

Skidmore Supported Agriculture: Bringing More Local Food to the Skidmore College
Community

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Abstract:

The current industrial agriculture system in the United States has damaged the environment and distanced people from their food and farms. The organic and local food movements have arisen in response to this system's flaws. Through programs such as Community Supported Agriculture, people are gaining access to wholesome, local food while reconnecting with their food and communities. This project seeks to provide the benefits of this service to the greater Skidmore College community.

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 Historical Context of Farming: Industrial and Green Revolutions

Agriculture in the United States began by necessity as a vast network of small, independent, labor-intensive farms. These small farms employed and were home to more than half of the population of the country. In the post-World War II era, however, the advent of new mechanized farming infrastructure and technology instigated a shift away from model. The myriad small farms were replaced by a much smaller number of large, mechanized, monoculture farms that today employ only around 2 percent of the United States workforce (Dimitri 2005).

This profound change in agricultural practices has increased crop yields and lowered the price of commodity crops for the average US consumer. Between 1920 and 1990, the bushels per acre of a United States corn farmer increased by almost 350 percent (Horrigan 2002). In 2009, the number of bushels per acre reached a record 167.2, but has leveled off to an average 146.7 in 2011 (USDA). These increases have come at the cost of increased environmental degradation, decreased nutritional integrity of the food and a lack of connectedness between people, their food and their communities. Among the numerous

examples of environmental impacts of industrial agriculture is the degradation of soil quality from excess tillage and compaction from heavy machinery, the eutrophication of the country's waterways from chemical fertilizer runoff, and the loss of natural ecosystem biodiversity through the intentional, and unintentional, spread of monoculture crops (Horrigan 2002). In response to these negative effects of conventional, industrial agriculture, there has been resurgence of interest in local food and small-scale, organic agriculture (Gopalan 2001). Farms of all sizes and across the world have been started with or have made the shift over to organic practices to meet the growing level of environmental concern and consumer demand (Best 2010, Greene 2003). In fact, in the European Union, the number of organic farms rose 21 percent between 2005 and 2008 (Arthurson 2011). In the United States, the acreage of certified organic cropland doubled between 1993 and 1997 to 1.3 billion acres and continues to rise (Dimitri 2005).

1.2 Sustainable Agriculture:

The term sustainable as it applies to varying forms of development has broad, diverse applications and is thus difficult to describe entirely. Broadly speaking, in regards to agriculture systems, sustainability is manifested in two primary ways: through the implementation of more ecologically sound organic and biodynamic farming methods and by way of new and growing economic structures bringing the farmer and consumer closer together.

1.2.1 – Organics

From an ecological perspective, the shift to organic and ecologically sustainable forms of agriculture has profound beneficial effects on the soil quality, land conservation and water quality in the local environment. The United States Department of Agriculture defines organic agriculture as employing methods that “integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity” (USDA National Organic Program). Additionally, the use of synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, chemical pesticides and herbicides and genetic engineering is strictly prohibited. Various techniques such as low-till farming, cover cropping, and the use of animal manure and compost as fertilizer are used to reduce soil erosion, limit chemical input and maintain the nutrient content and overall health and longevity of the soil (Bilalis 2010, Golabi 2007, Jackson 2004).

Farms of all sizes and across the world have been started with or have made the shift over to organic practices to meet the growing level of environmental concern and consumer demand (Best 2010, Greene 2003). In fact, in the European Union, the number of organic farms rose 21 percent between 2005 and 2008 (Arthurson 2011). In the United States, the acreage of certified organic cropland doubled between 1993 and 1997 to 1.3 billion acres and continues to rise (Dimitri 2005).

1.2.2 - Biodynamics

Another alternative method of agriculture, though not nearly as popular in the United States, is biodynamic agriculture. Through a deeply holistic approach, biodynamic practices seek to strengthen the connection between people and the land to promote optimal health and balance of the natural ecosystem. Many of the methods and practices between

organic and biodynamic agriculture are similar, but biodynamic beliefs reflect the idea that the farm is a dynamic, living being that is directly affected and respondent to celestial rhythms and complex natural cycles. In this sense some of the methods are more holistic, such as detailed direction for manure and compost production and homeopathic animal husbandry. According to Demeter-International, an international biodynamic certifier, there were 142,482 biodynamic hectares worldwide and that number continues to grow (Paull 2011).

1.2.3 – Local Movements

The more economic realm of sustainable agricultural development incorporates alternative and locally focused means of connecting the consumer with their food and where it comes from. With substantial implications for climate change benefits with reduced transportation and an enhanced educational experience for local communities, the sourcing of local agricultural products has become increasingly important with the growing concern for the sustainability and ecological viability of the food systems in the United States (Horrigan 2002). The most common distribution mechanisms that have been utilized in realizing these small scale food systems are the farmer's market and direct marketing strategies such as Community Supported Agriculture programs and grower/buyer cooperatives (Gopalan 2001).

1.3 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA):

Broadly defined, a CSA is a program in which a certain number of shareholders pay an upfront cost at the beginning of the season for a share of a farm's weekly harvest. This scenario is mutually beneficial for many reasons. First, there is an initial boost in working capital for the farmer at the beginning of the season. Secondly, there is a tangible and

recognizable connection between the consumer and their source of food. In a lot of cases, the investor knows the farmer and deals directly, sometimes even in the form of physical labor, with the procurement and transport of the products (Horrigan 2010).

There are several different structural methods for distribution within a CSA, but the most common involves a fixed selection that is packaged at the farm by the farmer and crew and picked up at a mutually convenient location by the shareholder on a weekly basis (Trauger 1990).

1.4 Sustainability in Higher Education:

At a college or university, the heightened awareness of social and environmental issues such as public health, climate change and social justice is often directly linked to the desire to find solutions and implement positive change. With the realization of the detrimental effects of large scale, conventional agriculture, colleges and universities across the country have taken the initiative to explore more sustainable food sourcing options. As Roberta Anderson of the Food Alliance states, “Colleges and Universities are leading the sustainable food movement and have been for a while (Barlett 2011). Though the details of programs vary from school to school, supporting local food systems on college campuses is conducted in three primary ways. First is the focus on local, organic food sourcing on the part of school dining program. Second is the use of a campus farm or garden to provide fresh produce and educational opportunities. Lastly, schools can increase the sustainability of their dining programs through the participation in CSA programs from either a campus growing operation or other local farms.

For example, Emory University has established the goal of having 75% of their food be “locally or sustainably grown” by 2015. An institution that excels in providing its students with fresh, locally sourced dining options is Princeton University. According to the sustainable food purchases section of their website, Princeton gets more than half of its total food purchase, including produce, baked goods, meat, cheeses, poultry, pork and eggs, from within 250 miles of the University (2012).

Middlebury is a school that demonstrates the possibility of an on campus agricultural operation exceptionally well. Through a three-acre organic farm, with an additional student garden, Middlebury’s students and staff provide fresh fruit and vegetables to CSA members in the community as well as directly to the Atwater Dining Hall (middlebury.edu 2012). Even more impressive is Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina, which has a 275-acre organic working farm that provides produce for the school as well as a CSA for the students, faculty and local community. For \$200 at the start of the season, members of the Warren Wilson CSA receive weekly shares of the harvest from May through December (warren-wilson.edu 2011).

1.5 Sustainability at Skidmore:

1.5.1 Local Food Sourcing

The increase in local food sourcing is something that the Skidmore College dining services has been aware of for years and continues to improve upon. Beginning in 2003-2004 through a partnership with Saratoga Apple and continuing with such events as the “Harvest Dinner” and the use of the Skidmore Student Garden, the Skidmore Dining Services

administration has shown that they are willing to seek out and provide local food to the Skidmore community. In the sustainability section of their website, Skidmore Dining Services advertises 24 partnerships with local distributors, farmers and processors and a study done by Jesse Moy and Maranda Duval in 2011 showed that sustainability is a priority within the dining services.

1.5.2 On-Campus Garden or Farm

Something that Skidmore has only recently adopted is the use of an on-campus agricultural operation to supply produce to the dining hall and provide experiential learning for students. The Skidmore Student Garden, started by student Laura Fralich in the Spring of 2009, is a modest 40 by 60 foot plot of land located on campus that produced 1000 pounds of organically grown produce for the dining hall in its first year of production (Duvall 2011). While Skidmore efforts with the student garden are not in vain, the garden is not at the level of size or productivity where it can be considered a viable major source of produce for the school.

1.5.3 Campus CSA

Though not in all cases, most colleges that have a functional farm on campus distribute their products through a CSA. This is the one major area of local food system integration in which Skidmore has seen no significant development on campus.

Skidmore College has an active awareness of food sourcing and has shown the desire to make greater efforts toward sustainability including strengthening partnerships with local farms and food distributors and starting a student garden, but there is more to be done in the realm of incorporating sustainable agriculture into the culture of Skidmore. An increase

in the sourcing of local food to supply a Community Supported Agriculture system through the Dining Hall would improve sustainability at Skidmore and provide a large portion of the school community with a convenient, regular source of fresh local produce. This report asks the question: how can Skidmore benefit from locally, sourced organic produce through a CSA-style system run through Skidmore's Dining Services?

2. METHODS:

2.1 Gathering Contextual Information:

Through research of past capstone projects and conversations with Dining Services Directors, I gathered the appropriate contextual information to determine the environment in which a shift towards starting a CSA program would occur. The information included the current local food partnerships the Dining Hall maintains as well as identifying other potential sources in the area more suitable for the type of wholesale supply needed for the most optimal CSA-style program at the school. This helped me explore which resources are already in place to facilitate such a change and where there are gaps in the system that could hinder the project.

2.2 Identifying and Involving Stakeholders:

A large portion of my project involved interviews and conversations with important stakeholders in the process of implementing a new program in Dining Services. These stakeholders are known as the key informants to the study and were asked a range of questions of varying specificity to determine their interest in such a project and their willingness to facilitate the new venture (Cornell Farm-to-School Northeast Toolkit 2007,

Tremblay 2009). This included directors and managers involved in Dining Services, particularly Mark Miller, who is a proponent of the idea, as well as the potential and current partners involved in supplying the food that would go into the CSA. These partners also included the directors at various distributions companies.

2.3 Community Survey:

Another crucial aspect of the project was gauging the level of interest in a CSA program within the targeted Skidmore community. This was done with a student survey through SurveyMonkey.com, a public Facebook event advertising the survey, an appearance in the student announcements, and the distribution of the survey through the all-student email lists and the all faculty/staff email lists.

3. RESULTS:

3.1 Contextual Information and Stakeholder Involvement:

While gathering my contextual information and interviewing the stakeholders in the project, my interviews became less formal and more conversation based and the stakeholders I initially anticipated as being ancillary additions to the project data quickly became clear supporters, promoters and actors in the staging of the CSA-type project on campus. In other words, the imagined interviewees became active participants and help move develop the project in real time. Mark Miller, the head of Dining Services and chief proponent of the idea, immediately supported the project and was open to suggestions and facilitating any development. Several successive meetings with Mark throughout the semester were integral in establishing the idea of the project in the administration and getting people to think seriously and take action on implementing the proposed options.

In my search for active stakeholders in the project, I discovered Riley Neugebauer, the Campus Sustainability Coordinator, Monica Raveret-Richter, a professor in the Biology Department, and their team of Dining Hall Interns, whose main objectives revolve around the increased sustainability of Skidmore's Dining Services Program. I began meeting with them on a weekly basis to generally discuss sustainability in Dining Services and how my project could be realized with their help. Riley also brought to my attention several interesting off campus meetings and events that aided in a deeper understanding of my project.

The first of these was the Cornell Cooperative Extension Small Farms Summit, which took place in Voorheesville, NY on Wednesday the 29th of February. This meeting consisted of local farmers and distributors getting together and communicating with similar groups all over the state via teleconference. Though no solid connections were made at this conference, it was nonetheless an educational experience that broadened my understanding of the concerns of farmers with the efficient distribution of their products. The second event was also organized through the Cornell Cooperative Extension, but was more focused on establishing CSAs at the workplace. There was a variety of farmers, distributors and business owners there discussing the merits of a CSA and how to best go about implementing them for employees at their place of work. Though the conversation was geared more towards business than schools, I did manage to have a meaningful conversation with a farmer from Kilpatrick Family Farms and was reminded of their Skidmore CSA.

Through these various conversations and events, I identified two principle options for a CSA for Skidmore College. The first is the already existing CSA option for Skidmore

students, faculty and staff through the Kilpatrick Family Farm. The alternative option is the service provided by the online company Field-goods.com.

3.2. Kilpatrick Family Farm:

In the course of my investigation, it became necessary to include the already existing option of the Kilpatrick Family Farm Skidmore CSA as a part of my results. The farm is located in Middle Granville, NY, which is about 50 miles from Skidmore. The Skidmore CSA is a share option through the farm that is tailored to the Skidmore academic schedule; it is available whenever Skidmore is in session. The share pricing for the 2012-2013 season is still to be determined, but a regular sized summer and fall share, which consist of about 6 to 8 items, are priced at \$575 and \$245, respectively. As such, I can expect that the Skidmore share will total somewhere in the range of \$800-\$1000. The pick up location for the share is at the Kilpatrick farm stand at the weekly Saratoga Spring's Farmer's Market. One unique aspect of the Kilpatrick CSA is the option to pick your own share. The farmer requires at least one item to be in the share, but the CSA member can pick the remaining items from anything that happens to be on the table at the Farmer's Market that day.

3.3 Field Goods:

Field Goods, though not technically a CSA in the purest sense of the definition, behaves somewhat like the combination of a farmer's market and a CSA through an online medium. Through the website, field-goods.com, interested participants can order a predetermined bag of seasonally available produce either on a flexible, week-by-week basis or a full seasonal subscription. The food that makes up the weekly share is sourced from a variety of farms all from within 70 miles of Saratoga Springs, mostly in Columbia County. These farms include, Rexcroft Farm in Athens, NY, Stoneledge Farm in Cairo, NY,

Markristo Farm in Hillsdale, NY, and The Farm at Miller's Crossing near Hudson, NY. The pre-ordered number of bags would be delivered by Donna Williams, the founder of the company, to the Atrium Cafe in the Murray-Aikins Dining Hall every Friday. There will be volunteers and Dining Hall Interns available to receive, organize and distribute the shares at the table throughout the day. The bags would cost the shareholder \$22.00, \$27.50 or \$33.00 for a small, medium or large bag, respectively. Skidmore Dining Services would take a 10 percent commission on this price for providing the space for the pick up as well as the necessary promotion and advertisement of the service. Also available to the participants picking up their shares would be local products provided by Dining Services including a dozen eggs from Thomas' Poultry Farm in Schuylerville, NY for \$2.00, a half pound of Vermont cheeses for \$4.00 and breads baked on site from locally milled flour for \$5.00 a loaf.

3.4 – Community Survey:

The survey designed on SurveyMonkey.com was meant to ascertain the degree of interest in a program such as Field Goods and CSAs in general. The questions were designed to differentiate which member of the Skidmore community was filling out the survey, whether they would be interested in the service and their reasons as to why or why not. The number of respondents for the community survey totaled at 283. The distribution of respondents among students, faculty and staff was more or less an even three-way split (see Figure 1). Of those who responded, 38.3% said they would be occasionally willing to volunteer on delivery days and 13.4% said they definitely would. Forty seven percent said they would not be willing to volunteer and one student said they would for financial compensation (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

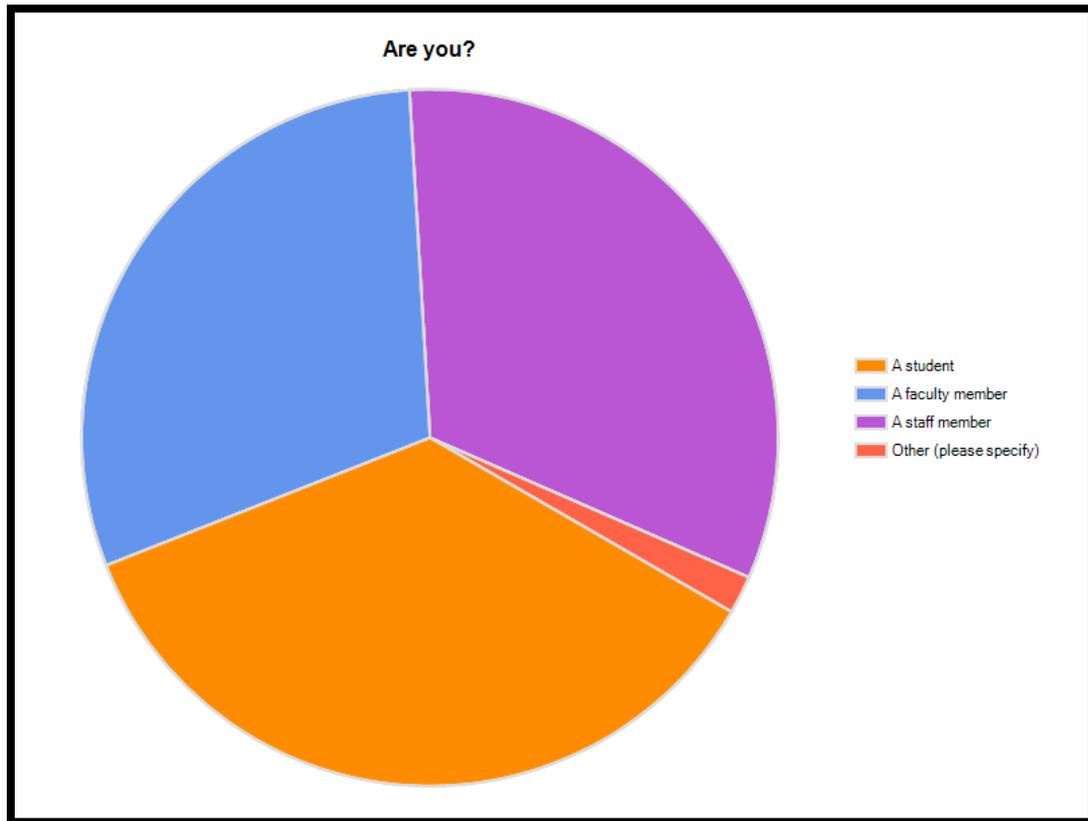
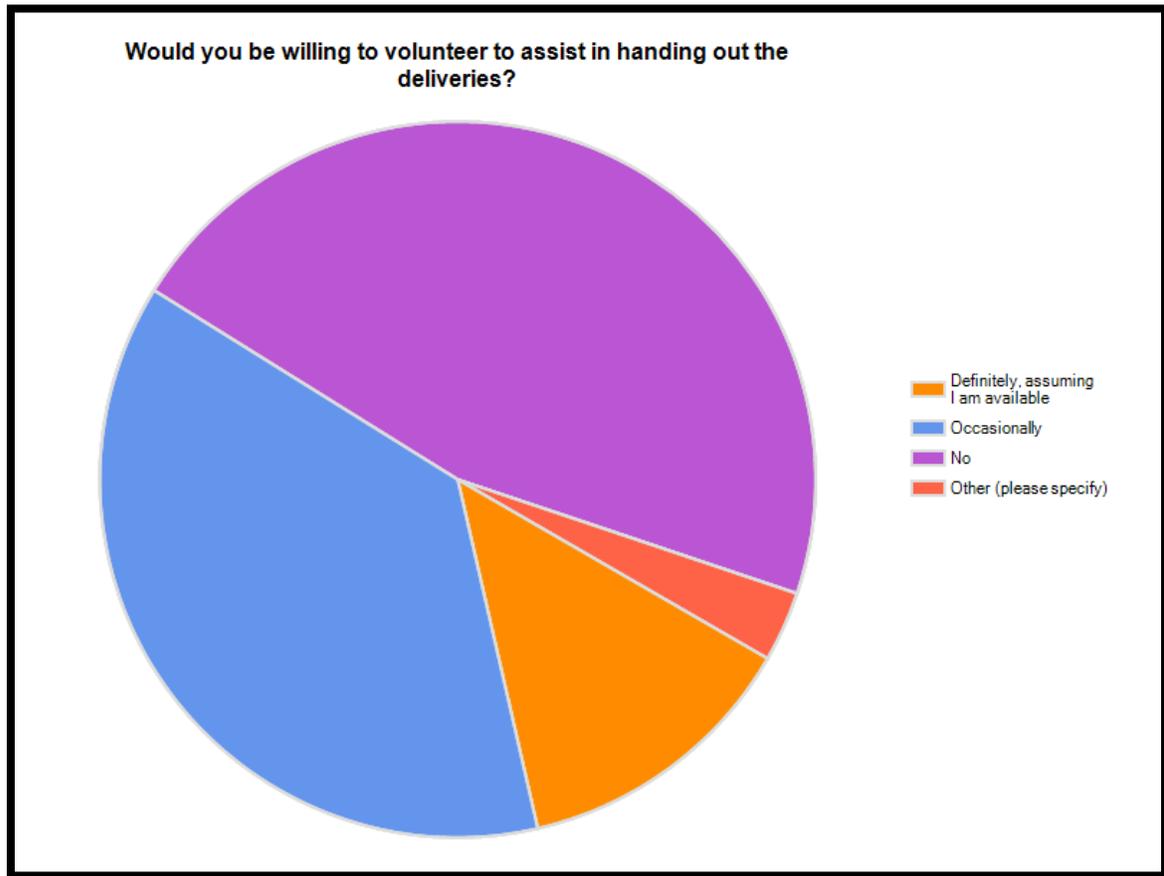
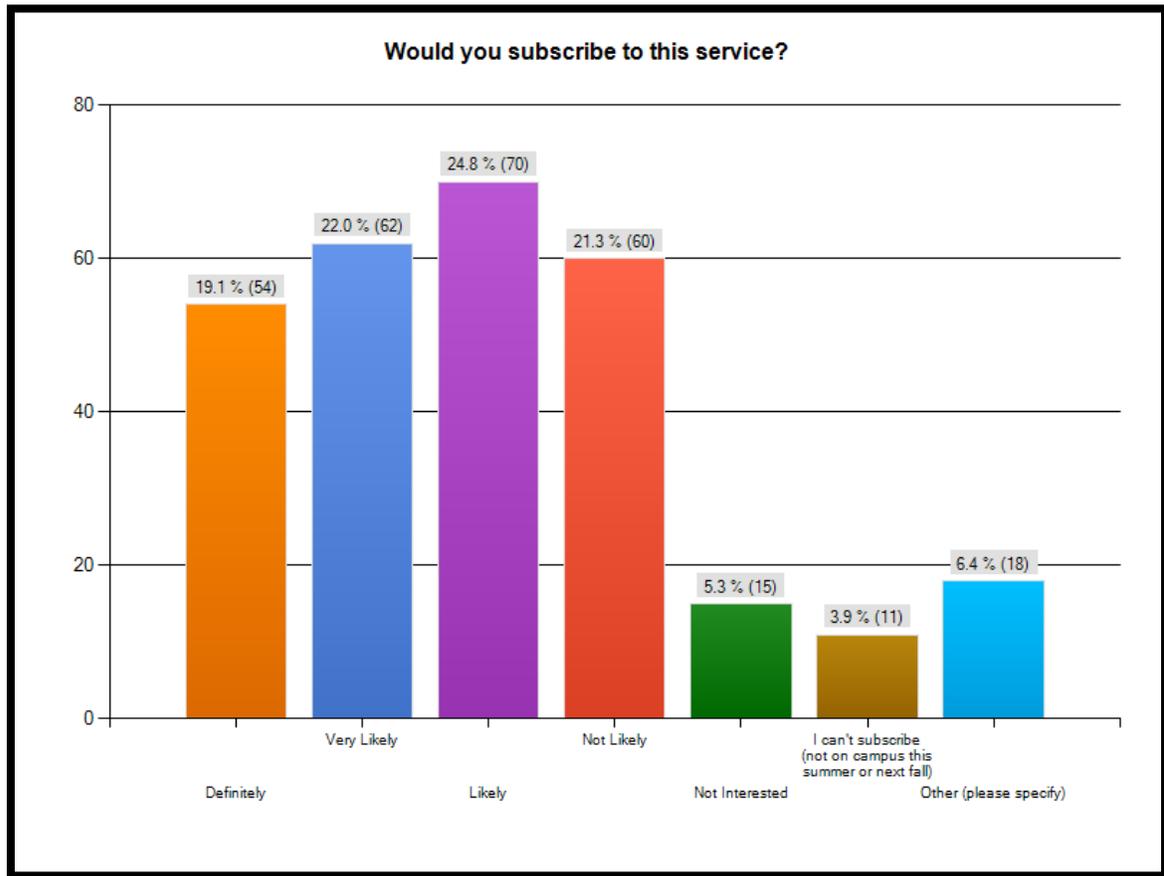


Figure 2



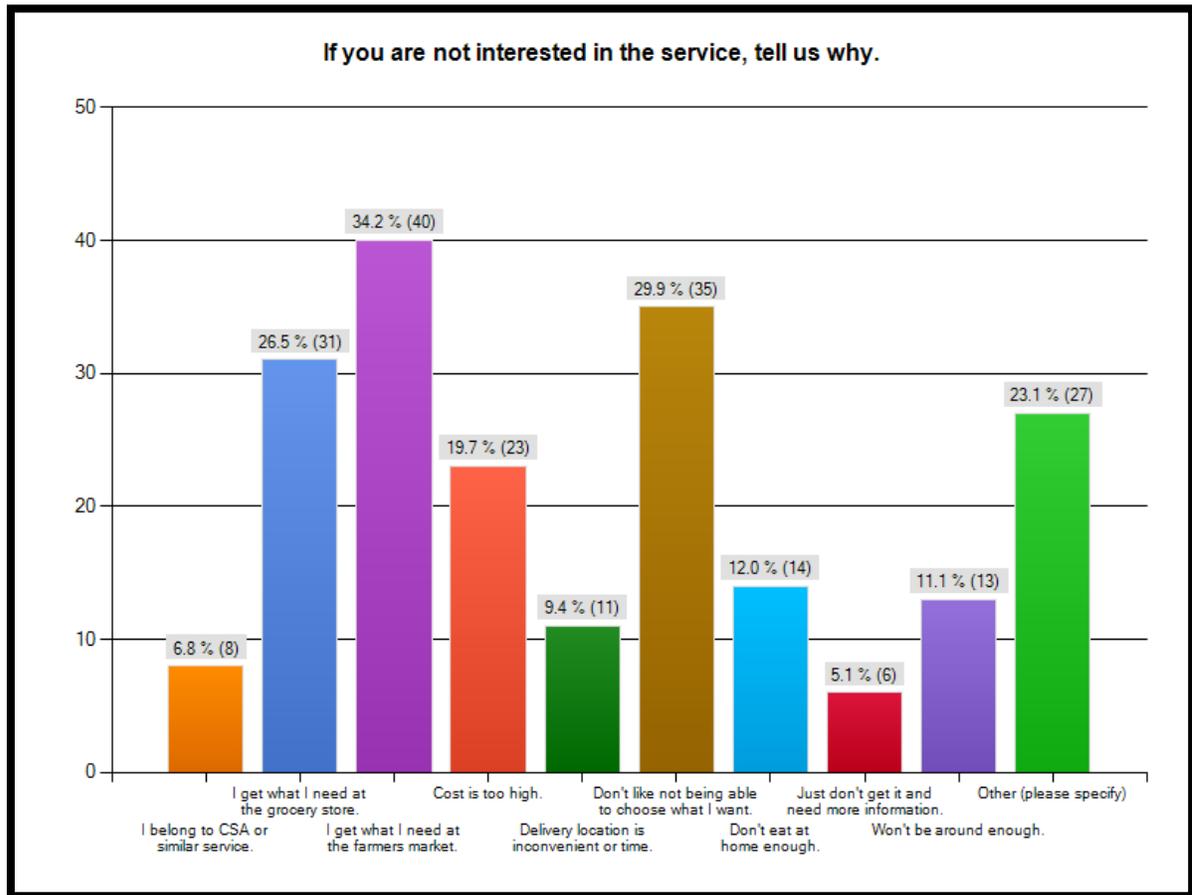
In response to the question assessing interest in the program, 65.9% of the responses indicated a positive interest in the service (see Figure 3). The remainder was either not interested or conditionally interested, with one student saying they would subscribe if they lived in Scribner Village or the Northwoods Apartments.

Figure 3



For the respondents who said they were not interested in the service, the largest percentage (38.9%) said the reason was because the cost was too high. The next most popular reason was because the respondent felt they would not be at school enough to benefit from the program. The remaining portion of the respondents said they get what they need at the farmer's market or grocery store, they do not eat at home enough or they do not like not being able to choose what they want (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



4. DISCUSSION:

Although my project was originally centered on the idea of a campus-based CSA program, throughout the process of interviews, conversations and brainstorming with Dining Services, local farmers and distributors, it became increasingly apparent that the operation would not be a CSA in the true sense of the term. The traditional CSA is founded upon the relationship between the CSA member and the farmer. The agricultural products come from one farm and the member cultivates an intimate relationship with that farm and

the people and products that define it. I realized that this unique situation was impossible on the scale I was imagining and in the venue where I was attempting to operate. Though the true CSA was not applicable to the specific program I was imagining through Dining Services, the traditional CSA scenario still exists as an option for the Skidmore community through Kilpatrick Family Farms.

When I first brought the idea to Riley Neugebauer and Mark Miller, they each brought up legitimate concerns with the model I originally had in mind. I had initially thought the best way to run a CSA program through Dining Services would be to have the school source enough produce from a variety of small, local farms and incorporate this inventory into a meal plan option that resembled a CSA for students who live off campus. Riley was the first to raise a concern about the feasibility of this model. She remarked that the forming of partnerships with the appropriate number of small farmers and establishing the groundwork for streamlining the inventory from all of these sources would take far too long to be feasible in the short term for a project such as mine. Mark, speaking from the administration's point of view, voiced the concern over liability. With so many disparate, small farms providing for the school, going through the necessary avenues of insurance for the school and the food proved to not be the most appealing option for the school.

The company model of Field Goods provided a convenient solution to both of these issues. The network of small farms that Field Goods already has in place to supply its customers eliminates the need and time taken to form individual partnerships with a large number of small farms. Additionally, having Field Goods act as the “middleman” for the school gives a clear picture of liability. Field Goods is insured up to \$100,000 for food safety issues associated with its product. As this fact became clear through a series of meetings and

conversations I helped facilitate between Mark and Donna Williams, the founder and owner of Field Goods, this option became much more palatable for the school.

A drawback to the Field Goods approach is that their services do not extend into the months between January and April, a time when the school is in peak function and participating students, faculty and staff would potentially still demand their weekly shares. In informal conversations with Donna, I have reason to believe that she is looking to expand into offering year-round subscriptions as soon as the business grows and she can foster better connections with farms that grow year round and sustainable storehouses. In the meantime, as a consequence of starting small and slowly integrating such an option into the Skidmore dining experience, participants in the program would have to look elsewhere for their produce in the winter and early spring months. Fortunately, though having no true affiliation with the school, the CSA offered by the Kilpatrick Family Farm provides greens and root vegetables through the winter months.

An additional concern that arose throughout the course of the project was the potential conflict between the services offered by Field Goods and the existing presence of the Saratoga Apple farm stand in Case Center on Friday afternoons. After conversations with Bob Carlton, Social Programming Administrator and Head of Technology Sales at the Skidmore Shop, and Jon Neil, Skidmore Shop director and Skidmore's director of business services, we determined that the two services operating on campus do not necessarily have to compete with each other, but rather they might be able to complement each other. As Jon Neil stated in a personal interview, he sees the two services working together as long as the delivery day for the Field Goods services is earlier in the week. Donna Williams at Field Goods has expressed interest in having the delivery day potentially be Wednesday, which would mean there would be minimal conflict between the two options.

5. CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, this project had a much different result than I originally had in mind. Though I quickly realized my initial intentions for the project were too grandiose to be realistic, the end product of my efforts involved the compromise of several different stakeholders. As I worked through the various options and weighed the benefits and drawbacks of each option with the interests of the involved parties, I realized that the true core of the project was centered on providing the option of healthier, local food to those who desire it. In the end, I am confident that this goal was achieved.

I have witnessed a growing interest in more sustainable food options among the Skidmore community and administration that I hope will continue to grow and breed positive results. With the creation of the Dining Hall Sustainability Interns and the appointment of Mark Miller as the head of Dining Services, I foresee a greater emphasis being made on sustainable dining initiatives at Skidmore and my project hopefully has planted the seed and opened the door for a more legitimate Community Supported Agriculture system through Dining Services and maybe even one day the expansion of the garden and the start of a larger scales Skidmore Organic Farm. Sustainability at Skidmore is becoming an increasingly apparent issue and I am proud of the contribution that this project has made toward institutionalizing sustainable dining at Skidmore College.

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Appendix 1:

Community Survey Questions

1. Would you subscribe to the service?

- Definitely
- Very Likely
- Likely
- Not Likely
- Not Interested
- I can't subscribe
- Other

2. Are you?

- A student
- A faculty member
- A staff member
- Other

3. If you are interested in the service, what 3 features are the most appealing to you?

- Value
- Delivery
- Length of delivery season
- Produce purchased from local farms
- Large variety
- Health benefits of greater access to fresh produce
- Environment/sustainability benefits
- Other

4. If you are not interested in the service, tell us why.

- I belong to a CSA or similar service.
- I get what I need at the grocery store.
- I get what I need at the farmer's market.
- Cost is too high.
- Delivery location or time is inconvenient.
- Don't like being able to choose what I want.
- Don't eat at home enough.
- Just don't get it and need more information.
- Won't be around enough.
- Other

5. Would you be interested in an additional option on the pick-up days of local breads, a dozen local eggs, and a half pound of local cheese for \$5, \$2 and \$4, respectively?

- Yes
- No

6. Would you be willing to volunteer to assist in handing out deliveries?

- Definitely, assuming I'm available
- Occasionally
- No
- Other

7. If the service were offered, would you be more likely to purchase a smaller meal plan from the dining hall?

- Definitely
- Very likely
- Likely
- Not likely
- No

8. Would you be more likely to participate in such a program if it were offered through Dining Services along with the other meal plans or through an external online source?

- More likely
- Less likely
- Either is good
- Wouldn't participate in either
- Other

9. During which season(s) would the availability of this service be most important to you?

- Winter
- Spring
- Summer
- Fall