

LAND GRANT COLLEGES' RESPONSE TO A CHANGING FOOD SYSTEM

Executive Summary

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The factors that drive today's Food System reflect sophistication in consumer palettes; fewer citizens in agriculture; rapid, world-wide communication; and the enhanced awareness for responsible stewardship of our natural resources. "Vision 2020: An Integrated Food System" is a project developed by the first cohort of Food Systems Leadership Institute fellows to engage stakeholders in a conversation of drivers of fundamental change in Food Systems. *Some of the drivers that impact our Food System include: greater consumer involvement in system issues, changing demographic profiles throughout the U.S., energy security policies, efforts to improve environmental health, demand for a safe food supply, global competition and increasing demand in the international food market, improved human health and nutrition, and rapid advancements in science and technology.* These forces influence what and how much we produce, the processing of raw products into value added consumables, the distribution of products domestically and worldwide, and the consumption of products.

Discussions with system stakeholders from nine states coupled the recognition of these drivers with the belief that higher education must develop a “demand pull” response to stakeholder needs rather than the traditional “supply push.” The stakeholders were introduced to a matrix of drivers of change and Food Systems components, and asked three basic questions designed to encourage broader input and provide similar structures to collected feedback at the different meetings: *What seems to be working reasonably well in higher education to address the needs of the nation’s Food System? What is not working as well in higher education to address the needs of the nation’s Food System? If you could create the future that would produce strong relevance and Land Grant Universities in support of the nation’s Food System, what would it look like? What would be happening that is different from today? What types of research, educational programs, and partnerships would be in place?*

Four prominent themes emerged to give guidance to thinking about the future of the land grant system’s study of and service to the Food System – production, processing, distribution, consumption. Simply put, participants expressed that the system must... **(1) be consumer-driven, and able to change as quickly as the environment it operates in; (2) have flexible and resilient business models that anticipate and respond to change; (3) assure the health and wellness of consumers, core to the economic viability of the Food System; (4) secure the environment and the natural resources with which it operates.**

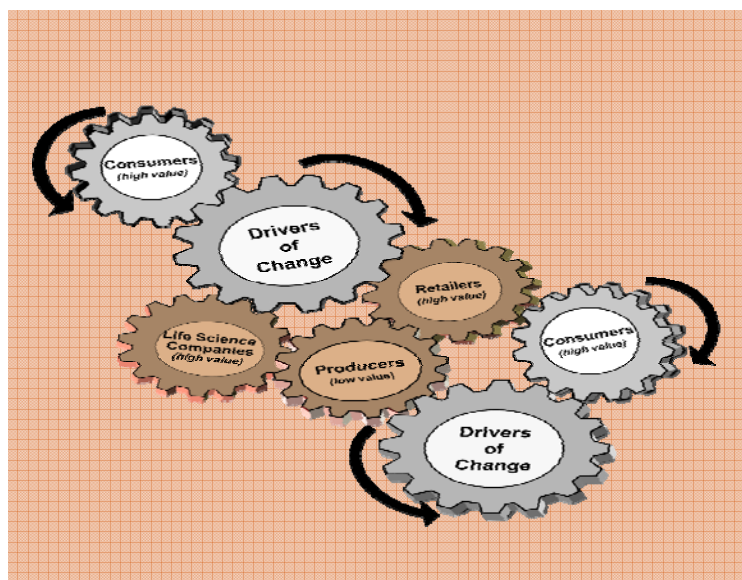
THEME ONE: Be consumer-driven, and able to change quickly as the environment changes.

“Consumer-driven” was the one universally agreed upon expectation of a future land grant college. Who that consumer is, what they’ll be driving, and how fast they’ll be allowed to drive were broader discussions. This theme includes effects of drivers presented as Demographics and Social & Cultural Demand, and is an underlying basis for Government Policy. Demographic shifts are changing the United States and the world at new speed. The food industry must learn who today’s consumer-citizens are, how they are changing, how they think, and what is important to them and why. Factors such as age, ethnic mix, household composition, work patterns and housing locations each affect future food infrastructure. Social demands force the government to act on things such as environmental standards, public health, nutrition and food safety; labor; firm business structure; and economic development...all impact the Food System. Additional discussion of the relevance of the Farm Bill noted the integration of “newer” issues into farm legislation and that the Farm Bill will focus on what will resonate with people...*but not just farm people*. Recognizing that future “farm bills” may not be “farmer bills” is important to future efforts in policy education, and participants encouraged policymakers to better partner with land grants to understand and direct the process.

THEME TWO: Flexible and resilient Business Models that respond to change. Flexibility is essential to the land-grant and food systems being responsive to pace of change imposed by other drivers. We are dealing with contemporary issues using very traditional approaches and the barriers that they impose. There was a call to reinvent Extension to meet needs brought by changing demographics. Funding models should be restructured and more cross-disciplinary Research collaboration developed that considers long-term and short-term projects concurrently. Cross-training of students is needed to solve future integrated problems. Additional flexibility is required by globalizing forces acting on industries that we serve. Scientific & Technological Advances drove much of the success of the U.S. Food System. The question now is whether the U.S. has lost this edge due to pressures on science funding to address more immediate and “popular” causes.

THEME THREE: Consumer health and wellness. Public health garnered the most discussion of the drivers in this theme area. Perhaps this was because public awareness of the availability of food and the reliability of its safety are highly emotional drivers of change. Land grant colleges need to become more notable resources for this discussion.

THEME FOUR: Quality environment and natural resources. Climate Change, Energy Security, and Environmental Health had varying levels of concern and support as change drivers. The industry can only react to social demands or government policy changes resulting from the climate change debate, or even more practical concerns like water shortage or supply disruption. Likewise, for questions surrounding Energy Security influences government policy affecting the food industry. Environmental Health issues were believed to be receiving more help and respect from the system, especially in comparison to the past, and higher education should continue forward progress in being responsive to changes in the environment.



A number of questions arose that guided thinking about Food System drivers and their components. While some seem obvious on second glance, they are useful as overriding tenants in thinking about the structure of future land-grant colleges of agriculture as they shift the focus of traditional resident instruction, research and extension activities:

- Who guides the ship? The short answer is “consumers.” “Which” consumers and other longer answers need to be considered. How will the system deal with such a focus?
- Resources: Where do they come from – differently than past? How are they divided for the biggest impact? What is accountability in the next generation of land grants?
- Short run vs. long run structure. Do “agriculture” colleges matter and where do they fit in future Food System discussions within higher education? How do we partner? The “vision thing” ... as much time as the system seems to spend in “visioning,” there’s still some question as to whether the broadest needs of this industry in the future is ever really considered.

Conclusions & Action Points

Several areas for action emerged from the various sessions that were part of this project. While detail is not developed here, the underlying premise is that dramatic action is needed to harness the innovative spirit of land grants without being hamstrung by rigid tradition or historic structure.

Fully Consumer Driven – As simple as it sounds, land grants must truly embrace this concept of consumer response more than ever. Caution is issued to not be *consumer reactive*, but to be proactive in projecting needs and developing forward-looking education and research agendas that look to put Food System firms and consumers ahead of evolving problems and markets. Part of this discussion has to be about broadening the view of “stakeholder” beyond the traditional production and bulk processing sector. It has to involve the entire “system” of the food industry in need assessment and evaluation of work done. A recommendation might be to develop approaches to gathering input that the system or individual institutions might apply to get input AND act upon it. A caution here is to avoid an inclination to get so involved with the process of collecting information that we fail to develop recommendations from it – any plan for collecting primary and secondary data on consumer demands must include guidance for developing concrete actions from those responses.

Practice What We Preach About “Systems” – Traditional structures for “Food System education” in land grant colleges are likely impeding progress in serving the consumer and various levels of stakeholders. As with any organization, changing such structures will be monumental. On one hand, the system demands it. On the other hand,

we don’t wish to lose the good in the land grant business model for the sake of “revolution.” The critical point here is to not let a fear of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” become an excuse for inertia. Barriers within organizational structures must be broken down. Perhaps more importantly, barriers across disciplines, between colleges and universities, and between public and private sector must be more easily navigated. We must *create new partnerships and remove barriers* to work between disciplines and institutions. Administrative barriers to collaboration are unacceptable in the eyes of the Food System and, certainly, in the eyes of a general public.

Must be Nimble – This may be somewhat repetitive of the “Systems” discussion related to business model, but land grants are too often seen as overly bureaucratic, slow to move, and even resistant to input or change. Obviously, there are aspects of the structure and culture that creates this perception that are valuable to the long run goals of knowledge discovery and development. However, this perception is increasingly dangerous in the current funding environment. Consideration of models that provide funding, time and focus to a portfolio of “quick response” and “industry building” efforts should be addressed. Some models exist in industry and academia that might be applied. Staffing patterns and traditions may need to be visited to achieve this. The point is that responsiveness is an area in which land grants (indeed most of academia) are vulnerable to criticism.

Need to Increase Funding – Funding problems and approaches drive the activity of the academy. Drivers of funding/investment need to be better aligned to drivers of the Food System. Partnerships within publicly-funded entities, non-government organizations, and industry need to be explored aggressively with one eye on the development of resources to solve system problems, and one eye on preserving the integrity of the land grant system. One response to criticisms of universities’ ability to predict issues or react to emerging concerns, might be the mandating of special funds within institutional structure. This would not be completely alien to those who deal with the competitive grant system. Discussion along these lines could include creation of fund streams to promote cross-activity (classroom, research, extension) and cross-discipline work. Having personnel dedicated to closely tracking Food System drivers and projecting future educational and research needs is one approach – having the ability to immediately develop and carry out a plan of action for such projections would be a critical part of such a scheme. Devoting additional resources to the monitoring of current needs and providing quick response to rapidly emerging issues, something the system has typically been done in an emergency response function. Having an ongoing system of interaction with all levels of stakeholders and the ability to swing resources to solving an emerging problem earlier on is critical as the system becomes faster paced and more highly leveraged to consumer foibles and natural events. ■

The Vision 2020 project was developed by the Fellows of the Food Systems Leadership Institute, who were given four tasks: identify emerging food systems issues, increase public understanding of the issues, engage broad-based stakeholders, and develop strategies for change. The Fellows worked together to develop the concept of drivers of change and the framework for examining how they impact various components of the food system.

Around the country, Fellows brought together food systems stakeholders to engage in discussions of drivers of change and to consider how land grant universities can participate in shaping future food systems. The FSLI would like to acknowledge the Fellows who held outreach meetings to collect the ideas, perspectives, and voices that have been used to develop this report, denoted by a (*) below.

The report writing team and FSLI Fellows of cohort 1 dedicate this report in memory of Dr. Larry Turner, Cooperative Extension Service Director at the time of his passing, of the University of Kentucky. His contributions as a colleague and friend continue to inspire us.

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** Denotes Fellows who held outreach meetings to collect information that contributed to this report.*