

# The Michigan Farm to Institution Network

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



*Authored by the University of Michigan Evaluation Team:*

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

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

This report documents the evolution and long-term impact of MFIN to offer network members and the leadership and management teams a way to build on past accomplishments and to also learn about how such networks can create a space for learning, sharing, and working together to help farm to institution programs grow more widely.



MFIN is such an asset to me and our company that it is highly frustrating to me that in the other states that we operate they don't have a version of MFIN...I could use MFIN in other states.

— FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONAL

### The goals of MFIN are to help:

- Farmers, food processors, and food suppliers provide the local foods that institutions require in the forms they need;
- Institutions like hospitals, schools, early care and education settings, and colleges locate, purchase, and use these products; and
- Eaters at these institutions recognize, understand, and enjoy local foods.

Network membership is open to food service directors and buyers from diverse institutions, including hospitals, universities, K-12 schools, and early childcare and education sites, as well as farmers, food vendors and suppliers, local food advocates, and researchers. 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% of their food products from Michigan growers, producers and processors by 2020.”**<sup>1</sup>

Based on extensive interviews with MFIN stakeholders and a review of past reports and surveys, we chronicle how the network's strategies, structure, and participants have changed over time and offer suggestions for MFIN looking forward.



Most of this report draws from 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with MFIN advisory committee members and other network members conducted between July and October 2020. Interviewees represented a range of roles, including institutional food service directors, farmers, nonprofit professionals, broadline distributor representatives, Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) Educators, and state government employees. We also include findings from eight surveys of MFIN members and documents such as MFIN-produced data briefs, meeting slides, and reports.<sup>2</sup>

**The report that follows is structured around the following themes:**



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# Launch of the Michigan Farm to Institution Network

## CRFS was immersed in farm to school and institutional sourcing efforts well before MFIN officially launched in 2014.

Between 2004 and 2014, CRFS conducted six surveys to better understand the landscape of farm to institution efforts in Michigan, and CRFS staff produced various resources to promote farm to institution sales, such as the 2010 publication entitled *Putting Michigan Produce on Your Menu: How to Buy and Use Michigan Produce in Your Institution*. Another report CRFS published in 2013<sup>3</sup> found that the majority (approximately 90%) of school food service directors were either already purchasing local foods or interested in doing so.

This early involvement and research provided CRFS with a deep sense of the unique challenges, opportunities, and demand for sourcing local foods among institutions in Michigan. In April 2014, MFIN officially launched as a collaboration between CRFS and Ann Arbor-based non-profit, the Ecology Center, with support from MSU Extension (MSUE). CRFS took the lead on Michigan-based farm to school work while the Ecology Center led the farm to hospital efforts, as well as served as the Michigan organizer for Health Care Without Harm. The two organizations co-managed the network until 2018, when MFIN leadership was transferred entirely to CRFS, with continued support from MSUE.



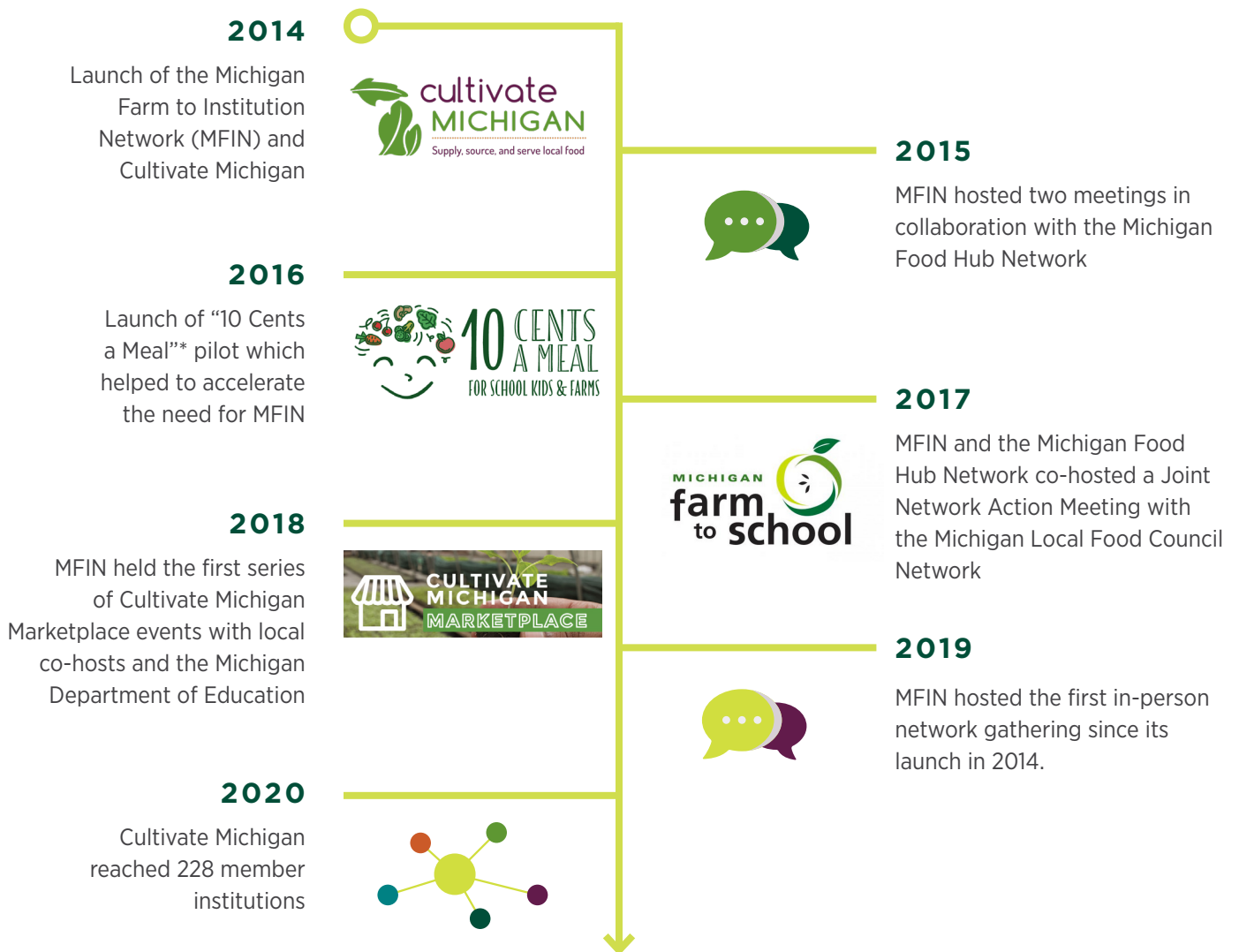
**In April of 2014, MFIN launched “Cultivate Michigan,” the local food purchasing and tracking campaign of MFIN.**

Institutional food service directors/buyers were invited to join Cultivate Michigan as a way to pledge their commitment to reaching the 20% local by 2020 goal and track their progress along the way through quarterly surveys. Cultivate Michigan featured four local, seasonally-available foods each year through 2019, for a total of 24 featured foods. Additionally, MFIN staff distributed toolkits to Cultivate Michigan members that included recipes and marketing materials (posters, signs, window clings, stickers) for each of the foods to help promote recognition of these local foods among eaters at participating institutions.

The timeline below illustrates some of the pivotal moments and milestones since the launch of MFIN and Cultivate Michigan in 2014.

Over this time period, MFIN and Cultivate Michigan have been funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Americana Foundation. The 2018 Cultivate Michigan Marketplaces were funded by a USDA Farm to School Grant to the Michigan Department of Education.

## Michigan Farm to Institution Milestones



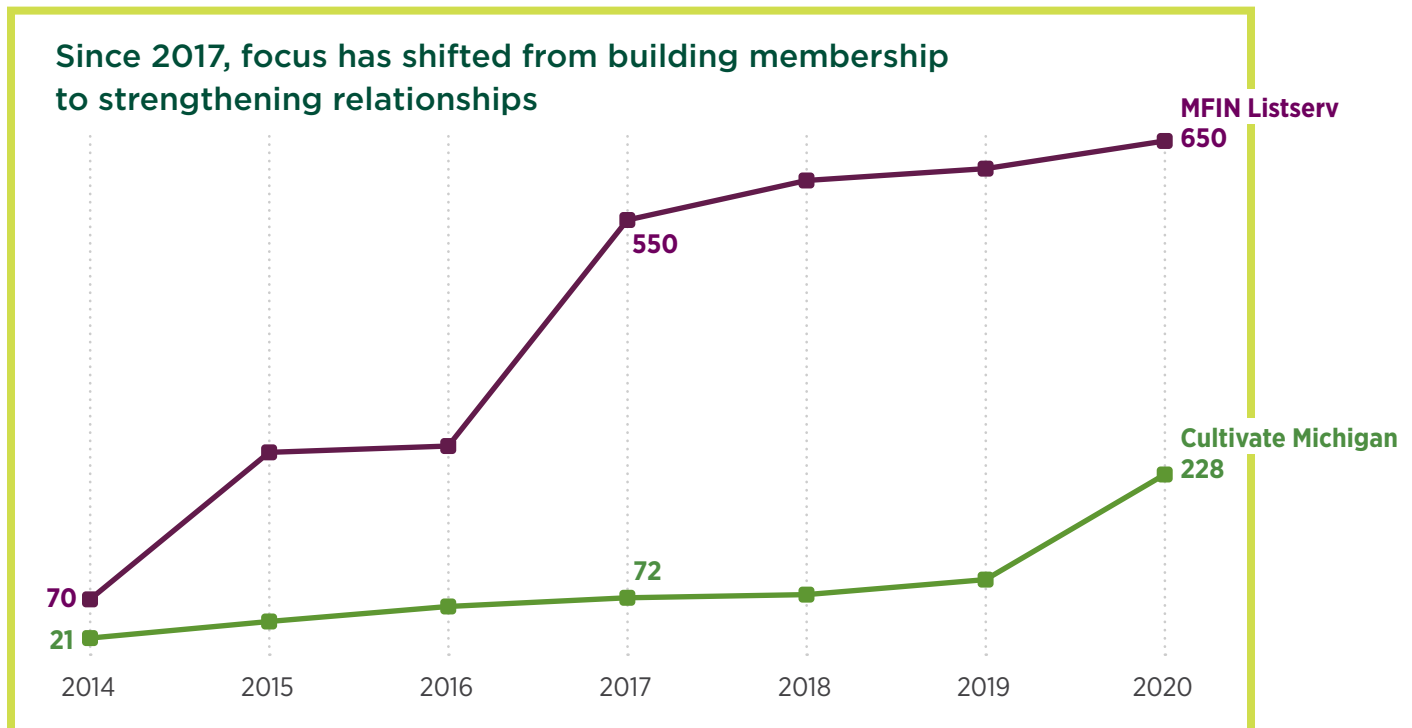
*\*\*10 Cents a Meal is a state-funded program providing schools with matching incentive funding up to 10 cents per meal to purchase and serve Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes. To learn more, visit [tencentsmichigan.org](http://tencentsmichigan.org) and [canr.msu.edu/10-cents-a-meal](http://canr.msu.edu/10-cents-a-meal).*

# Growth of the Michigan Farm to Institution Network

## MFIN and Cultivate Michigan membership has grown each year since 2014.

The MFIN listserv has grown dramatically since 2014—from 70 subscribers to over 600 by 2020. One MFIN co-coordinator suggested that MFIN membership had likely grown as much as it did because the Network tries to “meet members where they are,” creating a variety of ways to engage while staying “very nimble and open to better ideas and rethinking things as we go.” Cultivate Michigan membership has also increased each year,<sup>4</sup> albeit at a slower pace since participation in Cultivate Michigan requires an active commitment by institutions to local food sourcing, tracking, and reporting.

### Figure 1. Membership of Cultivate Michigan and the MFIN Listserv Increased Steadily





Despite the growth in MFIN participants, one interviewee expressed **disappointment that the Cultivate Michigan membership numbers were not higher:**



If you just look at the sheer number of institutions we have in the state and then you look at the number that are participating in the Cultivate Michigan program, I think we could have done better in that space.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

The speaker went on to explain that the membership numbers may reflect that even non-members have access to the Cultivate Michigan promotional materials and featured food resources for free on the Cultivate Michigan website. Many institutions, therefore, may be learning from the Cultivate Michigan marketing efforts and engaging in and increasing their local food purchasing, but without formally joining Cultivate Michigan.

One aspect of MFIN engagement that may be unclear to many who interface with the network, is what it means to be a MFIN member. Who is a member of the network and what qualifies as membership may not be obvious to many, despite the explanation of membership on the MFIN homepage.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, at the November 2019 MFIN meeting (that was exclusively a MFIN focused meeting), only 43% of survey respondents indicated that they were a MFIN member. This may be because this event attracted people who were curious about the network but not consistently involved. Or, perhaps there is confusion among people who are regularly engaged with the network about what it means to be an active network “member.”

# Leadership and Engagement

## All 27 interviewees agreed that they had a positive experience with the leadership and coordination of MFIN.

Several interviewees mentioned well-run meetings, and described network leadership as organized by ensuring that “every i is dotted and every t is crossed...the agendas are perfect.” One person noted how important it was that MSU plays an “anchoring” role for the network.

Unprompted, many interviewees expressed appreciation for the leadership of CRFS Specialist and MFIN Coordinator, Colleen Matts, who was a co-founder of the network and has been at the core of farm to institution work in Michigan since 2007. Some spoke about Matts as a “visionary leader” and others referenced her ability to “create space” for people. Someone else said they had “mad respect” for Colleen:



That is a wonderful thing about [Colleen] and her leadership capabilities—she wants to create a space for everybody and give everyone a chance to have their voice be heard.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL



I also appreciate...that [MFIN leaders] are flexible and [as] Colleen always says, ‘creating spaces for people.’

— FOOD SERVICE DISTRIBUTOR



I think Colleen is a visionary leader who has a very unique skill set of...being able to implement things with integrity and follow up and a lot of thought and planning and intention... I think Colleen has been a really good, stable force to keep [MFIN] steady but growing and evolving.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

MFIN has a management team of seven to eight members, which is made up of both CRFS and MSUE Educators. The advisory committee began with eight members but grew to 14 farm to institution practitioners in 2020, and has engaged 26 different people since 2014. MFIN launched with three subcommittees—focused on technical assistance and education, impact/research, and outreach/management—that organize the work of the network and engage broader members. As MFIN evolved its structure and strategy in 2018 and 2019, the subcommittees transitioned from a public-facing role to more internal organizing tool.

When asked about MFIN membership, one interviewee described that it “felt like everybody who joined kept going.” Those who disengaged with MFIN seemed to do so primarily because they moved or left their positions. Another person identified a “disconnect” between the MFIN “early adopters” and people who have joined more recently but are less passionate about the mission of the network. One person reflected on the various sectors that participate in the network, noting that “schools were the first adopters,” followed by hospitals and healthcare institutions.

From a demographic perspective, the people who are engaged with MFIN are largely similar to the makeup of people who are involved with other food systems networks in Michigan.<sup>6</sup> One third (36%) of MFIN members tend to be between 51 and 60 years old, the majority (51%) hold higher education degrees, and are female (72%). The only clear difference is that MFIN members tend to identify more as white (90%) compared to members in other Michigan-based food system networks, 76% of whom, on average, identify as white.<sup>7</sup>

**Despite a more recent emphasis on equity, four interviewees noted that the MFIN advisory committee and overall network membership was not very demographically diverse,** noting how:



It always felt like we were not a very racially diverse bunch and probably more female gendered.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



The farmers that come are all white farmers and it tends to be a lot of women involved. It’s kind of like any local food event. It’s really female led. It’s really white. We have that specific profile for sure.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

**Several interviewees also made it clear that MFIN is actively working to diversify its membership.** As one long-time MFIN member put it,



I think we could definitely do a better job on that equity front, of engaging farmers of color, organizations that work with them, that represent people of color, eaters of color, different neighborhoods, communities around the state....we’re a very white group from our management team to the people that maybe are in the network. So engaging more people of color in this space I would say has been difficult, but not something that we’re not aware of. It’s just a challenge for sure.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

Interviewees also had suggestions of sectors that are not currently involved with MFIN, or not engaged enough. These included the grocery sector, correctional facilities, large school districts, smaller scale distributors, senior facilities, produce distributors, and restaurants.

**The clearest theme, repeated by almost half (41%) of all interviewees is that MFIN has a “gap” in producer participation.** As interviewees explained,



I wish we had a little better participation from farmers but that’s just the nature of their lifestyle...That might be one of the groups that we could get more of.

– FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT



The big challenge is how to promote participation among farmers.

– NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL



It felt like we always had kind of a gap in producer participation, [though this] makes sense and is true across our farm to institution work just because farmers have a lot on their plate to begin with.

– EXTENSION EDUCATOR

Another interviewee shared that MFIN’s recent involvement with juvenile justice centers, senior housing, and independent living facilities are “brave new territories,” indicating that MFIN has more recently pursued partnerships with these groups—something that all interviewees may not be aware of.

## Interviewees suggested many sectors that are underrepresented in MFIN

**41% OF INTERVIEWEES SAID THAT FARMERS ARE “MISSING”**



FARMERS



GROCERY



CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES



LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICTS



SENIOR CARE CENTERS



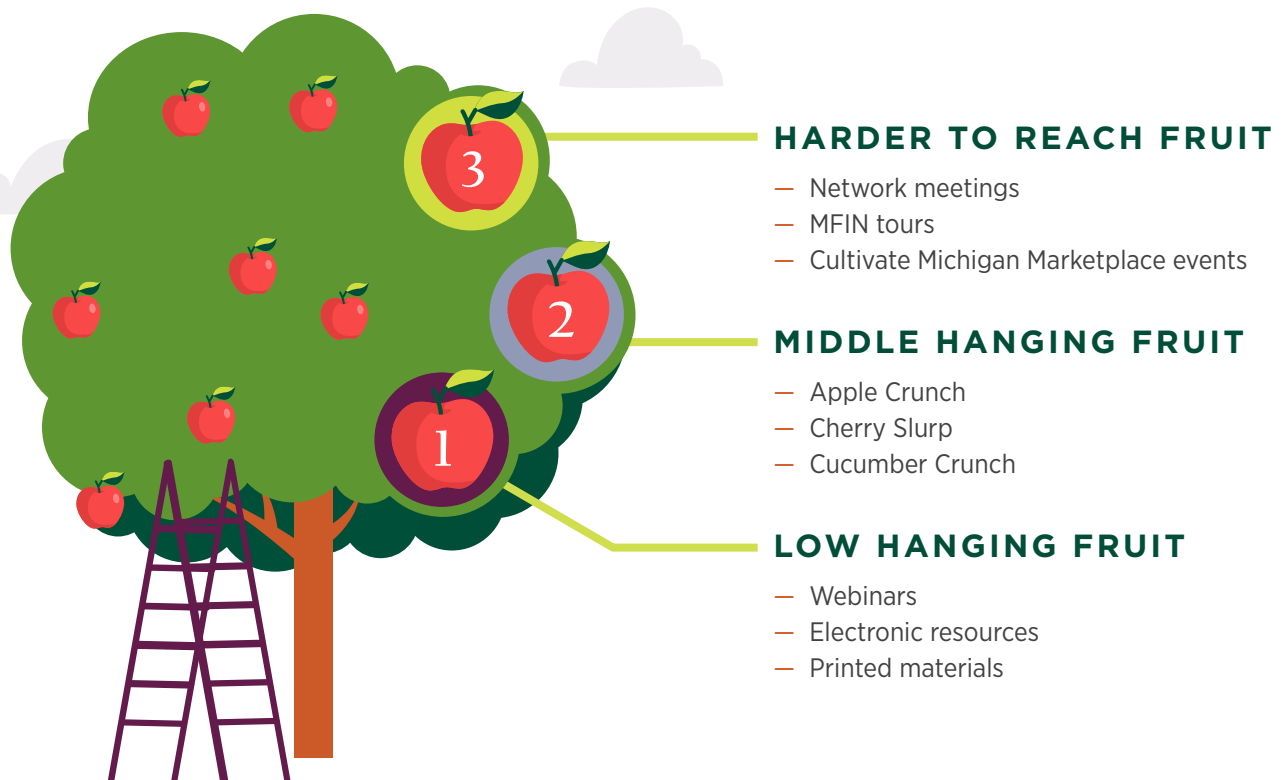
RESTAURANTS

# Strategies of the Michigan Farm to Institution Network

While the goals of MFIN have not changed since the launch of the network, the strategies to achieve those goals have evolved over the years.

One interviewee described that MFIN has a “tiered” system of engagement, meaning that there are different ways to engage with the network depending on capacity and interest. While some people may not have the time or capacity to travel across the state to attend an in-person meeting or facility tour, they might be able to organize an event in their community featuring local apples, or even more easily, participate in a virtual network meeting or take advantage of some of the ready-to-use Cultivate Michigan marketing materials.

## A “tiered” approach to MFIN Engagement





## LOW HANGING FRUIT

The “low hanging fruit” refers to the array of MFIN activities that require little time, travel, or other forms of commitment in order to participate.

Examples include attending relevant virtual network meetings, engaging with electronic resources, or making use of printed materials. Between 2014-2019, MFIN and Cultivate Michigan produced and distributed printed materials for food service establishments that made it easy to feature the Michigan-sourced food in their menu.

**About half (48%) of interviewees referenced the printed promotional materials as one of the network’s most successful strategies, and several people expressed regret that MFIN no longer creates new printed materials to highlight the Michigan featured foods:**



The [Cultivate Michigan] stickers, the decals, the posters—that helped really highlight [local foods] on our lunch lines and our menus and brought it all together.... [They were like Cultivate Michigan’s] local food resources in a box, so to speak.

— FORMER FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR



The posters and [window] clings for the quarterly highlight of produce —those were really successful in the school environment because you could marry what you were serving in the cafeteria with nutrition education going on in the health curriculum....[I would like MFIN to] bring back the product, the quarterly highlight [featured foods promotion]. You know, a director is not going to take time but if it comes to them, you bet they will [use it]. Just because this water trough exists doesn’t mean they’re going to drink it if they have to take a step to do it. But if you get somebody a glass of water and put it on their desk, they’ll drink it.

— FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT



I’ve used all the signage that Cultivate Michigan sends out in all of our cafeterias, and our residents ask questions about what those things are about each time.

— FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR



I think the featured foods [and] guides that have been created were amazing...all of the printed materials that were created were gorgeous and vibrant and they really did highlight and make everyone really want to be involved.”

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

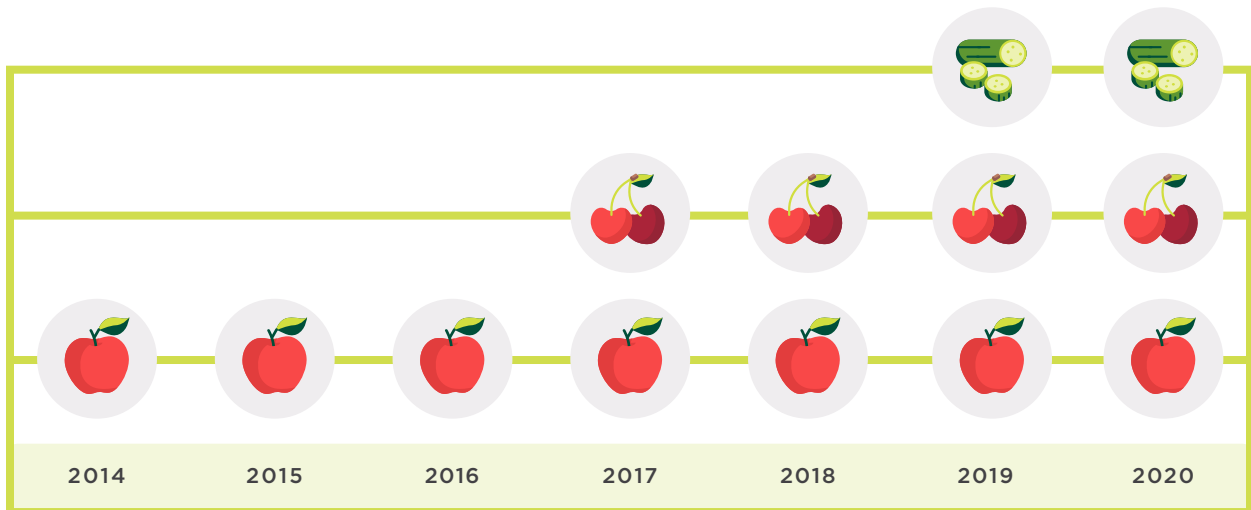


## MIDDLE HANGING FRUIT

**Starting in 2014, MFIN began supporting the annual Michigan Apple Crunch, a way to celebrate the local apple harvest every October.**

After participants register their own “Crunch” event, they receive information about where to find local apples and tips for promotion. On the same day in the fall, groups of people all across the state are invited to take a photo of themselves “crunching” into their Michigan-grown apples. School groups, government officials, and farmers are among the diverse groups of people who participate in the “Crunch.” More recently, MFIN has also participated in the “Great Lakes Apple Crunch” which includes 6 states<sup>8</sup> crunching on the same day for one big regional crunch.

Inspired by the success of the Apple Crunch and responding to specific requests from stakeholders to promote Michigan cherries, MFIN began hosting an annual Michigan Cherry Slurp in 2017 featuring frozen cherries to draw attention to Michigan cherries, and also added a summertime “Cucumber Crunch” for the first time in 2019, an effort that was led by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Participation in these events requires more time and effort than the activities in the “low hanging fruit” category, but less energy than the third category.



**The Michigan Apple Crunch, the Cherry Slurp, and the Cucumber Crunch are fun events to highlight Michigan produce throughout the year.**

**When asked about the Crunches and the Slurp, interviewees spoke positively about their involvement, with over half (56%) sharing fun stories about “crunching” with students, with colleagues, or in one case, even dressing up as apples for the occasion.** One interviewee described how participating in the Apple Crunch was a kind of “healthy peer pressure,” and another person appreciated how these events provide such “tangible opportunities for collaboration.”



The first [Apple] Crunch inspired me that we shouldn't be celebrating these apples or highlighting the apples just in the month of October. What's our excuse for just not having Michigan apples all the time?

— FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONAL



I think the Apple Crunch specifically has been really, really popular because it has moved and inspired people to be really devoted to Michigan apples...After I went through the first Apple Crunch with MFIN I made the declaration, with the support of our purchasing department, that every single Michigan location should only be serving Michigan apples and completely year-round, not just in apple season.

We have a great network of growers and vendors that are cold storing. What the heck are we buying Washington apples for and driving them across the country? We even did some fun campaigns around them...and now our campuses in the state of Michigan are exclusively Michigan apples.

— FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONAL



In February they have the Cherry Slurp so several of the districts in my county here used [Michigan] Farm to Freezer cherries to make crisps or a fruit cup or yogurt parfait in a whole host of ways using locally sourced cherries. So it's really, really cool and the farm to school directory has been really good because they can call those farmers and say, 'Hey, what do you have for me right now?'

...We serve children with special needs in my district. I incorporated different ways that all of the students could take part in the Apple Crunch. For example, we got local [pasteurized] apple cider for the liquid diet students. We had apple sauce for the children on soft diets that we got directly from one of the cider mills near Macomb. We got apple slices from a farm here in Macomb and then of course we got apples from a local orchard here in Macomb. Everybody could take part and it was great.

— FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT





I don't know that [the Apple Crunch] necessarily helped in moving the needle towards more local purchasing. I think more for the institutions that are new to the effort, it's a kind of bandwagon opportunity and a way to get the wheels moving.

— FORMER FARM TO SCHOOL COORDINATOR



I think [the Apple Crunch] was a really important educational tool to engage students, teachers, [and] parents to understand that Michigan is a strong producer of apples. I think it was fun, a lot of schools are really creative. They would have apples on a string...they make it like a festival. They have a drone and would get all the kids on the football field crunching their apple. They made it a fun fall festival. I did one Cherry Slurp, and the kids loved it. It was on Valentine's Day.

— FORMER EXTENSION EDUCATOR



## HARDER TO REACH FRUIT

**One key strategy to increase institutional purchasing of local food is through in-person events held across the state where attendees can network.**

These types of events have included tours, Cultivate Michigan Marketplace events, and in-person network meetings (which were often held in conjunction with other CRFS-led networks). Although not everyone is able to participate in these in-person events, those who did participate spoke positively about their experience. Notably, 19 interviewees specified that they think the in-person events have been some of the most successful MFIN strategies.

Since 2014, the Michigan Farm to Institution Network has hosted 18 tours across the state.



Since 2014, MFIN has hosted 18 Featured Food Tours of farms and food facilities across the state. Interviewees agreed that **while the tours can be very meaningful ways to facilitate connections between buyers and suppliers, they have a relatively low participation rate** since participation requires time and (often) travel across the state. As interviewees put it,



If you look at the membership of the network, versus how many people actually partake in [the tours], it's pretty low. So when people come they're effective, but not that many people were coming.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



I know tours are something that's always hard to get attendance to just because of busy schedules and things, but the ones I've been on have been phenomenal and all of the people who have been on them have learned a lot. I think all those ways they've built transparency between suppliers and buyers have been really impactful.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

**Over half (59%) of interviewees spoke about the MFIN tours as an effective strategy to increase local sourcing by developing personal relationships between buyers and farmers.**



The tours have been remarkable. Getting food service directors out educates them, especially if they haven't lived in a farm area... it gets them out to see a farm and to understand what questions to ask.

— GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE



I think the tours [work well] because they add a personal touch you can identify with actually having been there and it gives it that personal feel of knowing the people.

— FORMER FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR

By 2017, the network coordinators entered a different strategic phase, where their focus was not so much about building the network, but more focused on “strengthening and deepening and getting more efficient about how we do things,” which in part led to the launch of Cultivate Michigan Marketplace meet-the-buyer-style events. Between 2018 and 2020, MFIN held a total of five regional marketplace events, with the goal of bringing together buyers, farmers, and food vendors to network. One interviewee said that the marketplace was worth doing, but questioned the frequency, suggesting that perhaps they were held too often. The marketplaces ranged in size, depending on the population of the region. For example, the Ann Arbor marketplace had over 60 buyers and suppliers, while the marketplace held in Petoskey had about 40 people. Another MFIN member described these events as “small but mighty”:



Those marketplace events, even though they were small, it's kind of like small but mighty. Those were still pretty great, people met different growers and made those connections that we're talking about and so even though it was such a smaller scale it was still pretty powerful.

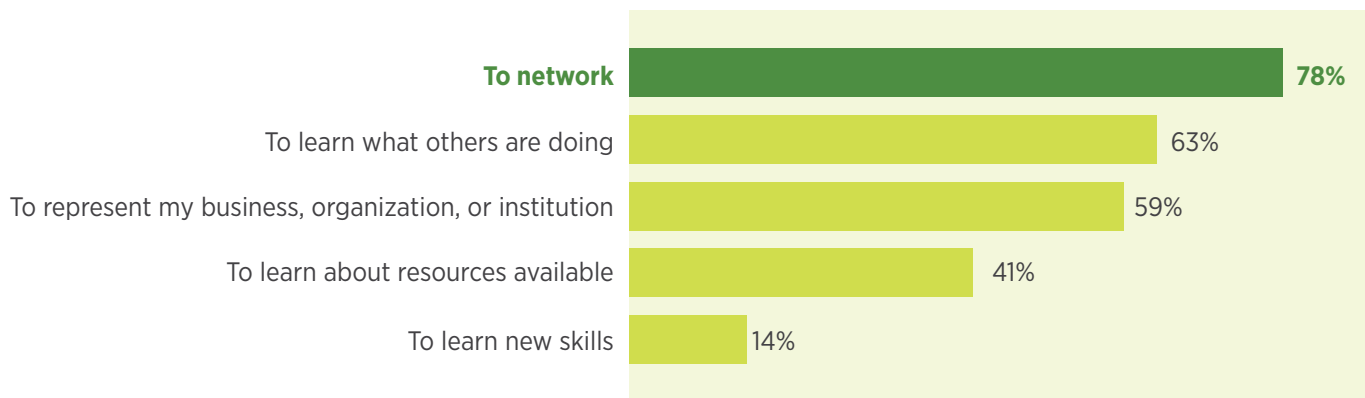
— GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE

## Michigan Farm to Institution Network Gathering 2019

**In November of 2019, MFIN brought together about 75 people from at least 22 different Michigan counties for a day-long gathering.** This was the first time MFIN held an in-person meeting that was not held in conjunction with other CRFS-led networks. The event celebrated farm to institution successes, facilitated peer networking, and began the process of gathering feedback to inform the direction of MFIN beyond 2020.

According to post-meeting surveys, the majority of people attended because they wanted to network (78%) and learn what others are doing (63%). Other reasons for attending, documented in the 2019 MFIN Evaluation report<sup>9</sup> included to represent their institution, business, or organization, to learn about resources available, or to learn new skills.

## Above all, people attended the 2019 MFIN Gathering to network



# Impacts of the Michigan Farm to Institution Network

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

While it is difficult to measure a general shift in perception across the state, many interviewees spoke about how MFIN has played a significant role in raising awareness about the benefits and possibilities of local food sourcing for institutions, both with groups who are directly involved in the work (farmers, distributors, buyers), and with the general public. Many interviewees agreed that MFIN has helped farm to institution efforts become more widely known and accepted. One person spoke about the changing culture of local sourcing, and how MFIN has helped to “build imagination about what is possible.”

The majority (67%) of interviewees discussed the power of the network and the value of having a community to network, share resources, and “build camaraderie over local food.” As one interviewee put it, “I think the relationship building piece has probably been what MFIN has done best—just creating relationships.” Lastly, over half (14 interviewees) identified MFIN’s greatest success in terms of the role it has played in helping representatives of different sectors understand, communicate, and collaborate with each other. One interviewee spoke about how MFIN taught farmers how to approach institutional buyers, especially how it is important to first establish a relationship with the institution and understand their needs before trying to sell to them. The figure and quotes below highlight the three main impacts interviewees outlined.

## 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**



## RAISING AWARENESS



[MFIN has helped the] concepts of farm to institution [be] more widely known. This is something that people weren't really talking about so much [before MFIN existed], but MFIN has definitely gotten the ideas out there across the state really effectively and I think that they have given tremendous support to all the organizations interested in moving this forward.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL



MFIN has helped by “building awareness of Michigan agriculture for institutions and building imagination around what can be done in schools...and just building creativity and imagination around what is possible. I think there are a lot of farmers who did not necessarily see schools as even in the realm of markets. And a lot of schools who didn't even see small farmers in the realm of people they could be working with.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



From a statewide perspective, [MFIN] has really been able to educate many of the people in school nutrition on what kinds of produce are available at different times during the year.

— FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT



The idea of cooking from scratch when you can just open a bag of something completely prepped and ready to heat and serve was scary. We had to kind of develop a culture around that...we developed the recipes, we tested. People love the flavor, they love the way the kitchen smelled, it smelled like barbecue instead of plastic.

— FORMER FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR



## COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE



MFIN is probably most successful at being that hub for people to connect and share ideas, resources, and to learn from each other about local food and Michigan foods specifically in the institutional space. [MFIN is] bringing people together, sharing ideas, connecting things. I think their strongest asset is bringing those like minds together and sharing when you have failed, when you've succeeded, what you did about it, how you overcame challenges or how easy something is to get started. That shared common knowledge and conversations [is] what MFIN facilitates...that's baked into what they do.

— FORMER FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR



One of the biggest benefits of my relationship through MFIN is just getting connected to other people across the state.

— INSTITUTIONAL BUYER



A great accomplishment of [MFIN] is just having connected people throughout the state. [MFIN] actually cultivates a network. A lot of things are called networks and they don't necessarily operate like one, but I think this one does.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



## CROSS SECTOR COLLABORATION



[MFIN has helped members see] “both sides of things. I think MFIN has done a really good job of trying to create institutional education for farmers and farmer education for institutions to bridge the gap between two relatively small margin industries that maybe don't understand the restrictions that the other people are going through.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



I think anytime you can get people to see each other's world, it's huge. I've listened to chefs say they had no idea what farmers have to do—all the steps they have to take. The realization of that affects how they talk to each other, what questions they ask. So it's had an enormous impact on their ability not only to create relationships—which is hugely important in building trust and food chains—but also to build their understanding of how to ask questions in order to actually do transactional work.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL



I learned how to go to institutions and present our products, and also learned what institutions want to see in order to buy a product.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL

**Other major impacts of the network relate to MFIN’s more recent efforts to center issues of equity at MFIN events, which have clearly resonated with some members.**

In particular, MFIN played a key role in influencing one member to more intentionally source food from minority-owned producers and has encouraged this member to think about the role of indigenous peoples and migrant workers. As one member explained,



MFIN really connected some dots for me and brought resources that I would not have known about. One of the biggest takeaways that I got from our [2019 MFIN gathering] last fall was how the food supply supports or fails the indigenous peoples of Michigan...

The other thing that MFIN has really gotten me looking at especially in the last two years is that we have a concentrated effort now to look for minority-owned producers or minority-run cooperatives. There’s no doubt that the folks that MSU and MFIN have, if not convinced me, they got it in my field of vision of why that matters not just from a social justice standpoint, but actually an agriculture standpoint. So that’s very cool to me and we’re pretty dedicated. It’s a little bit of an arduous process just because of all the systemic barriers—it’s hard...

At the same time, MFIN has made me very, very aware of migrant worker rights in the state of Michigan. We have talked to Migrant Legal Aid and have financially supported them and signed a petition that at any time—and it is part of our policy now—if Migrant Legal Aid brings to our attention that someone that we’re doing business is accused of abuses in any way, that we will cease purchasing from them immediately.

— FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONAL

**Another food service director shared that MFIN has “guided and introduced us to new farmers.”** They help gather information “from the farmers to us...Some farmers say ‘I’m interested in growing something different, will institutions let us know if they are interested?’” Another interviewee reflected on how MFIN has helped large distributors respond to increased interest in local food with more local options and greater supply chain transparency. As he explained:



[Local food] wasn’t really a priority for them or their customers. Within the last couple years we’ve really seen them jump on board full swing and have been asking us [MFIN] for help—how can we help them reach out to local farmers and connect with local farmers and provide more opportunities for local farmers to get into their system and to source to institutions? So seeing that whole about-face of that organization and that distributor has been really cool to see.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

# Challenges

**Interviewees cited a range of challenges MFIN faces in its efforts to promote more local food purchasing.**

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. Other themes<sup>10</sup> included how to support small farmers and small institutions, the need to anchor local purchasing values within an institution instead of an individual “champion,” and policy barriers like food safety regulations.

## The greatest challenges facing MFIN



### 1 DATA COLLECTION & TRACKING

**The hurdles associated with data collection that MFIN has encountered are multi-faceted.**

Since many institutions and distributors do not already differentiate what products are “local,” it requires a lot of effort to begin tracking that component. For others, there is a lack of time and capacity to complete surveys and requests for data. Another challenge is that some of the broadline distributors do not give permission to share this data. As interviewees put it,

“ The biggest challenges would be getting [school] food service directors to respond to data requests, whether it’s sales information or just a simple survey. And again, that’s kind of where it has helped to have state government involved because we were able to ask some questions as part of their National School Lunch Program application. And so we were able to glean some information from there.

— GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE





I think they uncovered obstacles that we didn't foresee. For example, many schools order food from GFS [Gordon Food Service] so GFS was not willing to share purchasing records without schools' permission. So schools said OK we'll sign a waiver and give permission for GFS to send purchasing records to our database system to be able to log how much purchasing is local.

Once schools gave permission, GFS said they didn't feel comfortable going to a third party database provider. The actual data logs which we thought would be able to give us a really streamlined accurate data source, that was a battle. I don't think they've got over that obstacle.

— FORMER EXTENSION EDUCATOR



We found out over the years that it's a really big ask for institutions to provide that information and it was much more challenging than we ever thought it would be...We had developed systems and data collection and surveys and all these different things and an online portal to do all this stuff. ...

What we found was that there just wasn't a lot of time for those people with that information to sit through it and to really break out what was local and what wasn't... We had this goal of hitting a specific target and [wanted to know] how are we measuring the effectiveness of our work, and the effectiveness of the network and the promotions that we're doing?....

It's been hard to measure the impact that we've had on some of those other institutions. So for me that's been a bit of a struggle and we've tried many different strategies over the years to get access to that information [including] trying to go directly to distributors to say, 'Okay, well, what are you selling to these institutions?'

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

## 2 COVID-19

**The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously disrupted supply chains and halted a significant proportion of local food purchases but in some cases, enhanced markets for local farmers.**

Among those hardest hit are larger farms that typically sell to wholesale markets who had established contracts with major institutions or who sold to major distributors. Due to pandemic related school closures, schools are currently not buying the same quantities or types of food that they were, many schools are temporarily not serving meals, and colleges and universities have in some cases stopped purchasing food altogether. Many agreed that the pandemic has put local food sourcing on the “backburner” for institutions, and some fear that the pandemic will hamper or perhaps even reverse local purchasing progress that has been made over the last few years. As several people put it, local food sourcing “is just not a priority right now.”



The food service directors are absolutely working at their maximum capacity right now and they don't have time to do much of anything except survive the emergency feeding that we're under....you can't give anybody extra work because no one has the bandwidth to take on any extra work right now. This emergency feeding thing since March 16 [2020] has put a whole new perspective on child nutrition.

— FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT



Farm to institution feels like it's just not the priority for people. I think people are just so focused on how to get calories to kids that the sourcing has become not a thought, at least locally. I'm sure it varies, but I don't see a lot of people talking about how much local food they're serving in the meals that they're sending home with kids. And that's really hard to see when we were on the cusp of maybe getting some state funding for 10 Cents [a Meal] and things like that.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



People are just trying to get people food and the budgets are tight and it's always one of the first things that goes to the wayside. So that's always a challenge, even before the pandemic. For people that are not like gung-ho local food supporters, getting across to them and [being] heard is one of the greatest challenges.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

On the other hand, some farmers who sell direct to consumers or through community supported agriculture (CSAs) have flourished during the pandemic because “a lot of local people are looking for different ways to access food and that's maybe not the grocery store or some of the places that they've traditionally shopped and are looking to support local farmers. So for some of them, the pandemic has brought more business.” As some described, some local farms also benefited from a shift that a handful of institutions were able to make to local purchases:



When this pandemic hit, it was much easier for me to be able to offer services and reach out to help some districts understand the supply chain management issues that we were having...We're not really serving on site as much [right now], but we have a couple of districts sourcing ears of corn because fresh produce is still very much a part of the emergency feeding. It's been good to try and source that as locally as we can.

— FOOD SERVICE CONSULTANT

“

Quite a few districts in the state of Michigan started coordinating with farmers who had a lot of product because they didn't have a distributor to package it. The distributors were delivering to the schools and the schools were actually packaging it for them. That big email went out that said 'don't forget to order from your farmers, distributors are shorthanded on lettuce and a few other produce products, go to your farmer directly, buy from your farmer directly.

— FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR

3

### SMALL VS. BIG

**Another challenge that emerged for MFIN is a tension around working with larger-scale versus smaller-scale farmers, distributors, and institutional purchasers.**

Although MFIN's official stance is to work on all levels to get more local food moving through all channels to institutions, many MFIN members reflected on this topic. Of the nine people who directly discussed questions around the role of large, broadline distributors, six supported their involvement in the network, one did not, and two were lukewarm. Those who argued for engaging corporate distributors suggested that these institutions are too embedded and too large to ignore as a major fixture in the movement of food across the county, and they recognized the potential of these companies to impact local food procurement at a significant scale. They acknowledged that excluding the “big guys” would be a missed opportunity for systemic, institutional change:

“

Our position is that if you continue to tell the Chartwells and [other big companies] to go somewhere else, then we're just going to keep pumping that engine. So if we invite them in to the table and they can make small changes, that's part of the impact. It might not be the perfect program, but it's something, and that's better than nothing...But I still think we need them. There are going to be a lot of schools out there that never will get rid of them. So, do we just say, 'oh, you kids, you're just gonna have the [terrible] food.' So we have to work with everyone, I think. I know there are a lot of opinions, I've seen them.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL

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It was kind of like if you can't beat them, join them...as soon as we started working with [broadline distributors] a little bit more we saw this ship sort of turn, which is a big giant ship and it took a long time. But we started seeing our broadline distributors make note of the importance of local and started to not only stock local but to identify local where they had different marketing and things like that.

— GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE



I could see where someone would say ‘woah, there’s a Sysco rep on this local food call, why are they here?’ But for real impact to happen you have to scale up. For real change to happen, for systematic change, it has to include all the players at the table and that includes those guys.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL

However, one MFIN member disagreed about the involvement of broadline distributors and considered working with them a “clash in values.” At a minimum, one member expressed that MFIN should be more transparent about the fact that the farm to “institution” work MFIN is supporting—in their perspective—is mainly referring to working with “large, national, or multinational distributors” and not “small, regional food systems”:



It’s a clash in values. Just the fact that they are corporations, they have a legal responsibility to stockholders, not stakeholders who are the kids eating the food. They talk really well and do good promotion, but sometimes fall short in what they are actually doing...MFIN gave those companies a lot of good opportunities for promotion without putting their money where their mouth is. I think they are doing better but it’s still just a drop in the bucket. You can’t really not work with them because they are in so many schools in Michigan, but I think we should be more straightforward about it...

When you say ‘farm to institution’ it seems you’re thinking of small, regional food systems but when we work with large, national, or multinational distributors, that is not the case...It is true that we need to help GFS and Sysco do better, but we also need to help the small businesses. Those large distributors already get a lot of help and food hubs don’t...

The other challenge is pricing on local foods... We always try to drive the price down but instead we need to be building the value of the local food. For big distributors there is not a lot of value in the food. They might take a loss on food, but the toilet paper they sell at a 300% markup. They make the money on other products that they supply like aluminum foil and pans, not on the food. Until all food is priced at [its] real value, it’s too hard [for smaller producers and distributors] to compete.

— FORMER FOOD DISTRIBUTOR

Three other interviewees discussed various challenges for small scale producers to sell to institutional markets. One issue someone raised is around food safety requirements for institutional markets, described as a “big, big thing that has become bigger and bigger in the last few years [and which] is a potential hindrance to some smaller growers.” Another person discussed how most institutional payment systems are oriented to larger growers with greater cash flow and can be prohibitive for smaller farmers and vendors.



The payment systems for the suppliers is a big challenge. I think we need to work a little more on that point. Because it's not fair when you deliver a product and then have to wait 46-60 days for payment. This takes from small producers who depend on it to keep working.

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL

Finally, one person also discussed how it has been difficult to work with smaller farmers to scale up when they have not already tapped into a large institutional market:



Helping farmers scale up has been really, really hard. So a lot of times it's the farmers that are already working at that scale that have been benefiting the most from the institutional market. They're not as focused on engaging and connecting with buyers because they're selling into a system that is already built for the scale and quantities that they're growing, so they're not as likely to be engaged and see the value in shaping this other system. Whereas, maybe some of the smaller farmers see the value in that but...it's really hard for a smaller farmer even that's growing on 20 acres to supply enough quantity of product to meet an institution's demand even when working with a food hub, and to hit the price point that institutions are looking for.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

## 4

## MFIN CHAMPIONS

**Several interviewees talked about how local sourcing success can often be credited to individual “champions” of the work, rather than institutional policies, which can both support and hinder farm to institution goals.**

On one hand, having passionate food service directors and other decision makers is crucial to sourcing more Michigan products. On the other hand, if farm to institution is not built into the organization culture, the focus on local purchasing “goes with the person rather than stay[ing] with the institution” when that champion changes jobs or retires. MFIN leadership has tried to stress that local sourcing “takes a team,” as opposed to the work of one “champion,” but this has become increasingly difficult for some institutions since COVID-19 has spawned budget cuts and staff layoffs. As interviewees discussed:



If the food service director did not have that personal investment [in buying local], it was extremely challenging...It would be interesting to know why some have that passion. I worked with [large school district] and both food service directors had that passion. When they retired, everything stopped and it broke my heart. It was sad to see.

— FORMER EXTENSION EDUCATOR



When people leave positions they take a lot of that knowledge...and that passion for maybe local purchasing, it kind of goes with the person rather than stays within the institution. So I think doing a better job of engaging some of those higher-ups to institutionalize local purchasing within an institutional food setting has been a missed opportunity.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR



You have to have those champions that are willing to do the nitty gritty on something that feels like, in measurement terms, is almost nothing. It's like me having a compost bin in my backyard. What's that doing for climate change? But if I can see that and understand that and think of the volume and what happened exponentially if 90% of my neighbors did that, what would happen, that sort of demonstration is so critical to see change...How do we leverage these secondary populations that could actually be great building blocks to fill in that chain?

— NONPROFIT PROFESSIONAL



## POLICY REFORM

**Several interviewees felt that the largest barriers to the success of farm to institution work in Michigan could be traced back to policy.**



We need policy reforms that make it easier for smaller, regional food systems to succeed. I feel like some policy change is needed. The state government can support smaller, regional food systems.

— FORMER FOOD DISTRIBUTOR



[10 Cents a Meal] lost [state] funding this last year<sup>11</sup> and it was a pretty significant reduction in product that went out. [MFIN] made it very easy to be able to have a letter and contact your senator... I really think you need a resource like them and to be that constant push, that constant proponent of a quality program. If [MFIN] weren't there, I don't think the push would be that strong.

— FARMER

# Looking ahead: The Future of MFIN

**The continued growth of MFIN since 2014 demonstrates the ongoing relevance and value that members find in the community of practice it has helped cultivate across farm to institution practitioners and advocates.**

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. While all of the themes below emerged directly from interviews about MFIN, about half of the key takeaways are also applicable to other kinds of networks, both food systems focused and beyond.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Having an “anchoring” organization and **inclusive leadership approach** has been key to MFIN’s success.
- MFIN has taken, and should continue to take, a **tiered approach to engagement**. Offering a range of opportunities and events that require different levels of involvement have been instrumental to MFIN’s growth.
- In order for MFIN to expand and deepen its work, it will be important to move beyond individual farm to institution “champions” and **move towards institutional policy that values local purchasing**.
- 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.
- One of the biggest hurdles in advancing the work of MFIN are the **challenges associated with data collection**. More strategies are needed to support producers and institutional buyers with data collection and tracking.
- MFIN’s more recent **prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion 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.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these broader lessons and reflections, interviewees shared a long list of creative suggestions that MFIN may consider in the future. These ranged from ideas of new groups to engage or partner with, to sharing specific suggestions to improve MFIN newsletters, to diversifying the advisory committee. Most of the ideas below were mentioned by only one or two interviewees.

## Interviewees shared suggestions for MFIN

- **Engage schoolchildren** and families as advocates for local food procurement and sourcing
- **Charge participants for MFIN events** to enable more frequent gatherings and increase stakeholder investment
- **Support small farmers with audits** to help them sell to institutional markets
- **Partner** with: the Michigan Farm Bureau, agricultural commodity groups, animal welfare organizations against factory farming, sporting events, correctional facilities, food trucks
- **Diversify the advisory committee**
- **Focus on food waste**
- **Engage more directly with policy advocacy**
- **Feature a BIPOC-owned business in each MFIN newsletter**
- **Expand MFIN awards to include food service directors.** MFIN already recognizes institutions with Cultivate Michigan awards for local sourcing
- **Strengthen MFIN's social media presence**

Although interviewees felt like significant progress has been made with institutions sourcing local food, many also feel like 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.



There is a lot of cheerleading with all those big numbers but never in comparison to the actual total budget. Instead of saying ‘oh it’s so successful’ we should say we’ve done this much but we still have a lot to do.

— FORMER FOOD DISTRIBUTOR



I think it [MFIN] has a future, I think it needs to continue to grow and be supported, more now than ever.

— FORMER FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR





I hope it [MFIN] continues. I know that's a shared sentiment. And not necessarily indefinitely, but even if it's not what it is now, that some form of support for farm to institution on the state level continues. Because I think it 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. And without it, I'm not sure who exactly will be leading that effort.

— EXTENSION EDUCATOR

One farmer summed up the role MFIN has played in his business, reflecting that, **“we wouldn't be where we are [today], without them.”**

# Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/michiganfood/>
- 2 This includes surveys and documents authored by CRFS staff as well as data collected by the UM evaluation team.
- 3 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/fts-2012-survey>
- 4 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/cultivate-michigan-2016-data-brief>
- 5 By joining the network, you will have the opportunity to use your skills and knowledge to help shape farm to institution programs in Michigan; network and participate in learning activities and social events across the state; and be part of a larger movement to help take local food purchasing at Michigan institutions to the next level!”
- 6 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/reach-and-value-of-crfs-events-2016-2018>
- 7 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/reach-and-value-of-crfs-events-2016-2018>
- 8 In 2019, 1,815,331 people from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin participated in the Great Lakes Apple Crunch: <https://cias.wisc.edu/applecrunch/>
- 9 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/foodsystems/uploads/files/2019-Michigan-Farm-to-Institution-Network-Gathering-Evaluation-Report.pdf>
- 10 Three points were also raised by individuals, including: that the time spent tabling at MFIN events “didn’t feel worth it”; that the Cultivate Michigan Sourcing guide is a great “one stop shop” tool, but didn’t seem to be utilized by very many people, perhaps because they have trouble navigating how to use it; and that the network rarely travels to the Upper Peninsula for meetings, which makes it difficult to have a meaningful connection with the work of the network.
- 11 Funding for 10 Cents a Meal was reinstated later in 2020.
- 12 As one interviewee explained, “We’ve had such a focus on ‘local’ for the lifetime of the network and that’s really farm to institution, local farms, supporting Michigan farms. And the last couple years I think we’ve been trying to strategize around, are there things beyond local that we can incorporate? Thinking more from a sustainability standpoint, thinking from more of a food justice and equity standpoint, how can we play a role in that? And that’s not just COVID but I think COVID has heightened a lot of those injustices, so it’s brought a lot of that stuff to light that I think we haven’t always had to face in our work and there’s a lot more to be done in that space.” — Extension Educator
- 13 <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/fts-2012-survey>

## 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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