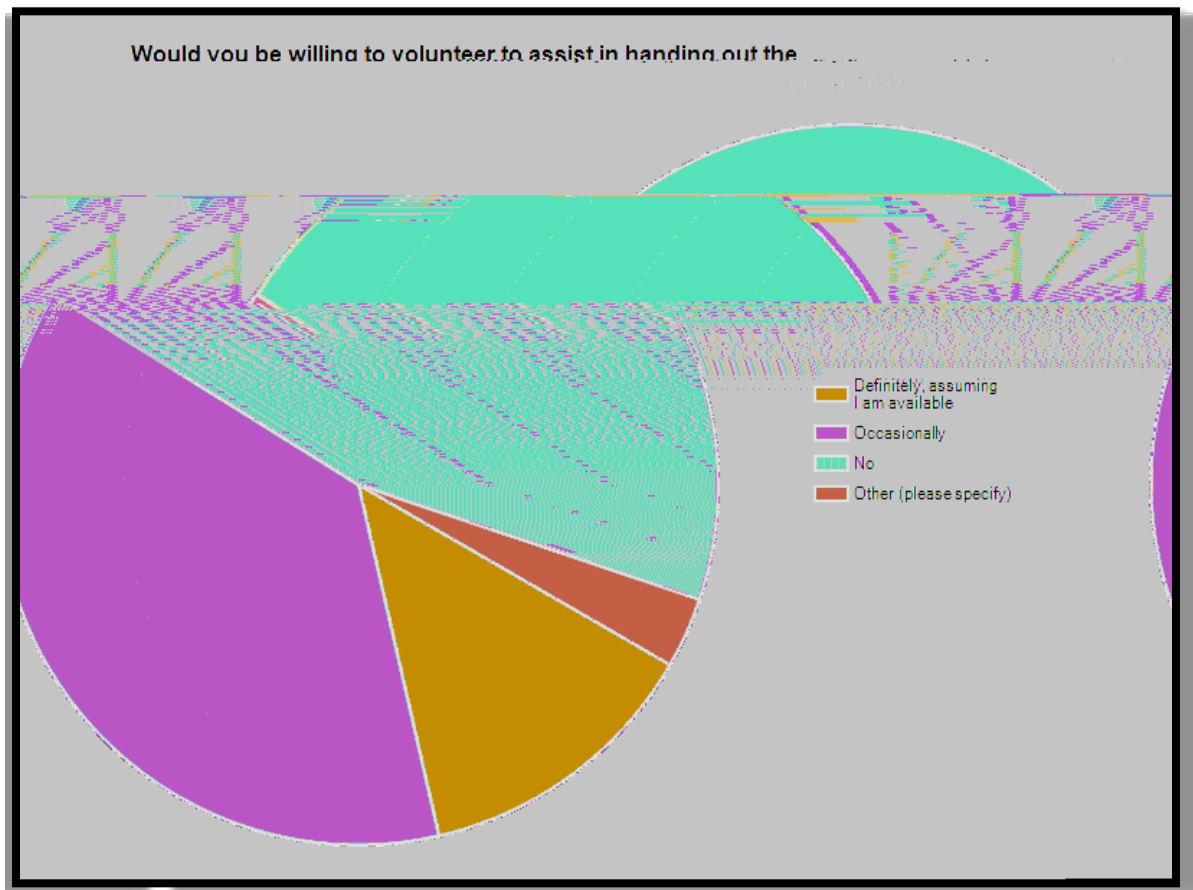


Figure 2



In response to the question assessing interest in the program, 65.9% of the responses indicated a positive interest in the service (see Figure 3). The remainder was either not interested or conditionally interested, with one student saying they would subscribe if they lived in Scribner Village or the Northwoods Apartments.

Figure 3

Figure 4

4. DISCUSSION:

conversations I helped facilitate between Mark and Donna Williams, the founder and owner of Field Goods, this option became much more palatable for the school.

A drawback

5. CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, this project had a much different result than I originally had in mind. Though I quickly realized my initial intentions for the project were too grandiose to be realistic, the end product of my efforts involved the compromise of several different stakeholders. As I worked through the various options and weighed the benefits and drawbacks of each option with the interests of the involved parties, I realized that the true core of the project was centered on providing the option of healthier, local food to those who desire it. In the end, I am confident that this goal was achieved.

I have witnessed a growing interest in more sustainable food options among the Skidmore community and administration that I hope will continue to grow and breed positive results. With the creation of the Dining Hall Sustainability Interns and the appointment of Mark Miller as the head of Dining Services, I foresee a greater emphasis being made on sustainable dining initiatives at Skidmore and my project hopefully has planted the seed and opened the door for a more legitimate Community Supported Agriculture system through Dining Services and maybe even one day the expansion of the garden and the start of a larger scales Skidmore Organic Farm. Sustainability at Skidmore is becoming an increasingly apparent issue and I am proud of the contribution that this project has made toward institutionalizing sustainable dining at Skidmore College.

Appendix 1:

Community Survey Questions

1. Would you subscribe to the service?

- Definitely
- Very Likely
- Likely
- Not Likely
- Not Interested
- I can't subscribe
- Other

2. Are you?

- A student
- A faculty member
- A staff member
- Other

3. If you are interested in the service, what 3 features are the most appealing to you?

- Value
- Delivery
- Length of delivery season
- Produce purchased from local farms
- Large variety
- Health benefits of greater access to fresh produce
- Environment/sustainability benefits
- Other

4. If you are not interested in the service, tell us why.

- I belong to a CSA or similar service.
- I get what I need at the grocery store.
- I get what I need at the farmer's market.
- Cost is too high.
- Delivery location or time is inconvenient.
- Don't like beiET rk s why,j ET Q q -0.3 (n) -0.3 (v) 0.3 (e) 0ci6 0 0.24 126 247.68 cm BT 50 0.24 113e

