

Community Food Security and UF/IFAS Extension¹

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Introduction

The modern food system in the United States is a complex, internationally connected network of industries and markets that is continuously changing and growing to meet the needs of its consumers. Cooperative Extension Service educational programs work to meet the needs of both producers and consumers in food systems in the United States and around the world. Extension is constantly evolving, adapting, and improving its educational programs so that clientele are empowered to address their issues or problems. The United States Department of Agriculture, the federal partner of Extension, recognized a specific need in the field of agriculture and food systems by adding the Community Food Security Act to the 1996 Farm Bill. The purpose of this paper is to define *community food security* and identify its importance for Extension agents in Florida.

Community Food Security

Community food security is, “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Hamm & Bellows, 2003, p. 37). To achieve this requires a systems approach that addresses local infrastructure, economic and job security, federal food assistance, food recovery and donations, education and awareness, and community food production and marketing (USDA NIFA, n.d.). There are seven components represented in this definition of community food security: food access, food

safety, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, local food systems, culturally acceptable food, and social justice.



Figure 1. A consumer peruses produce available at a farmers market. Credits: Catalin Petolea/iStock/Thinkstock, © Catalin Petolea

Community Food Security and Extension

Extension educators have an important role in working with their communities to build an effective food system through educational programming and stakeholder interaction. The concept of community food security deals with many aspects of the food system and with community involvement in the food system. The University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) has a commitment to increasing community food security across the state. UF/IFAS Extension developed a roadmap

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for the years 2013 to 2023 based on extensive stakeholder input gathered from all 67 counties (UF/IFAS Extension, 2013). The roadmap outlines five “super issues” citizens agree are the most pressing challenges and needs facing the state today. The first of those issues is “the awareness and appreciation of our food systems and our environment.” Programming to address these super issues is guided by seven “high-priority initiatives”:

1. Increasing the sustainability, profitability, and competitiveness of agricultural and horticultural enterprises.
2. Enhancing and protecting water quality, quantity, and supply.
3. Enhancing and conserving Florida’s natural resources and environmental quality.
4. Producing and conserving traditional and alternative forms of energy.
5. Empowering individuals and families to build healthy lives and achieve social and economic success.
6. Strengthening urban and rural community resources and economic development.
7. Preparing youth to be responsible citizens and productive members of the workforce.

Each of these initiatives has a statewide goal team divided into specific focus areas dedicated to addressing the initiative at the local level. The seven main concepts of community food security and UF/IFAS Extension’s roadmap are highly congruent. The National Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (NIFA) addresses hunger and food security through research, education, and extension work within the Land Grants, federally funded state nutrition education programs, grant programs for private nonprofits, and through partnerships across USDA (USDA NIFA, n.d.). Table 1 illustrates the relationship between community food security concepts, the NIFA priority science areas, and UF/IFAS Extension’s statewide goals and focus area teams.

Implications for Extension

Community food security is an issue of concern in the United States. Extension services across the country are already engaged in addressing food security issues at the community level. Based on the relationship between community food security and UF/IFAS Extension’s high-priority initiatives, this paper suggests that Extension agents explore two possibilities for improving community

food security-based programs: 1) inter-departmental or inter-organizational collaborations, and 2) assessments for community food security needs.

Collaborations

The opportunity to build collaborations and inter-organizational partnerships between Extension and other community food security organizations in the community is not only available, it is relevant and can help UF/IFAS Extension meet the needs and interests of its clientele. UF/IFAS Extension’s responsibility is to allocate resources and create opportunities for Extension agents to effectively address clientele needs. Collaborations with community organizations can be an excellent resource for addressing community issues specifically related to community food security.

There are many organizations in Florida working to address community food security issues and community development. Farmers markets, food banks, community gardens, and educational outreach organizations are just a few examples. Extension educators also work toward community development, citizen empowerment, and education for community members so they can make informed decisions. In addition, NIFA’s Hunger & Food Security Programs encourage collaboration between government and nonprofit organizations (USDA NIFA, n.d.).



Figure 2. There are many organizations in Florida that work to address community food security issues and community development. Credits: mangostock/iStock/Thinkstock, © mangostock

UF/IFAS Extension should explore the possibilities for partnerships with local and community organizations in order to assist Extension agents in effectively addressing community food security issues. In doing so, UF/IFAS Extension will function not only to address individual issues, but also to improve the condition of the community in which it serves. Hou (2017) suggests that urban gardens build and nurture individuals as well as social ties in a

community and can serve as a model for other urban greening strategies to achieve multiple social, cultural, and economic goals. In this way, partnerships with UF/IFAS Extension could work to address community food security issues and also strengthen economies, ecologies, and social capital in their counties.

Needs Assessments

Needs assessments are one of the tools Extension agents use to determine the needs, issues, and concerns within their counties and communities. Extension agents in Florida conduct needs assessments in their communities to gain a better understanding of their clientele's community food security needs. Needs assessments help Extension agents direct community food security programming toward community members who need it the most. Extension educators must be aware of the needs of their clientele and of their clientele's culture and background. In this way, a needs assessment can assist Extension agents in utilizing their time and programming resources in the most effective way possible.

Needs assessments allow Extension agents to examine community food security in a geographical community or neighborhood. The agents should examine each of the seven components of community food security when facilitating a needs assessment.

For example, agents need to find out if community members are having a hard time getting to the grocery store, if there is a problem with spoiled or improperly cooked food in the community, if people are having a hard time locating culturally acceptable foods, or if employers are treating food system workers unfairly.

Extension agents can conduct community food security needs assessments in their counties through focus groups, community forums, surveys, and listening sessions. These types of interactions with community clientele can also help agents improve existing educational programs by gaining a better understanding of clients' needs and issues. Agents can learn about different groups in an area or county by asking questions and getting immediate feedback on issues clientele are facing.

The USDA Economic Research Service has created a Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit to assist local service providers in facilitating a needs assessment. The toolkit includes data collection instruments for various measures of food security. The toolkit can be accessed at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=43179>.

Conclusion

UF/IFAS Extension agents routinely deal with issues that pertain to the concept of community food security. The purpose of this paper was to establish the link between UF/IFAS Extension's goals and the elements of community food security. Extension agents can improve existing efforts to meet clientele's community food security needs in two ways. First, they can collaborate with other departments or organizations that are addressing similar issues within the community. These collaborations enable Extension agents to design more effective educational programs, or reach new or nontraditional clientele. Second, they can conduct community food security–focused needs assessments. These assessments are designed specifically to identify community food needs. These two methods are just two ways in which UF/IFAS Extension agents can help reach UF/IFAS Extension goals and serve their communities in the most effective way possible.

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Table 1. Corresponding community food security concepts and Extension focus areas.

CFS Key Concept	Relevant NIFA Priority Science Area	UF/IFAS Statewide Goals and Focus Area Teams
Food Access	Food Security and Hunger	<i>Agriculture, Natural Resource and Food Systems</i> FA*3: Processing, Distribution, Safety, and Security of Food Systems
Food Safety	Food Security and Hunger Food Safety	<i>Agriculture, Natural Resource and Food Systems</i> FA3: Processing, Distribution, Safety, and Security of Food Systems <i>Individual and Family Development</i> FA3: Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety
Nutrition	Childhood Obesity	<i>Individual and Family Development</i> FA1: Personal and Family Well-being FA3: Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety
Sustainable Agriculture	Food Safety Climate Change	<i>Agriculture, Natural Resource and Food Systems</i> FA1: Agricultural and Natural Resource Profitability and the Sustainable Use of Environmental Resources <i>Florida's Environment</i> FA1: Water Resources FA2: Sustainable Use of Freshwater and Terrestrial Ecosystems FA5: Climate Variability and Change
Local/Community Food Systems	Food Security and Hunger	<i>Agriculture, Natural Resource, and Food Systems</i> F1: Agricultural and Natural Resource Profitability and the Sustainable Use of Environmental Resources (especially small farms and alternative enterprises) <i>Sustainable Living</i> FA3: Economic Development
Culturally Acceptable Food	None	None
Social Justice	None	None
*FA=focus area, statewide goals are in italics		