

An Innovative 4-H Farm to Fork Camp Program in North Carolina

Olivia Horning

Utah State University
2300 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-2300
olivia.horning@aggiemail.usu.edu

Dara Bloom

North Carolina State University
512 Brickhaven Drive 220 F
Raleigh, NC 27695
jdbloom@ncsu.edu

Travis Park

North Carolina State University
216 Ricks Hall
1 Lampe Drive
Raleigh, NC 27695
tdpark@ncsu.edu

Jackie Helton

NC Cooperative Extension
129 Alexander Dr
Lillington, NC 27546
jackie_helton@ncsu.edu

Gregory Huneycutt

NC Cooperative Extension
129 Alexander Dr
Lillington, NC 27546
greg_huneycutt@ncsu.edu

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Introduction: Need for Innovation

Consumers are interested in local food, evident by the popularity of farmers markets, with even restaurants and grocery stores having local food options. Despite this, access to fruit and vegetable markets can be more limited based on geographic area and location, particularly in minority communities (Moore & Diez, 2006). One way to bridge this gap between consumer and local food is through local food programming at the county Extension level, such as 4-H Farm to Fork Camps for youth. This camp supports non-farmer audiences, and by supporting those not within production agriculture, the Extension program portfolio is broadened (McDowell, 2004). The purpose of this innovative idea abstract is to share the details of the various 4-H Farm to Fork Camp models in use, as even farm tours must be structured to prevent students from simply being “passive spectators” (Morgan, 2006). Although this type of programming is neither standardized nor consistent between North Carolina counties that integrate 4-H Farm to Fork Camps into their summer programming, we believe dissemination of this information can support a national local food initiative.

Methodology/How it Works

Several counties in North Carolina created 4-H summer camps surrounding seasonal local food in which participants visited a local farm and learned to prepare an item from the farm. Eight Extension agents from five different counties were interviewed for evaluative feedback. Each camp contained a farm tour component. One camp consisted of three farm tours, a farmer’s market tour, and a cooking competition. Another camp consisted of one farm tour, a farmer’s market tour, and grocery store tour to observe the entire food chain. Another camp chose a single commodity for the students to focus on, such as sweet potatoes or peanuts, where in addition to the local farm, grocery store, and state farmer’s market, they toured a processing plant for that commodity. For example, if the commodity of focus was the cucumber, a pickle factory would be toured. Over half of the camps started the week with knife skill instruction. Knife skills can be gauged before and after the camp as an evaluation tool. Other forms of evaluation included the MyPlate quiz, parent evaluations, students voting on a “top chef”, and/or taking a 5-question quiz given to students to evaluate skills gained, favorite and least favorite activity, and what they would change. Camps concluded with either a cooking challenge, etiquette class at a local restaurant, or a presentation at the Friday afternoon farmer’s market on the commodity studied that week.

Camps were called Farm to Fork or Farm to Kitchen and accommodated students ranging from 9 to 15 years old with a capacity ranging from 12 to 20 students depending on the specific camp size and resources available. Day camps began as early as 8 AM and concluded as late as 4 PM, but were consistently one-week long, touring one to four farms per week. The shortest day camp was 4.5 hours per day and the longest was 7 hours per day. Additionally, camps must be held during the vegetable growing season in order to incorporate local foods, which varies widely based on location.

Results to Date/Implications

The Farm to Fork program is an example of the type of programming that promotes cross-program collaboration among extension agents, promoting 4-H youth development through public speaking, agricultural education by promoting agricultural literacy, and family and consumer sciences by teaching cooking skills with seasonal items. The visibility of Cooperative Extension programs increases through the demonstration of organizational relevance by exploring popular trends with cooking shows and local food, with the potential of creating a statewide cooking competition. One agent described the impacts of the program as it, “connects, or reconnects young people to the wealth of agricultural resources in the county where they live.” Another agent described impacts of the program as:

“behavior change that we experience, because of pictures and testimonies from parents, a month, a week, or two weeks later. They will say ‘hey, my kid prepared this at home’ or ‘they want me to get fresh food because they want to make this dish’ and stuff like that. So that lets you know how many of your participants are taking what they have learned and actually applying them at home.”

This evaluation has since developed into a local foods extension work group gaining funding through North Carolina Cooperative Extension. The work group was formed as part of Cooperative Extension’s Local Food Program Team in order to engage more agents in determining the content and mechanisms for creating a statewide program. One of the county extension offices involved in this evaluation has since trained 50 counties and 75 people at two events, the NC 4-H Volunteer Leaders Conference and the 2018 4-H & FCS March Institute in 4-H & FCS Farm to Kitchen Resources, which will be rebranded to Farm to Fork in 2019.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The work group has decided to delegate resources toward creating kits for extension agents to utilize if they do not have access to the common kitchen items needed to process produce from the local farms that they tour, in order to establish the farm to fork component. Future plans include the creation of a standardized evaluation tool to evaluate camp effectiveness once statewide kits are made available for extension agents to use. When planning and developing this type of programming, one agent said, “Don’t be afraid of developing joint programs with other agents across disciplines. That really magnifies impact and it reduces workload, so it makes you more efficient.” Another agent commented, “Do not try to do it all on your own.”

Cost and Resources Needed

With the creation of the local foods workgroup, North Carolina Cooperative Extension provided a budget for the work group to utilize. Costs vary widely depending on the type of camp and the resources being utilized. The creation of kits would decrease startup costs for agents and can be rotated around the state for this type of summer programming. Transportation was seen as a large cost if the Extension office did not have access to a county vehicle to transport students for farm tours. One camp acquired a United Way grant to help fund the camp, and another obtained a sponsorship through a dining company that provided culinary volunteers. Cost to camp participants ranged from \$10 - \$25 per week, which realistically could have cost \$30-\$50 per student according to the agents that commented on cost.

References

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