

# **CASE STUDY:** LESSONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT FOOD HUB MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

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The Michigan Food Hub Learning and Innovation Network is led by CRFS in collaboration with Morse Marketing Connections, LLC, with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Kresge Foundation. Additional resources and a two-page information sheet on the Michigan Food Hub Network are available on the CRFS website: [foodsystems.msu.edu/our-work/michigan\\_food\\_hub\\_learning\\_and\\_innovation\\_network/](https://foodsystems.msu.edu/our-work/michigan_food_hub_learning_and_innovation_network/)

## Does a Statewide Network Enhance the Learning Potential and Impact of Food Hub Training?

*“High-quality staffing is one of the greatest challenges that food hubs face but also the greatest contributing factor to their success.”*

*HUDSON VALLEY FOOD HUBS INITIATIVE (BRANNEN, 2013)*

Rapid growth in the local food sector has resulted in a critical need for trained and experienced staff at all levels of the value chain. This need is felt acutely in many food hubs, where current and/or potential employees may have formal education but lack practical training or work experience in food aggregation and distribution<sup>1</sup> (Hardy et al., 2016). This experience gap is one driver behind the creation of the University of Vermont (UVM) Food Hub Management Certificate (FHMC) program, which aims to increase the success of local food system work by providing support, guidance, and training to current and future food hub managers. The goal of this report is to learn about the experiences of Michigan food hub managers who participated in the UVM FHMC program and to reflect on the role that the Michigan Food Hub Network may have played in extending that training.



THE 2016 MICHIGAN COHORT USE THE “HAND MAP” TO SHOW THEIR HOME BASE. THE GROUP INCLUDED FOOD HUB MANAGERS FROM GRAND RAPIDS, LANSING, KALAMAZOO, AND BATTLE CREEK.

<sup>1</sup> The 2015 National Food Hub Survey (Hardy et al., 2016) revealed that 71% of food hub managers (n = 107) had completed a four-year, graduate, or professional degree, of which more than a quarter (29%) had higher education or degrees in general business, marketing, finance, or accounting. Managers at newer hubs generally had the most formal education, with close to half (46%) holding a graduate or professional degree, but they also tended to have the least practical food hub-related work experience.

## ► INTRODUCTION

Starting classes in January 2015, the FHMC program is the first accredited training program specifically for food hub professionals in the United States. It blends hands-on, community-based study, both online and on campus, for an innovative learning experience that covers the fundamentals of local and regional food aggregation and distribution from financial literacy to supply chain management.<sup>2</sup> The program offers two study tracks: a four-month “Fundamentals” curriculum and a 10-month “Full Certificate” curriculum, which includes an individual community-based action project. In addition to preparing students to effectively manage food hubs by providing them with essential tools and skills, the program aims to create peer networks to strengthen the support systems available to food hub professionals.

Developed independently from the FHMC program in 2012, the Michigan Food Hub Network, facilitated by Michigan State University’s Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), aims to support increased

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the UVM Food Hub Management program curriculum and coursework and an online application, visit <https://learn.uvm.edu/program/food-hub-management/>

learning, innovation, and the profitability of Michigan food hubs (Pirog, Harper, Gerencer, Lelle, & Gerencer, 2014). CRFS also strives to increase access to food hub financial and technical assistance, research, and education through the Network (Pirog et al., 2014). In response to direct feedback from food hub managers in Michigan and as part of an overall strategy to build the capacity of food hubs, CRFS and the Network leadership team developed a scholarship program in late 2014 to provide financial assistance to Michigan food hub managers interested in participating in the UVM FHMC program. This scholarship was offered for two consecutive years (2015 and 2016), with primary financial support provided through a grant to CRFS from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Over these two years, a total of eight Michigan food hub representatives from six different Michigan food hubs were awarded scholarships to participate in the four-month and 10-month UVM training programs. Two additional Michigan food hub representatives attended the UVM program in 2016 without CRFS scholarship funding. In both years, Michigan had the most students of any state participate in the UVM FHMC program.

## ► METHOD

In an effort to assess the value and impact of this investment of time, energy, and resources, an evaluation team from the University of Michigan conducted interviews with six representatives from five of the participating hubs that were offered CRFS scholarships. One of the nonscholarship Michigan food hub participants was also interviewed by CRFS staff using the same interview protocol. In particular, these interviews sought to better understand the ability of a professional network (in this case, the Michigan Food Hub Network) to enhance training

programs like the UVM FHMC by providing space for continued learning, communication, and collaboration. Interviews were conducted in person or by phone, lasted 20 to 30 minutes, and sought to identify the most important things participants learned in the course and whether and how interactions with fellow participants—especially in the Michigan-based cohort—added to participant learning.

## ► FINDINGS

The following summaries recount some of the salient themes that emerged from the interviews we conducted with Michigan's UVM FHMC program participants. In particular, interviewees tended to discuss how the training increased their "food hub literacy,"<sup>3</sup> their appreciation for cross-sector collaborative management, and their comfort with financial skills. They found the site visits to Vermont food hubs the most valuable component of the course and felt that the training improved cohesion with fellow classmates. Being part of a Michigan cohort further enhanced their learning and deepened their support system after the course was over, especially for those who were already actively participating in the Michigan Food Hub Network.

<sup>3</sup> "Food hub literacy" refers to general knowledge about food hub business and operations, including business models, management structure, product handling, inventory management, sales and marketing strategies, etc.

### Learning Outcomes: Increased Financial Skills and Food Hub Literacy

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When asked what part of the FHMC program was most beneficial to their learning, nearly every interviewee (six out of seven) discussed the financial section of the course. They noted learning, for instance, about how to read pro formas and balance sheets. One participant explained, "I learned an enormous amount about financials that I didn't know before ... The UVM training made it so that I could probably get into QuickBooks and not set the world on fire [i.e., without causing major errors]." Two of these participants additionally explained how the financial training they received—and the opportunity to learn about financial food hub models nationwide—shifted their concept of "local" and influenced them to be unapologetic about catering to high-end markets in order to subsidize food access in low-income communities. Another training participant also noted,

The financial section was really scary but satisfying ... the training helped me combat my own idealism about what a food hub is versus what food hubs really are and how they [approach] the work of food access and [supporting] farmers. I had a hard time [thinking about shifting toward working with] bigger farmers ... I wanted to stay to help out the little and local [farmers]. [The FHMC] helped me to think about a redefinition of what *local* really means and to not be apologetic about it.

Five participants additionally expressed that the UVM program increased their knowledge about food hub operations and, therefore, increased their confidence. One participant, for instance, expressed how the

training gave participants "street cred," noting, "I now feel like I have a place at the table in conversations like this. I am now [someone] who has a robust background in operating a food hub ... [and a] certificate." Two participants also discussed how they came away from the program with an understanding of how food hub management touches many disciplines and sectors from food safety to finance. These trainees noted how "the program very much reinforced the concept that we would have partners across the food value chain. Broadly, the people in the trucking company, the people who manage your warehouses, HR, marketing people, tax law, etc. All of those pieces fit together and are all essential to be successful." Others talked about being exposed to the array of existing food hub resources they could access to improve their operations.

### Networking Impacts: Interactions Added to the Experience

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All seven interviewees agreed that being part of a Michigan cohort contributed positively to their experience during the course and, in many cases, afterward. Many interviewees referenced seeing each other before and after the UVM training at Michigan Food Hub Network meetings, which take place three times annually, and others discussed keeping in touch via email or social media. Attending the Network meetings and the biennial Michigan Good Food Summit, one interviewee said, "gave me more touch points with those people and made my involvement in the class more meaningful." Another participant said that once they knew each other through the course, it was easy to reach out to another food hub manager to say, "Hey, have you thought of this? Do you guys know where to source

this kind of lettuce?” One participant also found it helpful to discuss food hub operations with others who shared the same frame of reference for the Michigan growing seasons and produce markets. Other interviewees gave similar explanations:

If there were concerns or questions, these are people I would see in the next couple of weeks or months and were only a phone call away, versus people who were from Arizona or Colorado who I didn't have the same long-term relationship with.

I'm friends with all of them on Facebook, so I kind of watch what they do. [It's] good to say, "Oh, yeah, you are struggling with that, too?" Knowing what doesn't work is also helpful. Our idea for incubating new farmers is stolen from [X food hub]. [Another one of our programs] is [inspired by Y food hub], and [X food hub] helped us with technology.

Another part of the course that facilitated networking was the Vermont-based, in-person portion. In particular, four of the seven interviewees cited the field trips as one of the most useful aspects of the course. They explained that it was helpful to learn about “projects that work” outside of Michigan and to gain perspective about models such as Black River Produce or Mad River Food Hub in Vermont. As one participant explained, they also learned a great deal from the time they had “to network with the other participants and pick their brains ... [learn] about shared struggles, etc. I didn't come from an educational background of working with food hubs, so I had zero experience working with food hubs outside my own experience.”

## ► CONCLUSION

### **These interviews also suggest that the presence of a statewide network for food hubs enhanced the learning potential of the UVM FHMC program during and after the course.**

Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of a single training program on food hub sales, food access, farmer livelihoods, or other aspects of food systems in the communities where food hubs are located, these interviews suggest anecdotally that the UVM FHMC program has had a net positive effect for participating Michigan food hub managers. Although not all participants are currently applying what they learned—including one participant who pursued a different career path after realizing how challenging it is to grow food hub earnings quickly—all interviewees identified positive aspects of the course, from useful financial training to benefits of networking to increased “food hub literacy.” The opportunity to visit Vermont and interact with other food hub professionals from Michigan and across the country exposed food hub managers to novel practices and new ideas. Perhaps just as importantly, this training allowed food hub professionals to extend and strengthen their networks both locally and nationally with others working in the local food sector.

These interviews also suggest that the presence of a statewide network for food hubs enhanced the learning potential of the UVM FHMC program during and after the course. The face-to-face time in Vermont seemed to promote cohesion among the class and particularly among the Michigan cohort. This bond was then carried home and maintained through regular Food Hub Network activities and recurring in-person events. The interviews support the idea that food hub trainings like UVM’s are enriched when shared with a common localized cohort and that the presence of a robust statewide network significantly enhances learning and collaboration among food hubs afterward. Going forward, we expect these deeper networks—particularly combined with the common language, increased literacy, and financial skills UVM program participants learned together—to continue to provide an infrastructure for new business partnerships and innovative practices between food hubs, farmers, and other value chain partners.



**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

Center for  
Regional Food Systems

*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. Its mission 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. 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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