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From Farm to Fork: A Firsthand Investigation into New Hampshire's Food System

Alexandra Papadakis
University of New Hampshire

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Commentary

From Farm to Fork: A Firsthand Investigation into New Hampshire's Food System

—Alex Papadakis

When you go to the grocery store and pick out a head of lettuce, have you ever thought about who produced it? Where it was produced? How many people were involved in the production, distribution, and sale of that single item?

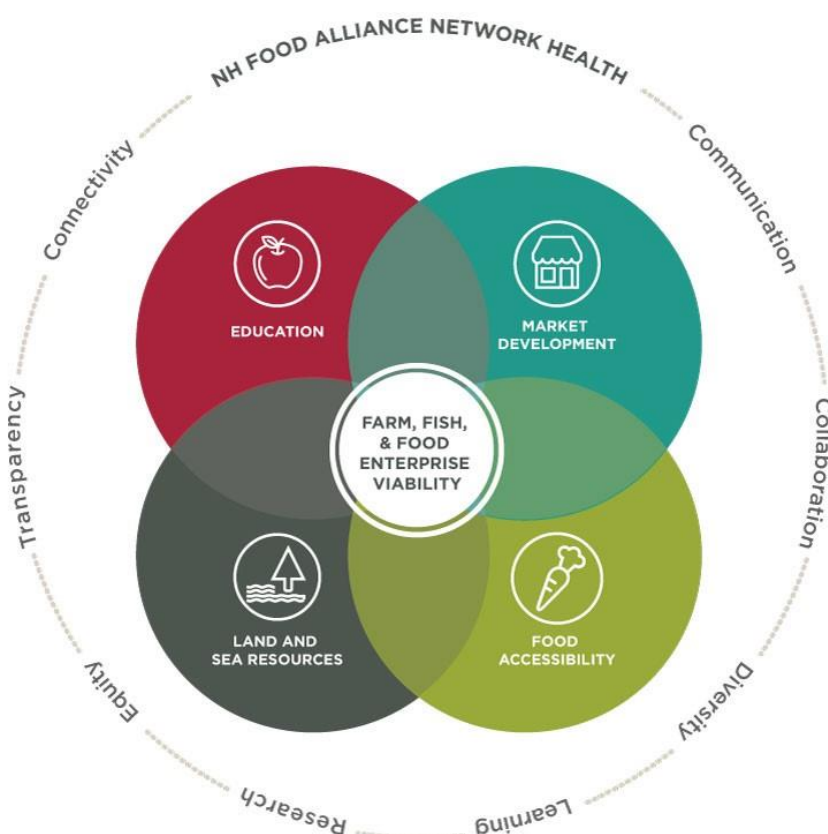
What you might not know, and what I certainly didn't know before deciding to be a sustainable agriculture and food systems major, is that a lot goes on behind the scenes of one food purchase. Over the summer of 2018, I sought to get a better handle on it myself after receiving a Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). As part of the REAP program, recipients are paired with a faculty mentor who supports and guides them through their research. For my project, I connected with Joanne Burke from the Department of Agriculture, Nutrition, and Food Systems at UNH.

With some detailed teamwork, Dr. Burke and I developed a proposal for my research project. I wanted to look critically at the food system, determine what exactly goes on from farm to fork, and see if there were specific opportunities to improve the food system and make it more viable. After some preliminary research, I crafted a research question: "What are the challenges and opportunities that exist within the New Hampshire food system?"



The author, Alex Papadakis.

I divided this research question into three main subsections, based on the food system framework of the New Hampshire Food Alliance: education, market development, and food access (NHFA, 2015). To maximize my time over the summer, Dr. Burke helped me connect with several organizations doing work in these arenas, including NH Farm-to-School, UNH Cooperative Extension, Seacoast Eat Local, NH Gleans, and several other individuals along the way.



The Food System Framework developed by the New Hampshire Food Alliance in 2015.

Education

Literature review results indicated that education can be a powerful tool in promoting food system viability: it has the potential to make eaters aware of the food decisions they make and understand the effect their decisions have on the economy, environment, and individual and community well-being (NHFA, 2015). For the education component of my project, I collaborated with Somersworth Middle School, which has a well-established farm-to-school program. For six weeks, I worked with students on projects that covered a variety of topics, from gardening to nutrition and healthful eating.

To investigate the effect of this program, I dedicated one day at both the beginning and end of the program to administer surveys that asked students about their knowledge of gardening and healthful

foods (Figure 1). After the six-week period, the students showed an improved ability to answer general food and garden questions, and more than half of them reported that they would be more willing to involve vegetables in their diets because of the activities they participated in as part of the program. Although this was only one farm-to-school program, I witnessed firsthand how influential education can be on students' knowledge of food and their food decisions.

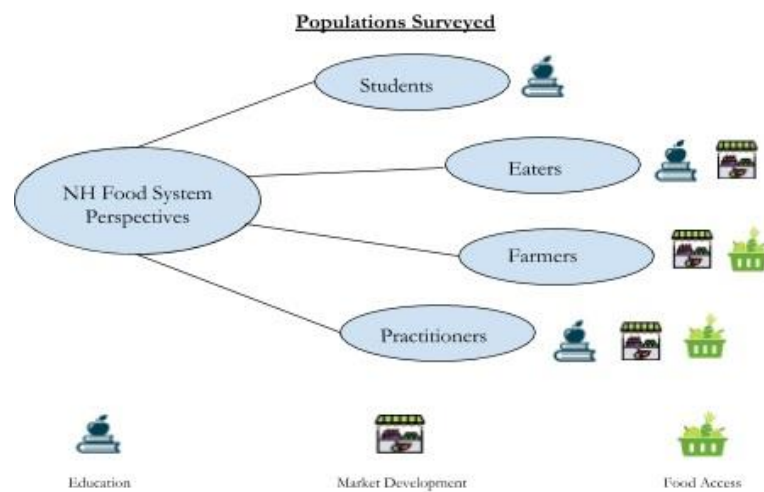


Figure 1: The author surveyed people from four primary perspectives on the food system (students, eaters, farmers, and practitioners). The chart indicates the category(ies) of information (education, market development, and food access) gained from each perspective.

Market Development

My preliminary research in market development showed that there is a need to expand existing market channels between farmers and eaters in New Hampshire. In particular, we have a lot of small-scale producers, but they often lack sufficient infrastructure to access different markets on their own (NHFA, 2015). Other states have addressed this issue through the development of food hubs, which are businesses or organizations that manage “the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers” (Fischer et al., 2013). A USDA-owned study has shown that food hubs have increased market opportunities for producers because they have been able to connect them to restaurants, grocery stores, colleges and universities, food cooperatives, distributors, and school food service providers that they traditionally could not access (Fischer et al., 2013). Given other states’ success with these establishments, Dr. Burke and I thought it would be valuable to investigate the feasibility of developing a food hub in New Hampshire.

To do so, I surveyed twenty-three farmers in the seacoast area. I asked the farmers if they would consider using a food hub, and if so, what services they most likely would use if this resource existed. Results indicated that many farmers had mixed feelings about food hubs. Though almost half could see a food hub increasing their market opportunities, many qualified their remarks by saying that the location and cost would be major determining factors for actual use. Given the pilot nature of my survey, I couldn’t draw any conclusive results, but my preliminary research indicated that food hubs have potential and could expand New Hampshire’s market channels.

Food Access

The third component of my research addressed food access. Hunger is very prevalent in our state; according to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 14.2 percent of New Hampshire households were food insecure in 2016–2017 (FRAC, 2018). The existing network of emergency food assistance providers in New Hampshire—including government programs, food pantries, and community soup kitchens—have noted that foods distributed through these venues vary in



The author collects unharvested produce with staff from NH Gleans.

nutritional quality. For that reason, many food assistance providers have started to incorporate local produce in their distribution by collaborating with an organization called NH Gleans.

“Gleaning” is the age-old practice of gathering leftover produce that would otherwise be wasted. Today, volunteers collect leftover produce that farmers don’t have time to harvest or that hasn’t sold at market but is still suitable for consumption. NH Gleans connects food assistance providers with fresh produce that’s been recovered by volunteers at farms or at the conclusion of farmers’ markets, so that the food is offered to families that would otherwise not have to access it.

For my REAP project, I spent one day a week working with the NH Gleans seacoast-area gleaning coordinator, collecting produce from farms and after farmers’ markets. During these gleanings, we tracked the amount of food we collected and witnessed firsthand how recent increases in gleaning have enhanced the food pantries’ capacities to offer fresh produce to families and individuals who might not otherwise receive that food. And although gleaning is certainly not the only answer to food insecurity, it is one way we are increasing healthful food access in our state.

Conclusion

One of the biggest takeaways from my summer research was not only what I found out from my research and the surveys, but also the value of the interdisciplinary nature of my project. I met individuals from many organizations, and the experience served as a wonderful networking opportunity. I was able to connect with farmers, students, schools, food pantries, and a variety of other people all working to increase food system viability in our state. Having this experience so early in my academic career has opened my eyes to all the work that is being done in the food system arena, and I can’t wait to sink my hands in even deeper.

I would like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for their dedication to supporting undergraduate research, and especially for helping first-year students access this opportunity through the REAP program. In particular, I would like to extend my thanks to the generosity of Mr. Dana Hamel, Mrs. O’Neil, as an extension of the Dorothy Perkins O’Neil Endowed Fund, and Ms. Nancy Lowenberg, who all contributed donations to my REAP award. I am also grateful for the various mentors I had throughout my research time: Joanne Burke, from the Department of Agriculture, Nutrition, and Food Systems, Stacey Purslow, program director for NH Farm-to-School and NH Gleans, Debbie Luppold, from UNH Cooperative Extension, and everyone else I met and worked alongside during my summer project.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Alex Papadakis, from North Hampton, New Hampshire, came to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) to major in sustainable agriculture and food systems, with a dual major in ecogastronomy. She is in the University Honors program and is also a Hamel Scholar. She will graduate in May 2021 with a bachelor of arts degree. Alex was motivated to get involved in research because she considers herself a hands-on learner. She said, “You are able to generate and facilitate your own questions, guide your own learning, and start to apply what you’ve learned in class to a real-world context.”

Alex says that the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP), through which she conducted her research on the local food system, taught her that research is not a linear process; she adapted and revised her research plan in several ways along the way. But the experience proved to be a “light bulb moment” for her. She has decided to focus her major studies on the food system, particularly on issues of food access and food insecurity. Alex decided to further this interest through the Semester in the City program. In the spring of 2019 she worked in Boston with an anti-hunger organization, Project Bread, where she has learned about and helped with some of the exciting work being done to address these important food issues.

Joanne D. Burke is a clinical professor and registered dietitian in the Department of Agriculture, Nutrition, and Food Systems at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). She is also the director of the UNH master’s of science in Nutritional Sciences with Dietetic Internship and senior faculty fellow for the UNH Sustainability Institute. She began working at the UNH Durham campus in 2004. Dr. Burke specializes in community nutrition and food systems, sustainability, dietary patterns, race and equity, and food security. She was able to connect Alex to other professionals working with UNH Cooperative Extension, the NH Food Bank, and Farm-to-School program staff who were integral to making Alex’s multifaceted project a success. An experienced faculty mentor through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, Dr. Burke was impressed with Alex’s dedication, intelligence, self-direction, attention to detail, and enthusiasm.