

The Sustainability, Wellness, and Learning Initiative: Food Next Door

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Healthy campus initiatives and sustainable food projects are trending on college campuses across the nation¹; however there is very little research that captures the impact of these programs. *Food Next Door (FND)*, a local food retail venue at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS), was developed as a part of the Sustainability, Wellness, and Learning (SWELL) Initiative with the goal of connecting health and sustainability through local food. **Purpose:** The primary purpose of this mixed-method study was to describe the overall experiences of consistent *FND* customers and the impact of the SWELL Initiative. A secondary aim was to evaluate these customers sustainable food literacy. **Methods:** A purposeful sample of 10 consistent *FND* customers participated in a 10 question audio-recorded interview (QL) followed by a 41 question online survey (QN) containing descriptive questions and a validated, reliable food literacy survey. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Significant statements were placed into clusters of meaning to identify themes and subthemes. Mean and standard deviations were calculated for the survey. **Results:** Three dominant themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: 1) fresh, flavorful food 2) smiling, supportive staff and 3) personal transformation. The positive energy exhibited by *FND* staff along with their passion and knowledge inspired customers to step outside of their comfort zone, encouraging them to experience new flavors and to see food in a new light, which has impacted their shopping and cooking routines (QL). The average food literacy score for the 10 participants (age: 36.2±16.0 yrs.; gender: 8 female, 2 male) was 25.3± 5.5 (33 possible) with 8 participants scoring above 75%, indicating that consistent customers are primarily food literate (QN). **Conclusion:** The essence of *FND* and the impact of the SWELL Initiative provides key information and motives for other Universities and food service establishments to implement similar programs.

INTRODUCTION

A sustainable food system is “one that provides healthy food to meet current food needs while maintaining healthy ecosystems that can also provide food for generations to come with minimal negative impact to the environment. A sustainable food system also encourages local production and distribution infrastructures and makes nutritious food available, accessible, and affordable to all. Further, it is humane and just, protecting farmers and other workers, consumers, and communities” according to America Public Health Association.²

The Sustainability, Wellness and Learning (SWELL) Initiative is new to the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS) and focuses on connecting health and sustainability through local food. The goal is to promote wellness through hands-on learning and skill building in sustainability practices to regenerate human health, cultivate a mindful society, and protect Mother Earth. As a part of the SWELL initiative, a local food retail venue was created in coordination with UCCS’ Dining and Hospitality Services, called *Food Next Door (FND)*.

Sourcing local, sustainable food from Colorado farmers is one of the goals of *FND*. *FND* is able to achieve this by utilizing zero-mile produce grown by UCCS’s farmer Kelley Jennings and her team at the UCCS Farm. *FND* also supports local farmers in the Arkansas River watershed. SWELL meals include plant-based, balanced meals and a protein flip SWELL burger, both menu options aiming for what SWELL stands for – good for you and good for the planet. SWELL burgers specifically include better but less meat complemented by grains, beans, vegetables and herbs. SWELL meals and burgers are served at the main retail location in UCCS, Café 65, each Tuesday and Wednesday. By producing seasonal meals and supporting local farmers, this program is able to educate students, faculty, and staff about the health and environmental benefits of eating seasonally and locally.



Figure 1. Weekly cyclic process which is managed by two SWELL graduate assistants (hired by Dining and Hospitality Services) who are in the Department of Health Sciences and specifically, in the Sport Nutrition Graduate Program

PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this mixed-method study was to describe the overall experiences of consistent (purchased 5+ meals) *Food Next Door (FND)* customers and impact of the Sustainability, Wellness, and Learning Initiative which are both new to UCCS. A secondary aim of this study was to evaluate current sustainable food literacy of customers to better understand the demographics of *FND* customers.



METHODS

Participants

A purposeful sample of 10 consistent (purchased 5+ meals) *Food Next Door (FND)* customers was recruited by the principal investigator to capture rich experiential descriptions

Mixed-Method Design

Qualitative: In-person audio-recorded interview

Key Questions:

1. How do you describe your overall experience at *FND*?
2. Has *FND* changed the way you define healthy eating? If so, how?
3. If you learned something while visiting *FND*, what did you learn?
4. In what ways has *FND* affected the way you think about or act around food?
5. What about *FND* is most important to you?

Quantitative: 41 question online survey

- 8 descriptive questions: gender, age, ethnicity, main role at UCCS, college, major, dietary restrictions, exposure to a sustainability course
- 33 Sustainable Food Literacy Questions
 - Question format: multiple choice, true/false/I don't know questions
 - Concepts:
 - Food Literacy: planning, managing, selecting, preparing and eating
 - Sustainability: equity, environment and economics constructs
 - Developed by UCCS faculty and students and validated by 10 regional/national experts for the Flying Carrot Farmers Market Study (IRB# 14-254)

Statistical Analysis

Qualitative Analysis:

- Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim
- Significant statements and quotes were identified
- Clusters of meaning from significant statements were used to identify themes and subthemes related to the essence and common experiences of *FND* customers as well as the impact of the SWELL Initiative

Quantitative Analysis (Excel 2013):

- Descriptive data and frequencies
- Food Literacy:
 - Correct answers (33 possible) were totaled to assess food literacy
 - Scores compared based on descriptive categories (age, gender, etc.)
 - A score at or above 75% of the total score is considered “food literate”
 - A score at or above 90% is considered “expert level” according to the validation study listed above
 - Means and standard deviations were analyzed to provide descriptive data of participants

UCCS University of Colorado
Colorado Springs

UCCS Dining and
Food Services
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
COLORADO SPRINGS

RESULTS

Table I. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants (n=10)

Descriptive Characteristic	Sample	Food Literacy Score (Max. 33 Points)
Age (yrs.) (mean ± SD)	36.2 ± 16.0	
Gender		mean ± SD
Male (n/%)	2 (20%)	28.0 ± 1.4
Female (n/%)	8 (80%)	24.6 ± 6.0
Main Role at UCCS		
Undergraduate Student (n/%)	5 (50%)	24.8 ± 7.2
Graduate Student (n/%)	1 (10%)	30.0
Faculty (n/%)	1 (10%)	26.0
Staff (n/%)	2 (20%)	23.0 ± 5.7
Community Member (n/%)	1 (10%)	27.0
Total Sample		25.3 ± 5.5
Scores at or above 75% (n/%)		8 (80%)
Top Score (as % max)		30 (91%)
Lowest Score (as % of max)		12 (36%)

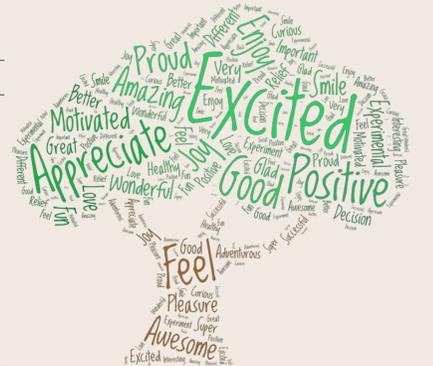


Figure II. Feelings expressed in participant interviews. Larger sized words were stated more often, but all feelings expressed are present.

Table II. Experiences Described by *Food Next Door* Customers (n=10)

Themes	Subthemes	Participants Quotes and Phrases
Fresh, Flavorful Food	Cost	“almost everything is very reasonably priced” ⁵ “I appreciate not paying the same price for something that is [vegetarian]” ⁸ “It’s a great price” ⁹
	Presentation Variety/Creativity	“the presentation of it, I like that” ⁹ “the presentation is amazing” ¹⁰ “beautifully set up” ¹⁰ “the creativity of the way that you all prepare the food is just amazing” ³ “appreciate that you do something different every week” ⁵ “everything is always really creative and something that I probably a year ago wouldn’t have known would go well together” ¹⁰
	Quality Health Benefits	“you give quantity and its quality because it is healthy” ⁹ “everything is just so fresh” ¹⁰ “the one healthy place on campus” ⁴ “I can actually make a good food decision that are actually delicious” ⁵ “getting what my body needs” ⁷ “I always feel really successful in my personal eating after I have finished my SWELL lunch” ⁹
	Sourcing	“[FND] is all based on localization which is incredibly important” ² “eating locally is so important” ³ “I like to eat the seasonal food” ⁶ “appreciate the fact that it is locally grown and so sustainable” ⁷ “it is fun that they are fresh and local based” ⁹ “coming from a good source” ¹⁰
Smiling, Supportive Staff	Flavor	“I get to try a variety of different items... prepared in a way that brings out different flavors” ² “a variety of flavors so your pallet is challenged” ² “there is definitely a taste difference” ⁴ this is delicious” ⁷ “I have not had a bad meal” ⁹ “everything is just so fresh” ¹⁰
	Knowledgeable	“[FND staff] are just so helpful and knowledgeable and friendly and I especially like the way that you describe the content of each meal” ³ “[FND staff] always explains everything very well” ¹⁰
	Passionate	“It’s one thing to provide information but when you provide information in a way that your getting it in the atmosphere where you can see someone else’s excitement” ² “it is so nice that there is active engagement” ²
Personal Transformation	Knowledgeable	“It is definitely the friendliest station, like you really get the impression that you, Hannah and everyone who is there helping out is really excited to be there and serve food rather than just there to take orders” ¹ “[FND staff] are very open minded and it’s a great environment” ⁴ “Bethany and Hannah always have a huge smile on their face” ¹⁰
	Shopping Routines	“I never looked into how [produce] was grown or what was used to make it look fresher and stay fresher longer” ⁴ “I am now more conscious about food labels” ⁴ “I am actually starting to like buying these vegetables now that I am like oh these are local and in season” ⁵ “I try to buy more organic” ⁶ “it is making me a lot more adventurous” ⁷ “making [healthy eating] fun, making it an experiment, playing with it” ³ “introduce things that I don’t normally make myself and that is actually what I really appreciate” ⁵ “[FND] is making me a lot more adventurous” ⁷ “[FND] gives me a lot of ideas for doing stuff at home” ⁸ “think about new ways of combining things” ⁸ “tasted some things that I would never have cooked myself” ⁹ “I have learned a lot of how to use different ingredients” ¹⁰
	Cooking Experimentation	“the most important is the education” ² “everybody needs to know what healthy eating is all about and what that means when you’re talking about localization” ² “I didn’t know [healthy eating] could be as good as it is” ⁷ “taught me how to save my tomato seeds” ⁸ “expanding my horizons” ⁸
Knowledge	Knowledge	

*Participant numbers listed next to quotes

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the positive energy exhibited by *FND* staff along with their passion and knowledge inspired customers to step outside of their comfort zone, encouraging them to experience new flavors and to see food in a new light, which has impacted their shopping and cooking routines. The essence of *FND* and the impact of the SWELL Initiative provides key information and motives for other Universities and food service establishments to implement similar seed-to-plate programs. It also sheds light on the importance of reconnecting people with the roots of their food and shifting back to local food systems.

References

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