Assessing the Feasibility of a UVa Farm



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"Agriculture is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real

wealth, good morals, and happiness"²

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¹ Photo by Paul Berry ²Letter from Thomas Jefferson to George Washington (1787)

Introduction



At least 65 other American universities, including many elite institutions, have implemented successful college farm programs; however, UVa has yet to implement any such program⁴. Other institutions have created these programs to provide opportunities for practical education, to reconnect students with the food system, and to take advantage of the multi-disciplinary educational opportunities provided by college farms. It is our recommendation that, as one of the nation's elite universities, the University of Virginia should follow the example of other schools in the nation and implement a farm program.

Although there is currently no farm program at UVa, there are ample resources to create one. At the time of writing, there are numerous signs that students and faculty desire a UVa farm and the opportunities it will provide: most professors reacted positively to the idea and several wanted to get immediately involved; a group of students

³ www.farmtocollege.org

⁴ www.farmtocollege.org

has already started composting for UVa's dining halls at a nearby farm; and Aramark has expressed a willingness to use local food in the dining halls. These developments indicate that there is already a movement towards local and sustainable foods within the university. A UVa farm would provide a unique centralizing effect on the various sustainable and environmental efforts on grounds.

College farm programs exist in three basic tiers of commitment. A university may 1) commit a large amount of resources to the cause and establish its own farm on campus or on a nearby parcel. Alternatively, on a more basic level, a school might 2) form a partnership with an existing local farm to provide educational opportunities or purchase its products or 3) a school might have a small garden or network of gardens on campus. UVa possesses the resources to explore any of these three options as the University owns several large parcels nearby, there are numerous local farmers in the surrounding area, and many "dead spaces" exist on grounds.

Our research has left us optimistic about the possibilities of a student farm at UVa since the university has both the human and land resources necessary to make the program a reality. Our report will survey the benefits of a university farm, discuss several precedents at other universities, examine the feasibility of the three tiers of commitment at UVa, make recommendations for future work on the project, and provide references for those who might wish to continue this project in the future.

Benefits

Both the University at large and the individual student would benefit from a UVa farm. For the University, the farm would encourage practical research about agriculture

through our existing departments. For the individual student, it would provide an opportunity to have a holistic, hands-on educational experience and bridge the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge.

In addition to its practical educational benefits, a UVa farm would reunite the university community with the food system on which it depends. Student involvement in a UVa farm would encourage necessary critical thinking about our larger, heavily industrial food system. The farm would provide direct exposure to local, organic food and a context by which to appreciate its importance to human, community, and environmental health. The dining hall provides an excellent opportunity to learn about food and health issues; however, the best way to reconnect with our food system is to establish a UVa farm—a participatory, model food system of our own.

The breadth of opportunities utilized in farm to school programs far exceeds agricultural education, though it is certainly an important component:



Student roles in farm-to-college programs

⁵ www.farmtocollege.org

The graph above illustrates student roles in other farm to college programs throughout the country. The survey was compiled by the <u>Community Food Security Coalition</u> (CFSC) in 2005, with over 100 schools responding. Student involvement in a university farm is by no means limited to planting seeds. When this model is applied to our own university, the possibilities are extensive. With a little imagination, one might envision: commerce students researching and implementing a business plan and doing real marketing; students of architecture designing and building greenhouses or sustainable buildings; students from the sciences and engineering conducting research into soils; education school students designing farm education programs for children; or participation by students of any subject who simply wish to become involved in the project. Few other projects at UVa are likely to result in such a breadth of multi-disciplinary opportunities as well as vital, concrete benefits to the university community.

Precedents

As mentioned in the introduction, at least 65 other universities have implemented successful college farm programs. At Stanford, student Brian Halweil instituted the university farm in 1996. This project in particular demonstrates the power of student initiative to accomplish such projects. The program is now well established. A selection from his statement of purpose is worth noting here:

In modern times, the study of agriculture has been isolated in research institutions and further isolated in technical disciplines with the overriding goal of increasing productivity. As a result, the study of agriculture (what is now known as the agricultural sciences) has been separated from its community, cultural and ecological context. On the other hand, a Stanford student farm would enjoy the unique situation of being accessible to students with diverse academic interests and backgrounds (in both technical and non-technical disciplines). With a more holistic foundation, students may learn "to see farming not as a production problem to be fixed, but as a more complex activity, at once cultural, ethical, ecological and political⁶.³⁷

One of the best known is the farm program Yale which has been featured in publications such as the New York Times, Atlantic Monthly, and Wall Street Journal. The project was initiated in 2000 by a collaborative effort between the university president and a local community member. Initially, the idea was to supply an experimental campus dining hall with local foods. The farm itself was created in 2003 on a single acre of unused land. The farm became part of the broader Yale Sustainable Food Project which is a holistic commitment to incorporating local, seasonal, sustainable food into the university food system. The farm operates all four seasons, using unheated greenhouses in the winter, and offers six student internships during the summertime. The produce from the farm is sold at a local farmers' market, given to volunteers, or eaten in the dining halls. According to the website, "Professors from a variety of disciplinesfrom soil science to psychology—use the farm as a resource in their coursework, and teachers from New Haven schools bring their classes to the farm for lessons in ecology, science, and food production. The farm also serves as a favorite place to relax; often students come to walk, read, study, or draw."⁸

Another well developed program exists at Cal Poly. Their Student Experimental Farm was established in 1989 as a graduate student research project to demonstrate lowimpact farming techniques in third world countries. The farm offers numerous course

⁶ Orr, David W. 1994. *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*. Island Press: Washington, D.C.

⁷ <u>http://www.stanford.edu/group/scfarm/proposal.html</u>

⁸ http://www.yale.edu/sustainablefood/farm.html

offerings for academic credit and the university is even working to develop a minor in sustainable agriculture.⁹ At 11 acres, the farm operates on a larger scale than the Yale farm. In addition to providing food to the local farmers' market and dining halls, the Cal Poly farm also operates its own community supported agriculture (CSA) program¹⁰. CSA programs allow consumers to purchase a share of a farm's product before the growing season, thus supporting local agriculture by assuming some of the risk with the farmer. Baskets of produce are typically delivered to the clients on a weekly basis. Through the CSA, the Cal Poly farm program provides extensive opportunities for students to participate in marketing and distribution.

Options for UVa



Existing garden at the Foxhaven site, maintained by Christoph Herby (UVa '05) and Sonya Fincham (UVa '05)

⁹ http://www.calpoly.edu/~sarc/classes.htm

 ¹⁰ http://www.calpolyorgfarm.com
¹¹ Photo by Paul Berry, July 2007

Tier 1: Establish a UVa Farm (large scale)

Proposal:

UVa owns, or will soon acquire, several properties which could be potential (or still are) farmland. Morven Farms and Foxhaven Farm are potential sites. Seth Friedman, a graduate student from the University of Montana, proposed to use Morven Farm as a UVa farm several years ago, however the project was never implemented. Currently there is no plan for Morven Farm though its distance from grounds may provide a significant obstacle. Nearby Foxhaven Farm will soon become property of the UVa Foundation, however no plan yet exists for its future use.

A farm could also serve as a retreat location for student, alumni, and faculty groups. It could also have performances spaces for art, music, or theater. This option is very attractive, due to the ownership the farm site and its potential for multiple uses. *Feasibility:*

The use of Foxhaven or Morven Farms, or any other UVa Foundation property, will inevitably encounter obstacles due to the scale and commitment required for the project. The UVa Foundation is opaque with its holdings and plans, and shelves many things and moves forward silently on others. Getting an "in," or significant press and student interest will be essential.

It is worth noting here that a proposal was made to use Foxhaven as an environmental studies center several years ago. The project involved a group of students and faculty and was quite well developed before the UVa foundation vetoed the proposal to avoid restrictions being placed on the property¹². The picturesque, 200-acre farm adjacent to grounds is currently the "life estate" of Jane Heyward, age 90, meaning she

¹² Personal Interview with Foxhaven resident Christoph Herby

may stay on the property as long as she lives. Eventually, it will become property of the UVa Foundation¹³. Although Heyward and her husband agreed to donate the property to the UVa foundation under these terms about 18 years ago, she has managed to place preservation easements on much of the land. Heyward is committed to sharing her land: she has created a network of public running trails, she allows several other residents to live in cottages throughout the property, and she was very enthusiastic about the earlier proposal for an environmental studies center because she "feels that the land can offer a welcome respite to city dwellers."¹⁴ Due to its size and proximity to grounds, in addition to respect for the future wishes of Mrs. Heyward, this parcel is probably the best—if not the ideal—site for a potential UVa farm.

Tier 2: Establish a partnership with an existing local farm (medium scale) *Proposal:*

Another way by which the university might become directly involved in the food system is to partner with a local farm and providing some labor in exchange for food and research space. This program is already being practiced around the country in various farm-to-college programs. Local farms are resources already in existence for students interested in pursuing local food procurement for dining halls. The FoodRoutes Network provides a comprehensive list of resources about these types of programs.¹⁵ Virginia currently has no documented farm-to-school programs, but with the wealth of farms in the area such a program is possible immediately.

¹³ Cavalier Daily October 29, 2003

http://www.cavalierdaily.com/CVArticle.asp?ID=17483&pid=1069

¹⁴ http://www.cavalierdaily.com/CVArticle.asp?ID=17483&pid=1069

¹⁵ http://www.foodroutes.org/farmtocollege.jsp

Establishing a partnership with an existing local farm already has the obvious benefit of not having to raise money or build infrastructure. Following this model, a local farmer might allow research on his farm or allow a class to take place, in exchange for a fee the University pays for the use of the space. The farmer could sell to the dining hall and benefit from increased marketing opportunities in addition to student labor and research.

Feasibility:

Students and faculty could partner with a local farm (such as Panorama, Best of What's Around, etc.) to make an interdisciplinary class about food issues and farming. Perhaps an arrangement of work for food could provide local produce and educational opportunities for the dining hall. This is a very feasible option, however this option will limit the breadth of opportunities for which the farm might be utilized since it will not be owned by the University.

Tier 3: Establish a Food Network on Grounds (smaller scale)

Proposal:

The historic purposes of the gardens of the lawn were to provide food for UVa students and staff (though this is contested by some). There are many places on grounds that could be utilized to grow food. Potential areas for on-grounds food production might include: a Pavilion Garden, a living roof, along roadsides, or other similar "dead space" including areas of mulch and unused grass.

Feasibility:

A farm on-grounds would be the easiest, in terms of logistics for gardening classes and ease of access for students. Unfortunately, the administration so far has opposed using the Pavilion Gardens as a food resource. However, this could change if the student body demonstrated significant support for the idea. Betsy Casteen has agreed to look into potential garden sites on-grounds. Interested students should also contact the Board of Visitors and Grounds management.

There is already a student farming group, Students for Sustainable Communities (SSC), which rents a garden plot from the City of Charlottesville. At the very least, the University could provide these students with an on-grounds garden plot which will provide them with a more convenient location, a visible presence, and a catalyst for further action.

The farm-on-grounds could be a very feasible plan to implement, however the potential benefits and educational opportunities it provides are also very limited.

Barriers/Challenges

While the prospects for a UVa student farm are encouraging there are still a number of obstacles to be overcome before any such program will become a reality. Foremost of these is student support for the project. While the power of student support for a project cannot be underestimated, we should keep in mind that there is currently little support or awareness of this project. A series of informal interviews seem to suggest that many students are simply not interested in the concept of a student farm. Though there is certainly a widespread concern about local food related issues within the

Urban Planning and Environmental Sciences departments the same probably cannot be said about the University as whole. Many students still conceptualize agriculture as a backward subject or not worthy of serious academic inquiry. These stigmas, however, represent not only the challenges which exist within the University community, but the challenges faced by the local food movement as a whole. The success of this project will depend on significant support from the student body—which will not be achieved without a substantially larger awareness of and commitment to critically examining and rethinking our industrial food system. However, as illustrated above, other elite universities have succeeded in doing this. There is no reason why UVa cannot succeed as well.

Also, as mentioned earlier, there is the issue of land. While partnering with a local farm or using a small space on grounds are very feasible options the use of a larger parcel of land for this project is questionable at best. Morven and Foxhaven are both large and very valuable pieces of land from the perspective of the UVa Real Estate Foundation, thus persuading the decision makers that these resources are best used as a farm will certainly present a challenge.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Based on this assessment we conclude that there are ample resources within the university to initiate a farm program. However, in order to implement this program more support will have to be generated. It may be most feasible to start with a smaller program such as an on-campus garden and work through student groups such as SSC and Green Grounds to build support for a UVa farm, however the true extent of student support for

the project is unknown at this time. One very tangible way to gauge student support is to place a referendum endorsing a UVa farm on the student elections ballot next spring. Another viable option might be to start an education campaign about local, seasonal food centered around the dining halls. If students and faculty become organized and committed to the project and submit the proposal to the administration, again and again if necessary, there is no reason why a student farm cannot become a reality here at UVa.

Appendix A: Possible Sources of Funding

Parent's program Department budgets Grants from corporations Capital campaign allotment CIO status Food-to-College program. Arts and Sciences Council Deans Secret societies B.O.V Future UVA farmers' market/CSA revenue

Appendix B: Resources for more information

Environmental Science/Biology Deborah Lawrence – environmental science professor* Laura Galloway Reginald Garrett Vivian Thomson Tom Smith

Mary Olien*, assistant curator at the Blandy Experimental Farm, who was involved in Foxhaven discussions of 2000.

Commerce School Mark White

Architecture School: Tim Beatley* Tanya Denckla Cobb* Graduate students EcoMod

Student Groups: Students for Sustainable Communities (SSC)* Contact: Elaine Quick (seq7j@virginia.edu)* Green Grounds group Students for Environmental Action Environmental Education and Protection Society Green Dining—Kendall Singleton These groups can be reached through a collaborative web site (University Environmental Coalition). Contact Chris Donnelly or a S.E.A. representative.

Administrators Betsy Casteen UVa Foundation

Other resources

Joel Salatin – proprietor of Polyface farm. Made famous through *Omnivore's Dilemma*. Christoph Herby—current Foxhaven Resident (<u>christoph.herby@gmail.com)*</u>

*Indicates expressed interest in project