

The 2010-2011 CEFS SARE PDP: The Experiences of Cooperative Extension Service Partners

The SARE PDP¹ project, led by CEFS and in partnership with the CES, was intended to catalyze the spread of local foods knowledge and activities across North Carolina. CES personnel are engaged in a host of “local foods” activities ranging from farmer’s markets and community and school gardens to farm tours and food policy councils. The number and variety of activities across counties within North Carolina varies widely, however, with some counties having numerous local foods projects and others having none. CEFS envisioned the PDP project as a means to enable Extension personnel “to be key facilitators in building strong sustainable agricultural practices through community food systems.”²

The PDP was based on a train-the-trainer model, with an initial cohort of six Phase I teams, comprised of community partners and led by a county Extension agent, trained in 2010, and a second cohort of six Phase II teams selected and trained by Phase I teams in 2011. CEFS provided informational resources, organizational support, and funding to each team. Informational resources took the form of an initial two-day training for Phase I partners in the first months of the project; information on local foods activities summarized and web-linked on the CEFS website; presentations on goal-setting and community engagement (both in-person meetings with CEFS staff and a community-engagement contractor, and in a webinar held on these topics), and support for some Phase I and Phase II partners to attend the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group conference in early 2011. Organizational support and facilitation was provided via scheduled conference calls during the year during which partners gave updates on their projects, and in the form of requirements that teams provide initial project logic models and information on actual project outcomes. Each team also received \$1000 for project development and each Phase I team received \$500 to be used for training activities for their Phase II partners.

This report summarizes interviews conducted with the Extension partners as the PDP neared its conclusion. The interviews with each of the Phase I leaders and 5 of the 6 Phase II leaders provide insight into team leader perceptions of the effectiveness of the train-the-trainer model in diffusing local food knowledge and activities in North Carolina. The 30-60 minute interviews were conducted in October, 2011.³

¹ SARE PDP = Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program, an initiative and associated grant program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture ; CEFS = Center for Environmental Farming Systems, a research partnership between North Carolina State University and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; CES = (North Carolina) Cooperative Extension Service

² SARE PDP Grant Proposal.

³ Of the 11 interviews, 10 were with extension agent project leaders, and one with an employee of the Natural Resource Conservation Service who worked in partnership with an extension agent to lead their county’s SARE local foods project.

Interview questions focused on the following:

- Team leaders actual use of the resources provided to support their projects, and their perception of how useful the resources were or could have been.
- Interviewees' perceptions of the clarity and reasonableness of the reporting requirements associated with the grant (e.g., required logic model and outcome reports; expectations of participation in conference calls and webinars).
- The means by which Phase I teams "passed on the gift" (trained and mentored) their Phase II counterparts.
- Whether and how interviewees' local foods projects operated differently from other (non-local foods) projects in which they have been involved, specifically from the standpoint of working with community partners.
- Topics that interviewees would feel comfortable speaking about if a follow-up conference or meeting were held among the SARE PDP partners and/or for others in the CES.
- Interviewees' perceptions of the success of the train-the-trainer model as a means to disseminate information between project leaders and counties. Interviewees were also asked how they might continue to exchange information on local foods now that the project is coming to a close.

This report begins by characterizing the types of projects and partner selection, and then addresses respondent comments with regard to each of the above areas. Conclusions and recommendations based on respondents' comments are given at the end of each subsection. A final summary revisits these recommendations and notes limitations in the methodology used for this report.

Description of Projects and Selection of Teams

Project leaders were asked to briefly summarize their projects and how they came to request funding through the SARE PDP (Table I). Of the 12 projects, five focused on revitalizing existing or creating new farmer's markets; four projects provided support for existing or created new school or community gardens; one focused on creating a new farm tour; one focused on creating presentation materials to highlight the benefits of local food systems; and one project focused on working with existing community organizations to support local food events, such as community meetings and meals.

Phase I teams were selected by CEFS staff using an RFP process (see Table I). Phase II teams were chosen by the Phase I teams. For Phase II, one county was selected based on an RFP process; in two cases Phase I leaders chose Phase II partners with whom they were already working on similar local foods projects; in one case the choice was facilitated by CEFS between previously unconnected counties; in one case the partnership was between extension personnel who previously had frequent contact but no joint projects; and in one case the partnership was between extension personnel who have frequent contact but had not worked on a local foods project together.

Table I. Project Teams, CEFS SARE PDP 2011-2012 Project

Phase I	Phase II Partner
Christy Bredenkamp—farmer’s market revitalization	Tamara Cole—farmer’s market revitalization
Amanda Egdorf-Sand—school garden	Don Mebane—community garden
David Fogarty—work with an existing community group to underwrite local foods projects	Greg Traywick—farmer’s market revitalization
Tammy Kelly—farmer’s market revitalization	Shenille Ford—new farmer’s market
Karen Neil—community garden with college partner	Stephen Greer—Food Bank and Children’s Home gardens
Taylor Williams—presentation materials	Danelle McKnight—farm tour

Use and Perceived Value of the Resources Provided Via the PDP

Initial two-day training in Raleigh, February 2010: Phase I leaders were asked to think back to the initial 2-day training in Raleigh and to consider the usefulness of the activities. All six of the Phase I project leaders reported that the training was a very positive experience, with respondents noting its usefulness with regard to three areas: (1) exposure of teams to local foods projects ongoing within NC, (2) as an overview of resources available for local foods projects, and (3) as an opportunity for project partners to clarify goals.

- (1) Exposure of teams to local foods projects across the state:

To hear about all the things going on across the state was great. When we used to have an annual (extension) conference, we would hear about those things. But now we don't.

I think the best thing from that meeting was the exposure that our partners had, hearing about all the different things going on in the state and what the potential is. We had someone from the hospital, a local restaurant owner, a (farmer’s market) advisory board member, and two agents.

It gave us an opportunity to look overall at local food as a pathway and what works and does not, and what agencies are doing to promote it...and we saw the connection between local food and people interested in social entrepreneurship, schools were involved, social justice...it gave us a logic for this, that it is not just an agriculture problem but a comprehensive societal problem based on food access, food health, etc.

(2) Overview of resources available for supporting local foods projects:

My plate is so full, I might not have time to actively pursue any of those ideas (covered in the training) but a lot of times I get an individual or small group that has an intense passion, and I know they can do something, so I can give them some guidance. I can say I know this person in Raleigh to talk to, or I can send them to the (CEFS) website.

(3) Time and facilitation to brainstorm as a group and define project goals:

The meeting in Raleigh was good because we had not really gotten together as a group...it made us really think about our goals. We had lofty ideas...it made us realize that there were a lot of things that we had not considered, and it helped us pare down our ideas to something more manageable that could be completed in one year.

Website and other resources: Respondents were asked whether or not and to what extent they used and found to be useful the following: webinars (two during year two); monthly conference calls in year two; and resource documents and web links on the CEFS website.

Website: Of the 11 respondents, nine noted that they had never used the website resources. Three of those who replied “no” said that they had other sources of information. These three were all involved in community garden projects, and used the resources provided by the active state community garden association (which has its own website, webinars, list-serve, etc.). The remaining respondents stated that they were simply too busy. An example comment:

The offer was there to pull on resources...I would say we didn't strongly pull on those resources—we did not really look at the stuff online....I think it was left to us—you've heard about all these resources, so when you get back to your site, pull on these. But then you get back and there are so many things going on.

Webinars: Eight of the 11 respondents noted that they participated in the webinars and that they found the information presented helpful. Two respondents noted that webinars were not useful for them because, unless the topics were very specific to their project, they tended to “get distracted” and work on other things during the webinar. One of the respondents noted the usefulness of the webinars because they could be archived for a later date.

Conference calls: Eight of the 11 found the conference calls helpful, one did not find them helpful, and two said that some were helpful. Interviewees were asked whether they preferred the calls that largely consisted of each project leader updating the group on his or her progress, or if they preferred calls that were focused on a particular topic. Respondents were equally split among those who specifically noted that they liked to

hear the progress of others, those who preferred the more subject-focused calls, and those who found both types of calls equally useful. Example comments:

I liked the project updates, it was encouraging to know when people were successful, it helped to encourage others.

I think where people gave updates, we could learn from their mistakes...But I think it would have been more useful to have just had calls among those whose projects were more similar in nature.

Other resources: One person specifically noted that she frequently used the two training manuals that were distributed. Three respondents specifically noted that in-person goal-setting training provided by a consultant (Warren, who trained the groups in planning and evaluation techniques) was extremely useful. Three respondents noted the wealth of information gained by attending the SSAWG conference. Three also noted the utility of learning how to construct a logic model.

Conclusions and recommendations:

Project leaders most consistently expressed enthusiasm for the initial two-day training in Raleigh and information learned at the SSAWG conference. Based on this and other comments made regarding the train-the-trainer model (included later in this report), a two-day training either in Raleigh or in conjunction with another conference is suggested for Phase II cohorts. Ideally, both Phase I and Phase II team members would be at this meeting. Because some of the overview information would likely be a repeat of what Phase I members learned during their own orientation session, Phase I members could attend the second day of training to work with the Phase II team.

The majority of respondents found value in the conference calls and webinars. Based on their comments, and those of the CEFS facilitator who arranged and led the calls, less frequent “sharing” calls may be warranted, with more frequent focused-topic calls. These focused calls could provide in-depth discussions among those who are working on similar projects, with invited guests in the call who have more experience. Conference calls or webinars facilitated by a CEFS staff or CEFS contractor in partnership with a knowledgeable CES agent would be well-received.

The resource least used was the website. Two project leaders noted that they could refer interested individuals to the website for further information. The most useful role for the website going forward would be as an updated resource listing NC local foods projects and CES agent contacts for each project. This information is not easily accessible from the CES. Additional information might take the form of adding pertinent links, but creation of new content does not appear warranted.

Reporting Requirements: Clarity and Reasonableness

One of the eleven respondents stated that the reporting requirements were overly burdensome:

I did not realize the amount of hoops and phone calls and emails...if I had known from the very beginning what was required I would have told [the agent who applied] not to apply for the grant.

Ten of the eleven project leaders noted that the requirements were acceptable, with several also noting that the requirements helped keep them on-task and their project moving forward:

The process was clearly communicated. I knew there were expectations. It is so easy in extension work, we allow ourselves to be jerked around from one project to another...knowing that a conference call was coming up and you might have to report, you needed to stop and think about it.

This grant...[provided] a lot of assistance and help along the way. I felt like we weren't being dumped. A lot of grants do that.

At first I was reluctant to do the logic model and stuff like that. It felt burdensome because it was outside of everyone's normal workload. But in the end it really helped us so far as coming up with our goals and seeing where we were in the project.

One of the Phase II respondents noted that they were initially unclear on the requirements (e.g., logic model, project reporting during conference calls):

I had no idea what the expectations were, and it took me a while to figure things out. It was not really anyone's fault, we are all just busy, but I needed to know more what was expected of me to provide.

Conclusions and recommendations:

The reporting requirements were clear and reasonable. To enhance clarity with regard to the timing of reporting, it is recommended that a schedule of reporting requirements be posted as a document on the CEFS project website. While reporting requirements were emailed to all Phase I and Phase II partners for the 2010-2011 project, having a fixed site with the requirements would serve as a helpful reference for project partners.

“Passing on the Gift” from Phase I to Phase II

The initial outlines of the SARE PDP project envisioned that Phase I partners would both mentor and provide training activities to Phase II partners. In three of the six counties, training activities took place. The activities were as follows: site visits to evaluate a community garden location; goal-setting workshops; a farmer's market tour; a food safety training; a GAP training; a meeting with NCSU tourism faculty; meetings with farmers to plan a farm tour; and meetings with farmers to clarify farmer's market rules.

All Phase I and Phase II leaders reported communication with their counterparts by telephone, email, and in person. More frequent communication was noted for counties that were adjacent and had worked frequently together on either local foods or other projects. Counties that were linked structurally (shared an agent, for example) also noted they worked well together and had frequent contact with their partners. Two respondents noted that they might have worked together more if their projects had been more similar. In the one case of non-adjacent counties who had not worked together before, communication was reported to be lacking:

I would say that communication has been lacking between us and the phase two team...I am sure that they are all busy, that has made the communication difficult...perhaps they have momentum and don't feel like they need the help.

Most of the contact between Phase I and Phase II teams took place via phone calls or emails between the project leaders. Formal training activities did occur (as noted, above), but respondents reported that most of the ongoing contact took the form of sharing information between the leads on an informal basis. Phase II leads then shared this information with their teams. Two Phase II agents noted that they needed more guidance on how to conduct a more formal training, and more guidance on how to keep the flow of information going between the two teams. One agent noted:

I think having a more formal written plan on how the transfer of information will take place would be good, so it is not just one extension director talking to the other director. During that transition period (Phase I to Phase II) have it on the agenda from the very beginning to have a meeting of the two teams, make it part of the formal requirements.

This agent did not, however, advocate a number of mandated meetings between the two teams during the year. Another agent noted the need to have a “how to be a trainer” session or set of guidelines that would provide concrete suggestions on how mentors could most effectively train their Phase II partners.

Conclusions and recommendations:

Mentoring and information transfer appears to have taken place most effectively for PDP partners for whom projects were similar and when partners had pre-existing ties. The ideal partnership, one that most capitalizes on the idea of a mentored transfer of knowledge to create local food activities, is one in which the mentored county has high interest—thus providing a fertile ground—and the mentoring county has sufficient project-specific experience to provide guidance. The result is a true partnership which maximizes the use of the SARE PDP grant resources.

An arguably much less effective use of SARE PDP resources is in the case of counties that are already sharing information on long-standing local foods projects. For example, one of the partnerships provided funds to ongoing community garden projects led by highly experienced agents who already worked together frequently. While the projects benefitted from the \$1000 grants, the return on investment was likely less than for a team

that was lower on the learning curve and had more potential to benefit from resources and guidance.

One intention of the PDP grant was to train CES agents to lead formal trainings in community based project development. Based on respondent comments, Phase I leaders should be provided with support on envisioning and designing specific training activities that they could provide to Phase II teams. A joint training at the beginning of year two would be an ideal time to work on this. At this time teams could also review the grant reporting requirements. A requirement that the two teams (or team leaders) meet with CEFS during year two is also advised, both to provide resource support and as an organizational aid to facilitate transfer of information between Phase I and Phase II teams.

Potential Presentations by Phase I and Phase II Leaders

Project leaders were asked for topics about which they would feel comfortable giving a presentation to CES agents with an interest in local foods. Most responded enthusiastically to the prospect of sharing information that they have learned through their involvement in local foods. A table appears at the end of this report listing these topics by project leader.

Unique Aspects of the SARE PDP Partnerships

The SARE PDP initiative sought to train county-based teams led by Extension partners in the design and implementation of community-based food project. Interviewees were asked to reflect upon how the projects resulting from the PDP accomplished the objective of creating *community* around the issue of local foods. This question was phrased to each interviewee as follows: “Did this particular partnership work any differently than other projects that you’ve been involved in, with regard to community partners?”

Responses indicated that the PDP was a catalyst in forging new networks of partners and information built around local foods issues. Example statements:

The neat thing about this local food culture, [is that] we are beginning to find out what other people are doing and to collaborate. We partnered with Tour Cleveland County, which is part of the Chamber (of Commerce), and they helped us organize and had some funding to help restaurateurs and chefs come (on our farm tour).

Having the non-traditional partners (from tourism, the hospital, a chef) was the biggest thing, and now those folks are really good partners, and they likely didn’t have a clue as to what we (extension agents) did before this project. This is an audience we don’t usually reach, it is not part of our traditional audience.

This has been very different. We’ve worked with lots of different partners...This has really brought the community together.

There were a lot of people out there that I didn't know about—lots of farmers. This was a way for me to get to know them. And we've had a lot of new people move here, so this is a way to connect everyone.

Respondents noted that having seed money and a focused project around which partners could coalesce were two important factors in community-building around local foods and in leveraging support:

Being part of this project was helpful in initially drawing community partners into the discussion. We could say, "we have been selected" and I think saying that and saying we have a bit of resource money helped bring people to the table.

We approached ASAP (the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) and they cost-shared the advertising (for the farmer's market). We also approached Farm Bureau, and between those two we paid for all the marketing. Then we spent our \$1000 (in project funds) on the billboard and rack cards...The SARE money was really pivotal...it was a main building block (for the project) and everything really fell into place.

We got a Community Sparkplug grant for \$3000 from BC/BS. It paid for doing cooking demos at the farmers market.

One respondent expressed skepticism about "local foods" as an initiative

I have been doing local foods for a very long time. It just has gone under different names. Marketing of local foods is great, it brings more attention to the public, but I am still doing about the same thing, repackaging it with a different name.

Conclusions and recommendations:

The SARE PDP was a very effective means to build support among new county partners around the issue of local foods and to leverage PDP funds for financial and intellectual support from these partners.

Interviewees Overall Perceptions of the Success of the Train-the-Trainer Model and Ongoing Information Exchange

Respondents were asked to reflect on the overall success of the train-the-trainer model in disseminating information and activities on local foods across counties. Most project leaders expressed satisfaction with the model.

I think this is a good model, because we all have to give updates, and we can go online and see what other projects are doing, how they went about setting them up, etc. It's really a sharing type situation and it can help you avoid the obstacles that might come up. Just the collaboration was very helpful.

As noted previously, several respondents suggested that projects worked “better,” with more information exchanged in the spirit of a train-the-trainer framework, when the projects were either similar in nature or the Extension leaders already worked together frequently. One agent noted that more information exchange would occur if the Phase II partners were selected when the project began:

I think for it (the train-the-trainer model) to work better we need to have the second county already selected and know that they were going to do something really similar to what we are doing.

The train-the-trainer mentor system is a great system. I mean, I don't want to train everybody! It works well if it is with someone that you are already working with.

I think this is a good approach IF the projects are similar. Because our situation was not totally similar, it was a stretch.

Overall, respondents believed their involvement in the project led to significant successes in building local foods initiatives in their counties:

Participating in the (train-the-trainer) process was beneficial, making us aware of resources across the state and getting us to focus on local foods as a central part of our work here. And that has happened. It was on our radar screen, but having this as a project and being accountable for it makes it a higher priority.... This project has helped us focus on local foods as a core program.

The PDP was an incentive for us to begin thinking creatively about how to start the conversation—no real plans had been there, the ideas had just been floating around in people's heads. [The PDP] gave us an incentive to get some action started.

Respondents were most enthusiastic about the new community partnerships that had formed around local foods and how this could continue to bear fruit in the form of new projects, and new sources of funding:

(Going forward) we will be able to build with new partners, like Farm Bureau. When you have partners you'll be able to reach more individuals and they'll advocate for you.

This has accelerated our growth and development astronomically, we've made three years of progress in one year. We've already applied for a couple of small grants, and we have developed small but meaningful projects.

We've worked to get the community used to local foods. When the art council has its gala, or the Chamber has its evening of stars, we work with them to source local foods.

Interviewees were also asked how they might continue to obtain and share information about local foods now that the SARE PDP was drawing to a close. Those who already had frequent contact before the project began noted that they would continue to communicate with each other, incorporating local food activities as a core part of their joint work. For those working specifically with community gardens, agents noted that there already exists a community garden organization and network in North Carolina, which they would continue to draw upon. Other agents noted that by being involved with the project they had learned about new information contacts, such as CEFS, Sandhills Farm to Table, and local food listserves. Several respondents noted that county local foods coordinators need more face-to-face training.

Conclusions and recommendations:

Although it is not possible to ascertain whether the train-the-trainer model was superior to an alternative form of information transfer (because no comparison group was used), overall the project leaders involved in this PDP were pleased with the process and the outcomes associated with their involvement in the grant. As envisioned, the PDP served as a catalyst for the creation of local foods projects.

Based on participant comments, it appears unlikely that the kind of communication that the SARE PDP facilitated across the 12 counties will continue. Project leaders said they would continue to share information with their partner counties, but do not have a means to communicate across the entire network or build on this network with outreach to other counties.

Recommendations and Limitations

Interviews with the CES leaders indicate that the SARE PDP grant provided significant support for the development of local foods initiatives in North Carolina. A limitation of the interviews is the possibility that respondents reflected more positively upon their experiences than they might have if their answers to the interview questions were anonymous. However, it is unlikely that their comments related to improving the train-the-trainer process are biased.

The final section of this report lists recommendations related to two areas:

(1) future train-the-trainer projects with a new set of counties (2) building upon the current network and knowledge of these Phase I and Phase II trainers.

For future train-the-trainer projects:

1. Return on investment is maximized when project leaders have a great deal of interest in local foods and the time and energy to devote to local foods, but have not yet developed specific initiatives. Focus on recruiting these types of counties as partners.
2. After an initial overview of resources and initiatives ongoing in the state (such as that held at the Arboretum), hold a follow-up meeting three months into each

- project year with project leaders and CEFS staff to provide ongoing resource support.
3. Train Phase I partners in the means to train Phase II partners, offering specific suggestions applicable to their projects.
 4. At the transition, from Phase I to Phase II, have CEFS involved in facilitating the meeting between the two, reviewing the goals and the requirements. This could include goal setting and logic-model training (which was highly valued by the participants).
 5. Solicit conference call and webinar topics, have guest experts participate in these calls. Make sharing/reporting conference calls less frequent.
 6. Have an end-of-project meeting with all Phase I and Phase II project leaders to reflect on lessons learned and garner specific suggestions on moving forward.

To build on the current network of trainers:

1. Organize an annual or biannual event during which local food coordinators could meet and network. These meetings could be the brainstorming grounds from which new projects arise. Interested individuals could then submit project proposals to CEFS for funding, with the requirement that the proposals must be made in conjunction with a mentor county. (These activities assume new grant funding.) Rather than a state-wide meeting, the meetings might be organized in conjunction with district conferences, or regional or national conferences, including SSAWG. .
2. Organize and facilitate webinars on specific topics, work through CES local food coordinators to solicit topics, and have agents serve as guest speakers on the webinars.
3. Maintain a list of NC Extension initiatives on the CEFS website. At minimum, annually update the progress of these 12 counties in moving their local foods initiatives forward.
4. Involve the CES project leaders from all participant counties in future CEFS initiatives.

Table II. Possible Future Presentations by SARE PDP Project Leaders

Extension leader	Topic
Christy Bredenkamp	Farmer's market revitalization
Amanda Egdorf-Sand	Creating partnerships to support school gardens in alternative schools and high schools; designing school garden projects for buy-in among older students
David Fogarty	Building a networked school-gardening program; building on existing partnerships to build support for local food projects
Shenille Ford	Customer service, especially vendor presentation, at farmer's markets
Stephen Greer	Marketing and promotions of community gardens (and fund-raising gardens) to the public
Tammy Kelly	Creating partnerships to revitalize farmer's markets; market advisory boards; re-writing market rules
Danelle McKnight	Holding your first farm tour, what to do and not to do
Don Mebane	Starting a community garden project, especially talking about lessons learned with regard to ensuring strong volunteer commitment
Karen Neil	Relationships and partnerships to develop and support community gardens; development of community garden hubs; establishing school garden networks
Greg Traywick	Building partnerships to support local food systems; the importance of getting buy-in from local officials. "I would say it is never too late to get started, wherever you are in our profession, and where your community is, things can happen quickly and you can get volunteers engaged and motivated."
Taylor Williams	Overall benefits of local food systems; linkages between local food projects and societal issues (e.g., health, social justice, etc.)

