

August 2011

Edgewood College – Local Food

Edgewood College is a liberal arts college located on 55 acres on the shore of Madison’s Lake Wingra. The college is administered by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, a Catholic order whose founding Dominican values of truth, compassion, justice, partnership and community inform all activities at the college. Edgewood enrolls about 2500 students a year.

Edgewood’s cafeteria, Phil’s, and its café, Wingra, serve hot, cold, to-go, and made-to-order meals to students living in the residence halls and to commuter students. Phil’s is a Green Restaurant Association Certified Green Restaurant.

Challenge

Phil’s and Wingra Café get almost all of the food they prepare from Sysco Food Services in Baraboo. In fall 2009, Edgewood’s dining services began to investigate where Sysco sourced their food, with the goal of increasing the amount of local food Edgewood received. They examined everything from produce to poultry to salad dressing as they sought to support local producers and get fresher, cheaper seasonal food. The definition of “local” varies based on who’s using it; for Edgewood, “local food” is food that’s grown or processed in Wisconsin.

Edgewood learned that much of the food that they were receiving was produced in the Midwest, which they consider “regional,” but not necessarily in Wisconsin. They were especially surprised to learn that most of their milk was coming from Minnesota cows!

Strategy

Edgewood relied on their strong relationship with Sysco to procure more local food beginning in summer 2010. The college is a large and influential Sysco customer, spending \$600-700,000 per year, and Sysco was receptive to making sourcing changes. Edgewood’s dining services manager worked with the Sysco representative to determine how much of each food (e.g., broccoli or french fries) Edgewood purchased over the year, and Sysco contacted Wisconsin farmers and producers to see how much of the food each could supply. As crops matured and food was processed, Sysco picked up the food from a number of local farms or suppliers to give Edgewood the total amount they needed.



Bagging frozen local blueberries at Edgewood

As Edgewood receives shipments of seasonal produce, some of it is served fresh, and some is stored so the college can provide local food year-round. The kitchen staff blanches, quick-freezes, and bags vegetables during the summer and stores them in the kitchen’s walk-in freezer. They have discussed canning as a storage method but haven’t attempted it yet because of the additional complexity and permits it entails.

In the case of the Minnesota milk, Edgewood learned that the 5-gallon containers they purchase were filled and boxed at the

nearest Kemps boxing plant, which was in Minnesota. The milk was sourced from around the boxing plant to ensure freshness, but that meant Wisconsin milk was not being used. At Edgewood's urging, Sysco discussed the situation with Kemps, and soon a new boxing plant was opened in Reedsburg. All the milk that Edgewood serves is now produced and packaged in Wisconsin.

Results

Summer 2011 is the second summer of Edgewood's local sourcing effort, and the results are already significant. Forty percent of Edgewood's food is now locally sourced, up from 10% just two years ago. The effort has a positive impact on the dining services budget, allowing the purchase of higher quality food at a reduced price. Dining services also sees this as an investment in Edgewood's future: Most Edgewood students are from Wisconsin, so a local sourcing effort that supports the businesses and economy of Wisconsin also supports the ability of Wisconsin students to attend Edgewood.

Although the kitchen staff now performs new food storage tasks, Edgewood incurs no extra labor costs because the college employs its 12 full-time kitchen employees year-round. Vegetables average more than 25% cheaper when purchased in-season, so the additional effort of freezing and storing them is far outweighed by this cost savings and the benefit of doing some food preparation tasks (e.g., washing and cutting fresh broccoli) during the kitchen's slower summer season, when most students are away from campus, than the busy school year. One budgetary difference is that the college is effectively paying up-front for a year's worth of produce over the summer rather than buying it year-round as it is needed for the cafeterias.

Two key lessons that Edgewood highlights are that "local" food is not the same as "organic" food, and that research and information are crucial for a local sourcing program. The focus on local food has not increased Edgewood's overall food expenditures, but a focus on organic food almost certainly would have. Local sourcing allows Edgewood to support local businesses and visit the farmers to learn about their production practices.

For some types of protein, Edgewood's overall commitment to sustainable sourcing means that local products aren't used. The college's chicken comes from Coleman Natural and is raised humanely and sustainably on small family farms in Pennsylvania; Wisconsin does not yet produce chicken in this manner in the volume Edgewood needs. The fish that Edgewood serves is caught in the U.S. and certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council. The college only includes four varieties of fish in its menus; other varieties are no longer served because they are not sustainably harvested.

Sysco has developed their local sourcing efforts into the Hometown Harvest program, which they now offer to other customers. In addition to local food, they provide bios of the farmers and farms; Edgewood posts this information on the salad bar at Phil's when locally sourced items are served there. Edgewood does their own outreach to smaller local farmers through the Institutional Food and Marketing Coalition, describing the types and quantities of food items the college requires and seeks to procure locally. Edgewood identifies these capacity-building activities as critical to enabling their increased use of local food.

One challenge Edgewood has found is getting their customers – the students – to engage with and support their local sourcing efforts. The motivation for local sourcing came from the dining services staff's understanding of Edgewood's values and was supported by Edgewood's Green Campus Task Force. Students eating in the dining halls, who are mainly freshmen and sophomores, haven't yet expressed strong opinions about locally sourced food. The dining services staff believes that education during college orientation would be helpful for getting students to care about this effort. Their long-term goal is to make Phil's more of a learning environment and not just a place to eat.

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