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By Community Design Center Staff

Farmers' Market a small step towards greening the campus

The Campus Sustainability Report Card has released its results for 2009, and the University of Cincinnati received a B-. Through surveys and independent investigation, the Report Card provides "in-depth sustainability profiles" for hundreds of North American colleges. Certainly UC's campus is not among the worst, but there is plenty of room for improvement.

The report commends UC's investment in campus LEED-certified buildings and community development projects in the surrounding neighborhoods, while the categories of Climate Change, Energy, and Transportation received significantly lower grades.

Buzz surrounding a food crisis over the summer, the enormous costs of transportation and the environmental impacts of industrialized agriculture have brought into focus the way we grow, move and eat our food. Universities are in a unique position – through institutional purchasing and education - to determine the source of food that reaches campus. Aspects such as the nutritional quality, distance traveled, and fairness of the contract with the farmer all enter into the discussion of "sustainability."

Last week, UC took a small step towards joining that discussion by hosting a farmers' market on MainStreet. The sparsely-advertised event drew a diverse crowd of students, staff, and faculty. Some were interested in doing their week's shopping at the vegetable, cheese, and sweets stands. Others were happy to be able to buy a fresh locally-baked muffin on their way to class.

"This helps support farmers around here and the community," said one student, who would like to see more of this type of effort at UC. Many also expressed their frustration at the typical selection of the food in and around campus.

"Lots of students asked me why I don't sell in there," said Donna – a local baker – pointing at the Tangeman University Center food court. The comments of both vendors and the UC community beg the question of why students are limited to the fast food fare likely brought in from far off lands with unknown quality or labor standards. Organizers of events such as the farmer's market had hoped to raise awareness about the origin and quality of food on and around campus. Some vendors were encouraging students to sign a petition asking the TUC to allow alternative vendors in the food court.

Several members of the university community expressed interest in seeing more of these initiatives along with a larger selection of fresh goods in the dining hall, TUC, and other campus food outlets. However, the organization and management of the four hour event was not without its headaches. At least three separate permits must be purchased to hold an event on MainStreet. And then there is the issue of electrical hookup needed to run the refrigerators and the sound equipment for the band, which cost organizers a cool \$300. Fortunately, several local

sponsors helped offset the cost of the event, but if these events are to take place more often the University must do more to remove the hurdles.

Another hurdle is convincing vegetable farmers/vendors to make the trip to Uptown for a market catered to students. Not typically known for their culinary acumen, university students may be the last audience to whom a farmer expects to sell his product. However, standing in front of a table covered with eggplant, tomatoes and artisanal cheeses one vender expressed his surprise that he had sold so much in the day. "I was skeptical that students would want to buy... they don't cook much."

Housing and Dining Services estimates that they spend \$1.8 million per year on the food products they serve. Add to that the dollars spent on food at the "restaurants" in TUC and just off campus. The interest in buying local food exists, and the market seems "ripe" to allow this healthy dining alternative to students.

One factor that helps ensure the success of events like the farmers' market is widespread advertising. No mention was made in campus newspapers or the university's website listing of events.

More events are scheduled for the quarter including the Sustainability Forum on October 22nd and a nuclear power lecture on October 30th. Look for posters hung around campus bulletin boards. Events like these and benchmarks such as the Campus Sustainability Report Card provide the university community an opportunity to evaluate the efforts UC is making towards increasing our environmental consciousness and nutritional options.