Market Survey of University of Toledo Faculty and Staff Regarding Potential Participation in an On-Campus Local Foods Buying Club

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Executive Summary

In recent years, the interest in purchasing locally grown foods has been on the rise, and Toledo has been no exception to this trend. As consumers become more aware of the potential benefits of buying from local producers, they continue to seek new ways of making this connection. The idea of buying local, on the surface, is one that is easy to support. In an era where the majority of food products are produced on large scale farms, sent to centralized processors, packagers, and distributors, and sold at large chain retailers, some consumers are daunted by the real or perceived increases in cost and decreases in convenience.

The University of Toledo Urban Affairs Center joins many across the country and in the Northwest Ohio region who are trying to find new and innovative ideas for shortening the path from producer to consumer. We seek to educate consumers about benefits and opportunities for supporting local producers. We also seek to inspire our local producers and entrepreneurs to forge new trails in the food market in order to meet the increasing demand for locally grown products.

To this end, we conducted a survey of UT faculty and staff to learn more about the potential for a buying club on campus that would allow participants to purchase local foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and eggs, directly from producers and have them delivered to their workplace. Programs such as this are successful because they pool together consumers upon whose patronage producers can depend, and because they increase the ease and convenience with which consumers can access locally produced items.

Our results indicate that faculty and staff are generally supportive of this kind of program, and that many would in fact participate regularly throughout the year, with many respondents stating they would pay slightly higher prices to have this access and convenience. We strongly believe that the time is ripe for a local entrepreneur to use this information and launch such a buying club here on UT's campus.

Benefits to Buying Local

Food is one item that we all purchase. Thus, even small shifts in consumer behavior can have noticeable and positive effects on the food system and on the bottom line of local producers. There are many potential benefits to buying local food. Shortening food chains means that food travels shorter distances, using less fuel and, in some cases, requiring less packaging, shrinking its environmental impact.

A shorter food chain also means that fruits and vegetables can be purchased at the peak of freshness, when their nutritional value (and taste!) is best. For other products such as dairy, baked goods, and meat, a quicker path to the consumer reduces the need for preservatives or other additives.

As consumers begin to get reacquainted with their food sources, this often leads to more cooking at home, higher fruit and vegetable consumption, and better all around nutrition. Shopping at farmers markets or receiving a weekly box of produce through a local farmer's community supported agriculture (CSA) business often exposes consumers to new varieties of produce as well.

A greater percentage of each dollar spent locally stays in the local economy because it is not forwarded to a corporate headquarters in another state. Local business owners also often have much more invested in the local community than a chain retailer does, and they support other local businesses as well as local charities and community organizations.

Barriers to Buying Local

The rise of industrial agriculture and the globalization of the economy have led to corporate control of the food supply, and a decline in consumer knowledge about food production. Many consumers simply do not give a thought to where their food came from or how it was produced when they pluck it off a grocery store shelf, yet many consumers do care about these questions. Large supermarkets make it extremely convenient to do one-stop-shopping and keep food prices low by purchasing from large centralized distributors, and with a continually shrinking pool of local retailers, producers often have few ways to reach the local market.

Ingrained consumer behavior and consumer demand for low food prices and convenient shopping is one half of the disconnect between consumers and growers. The other half is the reluctance or inability of some producers to cater to the so-called locavore consumers, for fear that the market is too small and/or too fickle. For some producers it is easier to accept a low but regular and guaranteed payment from large corporations than to sell directly to the consumer. This can lead to consumers being unable to access a variety of locally produced foods, even if they are seeking them out.

Potential Solutions

Interest in CSAs (community supported agriculture) and buying clubs have grown in recent years. These options provide a commitment by the consumer to the producer to purchase a share of the season's harvest. These programs can vary wildly in cost and product, some requiring full season upfront payment, other allowing monthly or weekly payment.

A CSA usually consists of one farm that has a set number of subscriptions available for consumers to contract for a season. A producer may sell most or all of their product through their CSA, or they may also still sell at farmers markets and other outlets. A buying club can be run differently, with a local business accepting subscriptions and then contracting with one or more farms to purchase local product and distribute it to subscribers. This model allows the club to add to the suppliers as

demand rises, though it is important to balance the two. CSA's or buying clubs which offer workplace delivery are often referred to as "farm to firm" opportunities.

One successful model is that of Isidore Foods, based in Pennsylvania, which combines aspects of CSA and buying club. The UT Urban Affairs Center arranged to have David Eason, president of Isidore, come to Toledo to speak to a group of stakeholders. Among those who came to hear Mr. Eason speak were local producers, local entrepreneurs interested in launching a similar business, local food activists and those involved in community and economic development.

Isidore Foods began with a pilot year in 2007 in which they connected 150 faculty and staff at the University of Pittsburgh with local product, making weekly deliveries to campus. Isidore has now grown to serving over 1,500 subscribers with products from 35 farms, delivering to 16 drop off points throughout southwest Pennsylvania and has recently expanded to central Ohio.

Survey Methodology

To test the market for such a pilot program here on UT's campus, we surveyed faculty and staff via an online survey tool. We wanted to know what the overall interest would be, what types of products potential participants would want, how much they would be willing to pay, and what the most convenient drop off points would be on campus. Total faculty and staff in fall 2010 numbered 6,567, and we were hoping for 500+ responses. We acknowledge that the respondents are likely biased towards a population that is already advocating for a stronger local food system, as those uninterested in the topic would be less likely to fill out the survey at all. However, even 100 responses that indicated strong support and high likelihood of participation could be enough to demonstrate demand for such a program on UT's campus.

To disseminate the survey, we contacted college administrative offices and asked that they send emails to all faculty and staff in their college that contained a short narrative describing the purpose of the survey and a link to the website where the survey was hosted. We also sent a press release to the UT media, and UT News published a brief story about the survey, as did a UT blogger. These stories contained a link to the survey.

Due to the nature of the recruiting process, we were unable to closely control who did or did not complete the survey. We did allow respondents to submit their email addresses at the end of the survey to be entered into a drawing for a gift card, and the majority of those email addresses were UT faculty, staff, and the occasional student. We were able to reach more individuals on main campus than on the health science campus, which led to slightly skewed results when it came to physical location. This should not be taken as a greater demand on main campus than on the health science campus.

Survey Results

The responses were collected over 5 weeks in October and November. The total number of respondents was 674. The majority of the respondents were full time faculty and staff (figure 1). Half of the respondents indicated that they were “very likely” to participate in a buying club for local produce at UT (figure 2). Only 12% responded that they were “very unlikely” or “somewhat unlikely” to participate.

Another important question is that of cost (figure 3). Of course one of the goals of a program such as this is to increase the percentage of the retail dollar that ends up in the hands of producers. At the same time, many consumers will be turned off by increases in price over a grocery store, regardless of the increase in quality that might come with the higher price. While many respondents (18%) said they would like the products in this buying club to cost less than what they currently pay at a grocery store, 36% said they were willing to pay more, with 7% of respondents indicating that they would pay up to 20% more than grocery store prices.

We also asked where respondents are currently buying the majority of their produce. Overwhelmingly, this is at a traditional grocery store (chain or local), or at a big box store. Only 7% of respondents reported buying produce at a farmers market or farm stand (figure 4), suggesting that a new UT-based program would not have a negative impact on existing direct sales by local producers.

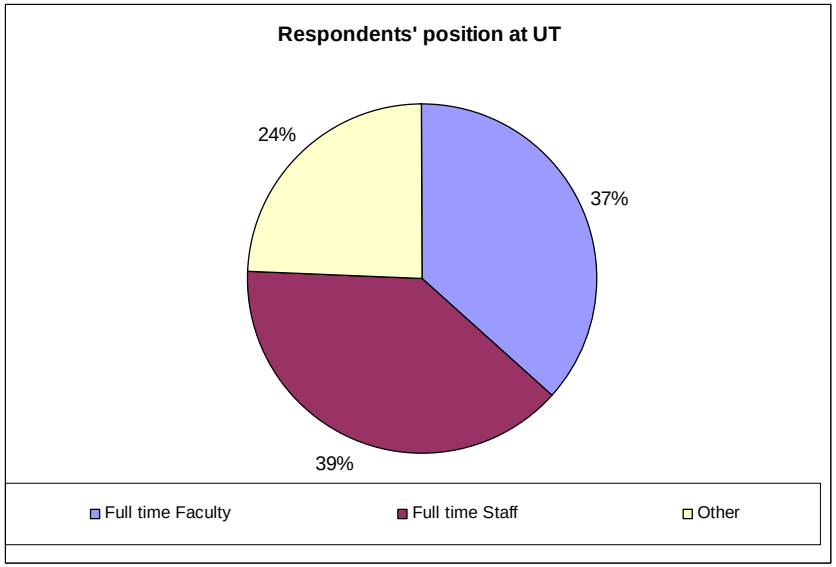

Figure 1

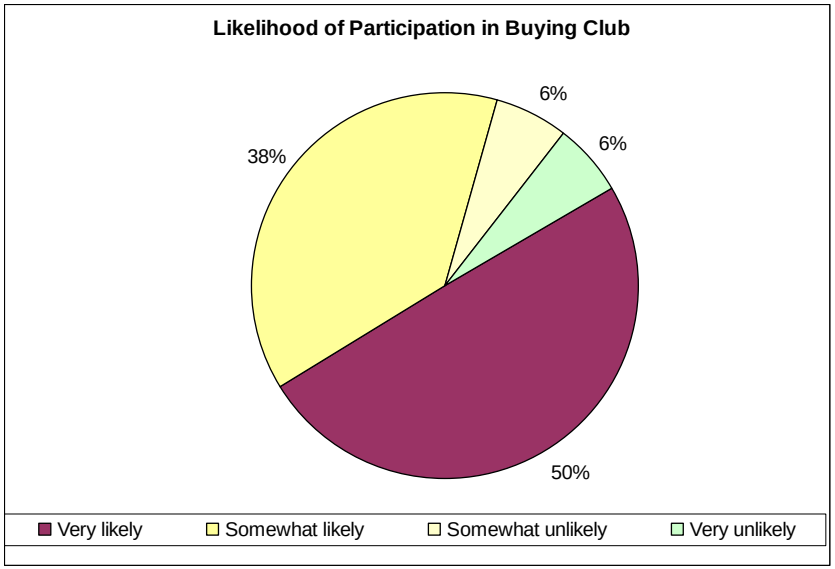

Figure 2

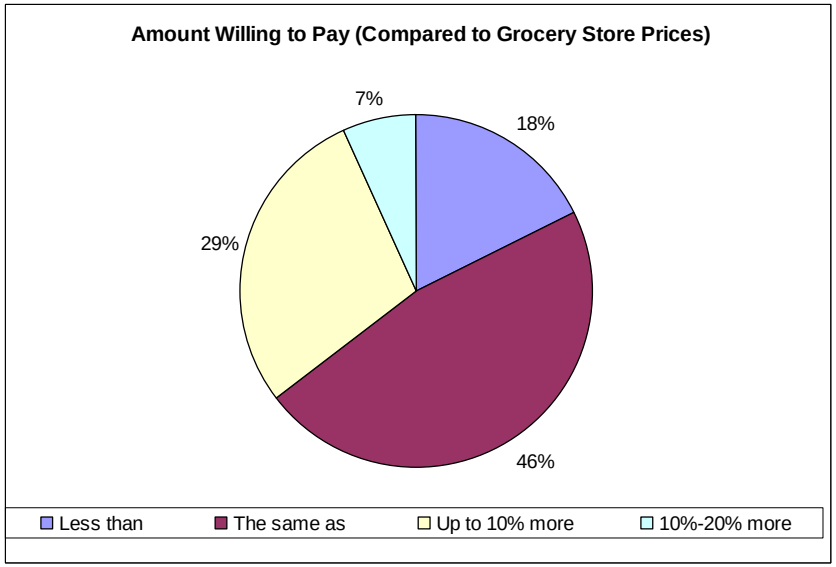

Figure 3

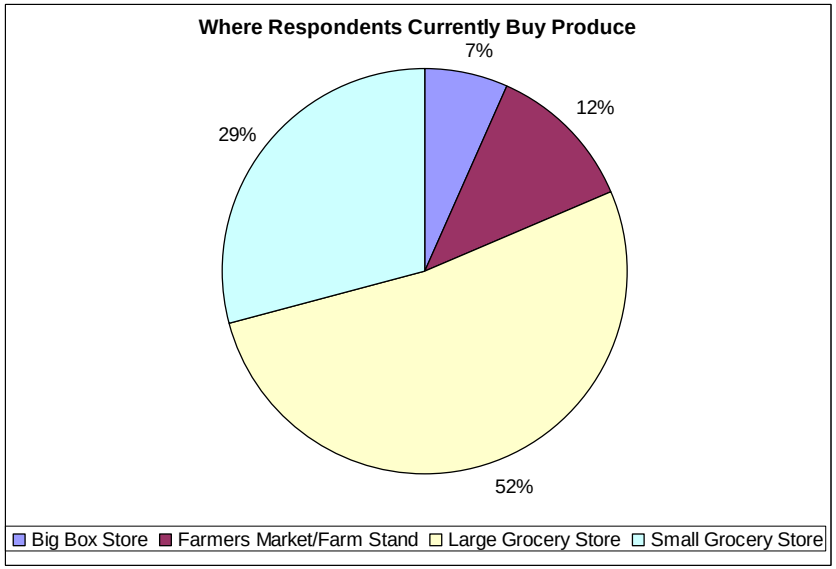

Figure 4

Local producers are eager to understand what consumers would want to purchase at what times of the year. The following tables show each product and how likely respondents would be to purchase that item. We included flowers and plants to determine the feasibility of creating a new avenue to market for our local greenhouse growers.

Table 1

	Strawberries			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	88.27%	11.11%	0.00%	0.62%
Somewhat likely	50.59%	44.31%	2.75%	2.35%
Somewhat unlikely	26.32%	52.63%	15.79%	5.26%
TOTAL	68.88%	27.39%	2.11%	1.62%

	Spinach/salad greens			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	81.71%	15.55%	1.83%	0.91%
Somewhat likely	49.02%	39.22%	8.24%	3.53%
Somewhat unlikely	13.16%	50.00%	23.68%	13.16%
TOTAL	64.09%	27.38%	5.80%	2.74%

	Asparagus			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	69.47%	15.89%	9.03%	5.61%
Somewhat likely	43.78%	30.12%	17.67%	8.43%
Somewhat unlikely	10.53%	36.84%	28.95%	23.68%
TOTAL	55.26%	23.03%	13.82%	7.89%

	Peas			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	53.09%	24.43%	13.03%	9.45%
Somewhat likely	16.17%	37.02%	36.17%	10.64%
Somewhat unlikely	7.89%	39.47%	31.58%	21.05%
TOTAL	35.17%	30.52%	23.62%	10.69%

	Beans			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	64.04%	23.66%	7.89%	4.42%
Somewhat likely	29.48%	46.61%	19.12%	4.78%
Somewhat unlikely	5.26%	44.74%	28.95%	21.05%
TOTAL	46.04%	34.49%	13.86%	5.61%

	Cucumbers			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	71.08%	19.38%	7.08%	2.46%
Somewhat likely	28.92%	47.79%	17.27%	6.02%
Somewhat unlikely	21.62%	37.84%	21.62%	18.92%
TOTAL	50.90%	32.08%	12.11%	4.91%

	Hanging Baskets			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	34.34%	29.63%	16.50%	19.53%
Somewhat likely	12.45%	32.78%	34.02%	20.75%
Somewhat unlikely	8.11%	27.03%	24.32%	40.54%
TOTAL	23.48%	30.78%	24.35%	21.39%

	Sweet Corn			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	79.33%	13.98%	3.04%	3.65%
Somewhat likely	49.80%	37.25%	7.06%	5.88%
Somewhat unlikely	31.58%	52.63%	13.16%	2.63%
TOTAL	64.31%	25.88%	5.31%	4.50%

	Tomatoes			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	78.83%	10.74%	4.91%	5.52%
Somewhat likely	49.21%	28.97%	12.30%	9.52%
Somewhat unlikely	23.68%	50.00%	15.79%	10.53%
TOTAL	63.31%	20.62%	8.60%	7.47%

	Peppers			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	71.03%	20.25%	5.92%	2.80%
Somewhat likely	27.76%	48.98%	16.73%	6.53%
Somewhat unlikely	16.22%	51.35%	18.92%	13.51%
TOTAL	50.08%	33.83%	11.11%	4.98%

	Blueberries			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	77.74%	16.30%	3.76%	2.19%
Somewhat likely	53.17%	40.08%	5.56%	1.19%
Somewhat unlikely	27.03%	32.43%	32.43%	8.11%
TOTAL	64.47%	27.14%	6.25%	2.14%

	Peaches			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	80.37%	14.02%	3.74%	1.87%
Somewhat likely	39.59%	39.18%	15.92%	5.31%
Somewhat unlikely	18.42%	44.74%	23.68%	13.16%
TOTAL	59.93%	26.16%	9.93%	3.97%

	Apples			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	81.93%	14.95%	2.49%	0.62%
Somewhat likely	46.67%	44.31%	9.02%	0.00%
Somewhat unlikely	31.58%	36.84%	26.32%	5.26%
TOTAL	64.17%	28.50%	6.68%	0.65%

	Raspberries			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	73.27%	16.67%	6.29%	3.77%
Somewhat likely	46.67%	44.31%	9.02%	0.00%
Somewhat unlikely	21.62%	29.73%	29.73%	18.92%
TOTAL	59.02%	19.18%	8.85%	3.11%

	Pumpkins			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	35.00%	30.00%	20.00%	15.00%
Somewhat likely	15.87%	38.49%	26.19%	19.44%
Somewhat unlikely	2.63%	36.84%	31.58%	28.95%
TOTAL	24.75%	34.07%	23.39%	17.80%

	Chrysanthemums			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	31.67%	28.33%	22.00%	18.00%
Somewhat likely	5.31%	27.35%	43.27%	24.08%
Somewhat unlikely	8.33%	16.67%	38.89%	36.11%
TOTAL	19.10%	27.19%	32.01%	21.69%

	Poinsettia			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	29.51%	29.51%	18.69%	22.30%
Somewhat likely	5.26%	34.82%	37.65%	22.27%
Somewhat unlikely	8.11%	24.32%	35.14%	32.43%
TOTAL	18.00%	31.41%	27.67%	22.92%

	Salad greens/herbs (late season)			
Respondents' overall likelihood of participation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
Very likely	75.61%	18.29%	5.18%	0.91%
Somewhat likely	44.22%	41.43%	10.76%	3.59%
Somewhat unlikely	10.53%	60.53%	15.79%	13.16%
TOTAL	58.83%	30.31%	8.10%	2.76%

We also asked if the drop off points being on one campus or the other would change their likelihood of participation. Not surprisingly, participation is more likely the closer the drop off point is to the respondents' building. Table 2 shows the number of respondents from each campus, and the overall impact on interest based on location of drop-off points. It should be noted that 1) not all respondents listed their building, and 2) the larger response from Main Campus does not necessarily indicate greater demand on that campus than on the Health Science Campus, but more likely that we were more successful at disseminating the survey among Main Campus faculty and staff.

Table 2

	More interested	Less interested	No effect on interest	Number of respondents from this campus
Main Campus	63.52%	25.19%	11.30%	288
Health Science Campus	39.77%	41.33%	18.91%	140
Your building	78.09%	1.87%	20.04%	N/A

Conclusion and Next Steps

The results of this survey show a positive response to a buying club for locally produced foods on UT's campus. While we concede that people who were interested in such a program would be more likely to respond to the survey, and thus to respond positively, the actual number of respondents indicate that there is a large enough number of likely participants, possibly even far more than could be served in a pilot year.

With such a positive response, and with such a large number of employees over two campuses, we are optimistic that a local entrepreneur will see the potential in this consumer base. The Urban Affairs Center stands ready to assist with the development of such a project wherever feasible, be it with connecting interested individuals or businesses to potential partners or additional information and resources. We are excited at the opportunities that are evident, and we believe that with the right individuals or partnerships, this could be a tremendously successful effort that benefits local producers, the UT community, other consumers, and businesses alike.