

Lexie Raczka



VggRbRnE

Entry details

Entry Name: Scaling Local Produce Purchases Through Strategic Partnership

Institution Name: Boston University

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Lexie Raczka, Sustainability Direc

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Essay:

Overall Impact

Boston University Dining Services' (BU Dining) significant purchasing power and position as a part of an institution of higher education underscore our responsibility to not only implement sustainable procurement practices but also to educate the university community about our practices so we inform their own purchasing behavior beyond Boston University. BU Dining's guiding principles for local and sustainable sourcing reflect our commitment to environmentally sustainable and socially responsible food systems. These principles recognize products with a strong local impact and/or "best in class" third-party sustainability certifications. In FY25, more than 23% of BU Dining's purchases were local and/or sustainable, a 10% increase from the year prior.

We see the value of local sourcing primarily in the community and economic impacts of supporting local businesses and job creation. We also recognize the benefit of supporting local agriculture and keeping land in open space, especially given development pressures in the Northeast. Our definition of local includes products grown, harvested, caught, raised, produced, or processed within 250 miles of campus by independently or cooperatively owned local businesses. Historically, the locally grown products available to us, particularly produce, were quite limited and due to the misalignment of the growing season in New England and the academic year, were primarily available for the first couple months of the fall semester. Our partnership with Boston Food Hub changed this reality, making it possible to source locally grown produce year-round.

BU Dining began sourcing local produce from Boston Food Hub, a non-profit, mission-driven food hub, in 2024, but dove headfirst into the partnership last year. In 2025, we purchased over 201,000lbs of produce from 35 small family farms throughout Massachusetts and New England through the food hub, a nearly 1,500% increase from the year prior. This partnership aligns with our local and sustainable sourcing goals, as all the farms are within our local radius and several are Certified Organic, woman-owned, and/or or minority-owned, and contributes to our community. The farms that Boston Food Hub works with receive the full purchase price for their products; in 2025 this totaled \$175,000 distributed amongst the 35 farms we sourced from. Additional revenue from service and delivery fees goes to Boston Area Gleaners, the food hub's parent organization, to help provide fresh, local produce to food-insecure communities in Eastern Massachusetts. As a result of our partnership with Boston Food Hub, our local and sustainable produce spend increased from about 5% of total produce spend to more than 26% of category spend in one year.

"It's rare for a partnership to be as symbiotic as the one we have fostered with Boston Food Hub. Not only are we able to access incredible variety of high-quality, locally grown produce at cost- competitive, if not cost-saving, prices, but the farmers who we source from set their own prices and earn more than they would through other distribution channels, and additional revenue helps to provide fresh locally grown food to food insecure communities. Between increasing costs of farming, development pressures, and impacts of climate change, it's important to support small farms, and educate our campus community on our efforts." - Lexie Raczka, Sustainability Director, BU Dining

To make the most of the partnership and incorporate seasonal local produce into our menus, we introduced a monthly check-in call with members of the BU Dining culinary team, our sustainability director, and Boston Food Hub. These calls serve as an opportunity to identify risks (price changes, crop shortages, availability, etc.), discuss challenges, review short- and long-term forecasts, explore bulk pricing opportunities, and identify other ways to expand the partnership. Together, we're able to develop solutions that maintain menu stability and strengthen our procurement strategy.

"Our partnership with Boston University has been invaluable to our food hub and our region's farmers since we started working together. Our mission to help farmers increase access to wholesale markets aligns so well with institutions like Boston University, which employs creative, flexible and dedicated chefs who can utilize a variety of freshly grown fruits and vegetables. Additionally, the year-round schedule of educational institutions like colleges and universities provides a consistent outlet for farms during the height of the growing season when product is in abundance in addition to off-season markets that allows farmers to hire year round staff and have a reliable source of income when costs are highest. BU not only prioritizes sustainability but clearly practices it in their everyday operations." - Annie Broad, Associate Food Hub Director, Boston Food Hub

Beyond sourcing through Boston Food Hub, Boston University has supported the food hub's efforts to grow their reach and impact. Last year, the University provided a letter of support for a capacity building funding opportunity, which they received.

Creativity & Innovation

The increased variety and high quality of produce available through Boston Food Hub, as well as opportunities to purchase pallets of single ingredients, has led to culinary creativity. Last fall, we had the opportunity to purchase both broccoli and cauliflower by the pallet for a steep discount. The volume of produce purchased led to menu innovation to prepare these ingredients in new and interesting ways that would not feel repetitive. Since the produce was so fresh, we were also able to maximize which parts we used; one of our dining halls developed a house-made cauliflower leaf kimchi which combined multiple sustainability goals by reducing waste and utilizing local produce.

"Beyond the economic impact, the shorter supply chain is the real hero here. Because local produce doesn't spend days or weeks in shipping containers, it retains higher levels of vitamins (like Vitamin C) that typically degrade over time. Local farmers often prioritize heirloom varieties bred for taste rather than the "commercial" varieties bred solely for tough skins and shelf-life." - Chef Chris Bee, Culinary Director, BU Dining

In April, we hosted a multi-course locally sourced meal for a select group of 50 students as part of our Earth Month programming. All the locally sourced produce for the meal was sourced through Boston Food Hub, and we invited Annie Broad, the Associate Food Hub Director to the dinner to speak about Boston Food Hub and their parent organization and the farms where ingredients were sourced. Students found this event and the opportunity to hear from Annie incredibly impactful, especially in April when people typically view local produce availability as quite limited; "Amazing experience, like genuinely." - BU Student

Startup Costs & Return

This partnership has proven to be both operationally and financially beneficial. There were no startup costs associated with the partnership, though there were minor marketing costs, such as chalkboard signs, print signage, and magnets, as the partnership expanded. Contrary to typical expectations about local produce being unaffordable, we have experienced competitive pricing compared to our traditional distribution channels, and even cost savings, especially for produce available in bulk. Throughout the fall semester, we saved up to \$800 per week at each of our three large residential dining halls. Beyond the purchase price, we've seen financial savings as a result of fresher and higher quality product. Yields are often higher than non-local alternative of the same product, so less produce is going to waste. This also applies to parts of produce that would ordinarily be trimmed away and wasted, such as cauliflower greens or carrot tops, but can be used as high quality ingredients instead. Through repurposing trim, we displace ingredients that would need to be purchased, such as cauliflower greens replacing cabbage for kimchi, leading to cost savings.

Applicability of the Initiative

This partnership with Boston Food Hub is easily applicable to other colleges and universities in Greater Boston. We've made introductions with several institutions, and many have since become customers. Because the model integrates with existing receiving, storage, and procurement systems already standard for campus dining programs, it requires very little to implement. Food hubs similar to Boston Food Hub exist nationwide, making it easy for other institutions to adopt this model by connecting with their regional hub or farm cooperative. This approach can be scaled to operations of any size and adapted to regional growing conditions, making it a flexible and widely transferable model for sustainable procurement.

Effectiveness of Measurement

Access to regular, reliable data is crucial to assess the impact of this partnership. Each order contains farm information and estimated total weight of the order in addition to product name, spend, and quantity purchased. Boston Food Hub also provides us with monthly reports by location including total spend, number of orders, total weight purchased, and number of farms purchased from. We also receive more detailed reports that break down the spend for each farm on a semesterly basis. These reports are incredibly important so that we can assess the impact of this partnership and hold our operations accountable. We have worked with our locations to set sourcing goals for individual units and hold them accountable.

Data analysis and integrity is incredibly important to us, both so we can have clear insight into our purchases so we can make educated decisions to continue to drive procurement and to ensure that the local and sustainable purchases are accurate and in line with our standards. Over time, we've transitioned to more automated reporting analysis, working with MaetaData, with manual review of the data for accuracy and to ensure all small, local vendors are reflected in the data.

Storytelling & Outreach

Equally important to establishing sourcing partnerships is communicating the story about these partnerships and the vendors we work with to both our team and the university community.

Over the summer, we arranged a series of field trips for chefs, operators, and members of the BU Dining management team to visit Boston Food Hub farm partners and meet the people who produce our food, learn about farm practices, and more. The farms we visited included a 9th generation family farm, the largest urban hydroponic farm in Massachusetts, and a diversified farm that had recently been taken over by a young couple. These tours were impactful for those who attended, according to Mark Yates, the Food Service Director for one of our residential dining halls, "visiting the farms helped our team see how our purchasing decisions directly support local growers. It reinforced our commitment to expanding our sourcing through Boston Food Hub." The knowledge we learned through these visits was shared with other members of the BU Dining team through huddles and trainings as well as the BU community through marketing.

At the start of the fall semester, we implemented engaging chalkboard signs for each dining hall to track how many pounds of local produce they sourced through Boston Food Hub academic year to date as well as the local produce on the menu each week. These signs are easily updated with magnets at least weekly and provide a clear way for students to see the changes in seasonality as well as track our progress throughout the year. We also created a signage template to display at stations where local produce is being served and highlighted Boston Food Hub and some of their partner farms on sustainability walls and in our monthly sustainability newsletter, which over 13,000 students opened.

Boston Food Hub also attended BU's Sustainability Festival in September, providing an opportunity for students and other members of the campus community to learn about their mission and farm partners and the partnership with BU Dining.

Log in to nacufs.awardsplatform.com to see complete entry attachments.





Marciano Team ... 1.0 MiB



Students at Loc... 251 KiB



BU Dining at Ta... 513 KiB



BU Dining Team... 447 KiB



Chef Danley at ... 372 KiB



BU Dining Team... 2.3 MiB



BU Dining Team... 3.0 MiB



BU Dining Visits... 1.4 MiB



Boston Food H... 509 KiB



Boston Food H... 74 KiB



Boston Food H... 4.8 MiB



Boston Food H... 4.7 MiB



Local Apples at ... 4.6 MiB



Cauliflower Gre... 529 KiB



Boston Food H... 3.8 MiB

PDF

Winter Moon R... 1.4 MiB

PDF

September 202... 3.1 MiB