

Strengthening the Food System through “Good Food Connections”

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A Call to Connect from Local Stakeholders

Through a 2019 food system study conducted by UF/IFAS Extension Martin & St. Lucie Counties and the UF Florida Agricultural Market Research Center, we learned that food retailers, growers, pantries, and others in our area needed help connecting with one another. In partnership with the Martin County Agriculture and Natural Resources Advisory Committee, we organized an in-person food system networking event in the fall of 2019 and planned for a second event the following fall. With the pandemic, we shifted the fall 2020 networking event to a series of monthly Zoom-based conversations held from October 2020 through June 2021.

Good Food Connections Answers the Call!

Attendance ranged from 2 to 13 participants, with an average of 7 participants each month.

Good Food Connections Participants

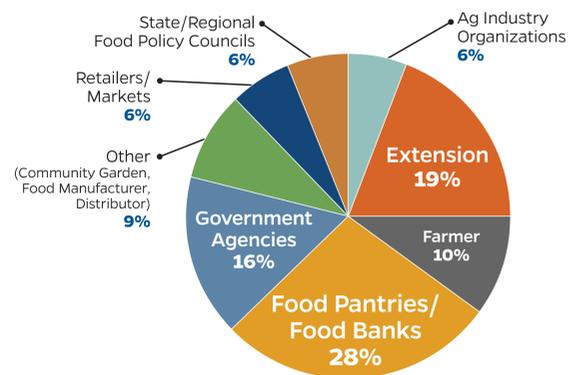


Figure 1. Categories of participants (n = 32) attending Good Food Connections during the fall/winter/spring season 2020/21, based on meeting registration data.

To evaluate the program at the end of the growing season, organizers gathered input from participants in June 2021 via an online Qualtrics survey and a “Reconnect & Reflect” Zoom meeting. The Zoom meeting, facilitated by CIVIC faculty, used Ripple Effects Mapping methodology “and the community capitals framework. Here is what we found.

Connections Made

- “It was a tremendous gift to be able to make those connections so quickly” – Allie, MEANS Database
- “I am really excited about the possibilities...especially with trying to rescue food... you never know where the next source is going to be. Just having more friends out there is definitely a positive and something I am taking away from this group” – Jackie, United Against Poverty
- **67% of respondents** (n=9) in the June 2021 Qualtrics survey said they “**definitely**” or “**probably**” were able to form at least one new connection
- **6 out of 7 respondents** said they felt the connection(s) they made would **definitely** or **probably** continue into the future



Relationships Developed Over Time

- “I think that one really good aspect of Good Food Connections is that the connections have been sustainable, in the sense that this isn’t one of those calls where someone just presents and then you forget about who they were. This gives opportunity to re-connect multiple times.” – Allie, MEANS Database
- [relationships take time,] “but they are the only way to make things happen” – Stefanie, Florida Department of Health, St. Lucie County

Number of Meetings Attended

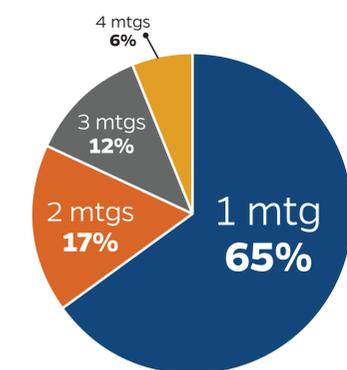


Figure 2. Based on attendance data, more than one-third of participants attended multiple Good Food Connections meetings throughout the 20/21 season.

Shared Learning

- “For me it was a great opportunity for networking and also looking at potential policies, systems, and environmental changes that are going to help us with food access” – Stefanie, Florida Department of Health, St. Lucie County
- “Instead of re-creating the wheel...just seeing what’s out there, what’s already working... working more effectively, more efficient” – Asmaa, SW Florida Food Policy Council & Regional Planning Council
- **100% of the June 2021 Qualtrics survey respondents** (n=4) said they **increased their knowledge** of the role of agriculture in local and state economies as a result of participating in the meetings

Participants Applied What They Learned

Based on the June 2021 Qualtrics survey, as a result of participating in Good Food Connections:

- **5 participants have used what they learned** in decision-making (e.g., incorporated info presented into the development of strategic plans, decided to grow new products)
- **2 participants have visited agritourism sites** to learn more about agriculture
- **3 participants have developed and/or advocated for a policy or policies** that support local agriculture (e.g., healthy eating and food access, advocated with elected officials on the importance of agriculture locally)
- **2 participants have increased the diversity of products** and/or services offered to consumers

Based on the June 2021 Qualtrics Survey and Ripple Effects Mapping event, connections made included:

