

Binghamton Farm Share capacity building project

Final Report for ONE15-241

Project Type: Partnership

Funds awarded in 2015: \$15,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2017

Region: Northeast

State: New York

Project Leader:

[Amelia LoDolce](#)

Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments

Co-Leaders:

[Kate Miller-Corcoran](#)

VINES

Project Information

Summary:

The goal of the Binghamton Farm Share Capacity Building Project is to further refine and expand Binghamton Farm Share (BFS) to create a sustainable CSA model that can be replicated and used in other regions so that farmers have the ability to sell their produce in low-income communities. This means providing producers with technical training that will help them meet the program's growing demand for shares while also developing educational materials for consumers to improve customer retention.

Over the course of the project we held a total of five technical trainings for our farmers based on their own needs-assessment and on member surveys from the past year. We worked to create new, easy to navigate educational materials for the customers and disseminated them over the course of the year. This included information on short and long term storage, easily accessible recipes and additional information on meal planning and pantry stocking. In year one Cornell Cooperative Extension- Broome County sampled recipes at rotating distribution sites throughout the season. In year two a member education intern was brought on board through BFS specifically to talk with members about their produce and understand better what knowledge gaps existed. This helped the consumers become more familiar with the produce they were receiving.

Introduction:

Farmers in the Binghamton region are interested in expanding their direct to consumer sales to increase revenues. Fortunately, area consumers are increasingly interested in buying direct from producers. However, the traditional models for direct sales (CSAs, farmers' markets, and farm stands) have not been as successful in serving the moderate and low income market in the area as compared to other

regions. Given that the median household income in the City of Binghamton (the population center of South Central New York) is only \$30,179, farmers in the area need a new model to gain access to a significant portion of the consumer market. Binghamton Farm Share (BFS) was created to address this need while also improving access to affordable, healthy foods in under-served neighborhoods. In the program's second year of operation (2014), we found distinct challenges for some producers in meeting demand while maintaining a high level of quality. We worked with our partner farms, our local extension agency and contracted with other experts to provide trainings in these areas of challenge, which are outlined below.

Project Objectives:

1. Increased sales: Our goal was to increase BFS sales by 30% in 2015 and 25% in 2016. We track this through detailed sales records kept in a customized Microsoft Access database. We know how many shares were sold each week of the season from each farm to what customers using which payment method.
2. Program sustainability: To make BFS sustainable and effective for farmers in the long run, we aim to reduce the overhead costs for delivering the program by increasing volunteer staffing of distribution sites and to reduce reliance on grant funds by increasing program income and building a dedicated donor base. We have worked with partner farms in the past and will continue to work with them in the future to identify creative ways to fund the operational costs of the program (i.e. encouraging early sign up customers to pay the full cost of their share and donate the early sign up discount portion to BFS). We anticipate generating \$3,000+ in program income in 2015 from \$1-\$2 fees added to the cost of shares, depending on the cost of the share.
3. Improved quality control: We will develop a quality control tracking system for the program that allows us to better track customer complaints over the season. We will work with partner farms to pinpoint sources of quality issues and to correct those problems through technical assistance. From experience to date, quality control problems arise primarily during packing and transport. We will compare the number and types of customer complaints and farmer feedback over the 2015 and 2016 seasons to track our progress.
4. Farmers increase knowledge of different marketing techniques: The majority of our partner farms have identified marketing as a specific challenge that they would like address through technical assistance. We will contract with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County (CCE-BC) to provide trainings on using social media, developing CSA newsletters, creating print materials, and any other types of marketing materials requested by partner farms. CCE-BC will develop a pre and post survey for those who take the trainings to evaluate the success of the trainings.
5. Farmers are provided with other technical assistance trainings as needed: In addition to marketing and quality control trainings, other technical assistance needs identified by partner farms include: improving efficiency, refining produce selections for shares, and addressing labor needs. We anticipate that other needs may be identified over the course of the project. We will contract with CCE-BC to provide these trainings (up to a total of 7 over the course of the project, including the trainings on quality control and marketing), and CCE-BC will develop a pre and post survey for those who take the trainings to evaluate the success of the trainings.
6. Overall customer satisfaction, knowledge, and retention: This is important to developing a program that will be sustainable in the long term and that will provide the greatest benefit to our partner farms. Losing customers midseason can make it less cost effective for farms to deliver to Binghamton and also increases program

costs due to the need to continue recruiting all season, which makes the program less cost effective and sustainable. Customer retention in the 2013 season was around 40%, but we have increased that to 60% in 2014. We will develop new, universal educational materials for CSA customers that will help customers to get the greatest value out of their share and to address educational needs identified by customers and farmers. Purchasing produce through a CSA and eating seasonally is a new concept for most consumers, and we can increase customer retention by providing customers with the information they need to make the most of their share so that the CSA option also becomes the most cost effective option for customers. We conduct pre and post surveys with customers and will continue to do so in the future to further improve the program.

Cooperators

- [Laura Biasillo](#)

lw257@cornell.edu

Agricultural Economic Development Specialist

840 Upper Front Street

Binghamton, NY 13905

(607) 584-5007 (office)

- [Anton Burkett](#)

anton@earlymorningfarm.com

Farmer

Early Morning Farms

9658 State Route 90

Genoa, NY 13071

(315) 364-6941 (office)

- [Sean Cummings](#)

sean@vinesgardens.org

Farmer

PO Box 3104

Binghamton, NY 13902

(607) 232-3582 (office)

- [Allan Gandelman](#)

info@mainstreetfarms.com

Farmer

116 North West Street

Homer, NY 13077

(607) 749-0086 (office)

- [Stephanie Roberts](#)
sharedrootsfarm@gmail.com
Farmer
3342 McGraw Marathon Road
McGraw, NY 13101
(607) 836-2242 (office)
- [Linda Titus](#)
nwbltitus@aol.com
Farmer
1609 NYS Rte 79
Windsor, NY 13865
(607) 655-2074 (office)

Research

Materials and methods:

At the outset of the project individual visits were made to each partner farm to discuss details of the project including expectations and compensation. Pre-surveys were administered determining:

- Experience of the farm both in agriculture and in growing for and distributing CSAs
- Marketing techniques already being implemented
- Technical areas of need
- Strengths partner farms would be able to help other farms with

We provided trainings for the areas already established by the grant narrative and those identified by the farms. Partnering with Cornell Cooperative Extension-Broome County and bringing in experts in various fields we provided trainings both on farms and in classrooms.

Each partner farm was assisted with a small travel stipend to help defray the cost of travel to trainings. Additionally, each farm that implemented of the ideas generated through technical assistance trainings were supported for their time invested after submitting brief proposals on their actions.

Surveys were conducted of share members in the year prior to and the years during the study. Members reported their satisfaction on a number of areas each year. After a training was given on a specific area and farm and program adjustments were made before and after results were compared. Surveys were conducted through SurveyMonkey with a link provided via email and hard copies of the surveys were provided at distribution sites for those without access to email.

Research results and discussion:

- Increased sales:
 - Sales increased each year of programming. The first year saw an increase of 40% with year two bringing a 23% increase, just shy of our goal of a 25% increase. Our percentage of funding decreased from 2015 to 2016 which affected our ability to market to our target low-income demographic. Retention rates went from 41% of members returning from 2014 in 2015 to 56% returning in 2016.
- Program sustainability:
 - Volunteer staffing has increased over the past two seasons. The Coordinator had previously been managing one of the distribution locations during distribution. As of 2016 most sites had at least 2 volunteers, sometimes 3 depending on volume. This allowed one volunteer to accept payments while the other handed out the shares and gave some information about the produce that the member was receiving. Over 400 volunteer hours were recorded. This way, the Coordinator was able to work on other projects or manage customer service issues during distribution times. In addition, the volunteers were often from the neighborhood in which BFS was distributing, promoting sustainability through community investment in the program.
 - We added \$1-\$2 fees to the cost of shares generating \$7,500 in program income over the past two seasons.
 - Our partner farms have invested in discounting shares, promoting our program and obtaining funding. One of our partner farms, Early Morning Farm, allowed CSA members who buy direct-from-farm to donate their early sign up savings to Binghamton Farm Share. This supplied us with an extra \$850 in funding. When, in 2016, our discount funding ran out, our partner farms allowed us to use their discount programs to supplement our discounts allowing us to serve approximately 25 extra people.
 - We included a section on our share agreement that allowed people to donate directly to the program when they were sending in their agreement. This garnered additional funding of approximately \$600 each year.
- Improved quality control:
 - Our technical training in October of 2015 pertained to packaging. Implementation occurred in 2016. On the end of season survey for 2015 11% of members reported being somewhat or very dissatisfied with packaging, 89% were somewhat or very satisfied. After the training one partner farm switched to using plastic bags in their reusable tote bags. A second farm was using large plastic bins for transport and changed to corrugated cardboard boxes. At the end of the season satisfaction rate rose to 95% somewhat or very satisfied with the packaging.
- Farmers increase knowledge of different marketing techniques
 - Two marketing trainings were provided over the course of the grant period. The first, held in 2015, was meant to be a basic overview of creating promotional materials, utilization of social media, what photographs are best to use and how to strategically use limited time. This started to get our partner farms thinking about their marketing. The second was more advanced, and provided further understanding of marketing strategies for our partner farms. This training further discussed the use of social media,

concentrating on the importance of branding and storytelling in all marketing outlets. Farmers learned how to create a marketing plan and timeline that was feasible to use during the busy growing season.

- Increase overall customer satisfaction, knowledge and retention:
 - Customer retention rose in both grant years. In 2014 in-season retention was 60% and it has now increased to 75%, a behavior in members that demonstrates increased satisfaction, leading to retention.
 - BFS invests much time in creating and educating our members. At the start of the year members receive the “Care for your Share” flyer as well as tips for pantry stocking and meal planning. This document is one sided and colorful, listing produce, how to store them and how long they are generally good for. We also provide a freezing guide for our members with tips on how to best to freeze and then use the items at later dates. Additionally, we have guides for storing herbs, cooking with greens, and meal planning guide. From our surveying we knew that members had some produce which they were confused by so we introduced a “Veggie of the Week” guide for less common produce. For the Veggie of the Week initiative we offered a recipe with a sample featuring that vegetable accompanied by a quick guide for ways to prepare, short and long term storage and some nutrition information.
 - A mid-season survey was also administered so that we could understand what members needed more information on and what their feedback was on shares. We did have some feedback on share variety which we addressed with farmers and then also created a share refining training (see below) so that farmers could understand better the low-income demographic.
 - Share Refining Training: we concluded our training series at Main Street Farm with a discussion on refining produce selection for the target demographic that BFS works with, people with limited access to and funds for fresh produce. BFS distribution volunteers and members of BFS presented feedback that they receive from members and helped the farmers to understand the realities of trying to eat healthy on a budget. It was helpful for the partner farmers understand that our members may not have ample refrigerator space, access to proper kitchen utensils, storage, etc. Many of our members have never cooked before or have very little cooking experience. Productive conversations were had revolving around how best to maximize the member benefit while ensuring the farmers were receiving fair compensation. The distribution volunteers, now familiar with the farmers, can in turn help the members to understand how the farmers make their selections for shares and bridge gaps that may occur.
- Farmers are provided with other technical assistance trainings as needed
 - In conversations and surveys of our partner farms we recognized that labor was a necessary area of technical assistance. Without having proper labor in place it becomes difficult to face challenges and grow. Farms indicated that they wanted to discuss ways of obtaining labor, what other farms were doing to retain their labor force and understand fair labor practices. Eric Denk, Agriculture Labor Program and Communications Specialist for the Department of Labor, came to speak to our farmers about compliance for both workers and growers and brought many resources to share. As well,

each farm shared their unique ways of obtaining and retaining labor.

Research conclusions:

More members are engaged with the program. Member volunteers at distribution centers increased from 6 in 2015 to 10 in 2016. This year, 2017, we have had many more inquiries from members about volunteering at distribution locations.

We know that because of our program we are having the overall impact of helping our members to have healthier lifestyles. According to our 2016 program survey, 75% of members are consuming more vegetables during the program as compared to before. Last year 56.8% of BFS members reported eating more than 3 vegetables a day, compared to the New York State average of 24.7%. (Centers for Disease Control (2010). State-Specific Trends in Fruit and Vegetable Consumption Among Adults. Available at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5935a1.htm>.)

The implementation of a mid-season survey and having engaged volunteers at the distribution sites we were able to understand sooner what complaints needed to be addressed and what knowledge gaps remained.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

[2017 Comprehensive Vegetable List](#)

[2017 Pantry Stocking Guide](#)

[2017 How to Care for your Share](#)

[2017 Freezing Guide](#)

Article published in Spring 2016 Small Farms Quarterly: [BINGHAMTON FARM SHARE: SUPPORTING LOCAL FARMS AND COMMUNITIES](#)

Article published in Spring 2017 Small Farms Quarterly: [SUCCESSFUL CSAS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES](#)

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

2015 Amount of Produce Sold in Low-Income Areas: \$49,021.50

2016 Amount of Produce Sold in Low-Income Areas: \$60,296

Farmer Adoption

Packaging

- Binghamton Urban Farm adopted a new style of plastic CSA boxes which can be sanitized, moving them closer to future GAPs certification.
- North Windsor Berries adopted using plastic bags in their reusable totes and clam shells for distributing their share.
- Shared Roots Farm began to use cardboard CSA boxes to transport their shares.



Marketing

- After the second training we saw an increase in social media presence with many of our partner farms, especially incorporating their story into their marketing. Posts went from a product based theme to a farm/people based theme. Shared Roots Farm and Main Street Farms are two very distinct examples of how their marketing changed.

<https://www.facebook.com/SharedRootsFarm/>

<https://www.instagram.com/mainstreetfarms/>

Refining Shares

- Main Street Farm adopted a new size share, Small, created specifically for



Binghamton Farm Share members.

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Areas needing additional study

It would be interesting to study what vegetables sell well in areas facing economic hardship and how members begin to grow in their use of unfamiliar vegetables as they become more confident in cooking.

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