

**Utah's Farm to Fork Landscape: Stakeholders' Perspectives on Root Causes and Potential Solutions**

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## Introduction

The farm to fork concept encourages a direct and transparent connection between food producers and consumers, reducing the role of intermediaries (Gonzales-Yanac et al., 2024). Sourcing food locally from farmers to institutions such as schools and daycare centers promotes and empowers local producers, supports sustainable farming practices, strengthens community ties, boosts the local economy, promotes self-sufficiency, encourages the consumption of healthy, locally produced foods, enhances mental and physical well-being, reduces food waste, and contributes to building a more equitable food system (Foraged, 2024; Sustainable Agriculture Network, 2024). The farm to fork concept gained popularity in Utah in 2015 with the establishment of the Utah Farm to Fork Task Force. However, despite nine years, Utah farm to fork has yet to achieve its full potential in the state due to various challenges (Utah Farm to Fork Task Force, 2022). This study examined stakeholders' perspectives on the root causes, explored potential solutions to increase the program's impact in Utah, and gains in knowledge after participating in regional Utah farm to fork workshops. The findings would support efforts to strengthen Utah farm to fork and provide a framework to ensure longevity for its strategic plan.

## Conceptual Framework

We employed an active cooperative learning approach, a framework in adult learning adapted from classroom teaching and learning centered on the "think-share-report-learn" methodology. Active cooperative learning is an approach that engages small groups of participants in discussions and aims to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). By focusing on the think-share-report-learn methodology, this framework ensures that participants actively shape and expand their learning in direct response to real-world challenges, contributing to the improvement of the program.

## Methodology

The Utah Farm to Fork Task Force held two root cause analysis sessions with 27 participants to identify barriers in procurement, edible gardens, and agricultural education. They then performed thematic analysis of the responses to find the root causes. To ensure representation of voices from across the state about root causes and solutions, we organized workshops across six locations in Utah, engaging 77 participants representing universities, agriculture nonprofits, K-12 schools, food service programs, garden programs, farms, Extension, tribal representatives, and state agencies. We had an average of 13 participants at each workshop. We structured these workshops around the "think-share-report-learn" methodology, which guided participants through four distinct stages to foster collaboration and innovation. During the *thinking* stage, participants critically analyzed the root causes of Utah's farm to fork initiative (Utah Farm to Fork Task Force, 2022). They reflected on challenges and opportunities, laying the groundwork for collaborative problem-solving and innovative solutions. In the *sharing* stage, small groups discussed and exchanged views, enabling participants to learn from each other's perspectives. They identified additional root causes and brainstormed solutions tailored to Utah's context.

During the *reporting* stage, each group synthesized their insights and presented to the entire workshop, fostering collaborative feedback to refine ideas and build shared knowledge. In the *learning* stage, we integrated feedback and ideas from the workshops, refined our understanding, and synthesized collective insight. This process allowed us to draw comprehensive and actionable conclusions aligned with advancing the farm to fork initiative in Utah. After each workshop, we administered a summative evaluation to assess participants' knowledge and experience using Likert scales. We compiled the findings and insights into a detailed report, which were shared with participants during a Zoom meeting after the workshops.

## Results

The final root causes include (1) hesitancy toward farm product aggregation and government funding due to Utah's independent mindset, (2) a culture of convenience and affordability driven by low wages, high housing costs, and inflation, (3) limited arable land, development pressures, and public land ownership challenge small-scale farming, (4) undervaluation of school nutrition programs and school nutrition staff, and garden education does not fit career-focused curricula, and (5) lack of farm-to-fork awareness and collaboration. In response to these root causes, participants proposed these solutions: (1) prioritizing support for local-level efforts rather than championing a one-size-fits-all state-wide solution, (2) integrating farm-to-fork concepts into the curriculum standards across all subjects and grade levels, and (3) increasing state-level support to assist local farmers in developing effective marketing and distribution strategies. Participants strongly agreed they understand the subject matter ( $M = 4.57$ ;  $SD = 0.52$ ) and agreed they are more connected to farm to fork initiatives ( $M = 4.55$ ;  $SD = 0.64$ ). They rated the workshop experience highly ( $M = 4.30$ ;  $SD = 0.78$ ) and agreed they understood the reasons to participate in Utah's farm to fork initiatives ( $M = 3.92$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ). Participants had an average understanding of the root cause analysis for identifying problems in farm to fork systems ( $M = 3.60$ ;  $SD = 0.94$ ) and the solutions to address these root causes ( $M = 3.43$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ).

## Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Findings suggest the workshops enhanced participants' knowledge and engagement with farm to fork initiatives in Utah. Participants identified root causes contributing to challenges with the Utah farm to fork initiative. One cause is the lack of appreciation for small-scale farming, as these farmers are not adequately valued or supported by state government. Another cause is the Utah education system that prioritizes specific career pathways. Proposed solutions centered on two key themes. First, integrating agriculture, gardening, and/or farm to fork concepts into the curriculum standards across all subjects and grade levels. By embedding agricultural education into the school system, students would develop a deeper understanding, respect, and engagement with farming from an early age (Cosby et al., 2022). Second, participants recommended providing farmers with education on high-value crops and supporting them in developing effective marketing strategies toward schools, hospitals, and institutions. This solution would enable farmers to better network and market their products locally, enhancing their economic viability (Quigley, 2023). Thus, future directions for the task force and the state agriculture branding program should prioritize Utah grown and created products, improve partnerships between schools and farms at the local level, and focus on local community-based solutions rather than statewide solutions for each region.

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