

University of Vermont: Vermont First Program

University of Vermont

Essay:

Dear NACUFS Sustainability Award Committee,
Please accept this application on behalf of the University of Vermont (UVM) Dining Services, for the prestigious 2025 NACUFS Sustainable Food Procurement Award.

Vermont's rolling pastures and picturesque mountains shape its identity as a leader in maple syrup and dairy production and support a robust farm-to-plate movement. Nestled atop the hill in Burlington, UVM is home to 14,000 students passionate about innovation, activism, and environmental stewardship. Sustainability is at the heart of our program, shaping everything we do. As a land-grant institution dedicated to planetary health and cutting-edge research, we are committed to strengthening the resilience of local and regional food systems for a more sustainable future.

Sodexo's Vermont First Program was launched at UVM in 2014, with a commitment to tracking and prioritizing local food purchasing across its Vermont accounts. Since its inception, the program has focused on expanding market opportunities for local producers, supporting the viability of Vermont's working lands, and providing consumer education around the food system. Our program is led by a Sustainability Manager, a Vermont First Facilitator, with guidance from our clients, the Vermont First Executive Committee and an Advisory Board. Our advisory board includes stakeholders from across the Vermont food system, such as the Agency on Agriculture, non-profits, food distributors, and farmers and producers to ensure we are aligned with other programs across the state.

In the past two years, we have reimagined the program, refining our strategies and initiatives to drive even greater impact. Since establishing our goal in 2023 to source 25% local food by 2030 as part of the UVM Comprehensive Sustainability Plan (CSP), we have increased local purchases from 13.2% (August 2022 – July 2023) to 20.9% (August – December 2024). This report highlights our progress and the key strategies that have fueled this growth.

Data Transparency and Technology

Vermont First has been recognized as a leader in the farm-to-institution sector, particularly for its transparent, data-driven tracking system. We use invoices and velocity reports to track local food (grown and/or manufactured in Vermont, per Vermont's Act 129) and regional food (grown/manufactured in New England +50 miles, per Farm to Institution New England's definition). In 2023, we migrated purchasing data from Excel to Power BI, which streamlines data collection and enables us to monitor our local and regional sourcing in real-time. This dynamic tool enhances our ability to analyze data and trends, makes information more accessible to chefs, and helps identify local spending opportunities. This efficiency has freed up time and resources, enabling our team to strengthen partnerships and drive menu innovations. It will also allow us to apply the multiplier effect and gain a deeper understanding of our broader economic impact of our program beyond raw food spend.

The Road to 25% Local Food by 2030

A pivotal moment for our program came in 2023 with the launch of UVM's Comprehensive Sustainability Plan (CSP). As part of this plan, the university set an ambitious goal to source 25% Vermont-grown food by 2030, prioritizing diverse suppliers when possible. A committee of faculty and staff, led by the UVM Dining Sustainability and Campus Partnership Manager, was also formed to support growth and connect with academic research. This collaboration has expanded outreach through partnerships with the UVM Climate Kitchen and UVM Extension.

At the start of the CSP commitment, UVM Dining's local food spending totaled \$954,356, accounting for 13.2% of our total food purchases from 64 producers. To reach our goal, we aimed for a steady annual growth of 1-2%. Farm-to-Institution efforts in Vermont face challenges due to the state's short growing season (USDA Zone 4-5) and the nature of its farms, which are often small, diversified, and geographically remote. Many farms struggle to produce the volume or meet the price points necessary to compete effectively in the wholesale institutional market. Our team recognized the need to broaden our focus beyond produce and expand our purchasing to include more bakery items and value-added foods.

During the 2023-2024 academic year, we introduced several initiatives to increase local food sourcing across campus, including the launch of the Vermont Burger Co., featuring local beef and black bean burgers, local brioche buns, and hand-cut fries. At Picante, a retail Tex-Mex location, we incorporated local ingredients such as carnitas, ground beef, tofu, beans, cheese, and corn tortillas. We also transitioned to serving 100% local coffee on campus and made local cheddar cheese available at all delis. Additionally, our catering services introduced a seasonal buffet that highlights the Harvest of the Month and features local ingredients. These strategies led to an additional \$771,040 in local food spending, totaling \$1,725,396 (15.5% of total food spend) from 91 producers (July 2023 – July 2024).

Starting in Fall 2024, we also implemented several additional strategies, which further accelerated our progress to the CSP goal. From August to December 2024, local food spending reached \$1,153,117.10, accounting for 20.9% of total food spending—an increase of 5.4% in local food percentage. Key initiatives included elevating the Harvest of the Month program to feature higher-cost items like turkey, pork, and fermented foods, onboarding a new local bakery to provide sub rolls, bread, and brioche buns at the delis and grill stations. We also worked with Miller Farm to develop a new product, and now proudly feature their organic half and half in creamer machines on campus.

Featured Commitments and Innovations

Commitments are one strategy that the Vermont First program uses to drive local food purchasing. These commitments guarantee the purchase of specific local food products, delivered weekly to our kitchens. Made in collaboration with Black River Produce and the Intervale Food Hub, planning occurs 6-12 months in advance to guide crop planning and production with farmers and producers. This model helps create predictable demand for small businesses, fosters trust and consistent communication with distributors, and provides opportunities to develop educational and marketing materials to share our story.

- Black River Meats Ground Beef
- Global Village Foods: *Allergen-friendly African Foods*
- *Harvest of the Month*

- *Intervale Food Hub*: Organic Salad Greens
 - Just Cut/Pioneer Valley Growers Association: *Local & regionally processed vegetables*
 - *Northeast Organic Family Farm Partnership*: Organic yogurt and dairy
 - *Vermont Bean Crafters*: Organic precooked, frozen beans
- *NEVP project

Four of our featured commitments launched after winning a New England Food Vision Prize (NEFVP), funded by the Henry P. Kendall Foundation. NEFVP aims to increase the amount of local and regional food prepared and served in K-12 and higher education campuses. Our participation as a lead institution on these projects brought in \$768,000 in grant funding to Vermont non-profits and businesses; funds were used to invest in equipment, infrastructure, and technical assistance to overcome barriers to supplying wholesale products to our kitchens.

Over the past decade, our Vermont First team has built trust with local food producers and distributors through dialogue, farm tours, and consistent support. More recently, our team has collaborated with select producers to support the creation and launch of value-added products tailored for institutional food service. For example, we partnered with Global Village Foods, a women- and Black-owned business specializing in allergen-friendly African cuisine, to develop new plant-based products and simmer sauces for stews and curries. We also worked with ecobean to conceptualize, and taste test a line of local, organic Yerba Mate and sparkling beverages. Lastly, to expand the availability of vegan and allergen-free Vermont made products, we teamed up with Chelsea Approved and Vermont Bean Crafters to launch frozen cookie dough pucks. All these products are now available in five states through Black River Produce's distribution network, extending the impact of our work beyond UVM's purchasing.

Farm to Plate Education

Our dining team is uniquely positioned to influence not only the food choices students make while on campus, but also to instill lasting values and perspectives that will shape their future decisions. Throughout the year, we host six week-long sustainability festivals, each featuring dedicated education and engaging events. In addition to "Meet the Producer" events and social media campaigns, we host cooking classes featuring seasonal and local ingredients in our Discovery Kitchen. Highlights of these weeks include our Annual Cheese and Dairy Fest, where local cheese and dairy producers provide free samples, and Apple Fest with apple tastings from UVM's own Catamount Farm. In Fall 2024, Farm Fest grew from small pop-ups to a larger event, hosting 20+ local farmers and producers on the UVM Green to share their products and stories. To support small businesses and local food spending, we sponsored Farm Fest and Cheese & Dairy Fest events by purchasing \$500 in products from each vendor, ensuring broader participation.

Experiential Learning

Internships in UVM Dining's sustainability program provide hands-on learning experiences, empowering students to drive environmental change while advancing the university's commitment to sustainable food systems. Each year, we sponsor two Graduate Food System Fellows who work 10 hours per week, assisting with data analysis, events, marketing, and communications for the Vermont First program. We also host two to three Master of Dietetics students for a six-week Sustainable Foodservice Management rotation. Recent business plans have included a Vermont First Food Truck, set to launch this summer, and support for our Local Meets Global Series.

Our Marketing Team also hires three interns annually to create digital designs and chalkboards highlighting sustainability, wellness, and pop-up programming. Last year, an intern's senior project led to the creation of our Sustainability Timeline, a hand-drawn visual of our initiatives, digitized and printed on canvas for the Sodexo Sustainability Gallery. Lastly, our partnership with the Office of Sustainability's Eco-Reps program engages a team of five student ambassadors who support UVM Dining events and promote sustainable food and waste education year-round. These collaborations are mutually beneficial, equipping students with valuable skills while strengthening our sustainability efforts.

Nurturing a Sense of Belonging

College dining isn't just nourishment; it's about creating spaces where students can come together and simply belong. Our dining team fosters student connections while also serving as a bridge to the broader Burlington community. At the start of 2025 we launched our Local Meets Global Series which partners with Vermont-based food entrepreneurs to bring authentic global flavors to campus, blending cultural heritage with local ingredients. In alignment with cultural heritage months, we welcome one or two Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)-owned food businesses each month into one of the dining halls for a station takeover at dinner. This program creates unique economic opportunities for minority-owned businesses and offers students and staff innovative, diverse, and sustainable food options.

In summary, UVM Dining Services' commitment to sustainability and local food procurement through our Vermont First program is truly one of a kind. By building partnerships with local farmers and producers and promoting environmentally responsible sourcing, we are leading the way toward a more sustainable food system. While we've made significant strides over the past decade, including becoming the first land-grant institution to reach 20% Real Food and surpassing 20% Vermont-grown food this fall, our work is far from over. As we continue working toward our goal of 25% local food by 2030, we remain dedicated to strengthening local and regional food systems and diversifying the businesses we support, particularly in the face of a changing climate. By fostering strong partnerships and utilizing data-driven insights, we will ensure that our Vermont First program not only endures but thrives in the years to come.

We thank you for your time and consideration for this award.
Sincerely,

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2024 TO 2025

HARVEST OF THE MONTH

Through the Harvest of the Month program, we encourage you to eat with the season and support regional readiness. Each month, we commit to using a seasonal local product and make recommendations monthly to enhance the diet patterns and improve your planning. This program supports local economies and provides you with the opportunity to eat locally and seasonally year-round.



TOMATOES

AUGUST



PEPPERS

SEPTEMBER



APPLES

OCTOBER



CARROTS AND CABBAGE

NOVEMBER



TURKEY

DECEMBER



PORK

JANUARY



CHEESE

FEBRUARY



FERMENTS AND PRESERVES

MARCH



PLANT BASED PROTEINS

APRIL



GLOBAL VILLAGE FOODS

MAY



STRAWBERRIES

JUNE



CUCUMBERS

JULY



Vermont First by Sodexo was established in 2014. Learn more at vermontfirst.sodexocareway.com. Follow us on Instagram @VermontFirst



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2023 2024 UVM... 2.5 MiB

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Vermont First FY... 1.3 MiB

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Seasonal Eating i... 2.3 MiB



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UVM Comprehensive Sus...

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UVM Farm Fest Video

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Good For the Gut Video

<https://www.youtube.co...>



Attachment name

UVM Dining Sustainabilit...



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Vermont First Website

<https://uvmdining.sodex...>

<https://vermontfirst.sod...>