

**“Cultural Factors Impacting
Food Distribution and Consumption in the
New River Valley, Virginia**

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Final Report Narrative

Name of Project: Cultural Factors Impacting Food Distribution and Consumption in the New River Valley, Virginia

Grant Period: February 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013

Grantee Name: Virginia Tech Project Director: Anita Puckett

Description of Project:

A. Background and Purpose of Study

The need for developing an alternative, viable agricultural base for Virginia's portion of South Central Appalachia is critical. This Appalachian subarea has relied on agriculture as its major or a major source of income for generations. Nevertheless, traditional farming relying on such cash crops as tobacco and the selling of livestock is no longer economically sustainable for most. The soil quality and lack of large fields have excluded industrial agribusiness from entering the region, while conventional methods of fruit and vegetable production have not yielded enough profit to make up for losses in tobacco. Soil ecologies have deteriorated to the point of diminishing returns unless extensive, environmentally-destructive synthetic fertilizers are used. Few farmers rely only on one crop and most must have sources of additional income outside of farming. Even so, adequate annual income is very difficult for many (cf. Economic Development Research Group 2007)

Many have turned to the raising of organics and the use of sustainable agriculture because of the increased prices locally grown produce can yield and the benefits to the land more generally. Yet problems continue to plague growers primarily due to issues of access to wholesale markets (Terry, personal communication). Local farmers markets are now common, but they do not provide enough income for most to warrant major investments in sustainable agriculture methods and materials. Yet many see organic food production as a key to sustainable agriculture and several co-ops and other grassroots organizations have emerged to support these nascent efforts (Stewart, personal communication). Many still need subvention, however. Nevertheless, development of this type of agriculture is economically promising, if distribution and purchasing barriers can be overcome.

The overarching purpose of this project was, therefore, to engage in a culturally-sensitive community-based study to obtain data that illuminated how to better market locally organically-grown produce in Virginia's New River Valley. The main partner in this project was the highly successful Blacksburg Farmers Market (<http://www.blacksburgfarmersmarket.com/>). As a leading open-air produce market in the area, it not only provides a venue for New River Valley organic farmers to sell their produce, but also works with local agencies to promote local food use through different marketing and partnership strategies. With Market support, its farmers also work locally to promote restaurant and grocery store purchases, but, to date, these have not been nearly as economically profitable as the Market sales themselves. The purpose of this project was to examine how these points of possible distribution (Market and local restaurants) could be configured or enhanced to economically benefit local farmers.

Activities:

I. Data collection and activities with community partners:

Students engaged in participant observation and interview research using the Blacksburg Farmers Market as its hub. Through it, we worked with local farmers and restaurants primarily in Montgomery County, Virginia. Based on last year's research, Dr. Puckett, project director, recruited Blacksburg Farmers Market administration and farmers who felt they would benefit from the project. She also consulted Kathlyn Terry at Appalachian Sustainable Development for possible "best strategies" to apply to Montgomery County. Virginia Tech IRB research approval was obtained.

Dates of these data collection, classification, and analysis activities were as follows:

TASKS/DATES	HOURS	OUTCOMES
<i>I. Consumers: Blacksburg Farmers Market</i>		
Observation at Blacksburg Farmers Market on Wed., Sept. 26-Nov. 7	17 hrs	Data collection
Observation at Blacksburg Farmers Market on Saturdays, Oct.	10 hrs	Data collection
Set-up at Ron Holdron's booth at Wednesday Farmers Market in Oct.	1 hr	Assisted setting up stand, particularly unloading and labeling
Supply organization for Ron Holdron in Oct.	2 hrs	Organized crate with sale bags, labels, and other miscellaneous items
Survey Construction for Stonecrop Farm (including pre-survey data collection, revisions and other) Oct. 27-Nov. 3.	5 hrs	Data collection

Survey administration	10 hrs.	Data collection for ATP and Stonecrop Farms Nov.3- 10.
<i>II. Restaurant Owners/Managers Interviews</i>		
Interviews at restaurants in Blacksburg; Oct-9-Nov.3	10 hrs	Data collection
Observation at restaurants in Blacksburg; Oct. 9-28	10 hrs.	Data collection
Talking with patrons; Oct. 16-23	5 hrs.	Data collection
Literature review	5 hrs.	Data collection
Data quantification and classification	10 hrs.	Data analysis
<i>III. Online Survey of Market usage and food preferences</i>		
Observation of Market sales; Oct. 2-14	10 hrs.	Data collection
Development of online survey questionnaire; Oct. 15-25	5 hrs	Data collection preparation
Administration of questionnaire and collection and analysis of responses; Oct. 26-Nov. 15	15 hrs	Data collection and analysis
<i>IV. Meetings with partnering professionals/organizations</i>		
Ellen Stewart, Director, Blacksburg Farmers Market and governing board. Sept. 5, 2012	2 hrs.	Data collection through discussion of needs and interview. Questions provided in Attachments
Ad hoc meetings with Ellen Stewart during Market observations. Sept. 9-Nov. 4. Ms. Stewart attends all Market events.	2 hrs	Data collection questions and issues.
Class presentation by Kathlyn Terry, Director, Appalachian Sustainable Development, Sept. 26, 2012. Presentation made in conjunction with the Appalachian Communities class.	2 hrs.	Data collection through presentation by expert on the research topic.

2. Required Presentations:

PRESENTATIONS/DATES	HRS	PURPOSE/AUDIENCE
<i>I. Conference-related</i>		

Washington oral presentation. Dec. 1	15 hrs.	Time represents preparation time. PowerPoint for this presentation in Attachments. Audience: ARC and other participating schools
Washington poster presentation. Nov. 29-Dec. 1	3 hrs.	Time represents preparation time. Displays derived from PowerPoint presentation. Audience: ARC and other participating schools
<i>II. Local presentations</i>		
Presentation via table at Blacksburg Farmers Market. April 27, 2013.	6 hrs @ Market; 3 hrs. prep.	Per Dr. Herrin's approval, we set up a display table (with large sign indicating it was the Appalachian Teaching Project) at the Market to discuss our project, the Teaching Project, the ARC, and VT Appalachian Studies. Audience: Market visitors including elected town officials and members of various civic organizations such as the Blacksburg United for Responsible Growth. Handout for this event provided in Attachments. As a booth in a public setting with substantial foot traffic, no prior PR was distributed.
Presentation at Blacksburg Public Library. May 3, 2013	2 hrs.	Formal presentation to local audience of our project based on Washington presentation. Audience: local residents including president of the Appalachian Authors Guild attended. Market administrators were also present, leading to a post presentation discussion of how to incorporate research findings into Market goals, strategies and future tasks. PR for the event through email listserves, Market Facebook page (texts in Attachments) and through communication at Market table on April 27.

3. Links to videos or social media

None to date for this specific project. No reference to this being a requirement was found in Scope of Work, but we plan on uploading relevant materials to the Virginia Tech Appalachian Studies website over the summer. The nature of this research did not facilitate video recording; VT Appalachian Studies does not have a Facebook or Twitter account, but its host Department, Religion and Culture, does. Future postings, subject to departmental review, will also be uploaded there.

Project Outcomes:

1. Research Outcomes:

- While bonds among restaurant owners within Blacksburg are strong and promote community, relations with local farmers producing locally grown produce are nearly non-existent. Discussion with Market personnel at the end of the project period resulted in them wanting to initiate a partnership with Virginia Tech's Hospitality and Tourism Management Program to develop ways of breaking down these barriers so as to promote greater use of local produce in local restaurants. This outcome addresses ARC goals of increasing job opportunities and per capita income.
- Purchasers of Market produce at the Market are less concerned with whether it meets federal government requirements for organic certification than they are about whether the produce or value-added products are locally grown or made. This finding is especially important to Market farmers who find the fees and costs associated with certified organic prohibitive. To them, this finding means that they need not invest in raising certified organic produce in order to increase sales and maximize their profits at the Market. This outcome addresses ARC goals of increasing per capita income.
- An online survey of Virginia Tech students and some faculty indicated that most students were satisfied with their food choice options on campus and felt that the Market was either too expensive or useful for only a few items. This finding indicates a problem area for Market development that, in a post research discussion with Market administrators, was reported as already known to them. They indicated that they needed to re-open their efforts to create a presence on campus that could enhance Market vendor profits and, at the same time, introduce better food choices to many students. Past efforts to work with this Virginia land grant university have been less than successful due to factors such as competition from on-campus food vendors, students' lack of knowledge about why the vendors were on campus, and proximity of the campus to the main Market site. This finding indicates a community/university interface problem that requires further project development to meet the ARC goal of increasing job opportunities and per capita income.
- Observational data of those visiting the Market indicated that most consumers were middle class, had a significant amount of disposable income, and used the Market setting for visiting with friends and strangers, lounging, and other community-building, social capital enhancing activities. The site of the Market is therefore emerging as a community center, providing a model for how to develop community sustainability from the ground up. This finding supports the ARC goal of promoting success in competing in the global

economy by developing a strong place-based community orientation that knows what assets it can successfully market globally and which ones it wants to keep local.

2. Student Outcomes

- Students had to initiate and implement their own research project under the mentorship of Dr. Puckett, and then present their work at the Washington conference. In so doing, they developed self-confidence and leadership skills. This was most evident in the two students who repeated the course, participating in the Project for two years. They developed a “take-charge” attitude that exhibited maturity, confidence, and skill by the end of the second year.
- In working with Market vendors and administrators, community business owners, and Market visitors, students engaged in active learning that permitted them to effectively apply their classroom instruction both in the Teaching Project course and from other classes they had taken in their respective majors. One comment was that they didn’t realize how much they had actually learned until after the Washington presentation.
- The foundational approach of the Virginia Tech Teaching Project course is to elicit needs from community residents and then work with them to determine possible solutions, not to impose “expert” knowledge or paradigms onto their ways of living or doing. In taking this approach, cultural differences emerge in the course of community-based research that get at the core of personal, communal, and regional identity constructions that can transform students’ own understandings of their belief, value, and meaning systems. The result is, in most cases, a more culturally-sensitive adult who can participate in a global economy with a developed sense of the value of a place-based civil society.

3. Community Outcomes

- Having the students continue their research with the Market for a second year resulted in stronger bonding between students, Market vendors, Market administrators, and Virginia Tech faculty involved in the project and the Appalachian Studies Program as evidenced by their willingness to work with students, to engage in casual conversation with us, and to talk to us about their concerns and our program. One example of this trust was that Stonecrop Farm asked a student to develop and then administer a questionnaire on whether consumers cared if the locally-grown produce was organically certified or not. Therefore, one significant outcome of the project was to create much stronger positive university/community ties that are enhancing the value of the Program outside of the university setting.
- In providing vendors and Market administrators with data about the problem areas related to more effective and financially rewarding distribution of locally-grown produce, the Virginia Tech project contributed to community asset development by identifying not only problems, which were, for the most part, already known to farmers, vendors, and Market administrators, but also in revealing where the difficulties and issues were within these problem areas. In so doing, they assisted in empowering these community members to find ways to solve or at least address these problems and to engage with professional experts from a position of strength rather than ignorance. The project therefore promoted community asset development.

4. Appalachian Teaching Project Outcomes

- The Virginia Tech project yielded information regarding the impact of sustainable agriculture in the New River Valley area that can be useful to the ARC in its planning for community asset development.
- The emergence of a very successful conference platform by the Appalachian Teaching Project has provided a motivation for Virginia Tech students to do their “best” in their research so as to contribute to the Project in a professional, responsible, and contributory manner. This collective attitude radiates downward to the Appalachian Studies Program itself and to those in its college who recognize its contributions to the reputation of Virginia Tech more broadly.
- The granting of Appalachian Teaching Project Fellow status to Dr. Puckett further enhanced the recognition of the Project at the college level. Posting of this award on the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences monthly e-newsletter brought recognition not only to her, but also to the ARC and ETSU more generally.

5. Outcomes for the Virginia Tech Appalachian Studies Program

- Continued involvement in the Appalachian Teaching Project has significantly enhanced the visibility of the Appalachian Studies Program at a land grant university. Archiving of reports in the Library, presentations by students to departmental undergraduate research conferences in previous years, and testimonies by students of the success of the course, has done nothing but benefit the Program.
- The quality of the conference itself, as it develops into student conference of high quality, enhances the reputation of the Program as one that is intellectually stimulating and an excellent learning opportunity.
- ARC funding for conference attendance and participation contributes to positive departmental metrics at the college and university levels.

Problems Encountered:

The major problem for this particular project was the low number of students who completed the course. While these three were extremely good and gave a fine Conference presentation, all of the goals of the research proposal approved in June 2012 could not be reached. This problem is an artifact of the Program being housed within a new department with a new major such that there were fewer departmental majors who could take the course as part of their degree.

Therefore, students were recruited from other departments and majors. In many cases, the work required, especially the community research component, was too demanding for their schedules so they withdrew.

This problem has been addressed by creating a new course that is cross-listed with Sociology so that students majoring in Sociology or wanting to take a course with a Sociology designator can still benefit from being participants in the Appalachian Teaching Project. Fall 2013 enrollment is strong.

Other problems were precipitated by low enrollment. These revolved around the need for fewer students having to do more work to meet Project funding requirements such as preparing the poster.

Any other problems were minor and dealt with through routine instructional procedures.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

With a new course identifier (APS 4094/SOC 4094) and with growing number of majors in the Program's host department, continuation of the Program is quite likely. Furthermore, the course is becoming known across departments and colleges, assisting the Virginia Tech Appalachian Studies Program in building its cross-campus networks. These networks are and will result in greater and more diverse enrollment for the course over time.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

This year's participation by Virginia Tech's Appalachian Studies Program was less successful than in 2011-2012 from the Program's perspective. While the research project clearly met ARC goals and the students were strongly engaged in the research, the number of students available to address the project question was too few to produce the results and deliverables envisioned in the original proposal. Nevertheless, problems were few and were, for the most part, easily addressed. Furthermore, departmental, college, and cross-college recognition of the research is becoming more widespread and positive. Development of a cross-listed course with Sociology for the project is also a positive step towards interdisciplinary collaboration.

More comprehensively, the conference venue, the organization of the conference, and the quality and level of engagement by all participating colleges and universities was exceptionally high. At this point in its development, it is clear that the Appalachian Teaching Project has emerged as a quality program for the ARC, ETSU, the participating institutions, and the region. From the Virginia Tech perspective, recognition of this excellence by appointing the project director as an ARC Teaching Fellow is a visible recognition of the Commission's own valuation of the directors' contributions. Clearly, collaboration among the various constituents is high and growing.

The Commission's willingness to come to campuses and reach out to students is and will further enhance this collaboration, and Virginia Tech plans on taking advantage of this offer coming funding period, should it be accepted as a partner. The openness of the Commission to work with campuses in other ways (providing access to personnel for advice, consulting with campus researchers on research projects, and inviting campus members to regional planning events, for example) is a noteworthy example of how the federal government serves its citizens and uses its funding for the common good.

The only substantive recommendation Virginia Tech offers is that the proposed expansion of the Project to include more educational institutions in the Program should occur. Other campuses than those currently included also have much to bring to the collaborations and the conference.

Cost Sharing:

Dr. Puckett committed 3% of her time to this project during the Fall and Spring 2012-2013 semesters for a total match of \$2,000, which fulfills the \$1,500 committed cost share for Virginia Tech.

References:

Economic Development Research Group, et al. 2007. *Source of Regional Growth in Non-Metro Appalachia*. ARC Research Report.

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Stewart, Ellen. 2012. Blacksburg Farmers Market. Blacksburg, VA. Personal Communication. September 5, 2012.

Terry, Kathlyn. 2012. Appalachian Sustainable Development. Abingdon, VA. Personal Communication. September 26.

Attachments:

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1. PowerPoint Presentation for Students' Oral Presentation, Appalachian Teaching Project Conference, November 30-December 1, 2012.

Cultural Factors Impacting Food Sustainability Distribution and Consumption in the New River Valley, Virginia

Instructor

Anita Puckett

Students

Luke Cox

Danielle Oliver

Shasta Sowers



2012 Appalachian Teaching Project:

Our topic focused on:

Consumer Cultural Influences

Our research focused on:

Producers and consumers at the Blacksburg Farmers Market



New River Valley, Virginia: Blacksburg

Montgomery County

Home to Virginia Tech campus

42,600 estimated 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau)



Current Consumer Trends:

- 756 Farmers Markets established 2011-2012 (USDA)
- 9.6% increase in Farmers Markets in U.S. (USDA)
- USDA recognizes rising consumer interest in providing locally grown food in supermarkets.
- Studies estimate that processed food in the United States travels over 1,300 miles, and fresh produce travels over 1,500 miles, before being consumed



2011 VT ATP team determined that the local sustainable farmers of the NRV area require their own regional paradigm

Categories	Description
Soil and Plant Maintenance	Generally Sustainable Not Organic Certified
Animal Care	Minimal Antibiotics Grass Fed
Plant and Animal Diversity	Polycultures
Competition	Moderate Regional High Cooperation
Support	Vibrant Local Market
Culture	Highly Individualistic
Business	Family Owned or Small Business



Central Concepts Relevant to Cultural Factors:

Concept of Community:

Sense of place involving relationships, cultures, and environments specific to a particular area.

Social Capital:

Involves interactions within groups or communities to build trust, reciprocity, collective identity and mutually beneficial relationships.

Bottom-up Economics:

Rebuilding our infrastructure and investing in the sustainable practices that advocate the growth of mutually beneficial relationships when all parties involved are rewarded which in turn, is ultimately reinvested within the local populace.



Understanding Consumers' Cultural Orientations Related to Food Consumption Choices:

Local food refers to a geographic origin, it can also characterize the food by cultural subjectivity and social and political environment.

Influences for choosing/not choosing local products:

- Cultural Orientations
- Relationships
- Quality
- Cost



Several methods were used to obtain data from the Consumers, and direct and indirect marketers



Participant Observation

Surveys



Interviews

- Vendors
- Grocery Stores
- Restaurants

Guest speakers
Ms. Kathlyn Terry

Site Observation



Blacksburg Farmers Market

2011 Findings:

Age range: 35-55

Customer Turnout:

- Events
- Virginia Tech

Types of Shoppers:

- novelty
- utopian
- environmentalists
- localists



Blacksburg Farmers Market

Consumer Observations

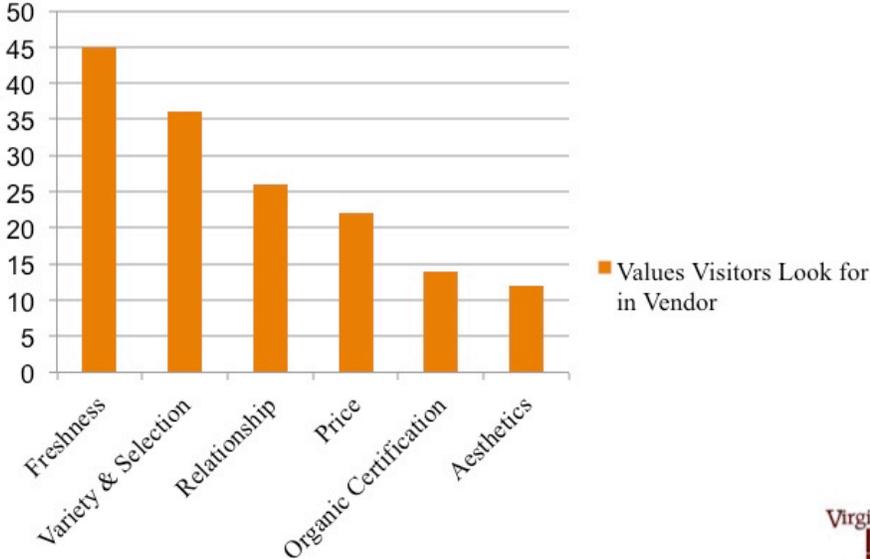
- Attendance variable by:
 - Day of week
 - Wednesdays more likely wealthy regulars
- Low socioeconomic status attendance
- Social aspect:
 - Meeting friends
 - Participate in events
 - Chat with vendors



Blacksburg Farmers Market

Market Customer Survey

Values Visitors Look for in Vendor



Blacksburg Farmers Market

Market Customer Survey

Labels Valued:

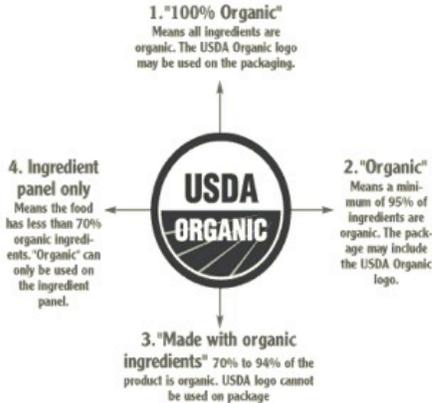
- None

Difference in organic labels:

- 66% yes

Certified Organic Vendors?

45% local
16% organic
39 % none



Downtown Blacksburg

- A 2010 census reports roughly 42,600 people living within the town limits with the median age of 21.9 years old.
- Blacksburg supports a large student population that makes up roughly 60 percent of the town.
- The majority of restaurants within the town of Blacksburg tend to cater their menus to the influx of college students adhering to the business models that support fast and cheap food to cater to their constituency.



Local Restaurants:

- While many restaurants are interested in using local suppliers, they are concerned about higher costs associated with purchasing locally.
- The use of a local food supply chain is influenced by customer value creation through demand and business-to-business relationships between farmers and restaurants.
- The emergence of increased recognition of the significance of “localness” within the agri-food sector has radically begun to change how people view their food.



Local Restaurants:



Specific Findings:

- Demand for the utilization of local products in the local restaurant industry remains low.
- Food costs remain the largest barrier to overcome in serving and utilizing local products.
- Community advocacy for the use of local products remains high throughout Blacksburg but is severely lacking within the restaurant industry.
- Social capital between restaurants within the community remains high however the social capital between farmers and restaurants is mostly nonexistent.



Conclusions:

Cultural Factors that Influence the use of Local Products:

- **Older established citizens can afford social scene at Blacksburg Farmers Market.**
- **Connectivity to local scene more important than label.**
- **Price of purchasing local products continues to be a concern among students.**
- **Consumers want the convenience of an one stop shop.**
- **Relationships cultivated between patrons and suppliers allows for a stronger marketplace that allows for the exchange of more than monetary capital.**



ARC Reccomendations:

Cultural Factors that Influence the use of Local Products:

Support local supermarkets

Support consumer education

Support outreach and marketing between local producers and businesses



We would like to give a special thank you to



Farmers
Ron Holdren
Robert Webster
Gwynn Hamilton

Dr. Anita Pucker

Director
Ellen Stewart

Guest Speaker
Ms. Kathlyn Terry



Questions?



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2. Survey Form for Stone Crop Farm

Questions for Appalachian Regional Commission Teaching Project: Food Sustainability
Distribution and Consumption in the New River Valley, Virginia

Fall 2012

Questions for vendors utilizing student workers:

1. What products do you sell?
 - a. Produce/meats/value-added/crafts/etc.
 - b. Homegrown/homemade and/or redistribution
 - c. Organic/non-certified organic/conventional
2. What is your definition of “local” products?
3. Why do you choose direct marketing?
 - a. How long using this approach?
 - b. Benefits
 - c. constraints
4. Define your sales approach:
 - a. Purpose
 - b. Goals
 - c. Timeline from farm to market to consumer
 - d. Customer appeal
 - e. History/education in marketing
 - f. Most valuable tools/resources for your approach
5. Why did you choose to sell at this particular market?
 - a. How long have you sold here?
 - b. Feelings about special events at the market
 - c. Feelings/attitudes toward campus/town events and how they affect marketplace
 - d. Feelings about atmosphere and location
6. Where do you purchase the food items that you don’t produce?
7. Describe your “off season” from the market
8. Do you have other means of distribution?
 - a. Wholesale
 - b. Restaurants
 - c. Delivery
 - d. Further processing
 - e. donation

3. Questionnaire for Restaurant Owners

Questions for Restaurant Owners:

1.) How likely are you to use fresh local ingredients in your menu?

- 0 = Unimportant
- 1 = Slightly important
- 2 = Important
- 3 = Very important

2.) How much of your menu / menu planning takes into account the availability of seasonal ingredients? Do seasonal ingredients influence your menu?

- 0 = Unimportant
- 1 = Slightly important
- 2 = Important
- 3 = Very important

3.) What are your food profit margins?

4.) Where does the majority of your food come from?

5.) How high is the demand for your restaurant to use local or organic ingredients?

- 0 = Nonexistent
- 1 = Low
- 2 = Present
- 3 = High

6.) How would you describe your restaurant? For example would you consider your restaurant to be a bar and grill, farm to table, casual, etc.?

7.) Would you be willing to increase prices to support higher quality ingredients?

- 0 = Not at all willing
- 1 = Somewhat willing
- 2 = Willing
- 3 = Very willing

8.) What are your biggest concerns (cost, availability, quality) with providing your customers with local ingredients?

9.) Do you have any plans to incorporate local or organic ingredients in the future? If so, how? If not, why?

10.) How important is it to you to incorporate sustainable ingredients into your restaurant?

0 = Unimportant

1 = Slightly important

2 = Important

3 = Very important

11.) How important is sustainability and investing in local produce to you personally?

0 = Unimportant

1 = Slightly important

2 = Important

= Very important

4. Online Usage Questionnaire for VT Students, Staff, and Faculty:

Questions for Farmer's Market

- 1.) How often do you visit the farmer's market?

- 2.) How much of your groceries come from the farmer's market?

- 3.) Are you originally from this area?

- 4.) How would you classify yourself? Are you retired, a student, working professional, unemployed or other?

- 5.) How important is local and sustainable produce to you?

- 6.) What do you like/dislike about the farmer's market?

- 7.) How old are you?

5. Interview Questions: Ellen Stewart, Director, Blacksburg Farmers Market

Questions for Ellen Stewart's Class Presentation Sept. 5, 2012

1. Can you summarize how the Blacksburg Farmers Market came into being and how you got involved in it?
2. What is the mission and purpose of the Market?
3. How are vendors selected? Are there any cliques or other informal ways vendors or others organize themselves at the Market? Or in working with it?
4. What is the scope of the Market? Does it have any satellite locations or outreach activities? Does it want any more than what it has?
5. How has the market or how will the Market accommodate those of limited income who are on food stamps?
6. How does the Market and its vendors relate to local food banks and other places where food is distributed at lower prices or for free?
7. What government (federal, state, local) regulations have to be followed to continue the Market? Are any of them impediments or barriers to Market functions?
8. Do you have any usage data—who comes, how many, for what?
9. How are other non-food activities determined? Are there any usage fees involved?
10. What is the relationship between the Market and the VT campus market? Why does the VT market exist?
11. Do you know of any consumer demands, that is, items or procedures buyers want at the Market?

6. Patron handout at Project table, Blacksburg Farmers Market, April 27, 2013

The Appalachian Teaching Project at Virginia Tech: Sustainable Agriculture/Blacksburg Farmers Market

For the last two fall semesters (Fall 2011 and Fall 2012), Virginia Tech's participation in the region-wide Appalachian Teaching Project has been to explore the cultural factors impacting the use of sustainable agriculture among farmers using the Blacksburg Farmers Market as a venue and how the consumer-end of this local food movement is affected by cultural factors. The Appalachia Teaching Project is administered through East Tennessee State University's Center for Appalachian Studies and Services through a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission. Each of the participating 15 colleges and universities conducts community research on a topic relevant to the strategic goals of the Commission during the fall semester. Students then present their findings to the Commission and other participating schools in early December of each year at a conference in Washington, DC. The Commission provides a \$4,000 grant to each participating university or college to pay for students' conference costs. Students can list the following on their resume:

- Participation at a conference sponsored by a federal agency;
- Submission of a report to a federal agency;
- Undergraduate research sponsored in part by a federal agency.

The two-year study of farmers and consumers at the Blacksburg Farmers Market yielding the following major findings:

1. Reported paradigms regarding conventional and sustainable agriculture do not fully apply in this subregion of Appalachia. Small plots of land, a tendency toward family-owned and family-run farms, and accommodation to the terrain more generally results in a mix-method approach in which farmers may, indeed, for example, use organic fertilizer and free ranging grass-fed strategies for vegetables and livestock, but rely on synthetic fertilizers as they determine is needed. A new paradigm that takes regional cultural variation into account is needed;
2. Cultural factors impacting why farmers farm the way they do is as important if not more important than economic factors in determining which methods farmers use. Family, senses of "place," oral traditions, and holding on to what has been working, are all major factors;
3. Economic factors are, however, very important, and farmers expect to make a profit from their farming, even if a minimal one;
4. Critical to the farmers in the target research area was having the thriving Blacksburg Farmers Market accessible. Other farmers markets in the area did not provide the clientele in sufficient numbers to make their participation profitable. Results indicated

that having a strong clientele interested in buying local organic produce was the most significant variable. Those interested in environmental issues or creating a more idyllic world were fewer in numbers and therefore economically less significant;

5. Farmers who embrace organic and sustainable agricultural methods were, for the most part, highly diverse in cultural orientations and backgrounds. Most, however, were not indigenes, but had moved to the area or had moved back after having lived elsewhere.
 - The Blacksburg Farmers Market provides a venue for building civic space for community members primarily in the 55-70 years old age range and having good to strong incomes;
 - Local restaurants have a strong town relationship, but a weak relationship with farmers, creating barriers to using locally-grown foods;
 - Buyers at the market are far less concerned with federal “organic” labeling than they are with the food being grown locally;
 - The Blacksburg Farmers Market is far more successful in its community-building functions than are other markets in the Floyd, Giles, and Montgomery region.
 -

Barriers for using sustainable agriculture for farmers included:

- Access to land, infrastructure, and other upfront costs;
- Education and Acquisition of local knowledge;
- Costs of Certification for various “organic” labels;
- Availability of produce year round for restaurants;
- Cost of produce for restaurants and consumers.

Recommendations included:

ARC should:

- Help with Cost Share Program to grow organically-certified produce;
- Development of and support for farming apprenticeships;
- Develop stronger consumer markets, direct markets, and distribution systems;
- Support efforts to promote civic agriculture and development of community civic space.

The class supporting this research, APS 4094 Undergraduate Community Research, is housed within the Appalachian Studies Program, Department of Religion and Culture, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, <http://www.rc.vt.edu/appalachia>.

Instructor was Dr. Anita Puckett, Director, Appalachian Studies Program, apuckett@vt.edu or 540/231-9526.

7. Sample Email Listserve Announcements for Public Presentation at Blacksburg Public Library, May 3, 2013

A. Blacksburg Farmers Market PR:

1) Text sent to Blacksburg Market Listserve, which reaches vendors, staff, administrators, and involved community residents.

Subject: Appalachian Studies Presentation this Friday

The Appalachian Studies students who have been working with the market this year will be doing their final presentation this coming Friday, May 3 at 4:00 in the Blacksburg Public Library. They will be reporting on their Fall 2012 project in which they researched consumer and distribution issues related to the Blacksburg Farmers Market. The event may last an hour, depending on audience comments and questions, but their presentation will be for only about 20 minutes.

Their findings dealt with whether consumers care if vendors are "organically certified" or not, as long as the produce is grown using organic and sustainable agriculture methods, problems with restaurants using their produce, who exactly from socioeconomic and demographic perspectives actually buys at the Market, and how the Market is being used to construct civic space.

Ellen Stewart

2) Posting below published to Blacksburg Farmers Market Facebook Page May 1, 2013.
<https://www.facebook.com/blacksburgfarmersmarket?fref=ts>

Status Update

By Blacksburg Farmers Market

The Appalachian Studies students who have been working with the market this year will be doing their final presentation this coming Friday, May 3 at 4:00 in the Blacksburg Public Library. They will be reporting on their Fall 2012 project in which they researched consumer and distribution issues related to the Blacksburg Farmers Market. The event may last an hour, depending on audience comments and questions, but their presentation will be for only about 20 minutes. Everyone is welcome!

Their findings dealt with whether consumers care if vendors are "organically certified" or not, as long as the produce is grown using organic and sustainable agriculture methods, problems with restaurants using their produce, who exactly from socioeconomic and demographic perspectives actually buys at the Market, and how the Market is being used to construct civic space.

B. Campus message sent to VT Appalachian Studies listserv, April 23, 2013:

Dear Colleagues,

As a condition of receiving our small ARC grant to conduct the Appalachian Teaching Project (APS 4094) each year, the students must present their community research findings to a public audience. Due to end of semester and journal editing pressures, I've not gotten word out as I had hoped about their presentation this coming Friday, 4:00, at the Blacksburg Library.

Please announce to your students, please use any inducements you can to get them to attend, and, if possible, please come yourself. We need your support.

This class examined the consumer side of sustainable and organic farming in the NRV as expressed through the Blacksburg Farmers Market and its farmers' efforts to sell their produce.

Their findings may surprise you. It was the second year we focused on Market farmers. In 2011-2012, we focused on issues related to farmers' production of their crops.

Our findings go to the ARC via a conference the ARC supports and a final report. VT is almost always one of the top three presentations out of 15.

Very best,
Anita