

The Bennington Sustainable Food Project  
**Proposal**  
**Spring 2010**

**Statement of purpose**

The Bennington Sustainable Food Project is an initiative started by Bennington College Students to address the fact that eating is a political act. We are dedicated to the promotion of human health and humane animal husbandry, maintenance of ecosystems, and the support of local economies. Climate Change, food security, economic inequality, hunger, an increasingly industrialized food system, and human health are among today's most pressing issues. It is important that Bennington considers its actions more closely, and takes measures to reevaluate, change, and improve its interactions with the environment, the local community, and the global community. Our food choices affect the vitality and health of our environments, communities, and economies. We believe that we have both the opportunity and responsibility to make these choices from an educated position.

Sustainability is a popular word associated with a wide range of theory, from fields including, but not limited to agricultural studies, social sciences, economics, and environmental sciences. Sustainability is different for each person, family, business, and institution. But what does it mean to make sustainable food choices? Our specific definition of "sustainable food for Bennington College," must come from a deeper understanding of our economic, environmental, and communal strengths and limitations. This foundation has helped us to focus our work.

We plan to work with students, faculty, staff, administrators, Bennington College alumni and members of the greater Bennington community in order to educate ourselves, and promote and initiate projects that will work to strengthen the connection between the College and the food system of which we are a part. We believe the self-guided, experiential, and collaborative nature of this project is aligned with the Bennington College educational philosophy.

We will initiate the following three separate, though inherently linked sub-projects that make up the Bennington Sustainable Food Project. These three sub-projects mutually support each other; informed food sourcing in the dining hall and developing a composting system will make help us become more aware of our consumption habits and strengthen our connection to our food. Finally, the compost will reduce landfill-bound waste and produce nutrient rich fertilizer for the garden. All of these steps exemplify the potential cyclical nature of a food system.

## **The Dining hall project**

The Bennington Sustainable Food Project members are working with Bill Scully, Director of Dining Services, Art Amuso, Executive chef, dining hall staff and Valerie Imbruce, Environmental Studies Coordinator, to establish what currently sustains the Bennington College dining hall. Where does our food come from? What products do we source locally? What are the farming practices that produce these foodstuffs? What products are organic, and where do they come from? And finally, what are the commonalities the foods that the dining hall purchases? What makes them the appropriate choices, and for what reasons? For the products that are harder to trace through the food distribution companies that work with the dining hall, we will conduct more comprehensive research, and where possible, discover the origins and the farming practices behind these products. This transparency will allow us to make informed sourcing decisions.

The Bennington College community has the opportunity to "vote with its fork" three times a day, making food choices that support local economies and environmentally conscious farming practices, while sustaining the economic and physical health of the College community. The goal of the Dining Hall sub-project is to make information on our food readily available to students, faculty, and staff, so that they may cast an educated vote, conscious of the social, economic, environmental, and health-related implications of their food choices.

### Labeling and public awareness

Bennington College's commitment to sustainability will be posted in the dining hall, encouraging students, faculty, and staff to consider what it means to sustain a specific community. The language appropriate for this statement is already being discussed by Bill Scully, Valerie Imbruce, and the members of BSFP.

Bennington College students, faculty, and staff have a right to know where their food comes from and what ingredients it contains. The BSFP will create a standardized food-labeling system in the dining hall, focusing initially on ingredients sourced from local farms, like Happenstance Farm in White Creek, NY. Labels will state the name of the farm and its location. Color codes will denote organic products and products sourced from within 100 miles. Further labeling will occur once we have this initial system in place, and have gathered more information on products purchased through Performance Food Group or other distribution companies.

We will also put up posters highlighting "farmer-partners" in the dining hall, putting a face to the name on dining hall labels. These posters will describe the farming practices behind the product and explain why it is economically feasible, environmentally sound, and health-conscious for the dining hall to partner with these farmers.

### Newsletter and "Know Your Dining Hall" Bulletin Board

The "Know Your Dining Hall" bulletin board will publicize items sourced locally each season and advertise on campus events put on by the BSFP and other groups working on food related issues. For example, we will focus heavily on the two local meals during the fall term, Thanksgiving and end of term/Holiday, publicizing what is already being done in the dining hall to support Bennington College's definition of sustainability. We will also list restaurants, cafès, farmers markets, and farms in the area that are producing local food, and notify the campus community of upcoming off campus events concerning food issues. For instance, we will keep up with, and post events put on by, but not limited to, Vermont Fresh Network and the Walloomsac Transition Forum.

Additionally, we are considering collaborating with the House Chair Food Committee to publish a newsletter that would disseminate the aforementioned information.

### **The Student Garden Project**

The Bennington College student garden will serve as a living, working example of the connection between the land and our food. The garden will be a resource for students, faculty, staff and Bennington community members. We see the garden as an educational tool, used to spread knowledge of sustainable farming practices, as well as an experiential and self-guided classroom. Not only will it serve Bennington College students in their education, but it will also be an outlet for community outreach, connecting summer garden interns with youth programs and local non-profits; strengthening communication, collaboration, and education between Bennington College and the greater Bennington community.

### Weekly volunteer days

During the fall and spring terms there will be weekly volunteer day(s) facilitated by the members of the Bennington Sustainable Food Project

### Summer of 2010 Student Garden Internship Pilot:

A sustained garden at Bennington College necessitates a structured internship program led by committed student interns. The immediate growth and future production of the garden will depend on the work done this summer, serving as a bridge between the spring and fall terms, during which the garden will be maintained by the Bennington Sustainable Food Project members and student volunteers.

The garden should be a space for experimentation, and each summer will express the individual interests of the garden interns. However, basic garden guidelines will be

upheld from year to year. For this initial pilot, the summer garden interns will help to design the basic garden guidelines.

#### PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES

The primary responsibilities of the Summer garden interns will be the maintenance and upkeep of the garden, an estimated 20 hours of work per week.

Additional responsibilities include hosting weekly community/youth groups (ex: DREAM's summer program, Blooming Chefs etc.) for educational activities and workdays.

The summer garden interns will keep a detailed record of garden processes: preparation of soil, planting, fertilization, weather, watering, weeding, and harvesting.

Additionally garden interns will create a blog to chronicle their process and experiences of working in the garden and with community partners. In the fall the summer garden interns will present their work to the both the Sustainability Committee and the greater campus community.

Throughout the summer, garden interns will visit at least two local farms, and community gardens to contextualize the work that they are doing on campus within similar efforts going on in the greater Bennington community.

#### FACULTY AND COMMUNITY ADVISORS

Susan Sgorbati and Valerie Imbruce have agreed to be faculty advisors for the summer 2010 Student Garden Internship Pilot Program. We have made connections with several community farmers and gardeners, in the hopes that they will help advise the summer garden interns through tutorials and workshops held this summer. Nancy Higby, a local gardner and landscape architect, and Carol Adinolfi, founder of Blooming Chefs have both agreed to be involved in this project.

#### EMPLOYMENT SPECIFICATIONS

The student garden internship positions will be part-time, paid positions. Our goal is to have two interns. One intern would serve as the student coordinator, and would facilitate regular communication and meetings with the faculty advisors.

#### GARDEN LOCATION

We have identified using an estimated 20' x 30' portion of the faculty community garden next to the observatory as a potential and viable location for the student garden.

#### POST HARVEST

Student interns will utilize some produce for weekly community/youth group educational activities, including cooking and tastings. The Bennington Rutland Opportunities Council and The 6 Bank Street Homeless Shelter will be potential

recipients of surplus produce grown in the garden. Additionally, a weekly harvest dinner could be prepared by the student interns for the residents of Six Bank Street. This would build off of the dinners that several students in the Community Outreach and Action group have recently done at Six Bank Street. Student interns will be encouraged to take some produce for their own consumption. Because this is a pilot program, we are not committing to growing a predetermined quantity of food to outside parties.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE GARDEN AND THE SUMMER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

As the garden becomes more established, the Bennington Sustainable Food Project would be interested in working with faculty to create a module that would serve as a prerequisite to prepare students to be a part of the summer garden internship.

### **The Compost Project**

The implementation of a composting system is directly tied to both the dining hall and garden projects. A compost system would reduce the amount of biodegradable waste that our dining hall sends to the landfill. When organic material, such as food waste, decomposes in landfills it produces high levels of methane, a harmful greenhouse gas. With a composting system, waste from the dining hall could be returned to the food cycle by being converted to high-quality fertilizer for the garden and returning essential nutrients to the soil. Aside from simply diverting unnecessary food waste, an important aspect of composting is the awareness that it would raise within the Bennington community about the place of waste and decomposition within the food system as a whole.

In the past, the amount of food waste produced by the dining hall on a daily basis was greater than the volunteer compost group could physically handle. It was difficult to turn the compost within the old wooden structure, and the students lacked the formal knowledge or incentive to maintain the compost. We will give new life to the compost system, learning from the past system's weaknesses and strengths by approaching it in a well-researched and organized manner.

#### Goals for Composting at Bennington

##### RESEARCH

For the compost program to be successful, we need to have a functional structure, a clear system of separation in the dining hall, and incentives for the students involved. Based on a trial run conducted on April 12, 2010, the total mass of compostable food waste that comes out of our dining hall daily is approximately 275-300 pounds, without separation of materials. To record the maximum amount of decompostable food waste possible, representatives at the Highfields Center for Composting in Hardwick, Vermont encouraged us to do the trial for everything but plastics. Whether

we choose to compost all materials or not, depends on how much time and energy can be allocated to the project. While all organic material coming out of the dining hall can be composted, materials such as meat and dairy require more care and oversight. All other materials are easily composted with a moderate degree of oversight.

### COMPOSTING CONSULTATION

Our preliminary goal is to bring in a professional consultant from the Highfields Center for Composting. Through their Close the Loop program, they have helped various institutions set up successful, large-scale composting systems. Members of our group have corresponded with them several times already regarding the best way to set up a composting system at Bennington. Although we have a solid idea of what the composting system will look like, their professional expertise will be essential in designing a sound, sustainable system. We would like to have members of the Sustainability Committee at this consultation, to show support for the project from multiple facets of the Bennington College community. A consultation would cost \$75 dollars an hour, plus travel time. If the consultation itself lasts three hours as an estimate, including four hours traveling time, that equals \$525. We believe that this consultation will help us design a system that will work well for Bennington in the long term.

### PROPOSED COMPOST SPACE

We propose to use the space used for composting in the past, near the community gardens and the observatory. It is close to the dining hall and student center but out of the way of the majority of the campus.

### COMPOST STRUCTURE

Composting structures can vary tremendously from simple piles or rows, to mechanized "in-vessel" composting systems that can cost thousands of dollars. We propose a simple, covered wooden structure comprised of 4 separated bins. These bins will be larger than those used in the past, making it easier to turn the compost and easier to maintain. The compost would start as food scraps in the first bin, and be moved to the others at different levels of decomposition to avoid contaminating the final product. Getting the consultation will tell us how large the structure should be, and how we should design it. Until we have the consultation, we will be unable to estimate the cost for building the compost structure. Student volunteers would design and build the structure and we plan to get wood and other building materials donated for the project.

### DINING HALL/SEPARATION

The dining hall staff is very supportive of our efforts to compost, and plan to contribute their kitchen waste. In regards to the student body, issues of non-compliance posed a big problem in the past. We propose a system where the compost would be separated from the general trash area and very clearly marked. Eventually, we hope that students will learn to make the choice to compost, and do so effectively. Representatives at Highfields encouraged us to compost all biodegradable

material, including things such as meat and dairy. However, composting these items takes more time and energy and doesn't impress upon students the importance of waste separation. Although our ultimate goal is to divert all organic waste from the dining hall, we will not compost meat and dairy until the system is established and functioning.

### STUDENT POSITIONS

Composting, while not complicated, requires a substantial time investment. We propose that it be initially maintained through two paid student positions, and possibly more as the program expands. These students will take food waste from the dining hall three days a week to the bins and layer it with leaf mulch or sawdust. It will also be their responsibility to turn and move the compost between bins. These students will be paid an hour for each day of composting, including an hour of time dedicated to turning, totaling 4 hours a week. A training will occur at the beginning of each term to make sure that the crewmembers are prepared to properly, and efficiently manage the compost. This training will happen initially by members of the Bennington Sustainable Food Project, however on a long term basis it will be very important to have a non-student advisor who will train the students. Composting would occur during the fall term from September through November, and the spring term from the end of March/April through June (dates are flexible depending on weather.)

### **Funding:**

The Bennington Sustainable Food Project is requesting funding for the payment of student summer garden interns, for the composting consultation, and for the compost positions during the fall and spring terms.

Total cost for two paid summer garden intern positions:

$\$8.06 \times 20 \text{ hours/week} \times 11 \text{ weeks} \times 2 \text{ students} = \$3546.40$

Total cost for compost consultation

$\$75 \text{ an hour} \times 5 \text{ hours travel} + 3 \text{ hours consultation} + \$.50/\text{mile for } 290 \text{ miles}$   
 $= \$745.00 \text{ (approx., can come down to } \$65 \text{ an hour if necessary)}$

Total cost for two paid compost positions:

$\$8.06 \times 4 \text{ hours/week} \times 14 \text{ weeks/term} \times 2 \text{ students} = \$902.00 \text{ per term}$

We will procure the additional funding that we require for purchasing seeds and other

supplies/tools through the following means:

- Application to the Budget and Events Committee (see attached proposal)
- Fundraising
- Donations

### **Additional Projects and Events:**

Film Series: King Corn, Food Inc., The Greenhorns

Workshops: seed starting, compost, pickling, bread making

Field Trips: Local Farms (Happenstance, Mighty Food, Clearbrook), Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture , Urban Agriculture projects in Troy/Albany Area

### **New Member Recruitment:**

The Student Organization Fair

Facebook and other social networking tools

Regular outreach in Downstairs Commons

Informational events: lectures/discussions, films, workshops

### **Timeline:**

Garden

Seed starting workshop - April 25th

Summer garden internship positions submitted to worklink May 1st, due May 10th, interns notified - May 15th

Garden location decision made - May 1st

Compost

Highfield's Compost Consultation - April 30th

Bennington Sustainable Food Project members and student Volunteers construct compost system structure - Start constructing May 15th

Finalizing compost program/positions for the fall and spring terms - by the end of summer

Dining Hall

Finalizing presentation, language and labeling key for dining hall labeling system - May

Bulletin Board installed in dining hall - May

First issue of the Sustainable Food Newsletter - May

