

# Overview

**WHO** is Discovering the Food System for? This guided experiential learning program is designed primarily for youth ages 12 to 18. Given the potential level of complexity involved in conducting a community research project (Part 2) and the community action it may inspire, elements of this program may also be suitable for some undergraduate college level courses.

But really, Discovering the Food System is meant for anyone who is curious about food, how it gets from farm to table, and how we, as eaters, are involved in that system. Such people with inquiring minds might be:

- a traditional student working with a teacher to develop an enrichment project. This could also be an independent team project that students could work within a block format.
- Home school students and their parent-teachers
- Alternative school students working independently
- Community-minded groups like the 4-H, service minded groups, Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts.
- Anyone interested in food!

**WHAT** is Discovering the Food System? Discovering the Food System is a guided discovery of the food system. This experiential process of discovery is grounded in the places we live, eat, work, learn, and play.

With Discovering the Food System, we will use our own "backyards" -- the school cafeteria, local food stores, nearby canneries, restaurants and farms -- as our laboratory for learning about the food system. In this way the food system will move from the abstract to the real.

Through experiential learning activities, we will meet real people that represent different parts or aspects of the food system - farmers, grocers, restaurateurs, processors, and marketers, as well as community citizens, who eat, just like us.

Discovering the Food System provides a basic understanding of the food system and our connection to that system through the choices we make every day.

Because this experiential learning program promotes an in-depth understanding of our own community food system, what is learned can be applied directly in local actions for community change. We can become

involved in community action by asking questions, seeking answers and drawing conclusions about possible alternatives within our communities.

Through the Discovering the Food System program, we will meet people in our local and possibly distant food system, explore the differences between a "community" and a "global" food system, and learn ways in which the food we eat and the food system are interrelated.

**WHY** do we need Discovering the Food System? Young people today are hungry – hungry for food and hungry for knowledge about the world around them. All of us, and increasingly our children, teens, and pre-adults, have to make food purchases for ourselves and do our shopping for our families. For teens, and even for many adults, the complexity of the food system that feeds us is largely unknown. A walk down the aisles of today's supermarkets provides a glimpse into our global food system -- one that offers consumers a safe, affordable, abundant, consistent and convenient food supply that comes from all over the world. Lost amidst most of the more than 30,000 food items available to shoppers is the connection food can provide with our community, local economy and the natural environment. Indeed, the food system is, for the most part, hidden from view.

But the food system can be discovered by the sharp and inquiring minds of today! By learning more about our food system we can make food choices that improve our health and the economic, social and environmental sustainability of our communities.

*Why is food system awareness important?*

We all need to eat. Our biological need to eat is met by a complex set of interdependent processes from seed to table. This complex system depends on a tremendous amount of resources - natural, economic, social, political.

While most of us enjoy food quite often – usually several times a day – the larger food system is virtually invisible to us. How can we learn about the food system? Food labels are excellent at providing nutrient content information but, for the most part, reveal little about how food is grown, where it was grown and processed, who was employed to grow and harvest the crop, or what mode of transportation was used to get the food to market. These are just some of the multitude of questions that might be asked about a food product that, if we had the answers, would tell us a lot more about the food system.

Another reason for our food system ignorance is that all of us, including today's youth, are exposed to numerous and often-conflicting messages related to food, nutrition and the food system. In the school cafeteria, local

supermarkets and fast food restaurants we are exposed to a vast array of food choices. The typical household has shifted from consuming food prepared in the home to consuming quick, prepared or prepackaged foods. As adolescents we grew up or are growing up with supermarkets and fast food rather than homegrown and homemade food. Throughout our lives, we have probably seen little connection between food and the setting in which it is produced. During pilot testing of this curriculum, we asked young people where their food comes from. Most answered, “the store.”

Through the Discovering the Food System program, we will gain an appreciation of our relationship to the local food system and the factors affecting food supply.

**WHEN** should we use Discovering the Food System? Discovering the Food System lessons have classroom applications or "curriculum links" to Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Music/Art and Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS). Because of the many links to a wide variety of subject areas, portions of Discovering the Food System can be incorporated easily into existing curricula.

**WHERE** should we use Discovering the Food System? Since one of the principles underlying the study of food systems is that food has a connection to a specific place, the context in which Discovering the Food System is used needs to be taken into account in a very conscious way. Discovering the Food System is very much about place – where we live, where we eat, where our food is grown, processed and marketed – and the people associated with those places. To get the most out of Discovering the Food System, we need to become familiar with the agriculture and food system in our own geographic region - state, county, region of the country. Most of the examples used in the lessons and the project description come from the Northeast – the region where the curriculum was written. However, the activities developed to engage us in learning about our food system can be applied to any region and other countries as well.

Some basic food system questions to ask ourselves include: What crops are grown in my area? Are there food processing businesses in my county, or state? Where are foods that grow in my area changed (processed) into products that I see on the supermarket shelves? Is there a farmers' market in the town I live in? What kinds of food stores are there in my community and where are they located? How are the foods the same and how are they different in the different stores? Are there any community gardens in my town, and who gardens in them? Of course, most of us are creative and

curious. So you will have many of your own interesting questions to ask about the food system.

Your local Cooperative Extension office can be a valuable resource throughout the Discovering the Food System program as nutrition and agriculture educators maintain strong connections with people who grow, market, process, prepare, serve and donate food.

**HOW** can we use Discovering the Food System? Discovering the Food System is designed primarily for middle school to high school age students. Many of the activities are suitable for grades 6 and 7 as well. While this program was developed primarily for use in a classroom setting, several of the activities are compatible with a variety of non-formal educational settings, Cooperative Extension 4-H youth development programs, home schools, school-aged childcare programs and community-based educational environments.