



Accessing Virginia’s College & University Market Sector: Fresh Produce Food Safety Considerations

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Despite the growing demand and support for local food, there can often be significant barriers for growers trying to tap into new markets, given specific food safety expectations, policies, and requirements. This trend is particularly true for institutional buyers, who are often constrained by far-reaching institutional and/or corporate policies. While there are lots of market opportunities in Virginia, navigating the landscape for growers can be daunting, since buyer food safety requirements are not a “one size fits all” standard for all markets. To better understand current expectations and perceptions across multiple market sectors in Virginia, and help producers better align their on-farm practices with these marketplaces, the Fresh Produce Food Safety Team conducted a state-wide market assessment survey in 2015-2016. The purpose of this factsheet is to provide you with the results of that work, especially if you are considering selling produce to colleges and universities.

and purchase a meal plan, a meal plan of which has a fixed amount, and the plan only binding itself to the dining hall(s) on campus. In lieu of this required purchase, universities like Virginia Tech both ask for and attentively listen to the student’s responses about their dining experiences and requests. With the current millennial generation being the majority in

College & University Market Sector

The College and University market sector is very unique in the sense that it can charge what it wants while still maintaining a steady demand. Why? Most freshmen at colleges and universities are required to both live on campus



Photo: Alexandra Battah

colleges and universities today, we can assume one thing: a greater demand for healthier, locally grown, “natural” foods. The millennial generation today not only takes up the majority of the United States’ population by composing 26% of it, but they’re also the most health-conscious and active generation, meaning demands for healthier foods. To the average consumer, healthier foods are often perceived to be locally grown foods. Knowing this demand, growers like you can perhaps penetrate the market sector for universities and colleges in order to meet the demand of millennials in one way or another.

Through a research study conducted through Harvard’s Food Law and Policy Clinic, the contributors highlight the importance of how universities and colleges should be capitalizing on the increasing demand of buying and eating local. They recommend that state colleges and universities gain a “competitive edge” by being more transparent with their food procurement practices. This in turn could raise the colleges’ and universities’ public ranking and would therefore give themselves a competitive edge in student recruitment. Collaborations, in which institutions grow a part of their produce at campus facilities, not only provide a fresh source of local foods for the dining hall, but also



Students harvesting broccoli at Virginia Tech’s Dining Services acreage at Kentland farm. (Photo: The Dining Services Farm at Kentland Facebook Page)

offer a great opportunity for students to gain farming and food production experience at colleges and universities.

Survey Highlights

This sector represented a greater level of complexity in the actual procurement of food. Since larger institutions, like colleges and universities, are typically connected to larger, broad-line, food service companies, the survey showed that less than 10% of produce was sourced locally. Because of these existing relationships and other major hurdles, like volume, deliverability of product, and food safety policies, these institutions were limited in their ability to make business connections with local producers. In cases where institutions had greater flexibility and commitment to sourcing more locally produced food, they were open to establishing new ties.

Purchasing Priorities

- ◆ Price
- ◆ Availability
- ◆ Grower/Producer Liability Insurance
- ◆ Food Safety Certification
- ◆ Quantity/Volume
- ◆ Quality/Consistency of Product
- ◆ Deliverability of Product

Barriers to Purchasing

- ◆ Insufficient Volume of Product
- ◆ Lack of Intermediaries (Food Hubs, etc.)
- ◆ Delivery Capabilities (Timing, Flexibility, etc.)
- ◆ Grower Lack of Understanding of Buyer Requirements, Needs, and Processes

Recommendations

- ◆ Colleges and universities often work with large nationwide food service companies that follow strict corporate parameters on food procurement. In rare cases, where institutions may not be tied to a food service

company, such as Sodexo or Aramark, it may be easier to tap into this market.

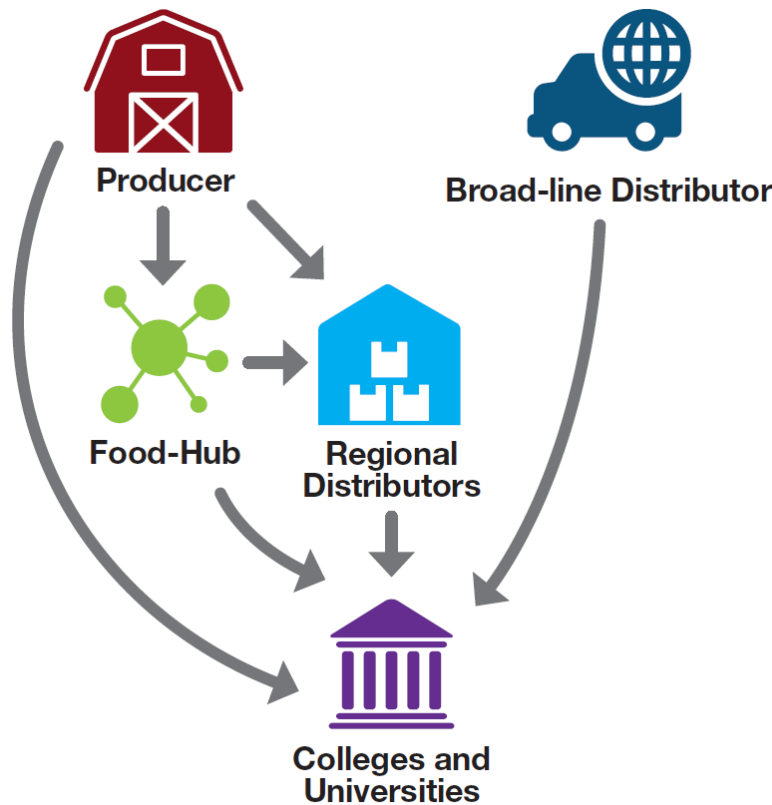
- ◆ To determine what universities need, it is imperative to establish effective communication.
- ◆ Be cognizant of large volume needs of particular institutions, since selling to them means being able to provide a consistent flow of product and meet exacting quality standards.
- ◆ Obtaining and maintaining third-party food safety certification is often standard practice in the institutional market, so it is likely more Virginia-grown produce would be purchased if food safety certification requirements were met by more Virginia growers.
- ◆ It is important to ask a potential buyer specific questions about what audit schemes they require, and whether they have an onboarding policy that allows for transition time to achieve higher levels of certification.
- ◆ Be aware that comprehensive liability insurance may also be a necessity in this market.
- ◆ Become familiarized with FSMA produce safety regulations and understand how they affect you as a local producer.
- ◆ More colleges and universities want to purchase locally-sourced product. Thus, additional certifications, such as “Fair Trade” and “National Organic Program”, may boost your marketability as a local producer.
- ◆ You may need to be flexible on your delivery schedule, making sure to accommodate the institution’s needs and timetables, especially since doing so can give you a competitive advantage.

Producer Checklist

- ◆ Does the institution have a contract with a larger food service company?
- ◆ Are you able to meet the volume demands of the college or university?
- ◆ If meeting volume demands is challenging, have you considered using a local food hub or other intermediaries to better meet the volume needs and also alleviate possible logistic issues such as transport and delivery?
- ◆ Do you need a 3rd party food safety audit, such as Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification in order to sell your product to this institution? GAP certification is the biggest one when it comes to produce.
- ◆ Are there are food safety requirements such as needing to have a HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control point) plan implemented in your operation?
- ◆ Is a minimum level of liability insurance required?
- ◆ Are you able to be punctual in terms of delivery, should you choose to transport your own produce?



Photo: Alexandra Battah



Sources of fresh produce for colleges and universities showing various access routes for producers.
Graphic by Sarah Gugercin, Department of Horticulture, Virginia Tech.

Resources

Farm to Institution New England (FINE)
<http://www.farmtoinstitution.org/>

FINE work relevant to market access include:
Campus Dining 101: A Benchmark Study on Farm to College in New England
http://www.farmtoinstitution.org/sites/default/files/imce/uploads/FINE%20Farm%20to%20College%20Report_1.pdf

Getting it There: Understanding the Role of New England Food Distributors in Providing Local Food to Institutions.
http://www.farmtoinstitution.org/sites/default/files/imce/uploads/FINE%20Distributor%20Report_3.pdf

Producer Perspectives: The New England Farm-to-Institution Market
<http://www.farmtoinstitution.org/sites/default/files/imce/uploads/FINE%20Producer%20Report.pdf>

Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic
<https://www.farmtoinstitution.org/sites/default/files/imce/uploads/Increasing%20Local%20Food%20Procurement%20by%20State%20Agencies,%20Colleges%20and%20Universities.pdf>

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia
<http://www.schev.edu/index/students-and-parents/explore/virginia-institutions>

Virginia Fresh Produce Food Safety
<http://www.hort.vt.edu/producesafety/>

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