

# Local Food System Practitioner Peer to Peer Call/Webinar Guide & Evaluation

*The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Local Foods Program received a USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program grant in 2016 to build the capacity of local food coordinators and other agricultural educators working to build stronger local food systems. With this funding, the Local Food Program team has implemented three strategies: (1) a mentorship program pairing experienced local food coordinators with beginning coordinators, (2) peer-to-peer (P2P) learning group calls held online using the Zoom collaborative meeting platform and (3) individualized face-to-face technical consultations for regional food system working group sites. This guide focuses on the P2P calls.*

## Overview

This project aims to build the capacity of local food coordinators and other agricultural educators working for the development of local food systems. The target audience includes Iowa State University Extension and Outreach staff, and employees of other entities (RC&D, city planners, community groups, etc.) Professional development opportunities for these food system practitioners will help build a sustainable and effective local food system.

Research shows that strong local food systems support profitability for farmers, strong environmental practices, and high quality of life for farmers and their communities. Peers are highly valued as sources of support and education. From our needs assessment, we learned that local food practitioners value Regional Food System Working Group (RFSWG) meetings, held on a quarterly basis. They also want more frequent and intensive peer sharing opportunities.

## Peer learning groups

Our original plan was to have peer learning groups connect through "peer learning calls," a series of monthly 1.5 hour video-chats for local food practitioners. We originally envisioned organizing each month's call in the following way:

- Focus on a different topic identified by practitioners through a survey submitted via the RFSWG listserv. Some topic examples include "working with food hubs" or "communicating the value of our work."
- Participants rotate leading the calls, and each call features a short presentation (by call leader or outside presenter) and discussion.
- The project coordinator assists with technology and logistics, and suggests content experts if needed. Call participants receive a brief electronic evaluation

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form from the project evaluator at the end of each call through which they suggest future topics.

- Peer learning calls are based on topics collected via surveys. If topics specific to certain sectors are consistently requested, it may be suggested that attendees form a peer cohort to focus on their needs.

## What we learned

Initially, the calls were scheduled monthly, but it quickly became clear that the timeframe was too frequent for both the facilitator of the calls and for the participants. After 3-4 of the monthly calls, the timeframe was switched to every other month.

The original format was via Zoom, which allowed for either videoconferencing or calling by phone. This did work well, but with one particularly popular topic, Farm to School 101, the webinar format was used to facilitate multiple speakers in different locations who would be using PowerPoint presentations. The webinar format allowed each of them to control the screen and share their presentations without needing the facilitator to do so.

Another change was the realization that the facilitation of the calls would always remain with the Local Foods Program staff. Participants did not want, nor have time for, the responsibility of dealing with scheduling and other logistics of the call (setting up Zoom, finding speakers, etc.)

The original plan was to have 2-3 cohort groups, each having a different focus in the food system, but that did not come to fruition. Again, there was some interest in specific topics or issue areas, but it was only from a small number of people. The calls remained open to anyone doing food system work.

Finally, the participants did not want national or even regional “experts” as presenters. They wanted local speakers who had “boots on the ground” experience with the chosen topic. This usually made finding speakers easier, but we did find some challenges in using the amount of money we had set aside, as many of the speakers provided their service as part of their employment and couldn’t accept stipends/honoraria. However, in keeping this in mind for future calls, the facilitator did look for local speakers with experience and expertise who were also able to accept compensation.

The majority of the participants were willing to fill out the evaluation forms, and the results indicate they believe the calls were helpful to them in performing their duties and helping them increase knowledge about their roles and responsibilities.

Topics covered included:

1. Coaching Colleagues, Leaders and Allies
2. Conflict Management
3. Food Systems Evaluation

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4. Writing Successful Grants to Support Your Food Systems Work
5. Tips for Improving Communications and Outreach
6. Food Hubs 101
7. Farmers Market 101 for Local Food Coordinators
8. Racial Equity and Inclusivity

For recordings of the webinars, please go here:

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/ffed/professional-development-opportunities/>

## Evaluation goals

### *Short-term outcomes:*

1. Increased knowledge of participants in food systems topics.
  - a. Increased capacity among local foods practitioners.
  - b. Network of local food practitioners in Iowa grows.
2. New relationships develop among people participating in the local food network.
3. Extension educators develop new partnerships with food system stakeholders in their region.
4. Farmers are key advisors in food system development processes.

### *Intermediate outcomes:*

1. Participating agricultural educators incorporate food systems concepts into existing and new programs, thereby meeting client demand.

For example:

  - a. Extension educators offer technical assistance related to local foods to farmers.
  - b. County Youth Coordinators participate in farm to school or school garden programs.
2. Farmers receive information, resources and technical assistance around local foods.
3. New collaborative work begins among network members.
4. Higher job retention among local food coordinators.
5. More local food coordinators are hired.
6. Local food practitioners leverage more funding to increase food system development outcomes.

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*Long-term outcomes:*

1. Better coordination and increased support for local food system efforts in the North Central Region.
2. Increase effectiveness of local food programming.
3. Increased access to local foods.
4. Policy, systems, and environmental changes to support local food systems occur throughout the state of Iowa.



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# Peer-to-peer calls

## Evaluation Report

By Arlene Enderton, April 2019

### Introduction

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Local Foods Program received a USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program grant in 2016 to build the capacity of local food coordinators and other agricultural educators working to build stronger local food systems. With this funding, the Local Food Program team has implemented three strategies: (1) a mentorship program pairing experienced local food coordinators with beginning coordinators, (2) peer-to-peer (P2P) learning group calls held online using the Zoom collaborative meeting platform and (3) individualized face-to-face technical consultations for regional food system working group sites.

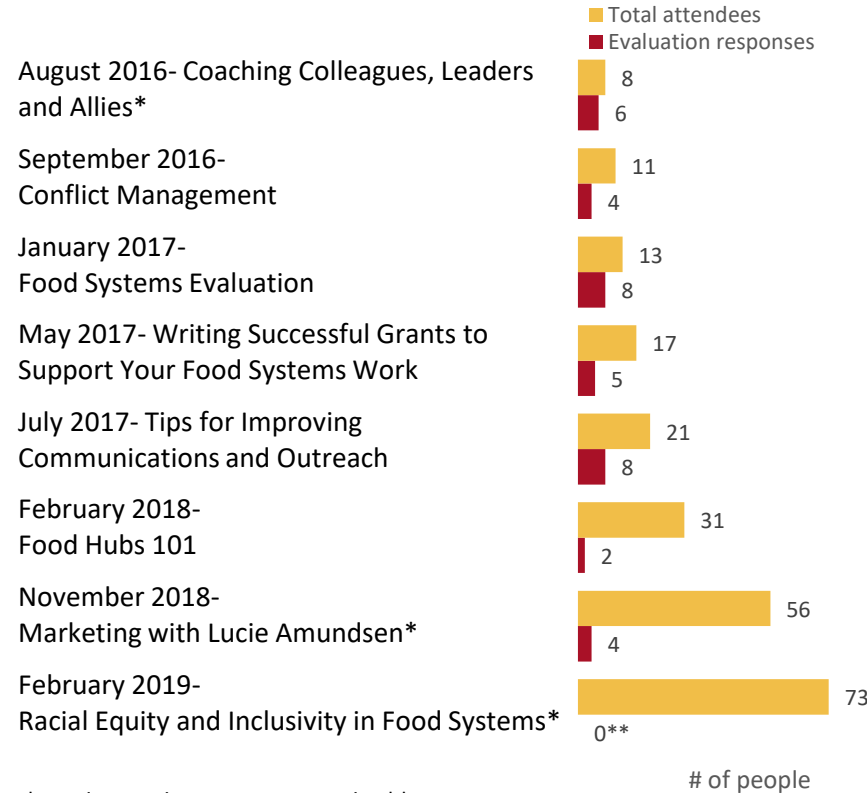
This report focuses on the P2P calls. Eight calls were held between August 2016 and February 2019 and are listed in Figure 1.

One hundred eighty-two unique individuals participated in these calls, attending a cumulative total of 228 times, shown in Figure 1. The Racial Equity and Inclusivity in Food Systems webinar had the highest attendance, partially because several (estimated 65) participants from other states participated who had never participated in a P2P call before.

Attendance increased with every P2P call held, demonstrating how P2P calls have grown.

Following each P2P call (except the call about racial equity and inclusion) Lynn Heuss, Program Coordinator, sent an evaluation survey to gather feedback on how to improve future calls and to identify topics of interest for future calls. A summary of those survey results is the topic of this report.

**Figure 1: Peer-to-peer call attendance increased with every call.**



\*Total attendance is estimated. \*\* No survey was sent.

## Methods

A survey was sent electronically to call participants following each P2P call. The survey questions included in each survey differed slightly from call to call.

We received 37 responses, for a 16 percent response rate. Figure 1 also shows the number of survey responses we received after each call, with the number of responses after each call ranging from two responses (Food Hubs 101) to eight (Food Systems Evaluation and Tips for Improving Communication and Outreach).

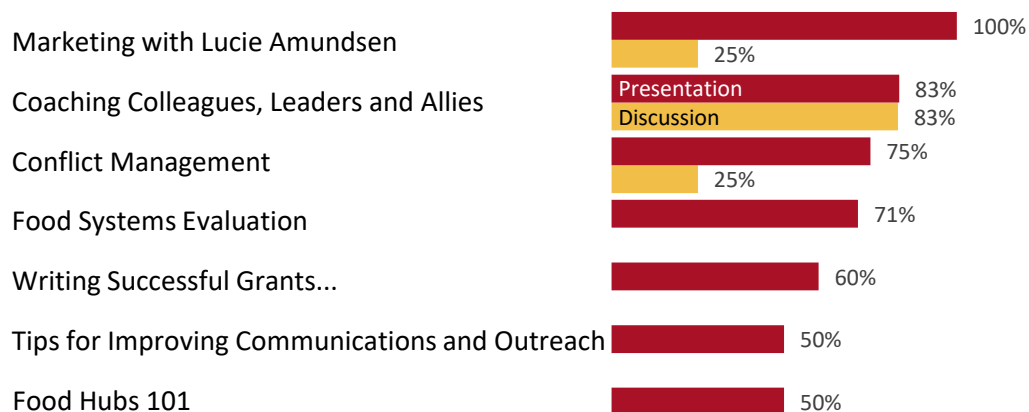
Arlene Enderton, Local Food Program evaluator, analyzed the data using SPSS™ statistics software.

## Results

### P2P calls received good ratings on usefulness.

For all calls we asked respondents to rate the P2P call topic; for three calls we also asked respondents to rate the usefulness of the call discussion time. The topic of all calls was rated highly, with at least half of respondents rating them as useful or very useful, shown in Figure 2. Respondents also found the discussion time helpful for the P2P call on coaching, but not the calls on conflict management or marketing. Unfortunately, the comments give us little insight into why discussion time was sometimes useful and other time not, other than one comment, in which the respondent said he/she felt he/she didn't know enough about conflict management to contribute to the discussion.

**Figure 2: Half or more of respondents found each webinar presentation useful**



% who found the call useful or very useful

### Participants want interaction and discussion but thought needs to be given as to how to set the stage for that.

When asked for suggestions to improve the P2P calls, respondents most commonly said they want the calls to be interactive. For example, one respondent said, "As this is a Peer to Peer call, I thought we might have a little more interaction between the peers about their experience. I understand you requested that in advance, but that info all went to [the presenter and organizer of the call]. The call itself did not incorporate too much sharing among those on the call."

For those who wanted to participate in a discussion, one respondent suggested sending out questions ahead of time to prepare them for a discussion. A comment that discussion is hard when participants are unfamiliar with a topic suggests a discussion format might be more appropriate for more familiar topics than novel ones.

However, respondents differed in how they want to interact. For example, some wanted a discussion time, another suggested using polls to engage the audience, and another suggested asking questions verbally, rather than through the chat box.

These results, coupled with the findings in Figure 2 showing that participants found some discussions helpful and others not, indicate that interaction is important, discussions are just one of many good ways to interact, and participants may need to be prepped ahead of time to interact.

### P2P calls are informing participants' plans

When asked how they anticipate implementing what they learned in a peer-to-peer call, the most common response (shared by seven respondents) was to use social media differently or try new social media platforms. These responses came from the calls about communication and about marketing. One respondent said, after participating in the call about marketing, "I am giving thought to who our audience is and going to craft Facebook posts with those audiences in mind." Another said, after the call about communications, "Today, I've already changed my how I manage my work-related social media habits."

Five respondents indicated they intend to incorporate what they learned into future work plans. For example, one respondent who participated in the Food Hub 101 call said, "We are excited to have the focused guidance on establishing our procurement segment of our plan."

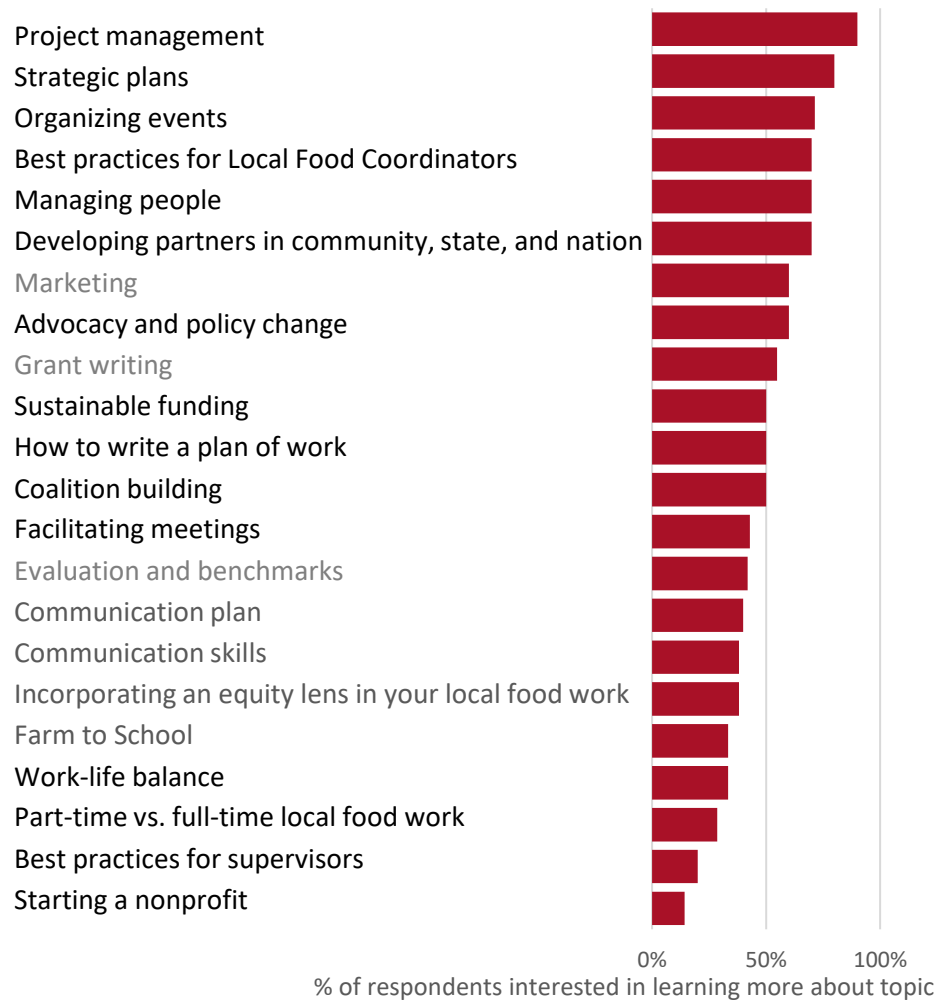
## Several topics remain that could be covered in P2P calls

Participants were asked to identify topics they were interested in through a multiple choice question, shown in Figure 3. The question was asked following each call, except Marketing with Lucie Amundsen, because that was one of the last calls held. The most popular topics include: project management, strategic plans, organizing events, best practices for Local Food Coordinators, managing people, and developing partners in the community, state, and nation.

Figure 3 also shows, in grey, which topics have been covered. This shows that results from this question were used to plan subsequent calls.

**Figure 3: Several topics remain to be covered in a P2P call**

Topics in gray have been the topic of a call.



## Recommendations

Give greater opportunity for interaction during peer-to-peer calls. How this is accomplished may depend on the topic of the call. For familiar topics, a presentation may not be necessary. In addition, participants will be more prepared to discuss if the organizers sends out discussion questions ahead of time. For less familiar topics, a presentation is appropriate, and interaction might be achieved using polls or unmuted question and answer time.