

Homefield Farm at Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech

Essay:

Overall Impact of Initiative or Program

The sustainable procurement priority in Virginia Tech Dining Services has demonstrated significant positive outcomes, particularly through the development and expansion of Homefield Farm. Homefield Farm is a partnership between Dining Services, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences. The farm is the only certified organic operation owned by a university in Virginia. The twelve-acre, student-driven farm is located eight miles west of the Blacksburg campus and has historically provided roughly 40,000 - 45,000 pounds of fresh produce to dining centers and Homefield's farm stands on campus. The farm annually raises 30 to 40 varieties of vegetables, herbs, flowers, and decorative gourds. Dining oversees the production of the twelve acres of organic land while researchers from SPES oversee adjacent conventional plots whose produce is also made available to our dining centers.

Homefield Farm provides a unique opportunity for collaboration between students and Dining Services' culinary staff to provide ingredients for popular dishes and events. For example, Homefield's ingredients can be found around campus in locations such as Turner Place's tomato bisque soup and pizza sauce or the hot peppers used for the annual Chili Challenge at D2 in Dietrick Hall. This partnership has contributed to a clear increase in locally sourced food offerings, aligning with the strategic goal to increase the percentage of local purchases.

Homefield farm stands, which were initially piloted in 2019 and scaled up in 2024, have proven to be highly popular, with sales more than doubling from the initial season. The initiative's success is further evidenced by the growing interest and

support from the campus community, as farm stand items meet the demand for fresh, locally grown produce, allowing students, faculty, and staff to purchase items using meal plans or credit cards.

Environmentally Sustainable

The Homefield Farm program reflects a strong commitment to environmental sustainability. Certified organic, the farm prioritizes ecological practices such as using natural inputs and irrigating from an onsite creek. Additionally, the farm incorporates cover cropping to enhance soil health. Homefield's pollinator gardens, developed in collaboration with the university's horticulture department, further contribute to environmental sustainability by supporting pollinators vital to our local ecosystem. These practices are indicative of a holistic approach to farming that supports food production while fostering biodiversity and long-term land health. The farm's proximity to campus, just 8 miles away, reduces transportation-related carbon emissions, further enhancing the initiative's environmental benefits.

Socially Responsible

The Homefield Farm initiative embodies social responsibility by fostering community engagement and supporting local food systems. Through Homefield farm stands, Dining Services ensures that students have access to organic, locally grown produce, by addressing the need for fresh produce options among students living in residence halls or in the Blacksburg community. The initiative also serves as an educational resource, providing opportunities for experiential learning and research in partnership with SPES. By offering fresh produce to the wider campus community and prioritizing organic and locally grown food, the program fosters a deeper understanding of food sourcing and sustainability. The inclusion of student interns, volunteers and classes at the farm and organizing the farm stands amplifies the initiative's commitment to providing meaningful learning experiences while positively impacting campus life.

Creativity and Innovation

Dining Services' marketing team has taken an active approach in promoting the farm and its farm stands through a variety of creative channels, including digital boards in dining centers, social media platforms, and sidewalk A-frames. The use of diverse media allows the initiative to engage the campus community effectively. The integration of student interns into the creative process has been key to ensuring the marketing efforts are engaging and relatable to their peers. These students contribute innovative ideas that help to capture attention and encourage participation in the initiative.

Involving students in both the creation of marketing materials and the logistics of the farm and its farm stands has been instrumental in fostering a sense of community and ownership. Student interns are responsible for managing Homefield Farm's Instagram and Facebook pages, which allows them to directly engage with the campus community and share the farm's story in real-time. On the day of the farm stands, student volunteers play an essential role in setup, including preparing signage, chalkboard decorations, and creating the atmosphere for the event. This hands-on involvement nurtures creativity among students and builds a deeper connection between them and the sustainable food practices promoted by Homefield.

Low Start-Up Resource Costs/High Return

The Homefield Farm initiative demonstrates a return on investment with relatively low start-up costs. For the 2024 season, dining services contributed approximately \$21,000 toward operating costs for expendable materials related to the farm's produce supplies, excluding labor. In return, the market value of the organic produce harvested from Homefield was approximately \$47,500. While farm stands contribute only a small portion of the farm's overall operation, they help further the goal of making fresh, local produce available to the campus community, while also generating additional value from unsold items. Unsold produce is either repurposed by dining services or diverted to community food banks, ensuring that no resources are wasted. This sustainable, low-cost initiative not only meets demand but promotes Dining Services' commitment to sustainable practices.

The primary risks associated with Homefield Farm are environmental and logistical. Extreme weather events, such as droughts or heavy rainfall, could adversely affect crop yields and harvest timelines, potentially disrupting the availability of produce. Labor shortages also pose a concern, impacting the farm's ability to meet production needs. Our partnership with other university departments helps alleviate this risk. Risks associated with the farm stands themselves are minimal. The main challenge is maintaining sufficient attendance. However, unsold produce is redirected to dining units or community food banks, mitigating potential waste. By proactively identifying these risks and planning for contingencies, such as repurposing produce, we can ensure a reliable and sustainable program.

Applicability of Initiative

Homefield Farm is easily replicable and has inspired interest from several universities and community groups. Starting as a small herb garden in 2008, it can be scaled to fit different resources and locations. Its flexibility makes it a model that can inspire similar sustainable initiatives at other institutions.

Effectiveness of Measurement

Homefield Farm tracks its effectiveness through various avenues, including feedback from classes, tours, and outreach activities, all of which highlight Homefield as a key destination for learning and engagement. Annual reports, available on our website (link included), provide detailed metrics that demonstrate the farm's value to multiple departments on campus. Additionally, farm stands have proven to be a popular form of engagement, addressing student needs while promoting the farm's broader mission. This feedback and data help support the continued growth and success of Homefield's educational and community outreach efforts.

Education, Outreach, and Marketing/Communications

Homefield Farm has actively engaged the campus and local community through a variety of outreach efforts. Student interns play a key role in promoting the initiative through social media, campus ads, and word-of-mouth, while Dining Services, CALS, and SPES promote the farm's sustainable practices to their students. The farm supports educational activities, including research, classes, and tours, highlighting its commitment to sustainability. These efforts not only raise awareness about sustainable food practices but also directly involve students in the program's design and implementation, enhancing both learning and community involvement. The outreach and marketing strategies ensure that the farm's impact is widely recognized and understood.

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Farmstand Sign... 541 KiB



Image(1).jpg 1.6 MiB



Sunflowers.png 1.2 MiB



Farmstand Sign... 1.1 MiB



Turner.png 2.6 MiB



Produce-Zinnias... 2.6 MiB



Produce.png 2.4 MiB



bouquet.png 1.9 MiB



Tomatoes.png 677 KiB



Peppers.png 1.7 MiB



Apples.png 980 KiB



Sunflowers2.png 2.0 MiB



Setup.png 2.1 MiB



Seed 2025-02-19... 638 KiB



Squash 2025-02-... 1,017 KiB



Tractor 2025-02-... 1.0 MiB



Field 2025-02-19... 1.4 MiB



Attachment name

<https://dining.vt.edu/sus...>



Attachment name

<https://news.vt.edu/art/...>

