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Two years in review: National food systems certification next steps

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Abstract

Food systems practitioners are involved in a variety of activities related to local and regional food systems across the country ranging from increasing food access to developing new markets for producers. This article shares insights from two foundational courses developed by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach to support individual skill development as well as community process for strategic planning in food systems. In 2016, Local Food Leader certification was developed in Iowa to address needs for skills in equity, leadership, evaluation and facilitation. Following these workshops, and due to successful implementation of the Community Food Systems process (formerly Agricultural Urbanism Toolkit), the Food Systems team received funding through the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center to develop two certification programs: Local Food Leader (LFL) and Community Food Systems (CFS) to launch nationally. They were piloted with 14 state partners between 2018-2019 as blended delivery platforms of in-person workshops followed by online modules. Local Food Leader had a total of 429 participants and Community Food Systems had a total of 297 participants. Local Food Leader certification continued to build on its initial emphases of individual skills and Community Food Systems emphasized a process-based framework for food systems development transferable to any community to enhance their place-based food system. Multi-disciplinary audiences participated in each certification, including Land-Grant Extension agents, businesses and non-profit with the goal to provide training related to place-based development for food systems. Additionally, train-the-trainers for both certifications were developed for certified partners to offer the certifications in their own communities and create place-based capacity for development and outlets for revenue generation.

This paper will review each certification and how they support food systems practitioners. It will highlight the curriculum development process, successes and challenges and evolution based on evaluation. Changes to the curriculum and new standards for teaching will be shared in hopes to provide considerations to colleagues considering new curriculum development. Last, it will detail the impact the certifications can have on community and opportunities for continuing certification work through COVID-19.

Keywords

community development, facilitation, leadership, framework, assessments, research

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INTRODUCTION

Food systems practitioners are involved in a variety of efforts from enhancing communities through access to food to developing business plans and facilitating strategic planning efforts. Due to the dynamic needs that practitioners face, there is a range of competencies needed for this work. There is also a need to “professionalize” this track for food systems workers by developing a set of standard trainings and professional development opportunities (Long and Chase, 2020).

The Local Food Leader and Community Food Systems certifications were developed as a professional development opportunity for food systems practitioners. To describe the intent of both programs, it is important to understand the history. In 2014, the Community Design Lab (CDL) at Iowa State University (ISU) received a grant through the Leopold Center of Sustainable Agriculture: Agricultural Urbanism Toolkit (AUT) to understand and create processes for design and development of food systems. Alongside development of AUT, now the Community Food

Systems program, the Iowa Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) had been convening regularly by the Local Food Team within the Leopold Center as a part of the Marketing and Food Systems Initiative program. RFSWG supported multiple regional and local food coordinators across the state in their efforts to support projects ranging from food hubs to farmers markets to food access.

As the Agricultural Urbanism Toolkit, transitioned to an Extension program in 2016: Community Food Systems, additional partners and coordination began between the two teams. The Community Food Systems (CFS) program confirmed its process as a multi-phased, multi-year program housed within the Farm, Food and Enterprise Development and Community and Economic Development programs of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. CFS then offered a transferable process with partner communities to develop and design their local and regional food systems; devoted to long-term community empowerment and lasting impacts. Through the Leopold Center grant it worked with eight communities in Iowa and has now helped implement more than 30 projects ranging from new business development to edible landscapes, awareness campaigns, urban orchards, and many more. The process incorporates two phases of strategic development; the first including coalition development, visioning, research and analysis (community food systems assessment), and project prioritization. The second phase includes project development and implementation for a variety of food systems tactics based on place-based efforts in Phase 1.

Through Extension partnership within communities and efforts between both programs, it was identified that professional development was needed for local food coordinator positions across the state. In 2016 the first Local Food Leader workshop was hosted in collaboration by ISU Extension and Outreach and the Community Design Lab to support local food coordinators, city planners, and other farm and food businesses in the role of working in food systems. Initially, communication, equity, development of plans of work, facilitation skills and evaluation were priorities of the training.

Following success of the Local Food Leader workshop and the Community Food Systems program, the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center funded a pilot for developing a full certification platform for Local Food Leader and the Community Food Systems Process. Funding allowed for the creation of a blended delivery platform for both certifications. Local Food Leader evolved its original content to include more intensive curriculum, including modules provided through Moodle, and the Community Food Systems certification launched as an in-person workshop and based on feedback of the workshops evolved to incorporate six levels of certification including mandatory workshops and alternative subject matter through Moodle.

Initial curricula for both certifications were based on feedback from local practitioners in Iowa as well as strategic planning efforts and best practices gleaned from the Community Food Systems process, including design thinking, strategic planning, collective impact, and general project management concepts. Local Food Leader focused on individual skills and homed in on reflection activities and building general understanding of tools and relationship development. Throughout the pilot, evaluations were reviewed, and facilitators reflected on successes and challenges. Course materials altered significantly from March 2018 through January 2019 and have continued to evolve due to COVID-19 and virtual-based platforms. The following sections will discuss findings and transitions of each certification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Local Food Leader and Community Food Systems certification programs use a blended delivery approach, combining workshops with online modules to meet course objectives. Blended

delivery has been proven to be effective for adult learning based on participants' access to different activities for learning (McKenzie et al., 2013). The flexibility of blended delivery creates an effective learning environment and allows instructors to reach broader audiences.

At the beginning of certification development, partner organizations, or hosts, were identified to offer each workshop and publicize locally. Initially, workshops were offered in-person and participation in online modules were optional based on desire to receive full certification. Hosts supported by providing space for the workshop and confirming the location for in-person workshops and confirming the agenda and providing place-based materials and presentations if desired. The first pilot was free to hosts except for providing location and meals for participants. The second round of pilots included a \$1,000 fee per host, with the option for hosts to charge a registration fee to participants if they needed to recover costs.

To fully assess knowledge and behavior change of participants, evaluations were created for workshops and online modules. Additionally, reflections and observations were shared between teachers after each workshop to adequately transition materials to become most useful. Initially, a pre-then-post evaluation was conducted, however, based on limitations in participants completing both evaluations, this transitioned to a post-then-pre evaluation for participants to record both knowledge levels at the same time (Rockwell and Kohn, 1989). All evaluations were anonymous and included sections on usefulness, knowledge change based on learning objectives, and open-ended responses.

Evaluations provided critical understanding of the success and challenges of the certifications offered and confirmed the need to build community capacity through skills and local leadership, thus leading to a Train-the-Trainer model. For both certifications, the pilot allowed for confirmation on needed schedule and agendas for workshops; designing accessible documents (printed slide decks, page numbers and section tabs); appropriate fees for program sustainability; levels of certification including Train-the-Trainer; online module content; and needed program materials, such as partnership agreements with hosts.

The following sections discuss specific lessons learned for LFL and CFS.

Local food leader results

As mentioned, LFL is an individual skill development program for beginning local food practitioners and local food supporters. It teaches several foundational competencies critical to successful involvement in community food systems development, including building trust, facilitation, knowledge of the food system, evaluation techniques, leadership, plan of work development and professional development plans (Learning Objectives listed below).

- Increase awareness, understanding, and confidence to work with various individuals, organizations, and institutions to develop their community food system.
- Understand new tools for conducting evaluation of programs, projects, and systems change in their communities.
- Develop new skills for facilitating conversations around topics of food systems and ability to support teamwork within their own communities, including coalition development.
- Identify their personal values and understand the connections they have to their work in food systems.
- Understand the importance of inclusion and building trust with diverse audiences and stakeholders.
- Increase ability to manage and facilitate conversations effectively between dynamic groups of people.
- Improve networks and relationships with both local and regional cohorts.

- Provide partners with tools and resources in developing various food systems sectors: production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and resource management (grants, best practices, research, etc.)
- Understand business development tools such as plans of work, logic models, project scope, and budgets.

Figure 1 highlights the usefulness of each section of the LFL workshop. Along with networking and partnership development, sections on equity, common language for food systems, evaluation and professional development were the most helpful and needed skills for foundational food systems work.

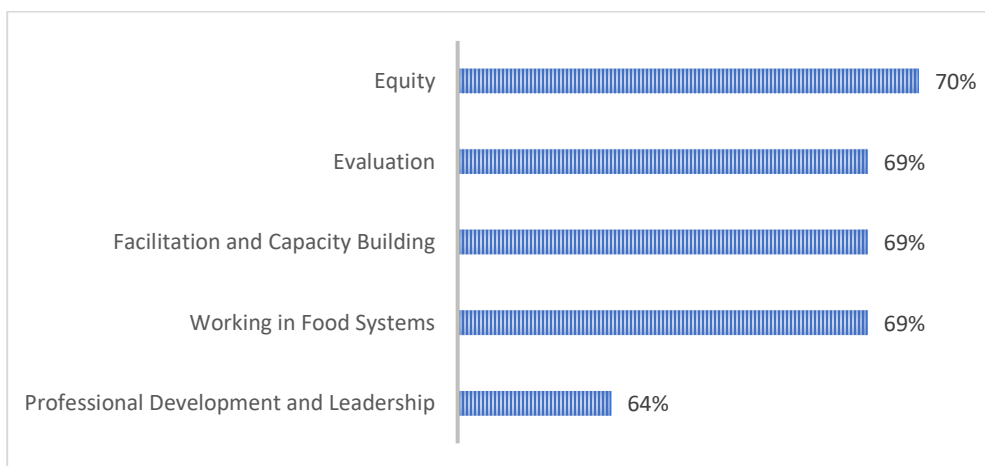


Figure 1. Usefulness, as reported by participants, of each section of Local Food Leader workshops.

Evaluation of Local Food Leader highlighted that networking was among one of the most critical components of food systems work and is an underlying factor for successful projects. This highlights the need for continued in-person or group facilitated activities. Many participants shared their appreciation of having multiple opportunities to connect with others both through workshop activities as well as built-in networking breaks.

A food system sector map is utilized in both introductions and within the facilitation section. This tool was shown to be a significant resource that many participants continue to use, “networking connections through the food systems activity” was a useful component while another respondent shared, “Having feedback from others in the group-learning [settings]” was helpful. “Meeting a diverse group of leaders that can help drive this conversation further after today” were all discussed regarding activities throughout the day.

One common question received was regarding audience for the LFL certification. Many times, the response is that its for everyone working in food. While this seems very general, overall feedback was shared that due to the dynamic representation of diversity in the room, participants were able to learn of other organizations, programs and projects occurring in their community and region through networking breaks. “It was useful to have so many different voices and communities heard in the room . . . [and] hear perspectives and programs”.

Evaluation was another primary takeaway, including tools, methods, and collaboration. Participants shared that utilizing the evaluation logic model in their work enhanced their ways of measuring project and program successes. “[I] will try to implement the evaluation logic model for

one of my projects,” while another declared, “I will do a better job at using the logic model to develop program evaluations.”

Professional development and creating plans of work is still an integral part of LFL. This aspect continues to be area of intention for participants following the workshop, “[I will] sit down with my supervisor to set a professional development plan;” “The professional development plan worksheet and understanding how I define work life.”

Community food systems results

Community Food Systems certification is intended for intermediate levels of food system practitioners. It is a process-based certification that increases capacity to support strategic planning around food system aspects. CFS certification involves visioning techniques, research and community food systems assessments, and strategic development of projects. The process incorporates two phases of strategic development; the first including coalition development, visioning, research and analysis (community food systems assessment), and project prioritization. The second phase includes project development and implementation for a variety of food systems tactics based on place-based efforts in Phase 1 (Learning Objectives listed below).

- Understand community food systems and how they relate to larger community and economic development goals.
- Engage and empower community partners to work collectively toward a community food system.
- Discern the different sectors of the food system and their impact on community.
- Utilize Collective Impact and Strategic Doing methods.
- Develop coalitions working toward collective community goals.
- Increase strategic partnerships with organizations for creative collaborations.
- Execute community processes including facilitation, project management, partnership, and building successful teams.
- Improved ability to develop community food systems assessments through mapping, interviews, and public input sessions.
- Identify primary and secondary data sources for community food systems assessment and priority projects.
- Utilize community food system assessments to determine priority projects.
- Understand evaluation methods for determining collective community projects.
- Acknowledge the importance of design in community food systems and where it fits within project development.
- Become aware of new tools and resources for various food systems sectors: production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and resource management.
- Able to apply concepts and skills learned to develop a place-based Community Food Systems Program in your own university or organization.
- Create evaluation methods to understand whether projects developed are successful.

Figure 2 highlights the usefulness of each section of the CFS workshop. Partnership development, community engagement, mapping and design analysis, and research methods and tools were the most valuable sections of the certification.

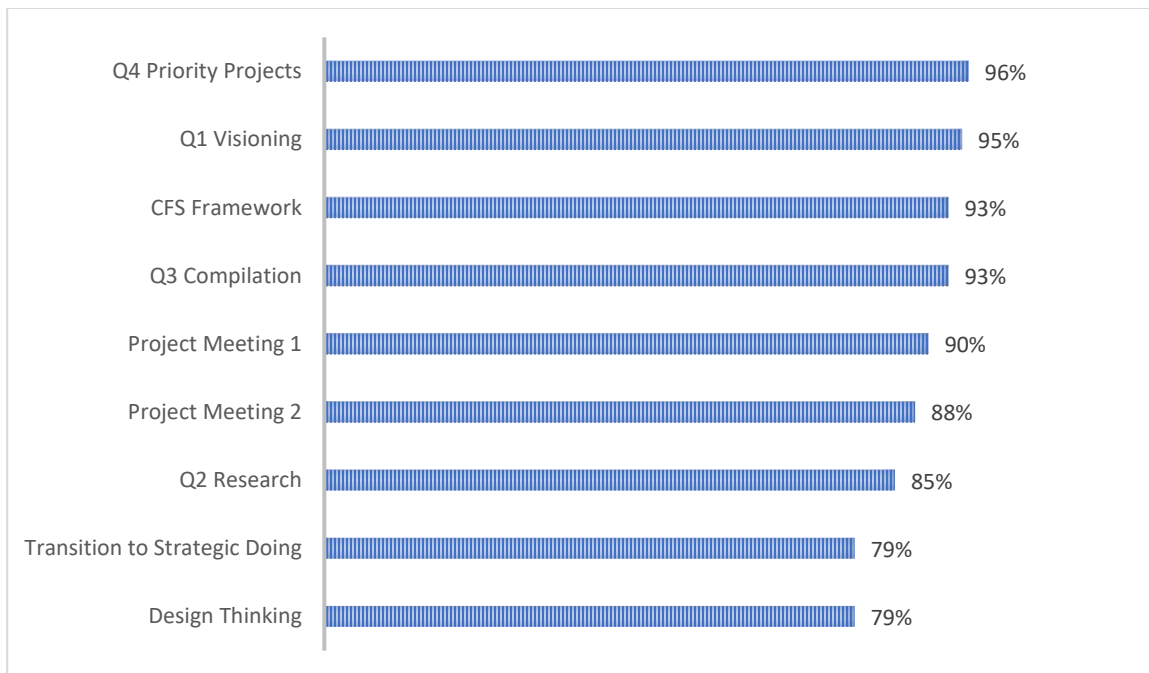


Figure 2. Usefulness, as reported by participants, of each section of the Community Food Systems workshops.

Initially, the workshop was designed based on content and framework components relating to strategic planning, design thinking, etc. However, this became convoluted for participants to understand the chronological process of CFS. Therefore, the workshop transitioned to teaching in chronological order by simulating the facilitation process.

Participants shared their plans to focus on enhancing their skills in relation to mapping and hope to generate maps for informing current and future food systems projects. One respondent shared their plan to use, “Better visuals for both decision making and communications,” while another similarly wrote, using “mapping and templates for evaluations.”

Participants also felt strongly that content related to food systems, evaluation, and community engagement will benefit their work. Many participants shared that the Community Food Systems framework was beneficial... “Understanding of a new framework for community food systems development and engagement;” and, “I know have a better understanding of the local food system and how I fit in the circle”. Some participants discussed their hope to increase and enhance their community involvement in their work, “More community engagement to move local foods forward in particular communities;” “Be more intentional about who is at the table;” and, “[Use] tools to guide and advance community engagement.” One participant described their plan to, “Incorporate Strategic Doing” in their work while others shared, “Implementing public input sessions;” and similarly, “I will work harder to get people I work with to get involved in local food.” Many participants used action verbs in their responses, implying a tangible change in work or behavior change (Miller and Long, 2020).

Additional components and next steps

1. Train-the-trainer.

Another significant addition from the pilot was creating train-the-trainers for both certifications to support place-based practitioners in capacity development. To date, there are 27 Local Food Leader trainers across the state, and the first Community Food Systems train-the-trainer will occur in February 2021. The train-the-trainer teaches the different activities utilized in each of the workshops as well as how to manage and work with Moodle. There are three different levels of trainers to allow for flexibility of individual needs. The train-the-trainers are offered as a cohort membership and support co-learning and creating content. Iowa State University Food Systems program still maintains course curricula, but trainers interested in collaborating on activity and presentation development can add additional materials as desired.

2. Core competency.

Following completion of LFL and CFS certification, the Food Systems team was awarded a cooperative agreement with USDA AMS to work with national partners between August 2019-December 2019, to develop a matrix of core competencies, a set of learning objectives for each competency, and identify existing curricula around the nation that met the objectives described (Long and Chase, 2020). The team included agriculture professionals, extension agents, non-profit organizations, and private businesses with diverse backgrounds in agriculture, health, equity, and community development. This project also helped clarify the competencies that LFL and CFS certifications provide as well as additional curricula available nationwide. It also validated the notion that this curriculum does not need to meet every competency because of the diversity in food systems curriculum across the nation.

3. COVID-19 move to virtual.

Shortly after the core competency project ended, in March of 2020, COVID-19 hit in full swing in the U.S., leading to many different efforts for virtual programming. The Food Systems team began transitioning the LFL and CFS certifications in the summer of 2020 to support food systems practitioners and generate additional programming opportunities for community leadership and development opportunities. In September 2020, LFL and CFS launched virtually with a cohort of participants from across the nation with an exclusively virtual format consisting of blended virtual workshop sessions and online module content. The workshops sold out with 16 participants in LFL and 21 in Community Food Systems. One transition made for the virtual certification is all participants are going through certification (vs. the option to only do workshops from the pilot). Thus, there is a cohort schedule that includes virtual workshop sessions followed by online module participation. Similar to the initial platform, after completing the certification (all sessions and modules), participants will be able to attend a train-the-trainer where they will have access to materials for both in-person workshops as well as the newly developed virtual workshops.

CONCLUSION

Local Food Leader and Community Food Systems certifications are appropriate professional development resources to support food systems practitioners in individual skill development for building trust and effective relationships as well as community food systems development processes.

Due to COVID-19, practitioners are embarking on new and unique transitions to meet producers, food businesses and community needs in both in-person and virtual ways, and the ability to be flexible and creative in solutions will be continually imperative for our communities.

For Iowa State Food Systems team, future development of the certifications will continue to be considered; for example, expanding the virtual workshops and hosting a train-the-trainer specifically for the virtual format to increase capacity for place-based training options. There are considerations for creating retreats based on the CFS certification for communities who have more readiness capacity and need an initial facilitation effort to confirm overall goals and priorities; this will involve a short-course version of the Community Food Systems process where participants will complete activities with place-based intention and leave with outcomes and objectives for furthering their food systems work as a collective. Additional goals include youth-based iterations of Local Food Leader to support high school agriculture educators and various youth program educators.

Overall, further development of professional development and curricula for food systems practitioners continue to be needed as well as research into best practices and standards for teaching. The future, with COVID and additional nuances is going to need flexibility and foundational community-based providers to be ever-ready to support our food systems.

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