

Virginia Farm to University: Equitable Pathways Webinar

[Link to Recording](#)

February 2, 2021

Webinar Summary

The outcome of the 2021 Farm to University: Equitable Pathways webinar is a continuation of a Farm to University initiative building on two gatherings, held in December 2018 and January 2020, as well as monthly Farm to University workgroup calls begun in Spring 2020. 131 people registered for the event, with over 75 attending in person. Virginia universities are seeking to increase the sustainability of their food supply chain and to broaden their supply chain to Virginia's farmers, with a specific interest in creating access for Virginia's Black and Brown farmers. It is understood that this is a long-term proposition and that achieving these systemic changes will require a long-term effort and commitment. The hope for the webinar was to build understanding across silos about the challenges associated with expanding Virginia's university food supply chain to Virginia farmers. Additionally, the webinar aimed to discuss and identify specific pathways for beginning the long-term process of building a more Virginia-based and diverse university supply chain that also reflects equitable access for Virginia's Black and Brown farmers.

The three panelists represented the farmer, farmer support, and distributor side of the food procurement process. Michael J. Carter, Jr. is an 11th generation farmer and the 5th generation to farm on Carter Farms, his family's century farm in Orange County, Virginia. At Virginia State University, he works as the Small Farm Resource Center Coordinator for the Small Farm Outreach Program. Stasia Greenewalt has been with Local Food Hub as Director of Grower Services for two years. While the expanding Grower Services program continues to focus on market access, wholesale readiness, and food safety support, Stasia started two drive-through markets in response to COVID-19 that advanced Local Food Hub's mission of supporting Virginia farmers and community access to local food. Tom McDougall is the Founder of 4P Foods, a Benefit Corporation that works with over 200 local and regional farms, delivering their

sustainably produced food to customers and businesses in the Mid-Atlantic. The panelists revolved their discussion around a central question: **How can Virginia's universities expand their food supply chain to include Virginia farmers, with particular attention to creating equitable access for Virginia's Black and Brown farmers?**

The panelists opened up with a conversation on the **top challenges and barriers for Virginia's Black and Brown farmers to enter the institutional food supply chain**. Carter Jr. identified GAP Certification as an extensive issue for small farmers, especially for small Black and Brown farmers. There is not a lot of incentive for these farmers to pursue getting GAP because it comes at a significant cost without much support. Additionally, Carter Jr. noted that the median age for farmers of color is 63. Older farmers are not comfortable with taking on the new business side required of GAP certification nor are they seeking new markets. Greenwalt noted that even if Black farmers would like to seek institutional markets, they would have to prepare for USDA auditors. Historically, Black farmers have had a bad relationship with USDA due to lack of trust. American agriculture is supported heavily from the federal level, however the assistance that is provided is inequitable as white farmers receive much more support than Black farmers. Greenwalt continued to note that there are broader systemic challenges like this that restrain farmers of color from entering larger food supply chains. McDougall listed generational wealth, land ownership, and loans as privileges white farmers enjoy that put them at an advantage. Consequently, Carter Jr. added, Black farmers are about 60-80 years behind whereas Latinx farmers are 10-20 years behind white farmers.

To uncover the challenges on the institutional level, the panelists then turned to the **top challenges and barriers for Virginia's universities to achieve a more equitable and diverse Virginia-sourced food supply chain**. Panelists noted that one of the greatest challenges is the institutions' strict need in projection of volume and consistency. Institutions need to know exactly what they'll receive. Panelists agreed that for small farmers, this information is not always available. Small farmers usually grow from June-September, a period when schools are closed. Carter Jr. emphasized that supply and demand varies during seasons and small farmers don't have the support to sustain their products for the school year. On top of that, he noted that institutions do not have the infrastructure to support the capacity of small Black and Brown farmers. Communicating to small farmers poses another challenge as rural broadband makes it difficult for universities to reach farmers. He concluded that, as a result, it is easier for institutions to use established ordering systems than to talk with local farmers.

The last segment of the panel attempted to come up with solutions to address **the stalemate where institutional dining providers' hands are tied by contracts and farmers are being asked to "bridge the gap" in ways that are insurmountable due to the institutional designs built on**

racism and the corresponding structures of power and wealth. Carter Jr. emphasized the need to start small and with intentionality. He said a target focus on specific farmers and investment into various farms is the beginning step to breaking down the stalemate. He suggested taking one or two Black farmers who are not GAP-certified and walking them through the process of certification. Opening the door is not enough, institutions must walk them through the door, “so that Black and Brown farmers are not left alone to fail but are guided to succeed.” The panelists agreed that institutions need to invest in solutions that make sense, including supporting the [Black Farmer Fund](#). This pilot program is intended to provide financial resources to farmers of color. Panelists also suggested that institutions could create a department or coordinator position specifically committed to meeting institutional targets for expanding food purchases from Black and Brown farmers. McDougall shared that institutional policies create a metric that holds institutions accountable rather than working relying on buyer discretion or preference. To combat the inconsistency of volume and products of small farmers of color, the panelists discussed the potential of creating a prepayment arrangement. This arrangement would set up a future contract to ensure predictability of volume and price so that investments can be made in advance. Farmers could receive support in infrastructure, land, seeds, and other preparation assistance with these arrangements while universities can commit to increasing procurement from Black and Brown farmers.

Next Steps

- Virginia Cooperative Extension will partner with the Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity to offer a workshop for minority businesses to learn about SWaM Certification. Encouraging Black & Brown farmers and food businesses to get certified will allow them to be recognized as a minority business and take advantage of future opportunities with institutions. This webinar is scheduled for March 24, 2021
- In March 2021, Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services will launch a new database for Virginia Grown farms to update their information. The system will be powered by [Virginia MarketMaker](#), and each profile will include fields for users to display their demographic information. This database will allow institutions to identify Black & Brown farmers and food businesses to work with. Farms and Food Businesses are encouraged to find and update their profile to indicate their willingness to sell to institutions.
- The Virginia Food System Leadership Institute (VFSLI) summer program will offer a research project to students to build out the information in this webinar summary, to build-out the supporting data and citations as well as developing two or more case studies of Black and Brown farmer experiences that illustrate these issues and their impacts in more depth.

- Continue the Farm to University Working Group on an as-needed basis.
 - Develop a subcommittee for University Dining to explore what it might take to be able to create longer-term contracts that ensure predictability of volume and price. One idea is “future contracts,” i.e., prepayment like a CSA arrangement so that investment can be made with infrastructure, land, seeds, and other preparation in advance. The subcommittee could identify specific seasonal products to source locally. VDACS and VCE can help identify needed infrastructure to support the university aggregated purchases
- University faculty and staff are encouraged to work with dining procurement staff to identify potential mechanisms for prioritizing or incentivizing procurement from Virginia’s Black and Brown farmers. Ideas for discussion for potential joint action over the next year:
 - Develop an award, perhaps by the Virginia Food System Council, for University Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Dining Award for sourcing from Black and Brown farmers
 - Host a webinar in which universities share their mechanisms and initiatives for prioritizing and incentivizing procurement from Black and Brown farmers
- Local Food Hub, working with Virginia Cooperative Extension, will explore how to build capacity of Black farmers entering the institutional sales pipeline by starting small, for example, supporting one or two Black farmers who are not yet GAP certified through the entire process.

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