

VERMONT FARM TO COLLEGE CASE STUDIES

Stories of successful & diverse local food dining programs in higher education



Colleges across the northeast are trying to incorporate local food into their dining and educational programs, but how are they doing it? These three case studies featuring Vermont colleges highlight successful and diverse approaches to values-based and local/regional food purchasing. We intentionally chose to feature an independently-operated dining program and two programs operated by different food service management companies to represent the diverse management arrangements found on Vermont campuses. The results are case studies that are partly stories – of how each campus progressed to their current local food purchasing and practices – and partly illustrations of best practices that are key to their success and could be implemented on other campuses. Mostly, these case studies are an opportunity for Vermont colleges to learn from and inspire each other's local food programs.

Table of Contents

BENNINGTON COLLEGE: <i>Connecting Campus Values to the Dining Hall</i>	2
GREEN MOUNTAIN COLLEGE: <i>Incorporating the Dining Program into Sustainability Education</i>	4
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE: <i>Farm & Food Relationships Matter</i>	6

Connecting Campus Values to the Dining Hall

Bennington College intentionally redesigned their dining program to focus on local food procurement to reflect the institution's values around the local economy and community support.

About five years ago, Bennington College did a thorough redesign of their dining program so that it reflected the values of the institution. This includes serving nourishing, delicious, creative, locally sourced food that contributes to the aesthetic experience of Bennington College. By intentionally identifying their values around local food they were able to evaluate their different options for building a dining program and select a management arrangement that would best match their values.

Located in Vermont's most southwestern corner, Bennington College is one of the largest economic drivers in Bennington County. The administration is very cognizant of the impact their



purchasing choices make on the vibrancy of the local economy. They recognize that in order to preserve the culture of an agrarian state like Vermont—which their students, faculty, and staff highly value—they **must support the producers and businesses that make Vermont unique**. In addition to supporting their community and local economy, Bennington College values local food because they feel it tends to be more ecologically sound, which fits with the college's overall commitment to environmental sustainability, and because it tends to be higher quality.

Until 2013, Bennington College's dining program was independently operated. In an evaluation, they determined they lacked the expertise and resources needed to significantly scale-up local purchasing in an efficient way, so they sought out a partner to help them. The administration solicited proposals prioritizing local food, ensuring that the resulting dining program would support the local economy. With this value as one criteria, they chose the foodservice management company Aramark Corporation because it demonstrated a deep understanding of the highly creative, independent, and aesthetic culture of Bennington College. Aramark has given their team at Bennington College a lot of freedom to meet the institution's priorities, and Bennington College has become a flagship site for

COLLEGE AT A GLANCE

DINING MANAGEMENT:

Aramark Food Service
Management Company

STUDENT BODY: 700

MEALS SERVED DAILY: 1,500

DINING HALLS: 1*

ON-CAMPUS FARM: 1 acre

* The Commons, Bennington's dining hall, is under a two-year renovation. Aramark has constructed a temporary dining hall for the meantime.

Aramark to develop a dining program focused on local food.

Bennington students were skeptical when Aramark first began managing the dining program in 2013 as to whether or not they would make good on their promise of serving more local food. It is clear, however, that Aramark is. **The administration has set a goal to procure 50% of the food served on campus locally**, which they define as being sourced from within 200 miles of the campus. Aramark hired Farm Logix to track local and organic purchasing during the 2015-2016 academic year, and found that they purchased 37% local food that year and they increased that to 42% during the 2016-2017 academic year. They started by procuring staples that are available locally year-round (e.g dairy, eggs, bread) and then branched out to seasonally dependent products like fruits and vegetables.

Soon after hiring Aramark to scale up their local food procurement,

the administration provided Aramark with the financial resources to purchase more local food, enabling them to create a dining program that embodies the institution's values. **Interestingly, the financial commitment necessary to scale up local purchasing, has not been overwhelming.** Bennington is a small school and had a lower than average per plate cost to begin with due to a high proportion--an estimated 25% of the student body--of vegans and vegetarians on campus (animal proteins tends to be a fairly expensive component of most meals). They've focused resources on creating delicious, appealing



was significantly more expensive (mostly because Coca-Cola gives rebates back to campuses they have contracts with) and is made with cane syrup rather than high fructose corn sugar. To help offset costs, they served the soda in smaller glasses and gambled on the fact that students would consume less. The gamble paid off--students have been consuming less Maine Root Soda than Coca-cola products.

Because Bennington College was **very clear about their desire to support the local economy and community**, they were able to to prioritize local food in their re-evaluation of their dining program, dedicate resources towards procuring local food, and select a management option for their dining program that could most effectively embody their values. The progress they have made towards their goal of 50% local food demonstrates that **partnerships with food service management companies can be successful if the values and priorities of the**

institution are clearly articulated and supported with the necessary resources.

David Rees, Senior Vice President for Institutional Initiatives, oversees the dining program and credits much of the program's success to the fact that all levels are committed to the values of local food, from the administration all the way to the kitchen staff. An extra boost for success, he claims, has been to hire a chef that is passionate about serving creative, delicious, local food. Ultimately, he says, "It takes a team. There can't just be one champion, but if there is just one champion it is the job of the champion to make more champions."

"It takes a team," says Rees. "There can't just be one champion." His tip is: hire chefs and staff whose values align with the values of the dining program—that way the entire team is on the same page."

(to vegetarians and meat-eaters, alike), and locally sourced vegetarian entrees, which are often more cost effective than sourcing local animal proteins.

In addition to extra financial support from the college, the dining program has been creative by reworking their menus to feature locally available products rather than trying to find locally produced items that fit within their old menus. They've even experimented with creative serving to make local products work within their budget. For example, students organized to demand the removal of Coca-Cola products on campus. As a result, the dining program switched to serving Maine Root soda, which



Napkin suggestion board in the cafeteria.



Incorporating the Dining Program into Sustainability Education

Green Mountain College is utilizing an existing resource on campus--the dining program--as a living laboratory and component of a holistic educational experience for students to learn about sustainable food systems, demonstrating that campuses can do more than just purchase local foods to contribute to a sustainable food economy.

Among the many ways campuses contribute to the creation of a more sustainable local food system, one of the most obvious actions is purchasing as much local and sustainable food as possible. While Green Mountain College (GMC) has, and continues, to purchase local and sustainable food, they also recognize some limitations to this strategy. The GMC administration feels that increasing the amount of local and sustainable food served on campus would increase student debt-load,

GMC is a small school located in rural southwestern Vermont that has been nationally recognized for leadership in sustainability. Their dining program, like the rest of campus, is focused at all levels on sustainability, from procurement to waste management. The campus currently uses the criteria developed by The Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) for the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Reporting System (STARS) to track food

purchases¹. As of 2017, this tracking showed that nearly 12% of their food was either locally sourced (from within 250 miles of campus) or third party verified to be ecologically



which they are reluctant to do. Rather than primarily focusing their efforts on purchasing, **they have taken a more holistic approach, coupling procurement in the dining program with education opportunities** to equip students with the knowledge and skills to find real-world solutions that build a stronger local food system.

sound, fair, and/or humane.²

While locally sourced food is highly valued by GMC, it is just one component of their sustainable dining program and is equally as valued as other sustainability characteristics, such as organic.

GMC's dining program turned their

COLLEGE AT A GLANCE

DINING MANAGEMENT:

Chartwells Food Service Management Company

STUDENT BODY: 400 on-campus (500 total)

MEALS SERVED DAILY: 700

DINING HALLS: 1

ON-CAMPUS FARM: 23 acres

focus to sustainable food purchasing before most campuses, and has served as a pioneer in the field. Inspired by a course taught by GMC faculty, Philip Ackerman-Leist, in 2006, the college decided to aim for 30% local, sustainable, or organic food on campus within three years (a purchasing goal made before the Real Food Challenge)³. Students in the course developed protocols for tracking purchases in order to benchmark progress years before most other campuses had begun to think about tracking sustainable food.

Since 2006, GMC's administration has continually pushed their foodservice management company,

¹ AASHE STARS is a self-reported framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance and make meaningful comparisons over time and across institutions.

² There are various systems, with unique criteria, for tracking local and sustainable food purchases at institutions, and therefore, the percentage of local food purchased at institutions should not be directly compared.

³ The Real Food Challenge is a national student-led movement to pressure colleges and universities to commit 20% of their food budget towards local, fair, humane, or ecologically sound sources by 2020.



Go beyond purchasing! If budgets are a constraint, there are still ways to use your campus dining program to contribute to a more vibrant local food system. Try integrating your dining program into curriculum to bring greater awareness to the process of sourcing and serving local foods.

preserving, and preparation that both teach students important life skills and directly tie into the campus dining program. Special events and workshops utilize dining hall staff and facilities to teach students how to use local foods, which are then incorporated into the meal program.

Chartwells, to reduce internal purchasing restrictions (i.e. the proportion of purchases that must be made through Chartwells' national purchasing agreements) and liability requirements (i.e. the amount of liability insurance farmers must carry in order to sell to GMC) to enable more local and sustainable food to be served on campus. GMC has essentially become Chartwells' flagship site for what a sustainable dining program can look like.

While GMC may have been a pioneering campus in sustainable dining, many other campuses have since adopted similar goals and systems. What sets GMC apart, however, is their **mission to use**

their dining program to educate students to be conscious, active participants in a local, sustainable food system. The college has a long-standing and innovative Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems undergraduate program that aims to "show students how to take part in the current food revolution that is transforming farming and how we view food."⁴

Dining staff, college faculty, and on-campus farm staff collaborate to integrate educational curriculum with efforts to create a more local, sustainable campus food system. For example, the dining director, Dave Ondria, regularly teaches skill-building courses on food sourcing,

By making education part of the mission the dining program, GMC is closing the gaps between the people who grow, prepare, and consume food on campus. When asked why it is important for the dining program to educate students, Ondria remarked, "It breaks down barriers." He explained how **involving students in the dining program exposes them to where their food comes from, how it is prepared, and what it costs to make a meal**, and that this knowledge debunks myths about institutional food service.

⁴ <http://www.greenmtn.edu/academics/undergraduate/majors/sustainable-agriculture-food-systems/>



Farm & Food Relationships Matter

Middlebury College maintains personal relationships with local producers in their community, which fosters mutual trust and respect and enhances the institution's ability to source local food.

Middlebury College, like many Vermont colleges, is a keystone institution embedded in an rural, agricultural community. The college has always valued its connection to the community, and they have purchased food for their dining program from local producers for the past several decades—before it was the norm. Their local food purchasing efforts grew out of community relationships, and they intentionally maintain these relationships to further their local food purchasing today.

Middlebury College created a mission for their dining program: ***"Nourish and nurture today and tomorrow by sustaining mind, body, and earth"***. This aligns with the campus' overall goal to be a leading campus in sustainability efforts. The dining program, as a pillar of the campus, is one way the college embodies its values of sustainability. While local food is not

explicitly included in the mission statement, procurement of ***local food is implicitly understood to be a critical way the dining program is achieving its goals of environmental sustainability.***

As a testament to the college's commitment to sustainability, the administration signed the Real Food Challenge Campus Commitment in 2014, pledging to purchase at least 30% "real" food—defined as locally sourced, ecologically sound, fair, or humane—by 2016 (this commitment went above and beyond the standard 20% by 2020 commitment made by most campuses). As of 2017, the dining program had exceeded this goal and was spending 38% of its budget on "real" food, a large portion of which is locally sourced (from within 250 miles of campus). About 32% of the food budget is spent on food sourced from over 50 local vendors. Local food purchasing is tracked

through the dining program's new menu management system, Eatec, which they view as far less labor intensive than the Real Food Calculator (their previous tracking system).

COLLEGE AT A GLANCE

DINING MANAGEMENT:

Independently-operated by the college

STUDENT BODY: 2,500

MEALS SERVED DAILY: 7,000

DINING HALLS: 3

ON-CAMPUS FARM: 1 acre

Middlebury College's informal food buying strategy is to purchase a product locally if it is available. All dairy products (including fluid milk), shell eggs, and maple syrup served on campus are sourced from nearby farms. ***Seasonal produce is purchased from local farms, and, because these relationships already exist, surplus crops are often purchased at discounted rates and stored in the campus's ample cold storage.*** This has been cited as a highly valuable resource for purchasing bulk quantities of local produce in season.

The dining program has recently started sourcing whole, grass-fed cows from multiple local farms and processing them at a local slaughterhouse to replace most of the beef on campus (they were not able to find a single consistent source of local, grass-fed beef with enough quantity to meet their needs). This shift was partly inspired by a student campaign to reduce beef consumption on campus by 10%, which subsequently freed up





funds to procure a higher quality product. Since sourcing local beef has been successful they are now working on sourcing local pork, and hope to be able to source more local poultry in the future as well. One reason Middlebury College has turned its efforts to sourcing local, pasture-based meat to further their mission of sustainability is the disproportionate negative impact large scale that conventional meat production has on the environment.

A critical element to the success of Middlebury College's local purchasing efforts is their relationships with local producers. The Dining Director, Dan Detora, maintains personal relationships with local producers through regular deliveries on campus and farm visits. **Before purchasing from a local producer, Detora will almost always visit the farm/producer to learn of their practices and decide if they are in line with Middlebury**

“ It is extremely important to **build a relationship** with the folks that produce our food. There is a trust involved and it is a great feeling to know you can stop by their farm anytime to review their procedures and to make sure they are sending us the highest quality items. ”

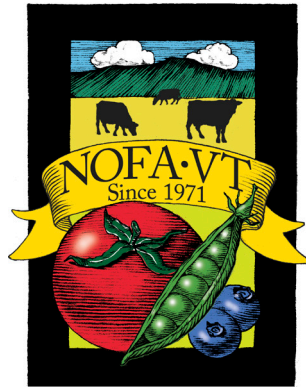
– Middlebury College Dining Director Dan Detora

College's values. Moreover, the college is an active member of the Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN), a local nonprofit which helps connect the college to new local producers and community partners.

Detora views vendor relationships as partnerships, rather than conventional supplier-customer relationships. He stated, “If we have an issue or need product in a pinch, they are always there to help.” Conversely, Middlebury

College is there to help the local food system; local producers know to call Middlebury College when they have a surplus of products they need to move in a hurry. Many of these relationships date back over a decade, and local producers have come to trust Middlebury College as a loyal partner. **This mutual trust brings a level of confidence to purchasing that the products will be high quality and will be available when needed.**





These case studies were inspired by the Vermont Farm to Plate Report, "Opportunities and Barriers to Greater Local Food Procurement in Vermont Higher Education Food Service," in which 12 of the 21 higher education food service operations in Vermont were interviewed about the strategies that enable them to utilize local foods. Based on the report, NOFA-VT and the Vermont Agency of Food, Agriculture and Markets (as part of Vermont Farm to Plate's Farm to Institution Task Force) compiled these case studies to feature successful and diverse approaches to values-based and local/regional food purchasing. Through the interview process it became clear that each institution was so unique that simply explaining a single practice they use to procure and serve local food would not tell the whole story. As such, we expanded the scope of each case study to offer a more holistic view of the institution's local food program. It takes more than a single conversation with one person on a campus to understand a food program holistically and as such, we spoke with dining directors, faculty and staff members, and college administrators to learn their local food stories.

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