

Community Food Systems scholarship utilization and impact in educational programing

Access to professional development is crucial for enhancing knowledge and skills as well as providing opportunities for networks and collaborations among professionals to improve performance in educational programing. In July 2016, I was awarded professional development scholarship through the UW-Extension Community Food Systems (CFS) program to participate in the 18th Annual National Value-Added Agriculture Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. The knowledge, perspectives, and professional networks gained as a result of participating in this conference has had an important impact on my programing in Chippewa Valley region. For example, one of my educational programming in Chippewa County is to expand the production and consumption of fresh healthy locally-produced foods in Chippewa Valley. This focus on local food was based on a needs assessment I conducted in late 2015. I discovered during the needs assessment that most of the local food producers/farmers market vendors in the area are of Hmong ethnic background, with limited knowledge in marketing strategies and organizational development such as co-op.

With the scholarship from CFS, I was able to participate in the 18th Annual National Value - Added Agriculture Conference held in Madison July 20 -21, 2016, where I learned a great deal about local food programs across the nation, including success stories, challenges, and opportunities. During the conference, I learned about and made connection with Pakou Hang, Executive Director of Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) in St. Paul Minnesota - successful Hmong farmers organization credited for awareness about and interest in local foods and small-scale sustainable farming in Minnesota, generating hundreds of millions in annual sales. This was an exciting moment as I explore frameworks/models of local food organizational development approach within Hmong cultural perspective. Since then, I have been in contact with Hang about collaborating to explore Hmong sustainable farming systems in Chippewa Valley. Hang has expressed willingness to collaborate and share the Hmong co-op and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) development experience in Minnesota, providing an opportunity to explore and replicate this model among Hmong farmers in Chippewa Valley. As a snowball effect, I have contacted the Director of Hmong Mutual Assistance Association in the neighboring Eau Claire County to help facilitate the initiative to organize a co-op for Hmong farmers. Currently, we are in the process of planning workshops and focus group discussions with farmers to learn their perspectives and share the HAFA model and experiences.

In addition to expanding local food, this program will address the importance goal of equity/inclusiveness in Community Food Systems and within UW - Extension mission and values.

It is important to note that this is just one of the highlights of the impacts of the CFS scholarship, however, I have also learned and made quality networks with other professionals, including food scientists and researchers on local foods during the conference.

As a new colleague at UW - Extension, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Community Food Systems team for awarding me the professional development scholarship that has had such a successful results and impact on my programming in Chippewa County.