The Student’s Food Hub: Bridging the Gap Between Students and Local Food

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Background

While Ann Arbor is a vibrant ‘foodie’ town where eating local food is popular among residents, there is a largely unrecognized undercurrent of food insecurity amongst students, who comprise 35% of the population (US Census, UofM Registrar). Local farmers have expressed interest in reaching the student population, but have faced barriers in increasing students’ access to locally grown food. There are a number of efforts taking place within the University food service system to increase purchasing of sustainable and local food, but these efforts often do not reach the 75% of students who live off-campus and are not using the dining halls (UofM Housing). In a recent campus-wide survey conducted by the Student Food Co, 41% of students reported food insecurity, meaning that they struggle to afford sufficient food, and this was largely associated with facing an increased number of barriers to obtaining fresh produce (Kasper et al). Satisfaction with the food environment was lowest for students in neighborhoods near central campus, who also have the most limited access to outlets that sell fresh produce.

Meanwhile, student groups that work to address these issues face a common barrier: limited physical space for storage and activities. In addition, these student groups function primarily independently of each other. Although collaboration is facilitated through the University of Michigan Sustainable Food Program, it is difficult to coordinate meetings between the busy leaders of student groups. As a result, these barriers prevent the groups from maximizing their organizational capacity, thereby limiting their ability to supply students with food from local farms, including the Campus Farm. For example, the Student Food Co, a student-run nonprofit whose mission is to increase student-access to fresh produce through a biweekly produce stand, has been unable to source directly from local farmers due to a lack of food storage space, and the Campus Farm has not been able to regularly sell its produce for the same reason. Furthermore, groups like the Student Advocates for Nutrition have lacked space to host cooking classes for students.

Project Scope

Project scope and associated outcomes/impacts

The Student’s Food Hub (SFH) is a student-led pilot project that is rooted in the mission of connecting University of Michigan students with various components and stakeholders in their local food system. The SFP communicates and collaborates with student groups in moving towards the development of a central shared space for a food center that will reach as many students as possible. In doing so, the SFH aims to fill gaps in access to fresh food and provide a collaborative space for the University of Michigan community.

While students on campus lack food hub facilities, the Washtenaw Food Hub (WFH) has taken root on the north side of Ann Arbor and serves as a model for students interested in increasing access to
fresh, affordable local food. As detailed in our original proposal, the SFH will partner with the WFH, leveraging it as an external site for student workshops, food storage and the cultivation of relationships with the faces of the local food system beyond the ivory tower.

The objectives of the SFH are to aid in the facilitation of distributing local food, establish a physical location for student use as they work on food issues, and to support educational opportunities and the growth of the sustainable food system and movement at the University of Michigan and the surrounding community.

This project is building a network between the local food production system and students, in particular those living off-campus. Theses links are being created by connecting two successful coalitions that are already each working in one of these areas: the UM Sustainable Food Program (UMSFP), which cuts across disciplines networking all of the student food groups working on campus, and the WFH, which offers a shared space for storage, preparation, distribution, and education for local farmers. The WFH is already an entity that is up and running, and is highly valuable, but not yet easily accessible to the UM student community. We are currently working to utilize the available physical space at the WFH to address some of the space and storage needs of student food groups and are building a network with local farmers to purchase and distribute their produce to students through the WFH.

Obtaining the additional funding will allow us to greatly expand these activities and reach a greater number of students through 1) expanded funding for storage and event space at the WFH; 2) the purchase of a food cart and truck to distribute food and to serve as a Mobile Food Hub, 3) salary support for a Food Hub director to oversee and manage the projects and additional funding for work-study Student’s Food Hub coordinators, and 4) educational opportunities in food hub management for key members of the project team.

Progress and Achievements

**Hired Student’s Food Hub Coordinator:** Immediately upon receiving notification of the initial Dow grant funding, we created a work-study position for a Student’s Food Hub Coordinator. We solicited applications through the widely-read UMSFP newsletter and our personal contacts. In the first week of September we interviewed applicants and hired Laura Miller, a Master’s student in dietetics with significant experience in supply chain management and who also serves on the UMSFP leadership board.

**Distribution System Progress:** Our first point of action is to connect students with producers in our local food system, resulting in increased access to local food. To execute this we have established relationships with local farms including Tantre Farm and the Campus Farm as we begin to source produce to sell on campus, and are currently reaching out to several others. We are investigating the option of buying excess produce in bulk from the farms and repackaging it to offer in weekly produce variety packs for organizations on campus that procure bulk produce for students. For example, we are currently are working with the Student Food Co and have begun conversations with Michigan Dining, the ICC housing cooperatives, and off-campus Greek life. In order to assess the need of both the producers and the distributors, we are teaming up with a Sustainable Food Systems class to perform a market analysis.

**Education:** Our current funds allow for the use of the Washtenaw Food Hub’s commercial kitchen. To aid in increasing cooking skills and educational opportunities we have created two workshop events that will be held this November at the Washtenaw Food hub. The first event is a basic knife
skills and pizza making class that will be taught in collaboration with Student Advocates for Nutrition, and we will be using produce from the School of Public Health’s garden and the Campus Farm. Our second event will be a fermentation workshop using produce from the Campus Farm and will be hosted with a local company, The Brinery, as well as the student group Cultivating Community.

**Business Plan Development:** Together the full team is working on an initial business plan including methods for purchasing and distribution produce as well as cultivating partnerships with student groups and faculty. Prior to creating our business plan, our leadership team reviewed best practices of food hubs throughout the United States and best practices of University sustainable food programs.

**Stakeholder and Membership Meeting:** The SFH held its first formal group meeting during the second week of September to increase membership and present our mission and plan. This meeting included members of various student groups including Cultivating Community, Student Food Co, UMSFP, the Sustainable Food Systems Initiative, Food Recovery Network and the Planet Blue Student Innovation Fund. We intend to work with these groups to ensure we are not duplicating efforts already being done and to make sure our ideas and plans best support the current progress of sustainable food programs on campus. We have also been in collaboration with Michigan Dining to confirm that the plan for SFH is in line with their movement toward sustainable food on campus.

**Identifying a Mobile Physical Space:** Our other achievements and progress have been centered on our next steps and how to use and find available spaces. We have located a Mobile Food Cart (the Beet Box) run by former University of Michigan students for sale, and have been in extensive conversation with the owners about the purchase of the cart and the logistics of running it (both business and mechanical). This includes discussions of costs of purchasing the cart, insurance, sidewalk permits, incorporation as an LLC, and cart repairs. We have also spent time researching places on campus to complement our partnership with the WFH, that we could use as a temporary space to host meetings and utilize as our centralized space for student group use.

**Remaining Project Plans**

**Creation of Local Food Distribution System:** The SFH has an exciting and busy year planned. One of our first future priorities is to continue conducting market research in order to better gauge ways to support both farmers and students. Our research is intended to better understand what amounts of produce and methods of purchase (i.e. CSA or bulk purchasing) would benefit the farmers the most and what the needs are for students. We are currently in talks with students in the interdisciplinary Sustainable Food Systems course to conduct this research as part of a class assignment.

Additionally, part of our plan is to begin the process of selling produce in collaboration with the Student Food Co. We will start by selling them the produce we source through our partnerships with the WFH and local farmers, and look forward to the potential of selling with Student Food Co out of the Mobile Food Hub.

Another priority project plan is to continue to build relationship with local farms to source food from and build relationships with other off-campus student groups such as the Inter-Cooperative Council (ICC), fraternities and sororities. We would like to take the time this fall and winter to continue to work through a procurement and sales plan, and then to potentially expand both avenues this spring. The WFH will serve as our primary site for sourcing, storage and distribution. A significant portion of our pilot funding will be used to for these purposes, as well as to provide
transportation to the WFH for students and as they utilize its services and network, as well as organize or attend workshops and classes at the WFH.

**Flash Food Hub:** We are also planning a pop-up produce market in the week prior to Thanksgiving or in early December. This will be our first attempt at a “flash food hub.” These will be demonstration days where we would use an outdoor space near central campus as a site for pop up food activities, such as a temporary grocery store where students can access fresh healthy and affordable food. These demonstration days would serve a variety of purposes: raise awareness of the Student’s Food Hub concept, increase access to healthy affordable foods, allow research opportunities to measure the impact that increased access to and student engagement in local food systems has on eating behavior, and allow for opportunities to spread knowledge and awareness of healthy eating and sustainable food systems.

**Education:** The SFH wants to support the momentum at the University of Michigan around sustainable food, which is growing on student, staff and faculty levels. We see opportunity in becoming the first university to have its own food hub, and offering hands on experience in food and systems management. We intend to offer educational training on how food hubs operate, and best practices for sourcing and distributing food for our target community. As we expand, we will continue to build partnerships with faculty and food classes, providing additional opportunities for interdisciplinary education and research in sustainable food systems.

**Physical Location:** The University of Michigan lacks a centralized space with refrigerated storage, a working commercial kitchen, and meeting space for student groups. One of our barriers to having such a space is funding. With rent averaging $1500-2000 per month for such a space, we would require between $18000 - $24000 per year in rent alone. However, this would not be the most efficient use of SFH capital at this point. As a stop-gap, we have a few plans in place to facilitate the goals of the SFH. Our long term goal is to establish and have our own commercial kitchen on or near central campus to conduct workshops in and begin to generate income, allowing the SFH to move away from reliance on grant funding. The funding to support a SFH director and student coordinators will allow an expansion of human resources and focused efforts to make this goal a reality. We strongly believe that a centralized physical space for student food groups is critical for overcoming the barriers these groups face in maximizing their impact.

Our current funds have allowed us to rent storage at the Washtenaw Food Hub and we are requesting additional funding to expand our WFH rental budget, as detailed here in paragraph text and below in an itemized table. We are also requesting funding to purchase a refrigerator to share with the Student Food Co that would live on or near central campus to as a landing place for foods distributed through the WFH, facilitating the next steps of distribution to students through the Student Food Co stand or to off-campus housing, like the ICC housing cooperatives. This refrigerator would also be used to store recovered food from the Food Recovery Network as it makes its way to the local food bank. We are also applying for additional funding for the purchase of a food cart that we would utilize as a Mobile Food Hub.

If we were able to purchase the food cart we would be able to increase our capacity to bring food from the Washtenaw Food Hub to the University, we would have a pop-up location to sell produce from and have cooking demonstrations. It would also allow our organization to obtain a food licence as a Mobile unit, which would open the door for UMSFP member groups to expand their current scope. For example, the Student Food Co is limited to selling fresh uncut, produce, but could expand to prepared food sale and the Campus Farm would be able to process their excess produce to increase sales and viability. The Mobile Food Hub would be a visible entity that would
increase awareness of our mission and allow us to reach a greater number of students. It would be a valuable resource for all UMSFP member student food groups.

**Future Plans:** With additional funding, a dedicated space will serve many purposes including: hosting educational activities such as cooking demonstrations, workshops, and laboratories. The SFH would also serve as a space to host guest lectures, student-led projects, and community events. Because our food systems do not stop at the boundary of campus, we see the Food Hub becoming an integral bridge between the Ann Arbor residents and UM community. In addition to serving as a resource for UM students, the SFH will play an integral role in partnership of UMSFP and the WFH to meet the food system needs of the local community. This could mean assisting the Food Recovery Network student group in getting unused food from the dining halls to Food Gatherers, or it could mean connecting with community nonprofit farm-to-school programs, such as The Agrarian Adventure. The SFH aims to foster many student-community relationships that will result in adding an economic driver to the Washtenaw community.

**Budget**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fridge</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>This fridge would be used by the SFH, the Student Food Co, Food Recovery Network, Campus Farm and other student groups to house produce on campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director Salary</td>
<td>$20,500</td>
<td>We would like to hire Emily Canosa as our Director and this is her two year salary for working 10 hours per week for a two year term. We have already spoken with Emily to ensure this is a role she would be willing to take on and that she is able to contribute this amount of time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Study Student to coordinate SFH efforts for 10 hours per week</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
<td>At $10 an hour and at a work-study expense of 40% of total pay, this would allow us an additional 375 hours to continue to expand and execute the project at a cost of $1500 dollars.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile Food Hub</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>This is the former Beet Box food cart. Included in the sale is the cart itself as well as additional cooking equipment, recipes, and brand features. Members of the beet box culinary and business team would also include a full consult and some hands-on training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generator for Mobile Food Hub</td>
<td>$700</td>
<td>The current generator in the food cart will need to be replaced in the first year so we would like to budget to purchase one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional cost for Mobile Food Hub</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>We would also need to purchase a health permit, insurance, storage space at the Washtenaw Food Hub, and incorporate as an LLC or nonprofit</td>
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### Pick-up truck and insurance

$4,000 Primarily to transport the Mobile Food hub to and from the Washtenaw Food Hub and food distribution from the WFH. Cost will cover a used pick up truck, insurance and a trailer hitch.

### Food Hub Management course

$4600 We would like to enroll a member of SFH leadership in the University of Vermont Food Management course which is conducted online from January - April 2015. This cost also covers airfare, hotel, and food for one member to spend four days in Vermont as part of the course.

### Overhead for Produce

$3,700 We would like to have some overhead for buying produce up front.

### Total

$50,000

### Timeline

**September 2014:** Interviewed and hired SFH Coordinator

**September-November 2014:** SFH Coordinator and Team will continue to work with WFH to develop ordering system buy and distribute food from local farms. Sales and consumer outlets will be piloted through the Student Food Co stand and a few ICC housing coops. Members of the Food Systems course will also perform a market analysis to help inform the decisions of the SFH.

**December 2014 - April 2015:** After the harvest season, the SFH Coordinator and team will focus efforts on spring 'Flash Food Hubs', and on expanding the network of off-campus student housing that can source from the WFH. We will also use this time to purchase the Mobile Food Hub and complete any necessary repairs and paperwork. The Mobile Food Hub will be available as a resource to student groups for sales and education. We will work with the Student Food Co. to allow them to begin selling out of the Mobile Food Hub and with other groups, like SAN to conduct cooking demonstrations

**May 2015-August 2015:** During next summer, we will put in place the ordering and distribution system. We will work with local farms to purchase produce in bulk and begin sourcing to ICC houses. Setting this up over the summer when there are less students on campus will allow us to work out the kinks and be prepared for the full roll out in September. We will also investigate creation of a weekly produce box, modeled off of a CSA, that is tailored to student schedules. The WFH kitchen will be used to preserve excess food from the Campus Farm or purchased food from local farms.

**September 2015-November 2015:** We will ramp up sourcing and distribution, now serving the Student Food Co, the increased number of students living in the ICC housing, and expanding to Greek housing. Based on our feasibility research, we may also begin selling weekly produce boxes to students through the Student Food Co. stand.

**December 2015-August 2016:** Continued expansion of our capabilities with the Mobile Food Cart into prepared sales, and processed or preserved produce. The team, led by Emily Canosa, will
continue to push forward towards the goal of obtaining a permanent physical space on or near campus for UMSFP member groups and expand community and University partnerships.

**Ongoing:** We will provide opportunities for classes and student groups to visit the WFH by providing funding for their transportation and rental costs.

**Skill gaps in the existing team**

Our current team consists of several strong team members: Nikki Kasper, Laura Miller, Emily Canosa, Ethan Schoolman, and our advisor, Karen Peterson. As a team, we have experience and expertise in research, grant writing, supply chain management, food and product distribution, farm management and strong ties to both the University of Michigan community and business in Washtenaw County.

The biggest skill gap in our team is Food Hub Management. We plan to rectify this by enrolling in the University of Vermont’s four-month online course in Food Hub Management. We have also done background research in best practices of Food Hubs that support Universities and have identified the Intervale Food Hub located in Burlington, Vermont as an ideal model. We are committed to the support and collaboration with the Washtenaw Food Hub, but would like to expand our personal knowledge on food hub management and general business skills. It is our intention to share any new information and skill with the founding members of the Washtenaw Food Hub to see if and how we can modify some of our practices. We would also like to learn from the practices of the WFH and believe that having coursework foundation in Food Hub Management will allow us to have higher level conversations and learnings for our partners. We also believe sharing knowledge with the Intervale Food Hub will better prepare us for how to accommodate the scale of work that goes into serving an entire University while also recognizing how it can serve the surrounding community.

**Success measurement**

We have identified five key outcomes that we would like to focus on during our first two years as an organization and developed methods for assessing them.

**Top Five intended Outcomes**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Increased access to local food for students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Increased collaboration between food-related student organizations and other players in the local food system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased educational and skill building opportunities for cooking and nutrition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased knowledge of successful food hub strategies, challenges, and best practices</td>
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Increased financial viability and operational efficiency of the Student's Food Hub

**What will be done with 50% of proposed level**

Our first step if we received additional funding would be to hire Emily Canosa as our part time Food Hub Director. Emily has been an invaluable member to our team and brings with her working knowledge of farms and a plethora of connections to student groups, faculty and local organization. Hiring Emily for ten hours a week for one year will cost $10250. We think this is the best use of future funds because it provides our project with an additional 10 hours each week dedicated to the SFH and its development.

Our next step would be to enroll SFH leadership in the Food Hub Management course offered online through the University of Vermont. The Food Hub Management course is the first and only college course being taught on Food Hub management and we see this an opportunity for one of our leaders to expand their knowledge base. The curriculum for this course includes material on working in a dynamic system, systems thinking, effective leadership, understanding supply chain management fundamentals, the organization and structure of a value chain system, and the role of food hubs in the development of more sustainable and better-performing food value chains. This course also requires travel to UVM’s campus for four days and the total of the course and travel would be around $4700. If possible we would like to send one member to Vermont and allow the other two members to access the course information online.

The last thing we would do with 50% of our funding would be to purchase a Mobile Food Hub. We have identified a former U of M food cart that is for sale for $6000 plus and additional $2000 cooking equipment, recipes, and brand features. We would also need $3000 to pay for a new generator for the Mobile Food hub, insurance, storage rental fees, and incorporation as an LLC or nonprofit.

**References**

1. U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts.  
   [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2603000.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2603000.html)

   [http://ro.umich.edu/enrollment/enrollment.php](http://ro.umich.edu/enrollment/enrollment.php)

3. University of Michigan Student Life Housing. About University Housing.  
   [http://www.housing.umich.edu/about](http://www.housing.umich.edu/about)