

Results from Iowa's Collaborative CSA Member Survey

NORTH CENTRAL REGIONAL CENTER FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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In 2005, the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD) in cooperation with the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture conducted a study of multi-producer, collaborative CSA (cCSA) in Iowa to understand its contributions to community development. Financial support was provided by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES). The primary goals of the study were to determine whether cCSA serves as a business incubator for small-scale, rural enterprise in Iowa and to learn about the benefits and outcomes members, producers and communities experience as a result of participating in cCSA. To meet these goals, we contacted current and former cCSA coordinators, producers and members by telephone, e-mail and mail. This is a brief summary of the lessons we learned from members. The full report of project results is available on the web at <http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/csa/LessonsFromIowa.pdf>.

So what is collaborative CSA? While most CSA operators usually collaborate in informal ways with other producers, our study focused on CSA in which multiple producers collaborate to provide food or fiber products to members of a CSA for which no single producer (or producer family) has sole responsibility. What distinguishes cCSA operations from those run by single proprietors is the decision-making process; in cCSA decision-making is horizontal and shared among

two or more producers. In single proprietor owned CSA, decision-making is vertical and the sole proprietor or family makes the decisions.

Coordinators of three of Iowa's four cCSAs agreed to participate in this study. Each participating cCSA served urban or peri-urban college towns and surrounding areas. Results are based on responses from 189 usable surveys, for an overall response rate of 46 percent.

Member Profile

More than half (55%) of the respondents were currently members of cCSA and 45 percent were former members. Primary adults most active in CSA are disproportionately female—82 percent. The age of cCSA members ranges from 21 to 78, showing how inclusive participation is in terms of attracting people from different age groups. We also asked respondents to estimate total household income from all sources in 2004. More than half reported a household income of \$70,000 or more, suggesting that cCSA is not an effective mechanism for providing food access to lower income families. Twelve percent live on acreages while the majority (88%) have in-town addresses.

Household size has implications for determining the appropriate share size but also the number of people receiving direct benefits of CSA. Of those we surveyed, the average household size was nearly three people (2.8) and half (51%) of

households reported they have no children 18 or younger. For households with children, the average number of children was nearly two (1.9). In summary, the average active adult cCSA member in Iowa is an urban female in her mid 40s living in an upper income household comprised of three people.

Member Benefits

Many studies focus on why people join CSA, not on the benefits of participation once they've joined. Our goal was to do just that. In this regard, we asked members the extent to which they agreed they experienced each of 49 benefits during the last growing season they were a member (Figure 1, pp. 3-4). Nearly all members agreed their participation enabled them to support local farmers and provided them access to healthy, nutritious foods. Participation also enables members to support the local economy, small farmers, and local agriculture. Nearly nine in ten (89%) say participation offers them access to a source of safe food. These results show that while members acknowledge receiving personal benefits, they are equally aware of the benefit participation provides their communities.

In order to understand these 49 benefits more broadly, we grouped them according to different categories based on the Community Capitals Framework by Flora, Flora, and Fey (2004). Figure 2 (page 5) illustrates the way in which each community capital intersects to contribute to sustainable community outcomes (shown in the center box).

Each of the benefits (or items) listed in Figure 1 fits into one, if not several, community capital categories. Using the model's theoretical framework, we assigned each item to only one category and tested each score for reliability to determine whether they belonged together as a single con-

cept. Finally, we settled on a set of measures for six of the seven types of community capitals (we only created six scales because we did not include measures for built capital benefits; see the full report for details on how each scale was constructed). Members reported receiving the following benefits in order from most to least (see also Figure 2):

1. Financial
2. Natural
3. Human
4. Social
5. Cultural
6. Political

Please note that financial capital measures perceived benefits to the community, not to members themselves. These items related to benefits members received from supporting the local economy, creating/saving local jobs, supporting local farmers, and supporting small farmers (see page 29 of the final report). This has implications on the way alternative food systems such as collaborative CSA can be framed in terms of gaining public support and participation. It also demonstrates the strengths of collaborative CSAs, as well as areas needing improvement (such as political capital).

Member Retention

Champions of CSA across the nation invest a substantial amount of time, energy, and other resources into educating people about the role and benefits of participating in CSA. Put in strictly economic terms, it is important for CSA operators to gain a return on these investments because of the intensive up-front costs associated with educating members, and sharing and shaping expectations. It is therefore important for CSAs to retain members, since turnover increases the per capita, high-cost investments these operations

Figure 1. Benefits of CSA Membership

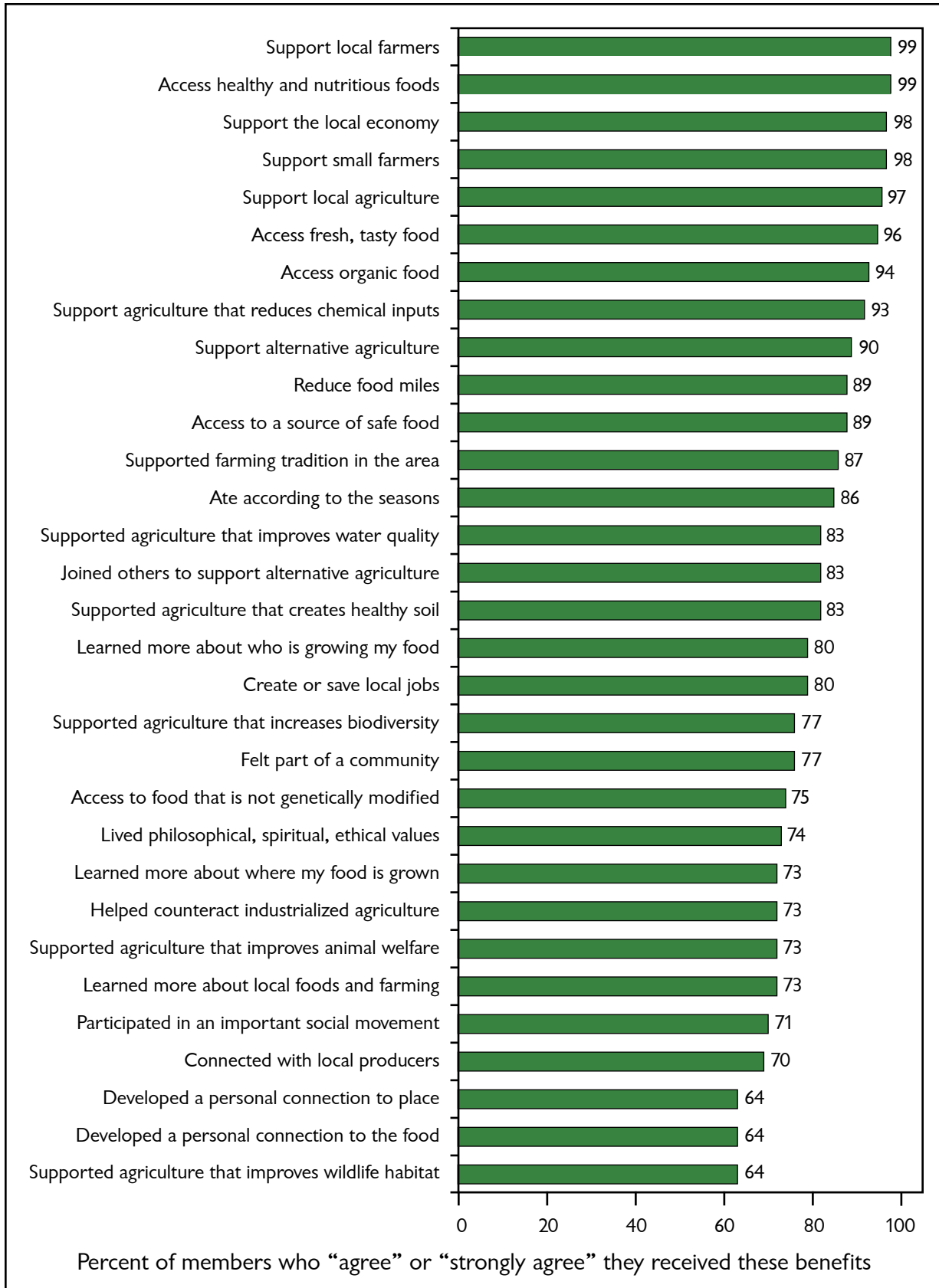
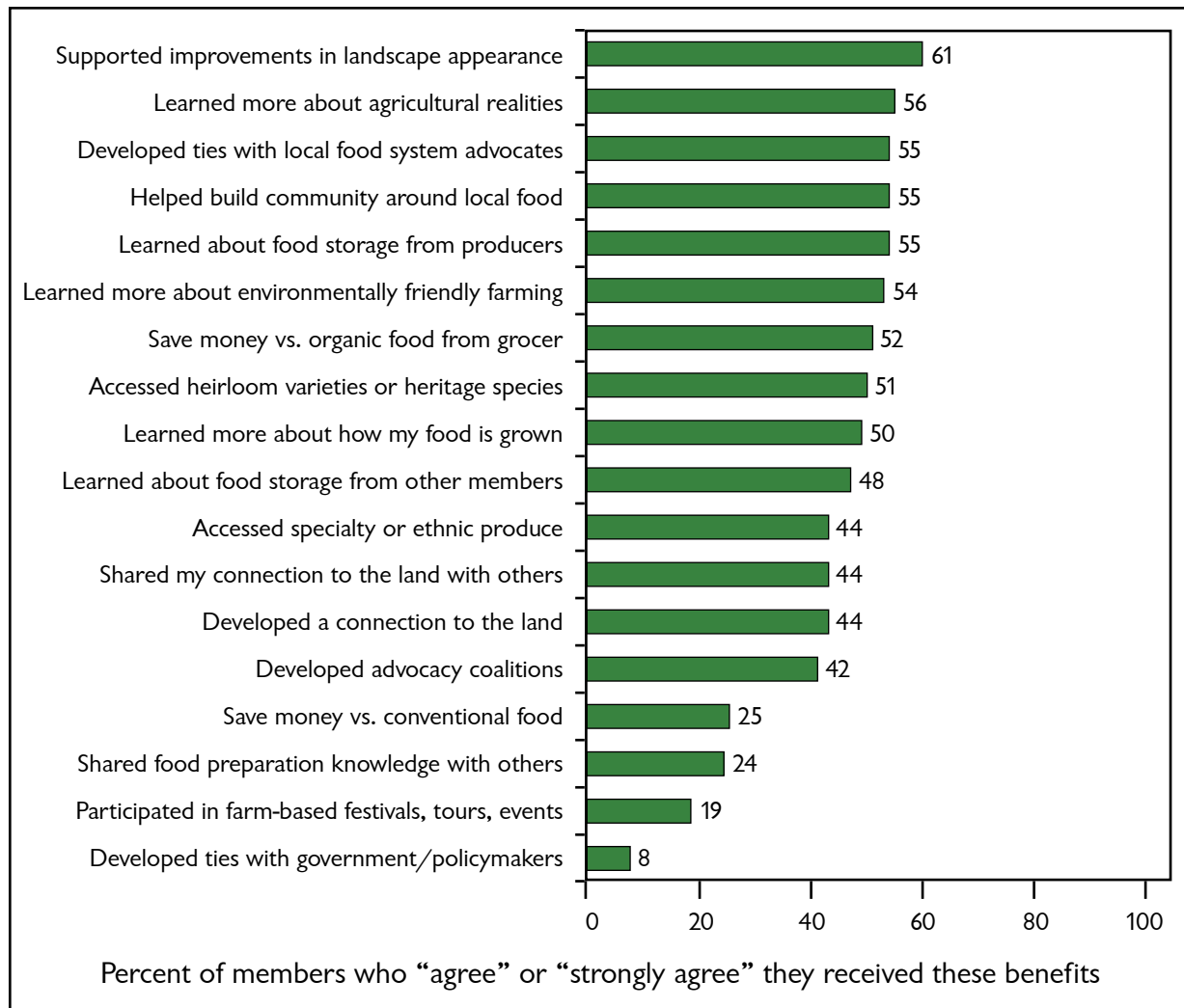


Figure 1 (continued). Benefits of CSA Membership

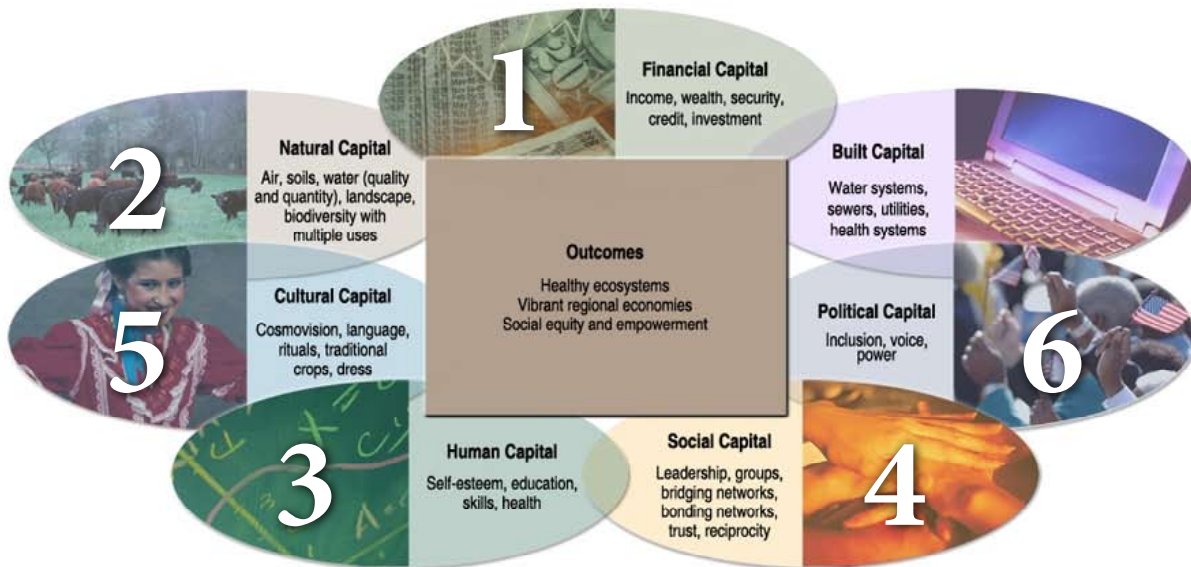


typically make to ensure producers and members maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Attrition rates can indicate the extent to which CSAs are or are not meeting member expectations although some retention is inevitable if people move. In many CSAs, members want some level of control over the quantities and types of products they receive, which is why some CSAs are changing to farm subscription or box scheme models where members pay by the box or pound while still paying an upfront fee. We explored several possible predictors of attrition, including reasons for leaving, demographic characteristics of members, level of member involvement, single vs. multi-producer proprietorship, type of com-

munity capital benefits reportedly received, and the diversity of capital benefits experienced. Here we limit our discussion of attrition as it relates to reasons why members say they left, demographic characteristics, and the role of benefits.

Reasons for Attrition. Recall that nearly half (45.5 percent) of member respondents are no longer participating in collaborative CSA. Why not? Figure 3 (page 6) shows reasons why members say they are no longer involved (they could indicate more than one reason). The top six reasons for attrition have to do with coordination issues: Coordinating member’s summer schedules with weekly deliveries, coordinating

Figure 2. Members Rank Benefits of cCSA Participation According to the Community Capitals Framework



the appropriate amount of produce distributed to members throughout the season, and the convenience and/or control offered by farmers' markets.

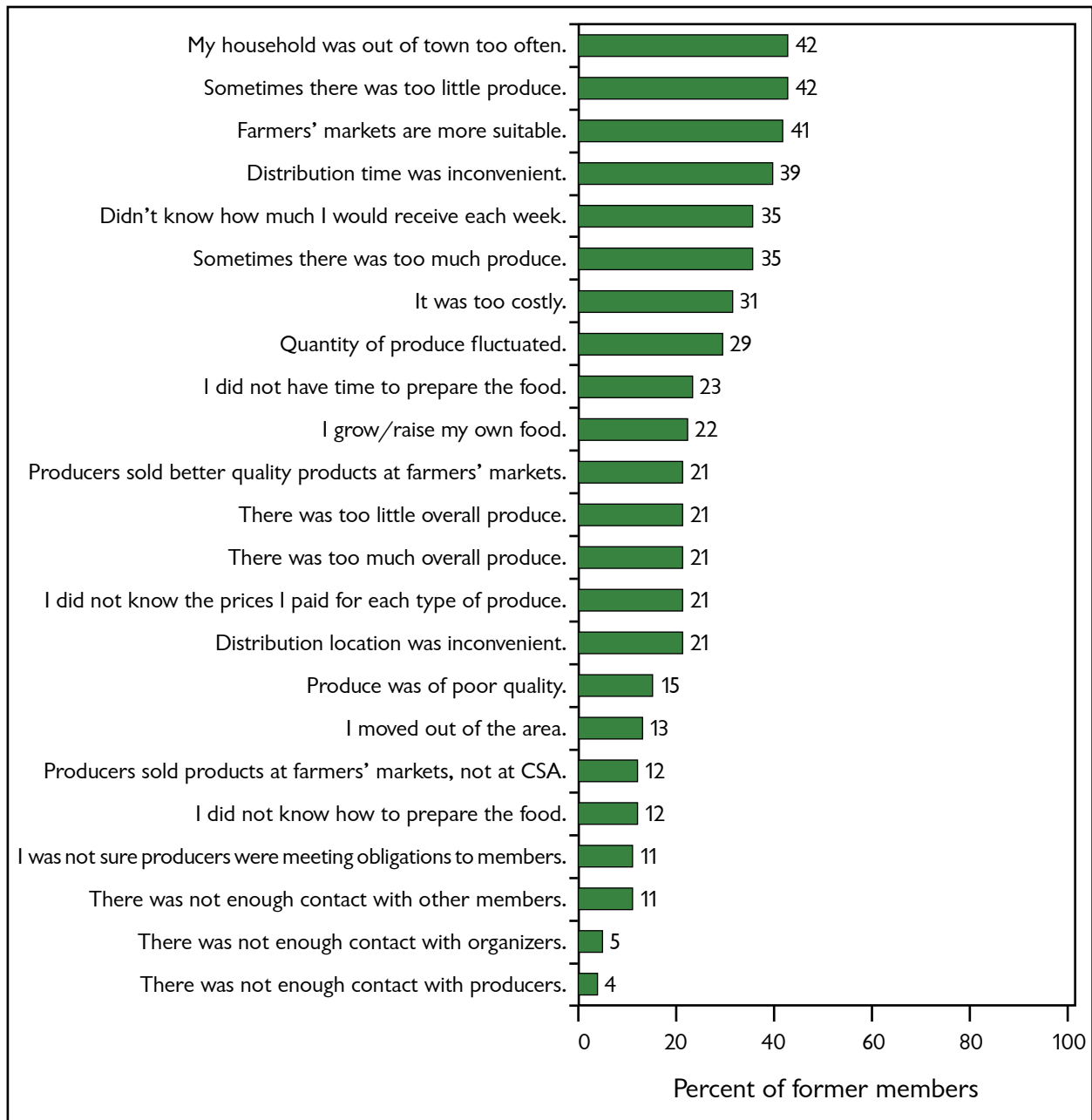
Demographic Predictors. When we examined the relationship between retention and gender, age, country/urban living, length of area residency, number of people in the household, households with children, income and number of years a collaborative CSA member, we found that CSA tenure—that is, the number of years members had been in the CSA—was the only characteristic positively associated with likelihood to stay. For each year members participate in collaborative CSA, they were 1.3 times more likely to stay.

The Role of Community Capital Benefits. Do former members report different kinds of benefits compared to current members? If so, CSA advocates might find such information useful to get people involved and to keep them involved. When we compare the responses of current members to former members, there are several differences worth noting. First, current members are more likely than former members to agree

they derive (community oriented) financial benefits from participation. Second, current members are also more likely than former members to report they experience social, human, and cultural benefits. Ensuring members receive rewards in these areas is important for retaining members. In addition, we found that members who experienced greater levels of social capital benefits were more likely to stay. It is therefore important for CSA organizers to ensure members feel connected to the people with whom they want to connect (for some, this might mean other members; for others, it might mean the producers).

The Role of Diverse Benefits. In addition to meeting our expectations that retention might be linked to different kinds of capital benefits, we also expected members would be more likely to stay if they received benefits in a wider array of community capital categories. The logic supporting this expectation was that the more diverse and varied the capital benefits, the more appealing participation would be. It follows that members who experience benefits in one capital category would be less likely to stay. When we

Figure 3. Reasons for Attrition



tested this, we found that diversity of member capital benefits is statistically important in predicting retention. More specifically, as benefits in the number of community capital categories increases by one, members are 1.5 times more likely to stay. In summary, the more diverse the benefits are for members, the more likely they will continue participating in collaborative CSA. For

example, a member who reports benefits in cultural capital (e.g., by living ethical, spiritual and philosophical values), financial capital (e.g., helping support the local economy), and social capital (e.g., connecting with producers) will be more likely to stay than someone who reports benefits in only one type of capital such as gaining access to a source of healthy, nutritious produce.

Member Participation in Other Local Food Markets

Understanding the broader local food context and the extent to which CSA members secure local food from other sources is important for understanding CSA attrition. From our study, we learned that nearly nine in ten respondents (88%) supplement their cCSA share one way or another—either by growing their own produce/raising livestock or buying local farm products from sources other than collaborative CSA such as farmer’s markets, u-pick operations, local food cooperatives, and on-farm sales. This phenomenon begs the questions: Do non-cCSA sources of local food compete with cCSAs or do they strengthen them? In this section, we examine two alternative local food sources and their impact on CSA participation.

Farmers’ Markets. A whopping 72 percent of cCSA members say they supplemented their CSA share with local produce from farmers’ markets. When we compared current and former members, we found no significant difference between their likelihood to supplement at farmer’s markets—this, despite results in the previous section that showed 41 percent of former members find farmers’ markets more suitable. We can therefore reasonably conclude that farmers’ markets alone do not draw members away from cCSA and that members likely have several reasons why they choose to leave. In fact, based on our analysis of farmers’ markets, local food coops, u-pick operations, and other direct markets, it appears that these local food alternatives might actually be strengthening participation in collaborative CSA. Such markets make cCSA participation possible by providing complementary options to meet members’ complex local food needs.

Single Proprietor Owned CSAs. Single proprietor owned CSA (sCSA) is another market alternative offering access to local foods. We were curious whether dissatisfaction with cCSA was creating more opportunities for sCSA operators. Fifteen percent (28) of Iowa’s cCSA members have been members of cCSA and sCSA (not necessarily simultaneously). When we asked why these “dual” members switched, we received 21 usable responses. Of these 21, two had not switched but rather belonged to both at the same time. Removing these cases (for a total of 19), we found that nearly half (47%) said they changed because of a better location, convenience and delivery options (such as home delivery) (note that respondents could state multiple reasons). Nearly one in three (32%) switched because they moved and 37 percent said single proprietor CSA was a better fit because it offered members more choice and control over quantity and quality. As one of these members observed,

Some producers did the CSA as a ‘side’ event; often there were new enthusiastic producers who were learning how to be a producer. I felt like every year was a year that I was still supporting the ‘learning curve’ of the CSA. It felt not so much like I was supporting normal risk, which is certainly part of a CSA, but that I was consistently subsidizing the learning and growth of the CSA and its producers—constant extra risk, no reliable reward. After four or five years I decided I had done my part to be true to my values, and went shopping for ‘my own farmer’ as I call it. Someone who was my person, my farmer, and whose single focus was pretty much his/her relationship with what they grew and by extension who they grew it for.

These words reflect some impressions that the sCSA structure provides a more responsive, flexible, and personalized experience which helps explain why some CSAs across the country are choosing to establish “box scheme” or subscription memberships rather than “pure” CSA shares. Before we conclude that cCSAs are indeed less responsive, however, we must realize that this may be attributed not necessarily to the multi-producer structure but how effective those structures are communicating with members. Hence, one of the most challenging issues facing collaborative CSA is effective member management—specifically, ensuring that the relationship between members and producers is not obscured by too many farmers with too many faces, as then it becomes difficult to differentiate from industrialized food systems.

As concerns are raised nationally about food safety and health, CSAs are well positioned to respond to citizens’ growing interest in accessing local sources of safe, healthy, fresh, and delicious food while at the same time contributing to local community and economic development. Although farmers’ markets may play a role in this shift, CSA offers particularly unique opportunities because they rely on frequently reinforced, long-term commitments with equally committed eaters in order to build strong and safe food systems for years to come.

Reference

Flora, C.B., J.L. Flora, with S. Fey. 2004. *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*. 2nd ed. USA: Westview Press.

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Research Brief: Results from Iowa’s Collaborative CSA Member Survey is available at <http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/csa/index.html>. For more information contact:



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