

SUMMARY

The Michigan Farm to Institution Network

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



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Summary

What role has the Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN) played in linking Michigan institutions with local food and food suppliers?

Through 27 interviews, document review and secondary data analysis, this report documents the evolution and long-term impact of MFIN since its launch in 2014. It examines how the network's strategies, structure, and participants have changed over time and offers suggestions for MFIN looking forward.

Coordinated by the Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), MFIN aims to support institutions in meeting the 2010 Michigan Good Food Charter goal that Michigan institutions will source 20 percent of their food products from Michigan growers, producers and processors by 2020.

Three clear themes emerged when interviewees were asked to reflect on the greatest successes of MFIN.

First, many spoke about how MFIN has raised awareness about the benefits and possibilities of local food sourcing with groups directly involved in the work (farmers, distributors, buyers), and the general public. One person spoke about the changing culture of local sourcing, and how MFIN has helped to **“build imagination about what is possible.”**

MFIN has changed the culture of local procurement in Michigan by:



RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT MICHIGAN AGRICULTURE AND THE BENEFITS OF LOCAL SOURCING



CREATING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE THAT VALUES LOCAL SOURCING

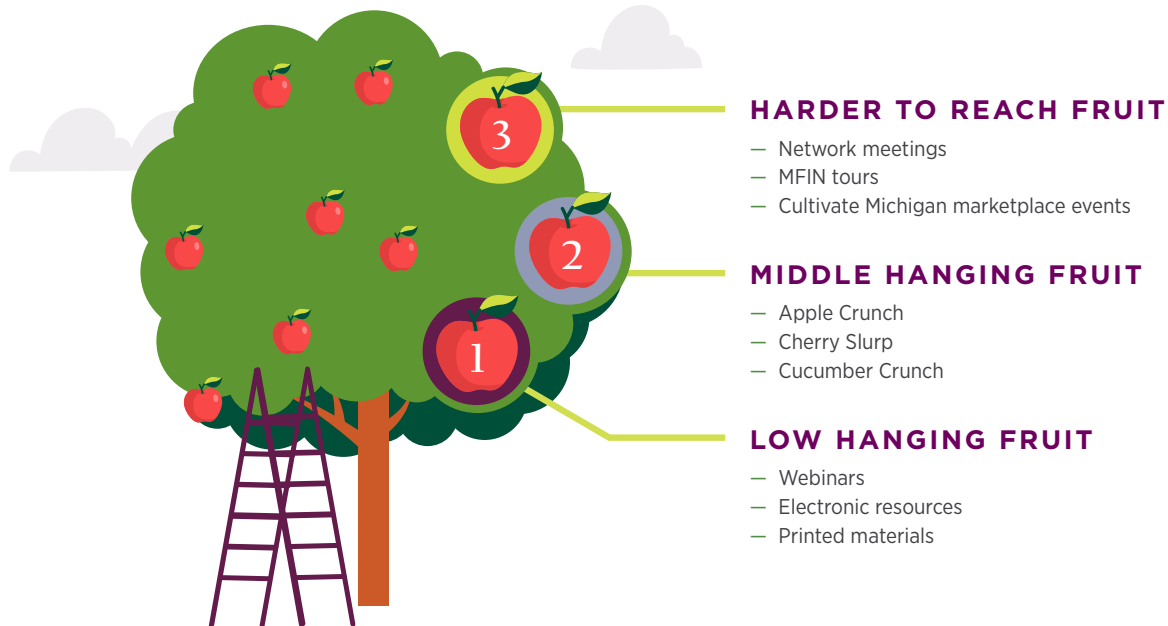


EDUCATING STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT HOW TO COMMUNICATE AND COLLABORATE WITH DIVERSE SECTORS

Second, a majority (67%) of interviewees discussed the power of having a community to network, share resources, and “build camaraderie over local food.” And third, over half of interviewees discussed the role

MFIN has played in helping representatives of different sectors understand, communicate, and collaborate with each other.

A “tiered” approach to MFIN engagement:



Key Findings and Lessons

Based on the themes that emerged in our analysis, several key takeaways may help MFIN chart out its future direction and serve as lessons for other emerging farm to institution networks in other states.

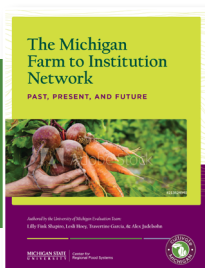
- **MFIN membership has continued to grow** each year since 2014. The MFIN listserv has grown dramatically since 2014; from 70 subscribers to over 600 by 2020.
- Having an **“anchoring” organization and inclusive leadership** approach has been key to MFIN’s success.
- MFIN’s **“tiered” system of engagement** (offering a range of opportunities and events that require different levels of involvement) has been instrumental to MFIN’s growth in membership.
- Interviewees shared suggestions of sectors that are not currently involved

- with MFIN, or not engaged enough. The clearest theme, repeated by almost half (41%) of all interviewees is that **MFIN has a “gap” in farmer participation.**
- Unprompted, almost half (44%) of interviewees spoke about the **challenges associated with data collection** and measuring local sourcing progress. Many also discussed the unique challenges COVID-19 has posed for farm to institution efforts.
- MFIN’s more recent **prioritization on diversity, equity and inclusion values** has resonated with members. Moving forward, an effort to diversify MFIN membership and leadership should help expand its reach and impact.
- Some members appreciate the need to **look beyond “local”** to other values such as workforce/labor standards and sustainability practices. Looking ahead, MFIN may consider trying to find strategies for institutional buyers to balance competing priorities.
- MFIN should continue to **engage with producers and buyers of various scales**, while simultaneously addressing ways to support the unique challenges that small(er) scale producers and buyers face.
- It will be important to move beyond individual farm to institution “champions” towards more entrenched **institutional policy that values local purchasing.**
- Although interviewees felt like **significant progress has been made with institutions sourcing local food, many also feel that Michigan still has a long way to go until local food becomes the “default”** and a significant percentage of institutional food service budgets, necessitating the continuation of a network like MFIN.



[MFIN] has been a really powerful force in Michigan and is a really big reason why the state has been able to make strides in that area. Without it, I’m not sure who exactly will be leading that effort.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



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VISION

CRFS envisions a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the country, and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on Good Food: food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable.

MISSION

The mission of CRFS is to engage the people of Michigan, the United States, and the world in applied research, education, and outreach to develop regionally integrated, sustainable food systems.

ABOUT

CRFS joins in Michigan State University's pioneering legacy of applied research, education, and outreach by catalyzing collaboration and fostering innovation among the diverse range of people, processes, and places involved in regional food systems. Working in local, state, national, and global spheres, CRFS' projects span from farm to fork, including production, processing, distribution, policy, and access.

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