Local Food Systems Response to COVID:
Building Better Beyond

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➲ ISSUE

Local food systems organizations and departments were, and continue to be, overwhelmed by high rates of food insecurity as social distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic causes job loss, lack of school meal availability, and an overall economic downturn. This includes food banks and pantries which are now serving more clients while also implementing COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. This also includes food policy councils and farm to institution organizations seeking to create connections within local food systems to ensure residents have access to food and farmers can transition their client base (ex. from restaurants or wholesale to direct markets). These organizations often lack resources in terms of staffing, finances, infrastructure and technical knowledge. Closures of schools, for example, forced municipalities, schools, and nonprofits to develop rapid-response food distribution infrastructure and programs almost overnight.

➲ INNOVATION

Students at the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy launched the Friedman Food Systems COVID-19 Connector ("Connector"), a service learning program utilizing an online platform to match organizations seeking technical assistance in their responses to COVID-19 to Tufts students with corresponding skills and interests. Non-profit organizations, farms, companies, and governments benefit from students' time and skills and students have the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to real world problems.

➲ OUTCOME

Students created food safety guides, local food maps, data visualizations, data management platforms, blog posts, grant proposals, and newsletters, among other things, for 26 organizations in 13 US states. The Connector will be folded into an existing program at the Friedman school called Service Scholars. Moving forward, Service Scholars will connect students and organizations on a variety of projects (not limited to direct responses to COVID-19) that work to alleviate food systems challenges in communities across the U.S.

Friedman Food Systems COVID-19 Connector

The Friedman Food Systems COVID-19 Connector ("Connector") came out of discussions that took place in a course at the Friedman school, Food Law and Regulation. When classes stopped meeting in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the professor of this course quickly adjusted the curriculum to consider the topics on the syllabus in tandem with the on-going pandemic. A few students from the course decided they wanted to act upon ideas that emerged from class discussions, thus seeding the idea for a platform to match food systems organizations with students who could provide technical assistance in response to the pandemic. Almost all of the organizations involved in the Connector are local food systems organizations meaning that they do their work within one city or region of the country.

The goal of the Connector was primarily to help organizations respond to the COVID-19 crisis, which had and continues to have a big impact on the food system. Secondarily, the Connector was launched to provide students with the opportunity to give back to a community in a time of great need and uncertainty. The platform received 40 project submissions from April to June 2020, 26 of which were pursued as projects by students through the Connector. Thirty-six students worked on these projects, which included graduate students in the Friedman school, as well as undergraduate and graduate students in other programs at Tufts. The projects fell into two broad categories: food policy and food access. Food policy projects focused on farm to institution, child nutrition, essential workers in the food system, and food waste. Food security projects included support for food pantries, community gardens, local food markets, and farmers market logistics.

Screenshot from the AIO Action Data Dashboard showing Individual Food Pantry Visits in Q3 of 2020. This is one example of a completed student project.

The Connector organizers set up two submission forms: one for organizations with a project, and one for students interested in working on a project. Organization contacts answered a number of questions about the idea for the project and a general sense of the time commitment needed to complete the project. Students were asked about topics in which they were interested, their skill-set, and how much time they were able to commit. Connector organizers then matched students to projects based on availability, skills, and topic interest. Organization contacts and student volunteers worked together once they started on the projects to figure out deliverables and a project timeline, since the projects came together quickly in response to urgent needs. Throughout the project, Connector organizers stayed in touch with the students and organization contacts, providing support as needed.

Student organizers created a website for the Connector where project submissions were posted and students uploaded their interest forms. To reach out to local organizations and businesses, an announcement of the website and project was sent to a number of local & regional food systems listservs including that of Massachusetts Food Systems Collaborative, Nutrition & Obesity Network Policy Research & Evaluation, Healthy Eating Research

(NER NOPREN), and theCenter for Liveable Futures Food Policy Network project. Information was also sent out to the Friedman and public health student bodies, posted on the Friedman Student Facebook group and on the Tufts Civic Impact volunteer opportunities page through Tisch College.

Project Examples

A number of students collated resources for organizations to send to their members in the form of a newsletter or for their websites. A couple students worked on updating the Somerville Food Security Coalition's website with updated information on which pantries and community meals to access during COVID.

One student created a local food map for the Chattanooga Sustainable Food Center with farms, farmers markets, community gardens, and restaurants for residents who are interested in eating local food.

One student is collating links and resources for a weekly digest put out by the Healthy Eating

Research group of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

A few students worked on creating data dashboards and visualizations for food banks or pantries to track and see the change in food distribution before and during the pandemic.

- One student used her skills to create graphs for the Greater Boston Food Bank to show the impact of the pandemic on the food bank's operations. Some of these graphs were used in a case study on the food bank's response to the pandemic that will be submitted to an academic journal.
- Two students worked with AIO Food Pantry in Maine to set up a data dashboard that can provide data visualizations to advance the pantry's mission.

One student is working with Long Beach Fresh, a food policy organization in California. They are working with the local public schools on local food procurement, nutrition education, and how to adapt to COVID-19.

> **"The competence, enthusiasm, and reliability of the student interns was excellent and their contributions to the overall project were significant and valuable. We'd be happy to participate in any future opportunities"**
>
> Project Partner

Project Highlights

As the projects came to a close, we reached out to students and project coordinators from the organizations that participated asking them to share the final deliverables completed by the students and reflections about their experience.

Farm to Pantry (Sonoma County, CA)

One student helped a small non-profit, Farm to Pantry, in Sonoma County save 50% in fees from donations by setting up a new donation platform. Saving money and stretching donations is critical for food system organizations during the time of COVID-19. This support allowed Farm to Pantry to rescue 60,000 pounds of produce a week, which translates to over 24,000 servings of food.

Maine Farm to School and Farm to Institution Networks (Maine)

One student disseminated information about COVID support programs for school nutrition, school gardens, and other farm-to-school programming across New England. As stated by the organization contact, "It was impossible to keep up with everything until she came on board and could hone-in on COVID-specific news, webinars, and toolkits for farm to school as they came available...she is awesome and has been a great asset." The organization contact expressed hope that the platform was mutually beneficial—in particular she hopes that the student she worked with now has a better sense for the food systems work happening regionally.

Organizations that worked with the Connector

- Long Beach Fresh
- Health Eating Research
- Maine Farm to School Network
- Chattanooga Sustainable Food Center
- Greater Boston Food Bank

- Farm to Pantry
- Somerville Food Security Coalition
- Cambridge Health Alliance
- AIO Food and Energy Assistance
- City of Revere

- City of Everett
- Massachusetts Farm to School
- MA Food Systems Collaborative
- Center for Livable Future

In addition to the organizations listed above, several students will continue on with the organizations they were matched with as interns.

Building Better Beyond:
opportunities and considerations

Fundamentals of Success

- Committed and passionate students and organizations
- Organized spreadsheets and matching system for Connector leadership team
- Continued support from Connector leadership team to students and organizations throughout projects

Considerations Moving Forward

- Create systems for better accountability throughout the project. One recommendation would be to receive commitments from students and organizations to send biweekly updates to the Connector leadership team and for there to be an automatic reminder sent to all individuals working on projects to send these updates.
- Create opportunities for students to meet, connect and learn from one another.
- Consider the following questions when students and organizations sign up for the Connector:
  - Will the student have the capacity to commit to projects with full class and work schedules? When a student signs up for the Connector using the interest form posted on the website, this does not necessarily mean they will be able to commit to working on a project when one comes up that is a good match for them.
  - Will organizations have the capacity to mentor or provide guidance/support to

students working on projects?
- Embed the Connector within existing programs at Friedman school to ensure that the platform has the organizational support and resources it needs to continue the work.

Final Thoughts & Next Steps

This platform was seen as a success by the Connector leadership team, project organizations, and students who participated. It also served as an opportunity for the Friedman school to create and build relationships with organizations in the Boston area and around the country. In a recent survey of service-minded graduate students at the Friedman school, 33 out of 42 students stated that they would be interested in working on a long-term volunteer opportunity like those housed under the Connector.

Moving forward, the Connector will be housed under the Service Scholars program at the Friedman School, an organization for service-minded students to work on service projects, volunteer, build relationships, and cultivate service opportunities for the entire student body. Organizations will not be limited to submitting projects that support COVID relief/response work, and can submit short or long term projects on which students can work. Connector organizer, Allie Wainer, will be involved in getting the platform up and running through the Service Scholars website, getting systems in place to match Service Scholar students with organizations based on availability, skills, and interests. Service Scholars has a curriculum committee that is working to build more service opportunities into the Friedman curriculum. The

Connector committee will work with the curriculum committee to facilitate the integration of connector projects into coursework.

Additionally, the Connector committee will also have ambassadors who will work to build relationships with the partner organizations and educate them about this opportunity.

This innovation brief was created in fulfillment of a cooperative research agreement between the Marketing Services Division of the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA AMS), the University of Kentucky, Colorado State University and Penn State University.

Thanks for reading!

For more information and resources on *Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Building Better Beyond,* **visit:** **https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/** where you can sign up for our project listserv, read other innovation briefs, and check out resources put forth by other sectors of the local and regional food system.

College of Agriculture, Food and Environment

NE RCRD

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Colorado State University

USDA **United States Department of Agriculture**

For more information regarding the Friedman Food Systems COVID-19 Connector, visit: **https://sites.tufts.edu/covidfoodsystems/**

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