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Farming and Eating Locally: An Interview with Garry Griffith about Augustana's Farm2Fork Program

What was food service like when you first came to Augustana? How have things changed?

I was a little bit shocked, actually. Almost all the vegetables, soups, and even the meats were pre-cooked and pre-packaged. We weren't making much of anything from scratch. In our kitchens at that time you could find dozens of pairing knives but no chef knives. Why? Because the knives were only used to open packages. It didn't take us long to start getting all of our vegetables, potatoes, and even meats fresh from local farmers. I and others started working extensively with our staff in the summers, giving them a set of skills for choosing and preparing quality foods. We've really come a long way.

What we call our "Farm2Fork" program is a significant investment into the health of our community, helping to build regional and local food systems. Local farms and ranches provide our campus with a direct and reliable food source, thereby making us less dependent on food sources that are thousands of miles away. Jim Johansen of Wesley Acres in the neighboring town of Moline was our first partner, but there are now a number of others that we work with closely.

Is it hard to find farmers to work with?

It wasn't in the case of Johansen. He recognized that our vision for local food systems was the near equivalent of his own. We share a vision of what local, sustainable food production and consumption should look like. But there are many barriers. It's hard to get farmers to give up their high yields of corn and soy bean production to grow a diversity of crops—especially vegetables that need to be tended and that aren't sold to a corporation. The really scary part is how high grain prices are. There are many disincentives for farmers to grow crops for local consumption. We're still not sure how we can sustain this model, although national trends toward farmer's markets and sustainable agriculture are encouraging.



How do students get involved?

Augustana has a small vegetable farm and orchard on campus called Augie Acres. Students tend the gardens; dining services uses a good deal of the produce and the students sell the rest in an on-campus farmers market. Much of the student work is through team-taught "learning-community" courses. Since many of our students are from the Chicago sprawl and have never gotten dirty in a garden before coming to college, growing their own food seems like something we ought to be teaching them.

How else does Dining Services contribute to the health of the area?

We do all we can do with recycling and minimizing waste, including a program that provides students with washable "to-go" containers. We use compostable materials and compost locally.

Our most exciting venture is probably working with Wesley Acres to recycle our used fryer oil which they convert to bio-diesel to heat their green houses to extend the growing season and run farm equipment. Last spring, Augustana purchased their own bio-diesel converter and an Alternative Fuels class will help convert our cooking grease to usable fuel. Meanwhile, we're adding utility vehicles on campus that can use bio-diesel fuel. We hope we can produce 2500-3000 gallons per year at 68 cents per gallon. (Compare that to \$4 per gallon for gas!) And so, the very programs that help local growers also help Augustana to be energy independent and help teach our students to be citizens of the local economy, which includes the health of soil and water.

Does Augustana's Lutheran identity matter to these efforts?

As a Lutheran school and a place where students and staff take many religious traditions seriously, we feel as though being good stewards of the earth has been put in our charge. It is the responsibility of any church or religious organization to understand that resources are limited and that stewardship is our collective calling. Anything we can do to teach that stewardship is well worth it.

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