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University of Missouri Extension Metropolitan Foods System Team

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Abstract

University of Missouri Extension established a Metropolitan Food Systems Team in September 2011 with the goal of creating a framework for the identification, development and implementation of Extension food system programming in and near Missouri's urban areas. The membership and activities of the team have shifted over the years with various personnel changes and different topics of interest in the state, but overall, the goal of the team has remained the same. The work of this team can provide ideas for other states of the role that Extension can play in helping to strengthen urban and peri-urban food systems. We outline specific elements that have contributed to our team's successes and recommendations to other University Extension systems who may be interested in developing a similar initiative. Since its formation, the team has developed several Extension curricula, including Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy (which has been implemented nationally) and Selling Local Foods; and had the opportunity to visit two other state Extension programs to learn about their urban food systems work. The team held a conference for producers, buyers and food system stakeholders in all of Missouri's metropolitan areas. The team has also established a food systems website (<https://extension2.missouri.edu/programs/food-systems>) which serves as valuable clearinghouse of information of the various resources that MU Extension has available in each of the different sectors of the food system. Rather than categorizing information by only the academic discipline that developed those resources, the website groups the information by sectors including 1) grow/produce/harvest, 2) deliver/process, 3) market/distribute, 4) display/purchase, 5) prepare/consume, 6) surplus/waste. This is a useful resource for internal Extension personnel, but also for external groups looking for resources. In 2019, the team engaged in a strategic planning process to determine our best approach for future work in light of new Extension and state initiatives around regional food systems. One of the main benefits of this team is that it brings together Extension personnel working in various disciplines from different parts of the state, which has enabled the team members to learn about ongoing and future initiatives occurring in other disciplines and areas of the state that are of interest to others. This multi-disciplinary approach has fostered extensive collaboration between different disciplines in projects that team members may have otherwise worked on independently or only within a single discipline. This presentation will help provide recommendations on implementing similar teams, based on our experiences.

Keywords

outreach, multi-disciplinary, urban, university, education, partnerships

Presenter Information

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University of Missouri Extension Metropolitan Foods System Team

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Missouri (MU) Extension Metropolitan Food Systems Team was established in September 2011 by a group of Extension personnel working in various disciplines related to food systems in the areas in and near Missouri's urban centers. The team was established with the full support of MU Extension's administrative team.

Prior to the forming of this team, MU Extension's work in the area of food systems was primarily conducted within each of the various disciplines working in food systems. For example, persons working in horticulture worked together, but worked independently of those working together in the area of nutrition. In addition, personnel specifically working in urban counties may work together more because they attended the same county meetings and may be housed in the

same offices. However, personnel working in peri-urban counties often did not work as closely with personnel working in urban counties as they were not grouped together administratively and thus did not attend the same meetings and were not housed in the same office.

Accordingly, this team was formed due to the recognition that personnel working in different disciplines would benefit greatly from working together across disciplines and that personnel working in peri-urban areas could contribute greatly to work being conducted in urban areas. The group recognized that urban food systems issues are greatly influenced by the broader metropolitan area that surrounds the urban area and that both the urban and peri-urban areas would benefit from working together. The original goal of the team was to create a framework for identification, development and implementation of Extension food system programming in and near Missouri's urban areas.

DISCUSSION

The membership of the team has continued to evolve over the years due to personnel changes on the team and the interests and needs of the state. Historically and currently, the team includes personnel working in metropolitan areas across the state in the areas of horticulture/agronomy, community development, nutrition/food safety and agriculture business. In general, the team has always included at least one person with statewide responsibilities, with most of the team members having regional responsibilities. The team is currently increasing its membership with people working in more rural areas of the state and is seeking to further diversify the disciplinary and cultural backgrounds of its membership.

In 2019, the team underwent a strategic planning process, which encouraged the team to expand its focus to include food systems efforts across the entire state. This strategic planning process and modification of the team focus was partially due to recent MU Extension and MO state initiatives on regional food systems. This process also led to the development of the following vision for the team: seek to improve health, education, and wealth by cultivating a prosperous, dynamic food system for all. The team also established its mission as follows: We strengthen regional and community food systems in Missouri by serving as a support team through collaborative research, education, tools and program development.

The team worked together to develop goals for itself and team leaders closely monitor our progress towards these goals, including the following:

1. Increase MU Extension's capacity to support Community Food System Development
2. Increase awareness/collaboration with individuals/groups engaging in food systems work
3. Increase understanding of "Food System" for MU Extension Colleagues
4. Create curriculum, publications, or other resources in each area of food systems
5. Create a productive and engaged team, with funding to support team operations and projects

These goals have led the team to complete several activities. The team has developed Extension curricula that has been and is currently utilized throughout Missouri (Selling Local Foods) and nation-wide (Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy). The Selling Local Foods curriculum includes information on how food producers can sell foods through venues such as farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture, farm stands, grocery stores, schools/institutions, and produce auctions. It also includes information on the regulations for selling local foods and best practices for post-harvest handling of produce for safety and quality. The Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy curriculum includes numerous resources for personnel to work with local, small-scale grocery stores and corner stores to improve the nutrition of the food sold through that store. The materials

also include resources to encourage shoppers at that store to purchase and consume more of the nutritious foods.

The team has also toured urban food systems efforts in other states to learn more from those states and potentially implement some of the urban food systems practices in Missouri. The team has visited Ohio and Michigan and had plans to visit North Carolina in 2020, but those plans were altered by the global pandemic.

In February 2019, members of the team organized a conference entitled “Growing Local Food Economies: Good Food - Good Business” for producers, buyers, and food systems stakeholders in the metro areas of the state. The conference was offered in-person in the four main metropolitan areas of the state (Springfield, St. Louis, Columbia, and Kansas City) at the same time, with a live stream of food systems-related speakers at the beginning of the day and local panel discussions at the conclusion of the conference. The conference provided information on civic agriculture and community capitol and Dr. Becca Jablonski provided a keynote presentation on the conference topic. An online conference on the Regulations for Selling Local Foods is planned for producers in the spring of 2021.

Another important activity of the team has been to develop a team website: <https://extension2.missouri.edu/programs/food-systems>, which provides a one-stop location to gain information on the various food systems-related publications and activities of MU Extension. Rather than categorizing information by only the academic discipline that developed those resources, the website groups the information by sectors including 1) grow/produce/harvest, 2) deliver/process, 3) market/distribute, 4) display/purchase, 5) prepare/consume, 6) surplus/waste. This is a useful resource for both internal Extension personnel, but also for external groups looking for resources.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the team recognized the need to improve communication between all the various groups within MU working in areas related to food systems. Many groups within MU were working on great projects that various food system stakeholders could benefit from, but it was hard to keep track of what everyone was doing, due to the overload of information at the time and the additional stress on everyone. Therefore, the team established MU Food Systems network communication calls in April 2020. We contacted people working with various food systems-related groups or individuals working in a food systems-related area to invite them to join the calls. The call occurs approximately once a month, although we met with greater frequency initially. The call has become an excellent time to share information on projects that everyone is working on, so that groups can learn from each other about available resources and grow opportunities for collaboration, limit duplication of programs, and leverage resources to respond to Missouri food system needs. We often also have a speaker who provides information on a specific topic, such as grant funding opportunities or sending out digital newsletters. The team also established an email listserv that is open to all MU personnel interested in learning more about food systems-related information. The email listserv provides an easy way for members to share information on food systems-related activities and resources available at any time, between our group calls.

This team has produced many important benefits to MU Extension, as well as to all food system stakeholders in Missouri and beyond. The team has enabled people from various disciplines and various parts of the state to work together and communicate more easily, to help MU personnel to gain knowledge of existing resources and future initiatives in food systems-related areas. Therefore, team members can share this information with food systems stakeholders in the state who can benefit from that information. The team has enabled multi-disciplinary collaboration,

which has led to the development of strong multi-disciplinary food systems-related resources for all of Missouri and beyond (particularly the Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy curriculum) to utilize.

This team has been successful due to a few key reasons. First, the team has benefitted from the support of the MU Extension administration. The team currently includes a regional director, as well as a program director as part of the team advisory structure. Those members are not able to make it to every meeting, but since they receive our team emails, they are aware of the team's activities. Therefore, when we do need to reach out to them for support of various initiatives, or to ask questions, they are more informed of what is happening with the team. Also, the team has worked hard to develop tangible "products", such as publications, curricula, conferences, etc., so that the administration can more easily understand the benefits of the team, and therefore will be more supportive of the team.

The team has also been successful due to strong leadership on the team. The leadership of the team has changed over time as personnel move in and out of positions with MU Extension. In general, the team has had two co-leaders, one of which is generally a Community Development Specialist. The community development specialists have been very beneficial to have in a leadership role since they have a strong understanding of group facilitation and goal establishment. The current team leadership led the team through a strategic planning process in 2019, where they called upon another MU Extension Community Development specialist who was external to the team to facilitate the strategic planning process. This strategic planning process helped the team to establish goals, and the current team leadership is keeping the team on track to continuously make progress on those goals.

CONCLUSION

Based on the experiences of this Extension food system team, we offer recommendations for similar teams working in the area of metropolitan, and broader, food systems issues. First, as previously noted, it is essential to ensure administration support of the team. We have been able to garner financial resources for the team, as well as general "moral" support of the team by keeping the administration informed of the team's efforts and involving administrators in the team as much as possible. Without administrative support, this team would not be nearly as successful.

Teams should also be flexible and adaptive to the needs of the current situation. Our team has been able to adapt to the current COVID situation in developing a stronger food systems-related communication network, which has benefited the team, but more importantly has benefitted food system stakeholders in Missouri.

It is also important for teams to be as inclusive as possible, which is something that our team is currently deliberating. It is important to engage everyone that wants to be part of the team, but to engage them in a way that makes the most sense for them and for the entire team. This inclusive nature includes personnel from different cultural backgrounds, as well as people from different disciplines and different areas of the state. Our team has found that it is also important to allow team leaders and team members to rotate on and off the team in an orderly manner, so that members of the team can feel free to rotate off to allow others to rotate onto the team. This provides more opportunity for the team to be inclusive, as more people have an opportunity to be a part of the team.

Finally, as previously indicated, this team was initially established as a metropolitan food systems team. Over time, the team recognized that issues facing food systems in metropolitan areas had many similarities with food systems issues in rural areas. Some food systems issues are unique to urban and metropolitan areas, but to better address the needs of the state of Missouri, we recognized that it would be beneficial for the team to address food systems issues for the entire

state, since food systems are very inter-connected across different parts of the state. When food systems are stronger in the rural areas of the state, food systems in metropolitan parts of the state will also benefit.

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