INTRODUCTION

The Community Food Assessment research project originated from a two-year food study spearheaded by the University of Cincinnati-Niehoff Studio, the academic program of the Community Design Center, that allowed students to gain knowledge and practical skills while researching urban food and quality of life issues affecting Cincinnati. Because of local interest surrounding Cincinnati’s food system, the Community Design Center initiated this project. Through the development of the Cincinnati Food Congress, interested persons and groups along with the Community Design Center were afforded a joint opportunity to participate in discussions, ideas, and goals for a Community Food Assessment of the Greater Cincinnati Area.

The Greater Cincinnati Area comprise of 8 counties: Butler, Warren, Hamilton and Clermont in southwest Ohio; Dearborn in eastern Indiana; and Boone, Kenton, and Campbell in northern Kentucky.

BACKGROUND

A Community Food Assessment (CFS) is an assessment tool that enables groups to examine food systems at local, regional and national levels to determine the range of food security. A food system entails the complete process in which food is derived, including but not limited to, production, processing, distribution, consumption and recycling of food waste. CFS allows users to highlight trends, problems and opportunities affecting the food system. One of the strengths of the CFS is that it not only seeks to identify food issues, but also to identify “local” resources that may be capable of providing solutions.

Although Community Food Assessment is a relatively new idea, several communities around the nation have undertaken it to gain a better understanding about the food system and related problems facing their community. The assessment process allows users to document findings, create a forum to generate discussion, and develop strategies that could empower community members. Similarly, these were the Cincinnati Food Congress’s primary objectives as well.

CASE STUDIES

In order to better understand what the CFS and how communities have applied it, case studies were reviewed. Sources used for this were: What’s Cooking in Your Food System, Columbus FoodShed Alliance’s website, and recently conducted Community Food Assessments by the
Kentucky branch of the Community Farm Alliance. A few of the cities looked at for the case study review were: Madison, Wisconsin; San Francisco, California; Somerville, Massachusetts; Columbus, Ohio.

In each case reviewed attention was given to the reason for undertaking the food assessment, the focus area of the study, and the methodology used to gather data. One of the commonalities found was the fact that most, if not all, of the food assessments were based in low-income neighborhoods. The other finds from the case study reviews can be seen in the below tables.

<table>
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<th>Reasons for Undertaking the Community Food Assessment</th>
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| Madison, WI | ● Gain a better understanding of food system.  
● Devise strategies to improve food security.  
● Establish partnership between community members and educational institution. |
| San Francisco, CA | ● Improve accessibility to nutritious foods.  
● Provide job training opportunity for youth |
| Somerville, MA | ● Determine food and nutrition resources. |
| Columbus, OH | ● Promote sustainability while moving toward a more food secure community. |
| Louisville, KY | ● Address food insecurity caused by lack of access to healthy nutritious foods |

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<th>Focus of Study Area</th>
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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In undertaking the CFS the Cincinnati Food Congress devised a list of goals in the form of a mission statement¹, and established a mapping of the basic steps that needed to be taken to achieve its goals for the structure of a database. The critical path diagram below presents the

Critical Path Diagram

After determining the overall steps needed, the Cincinnati Food Congress sought to develop a comprehensive resource database. The resource database was to allow the Cincinnati Food Congress to identify the various organizations in the Greater Cincinnati Area that had direct or indirect relationships with the local food system as well as reveal existing gaps in the food system. Three types database models were discussed and two were attempted. The models were: 1) Interest Groups; 2) Organization Types; and 3) Comprehensive. Since the objective of the database was for a comprehensive, categorized structure that was easy to use, the study opted to use with the Comprehensive Model, which was gleaned from the Case Studies Table in What’s Cooking In Your Food System? As a visual aid, a diagram of each model is shown below.

¹ See appendix.
RESEARCH FINDINGS – RESOURCE DATABASE

Data was gathered through various methods including, but not limited to, Internet searches, site visits, telephone calls, and interviews. Over 700 records were amassed. Great emphasis was placed on the researching Anti-Hunger Resources/Services, Community-Based and/or Local Food Systems, and Community Organization/Institution sectors. A brief description and findings for each sector incorporated in the Comprehensive database is itemized below.
Anti-Hunger Resources/Services

The objective of these institutions and agencies is to provide nutritious food to the indigent, vulnerable, young, elderly and disabled populace. A total of 551 records were collected. Sub-sectors are: emergency food, government, national schools, child and adult care, summer food, food pantries, and other outreach.

Public Health and Nutrition

Twenty-one records were found. Organizations and agencies under this section were typically non-profit in nature with an emphasis on community health and intervention.

Conventional Food System

Entries covered a broad range of food system characteristics, including but not limited to, grocery stores, wholesale stores, conventional food stores, restaurants and other food service businesses. A total of 20 records were compiled.

Community-Based and/or Local Food Systems

Data under this section reflects local producers and markets of local goods. There 63 records collected under this sector. Livestock information was gathered under a subcategory.

Community Organizations/Institutions

Reflect community-based initiatives for the betterment of the environment and livelihood of residents. There were two sub-sectors: cooking schools/classes, and universities. A total of 63 records were collected.

Infrastructure/Transportation

This section reflects businesses and/or agencies whose main concern is with public transportation, vehicle and other mobile transportation access. Limited information was gathered for this sector.

Community Development/Economic

Organizations that provided job training and offer assistance to individuals or businesses participating in the local food system. Limited information was gathered for this sector.

Environmental (Food System Related Issues)

Organizations and/or agency concerned with environmental issues. Limited information gathered.
**Policy**

Section reflects legislation that effect local food system. Limited information gathered.

**Media**

Dissemination of food related issues and advertisements. Limited information gathered.

**Difficulties and Recommendations**

Time, availability, accessibility, and coverage area were all factors of difficulty experienced while researching for direct and indirect food related resources. Separated and combined these issues contributed to the amount of data collected per sector as well as per county in some cases.

**Time.** Each segment of a sector was allocated a block of time in which to gather information. The amount of time given ranged from one to four weeks, depending on the size, scope, and value on the sector. Manpower consisted of approximately 20 hours per week, making the total research time between 20 to 80 hours per sector. For some sectors, the allotted time was not sufficient because of the breadth of the coverage area and complexity of the subject matter researched.

**Availability and Accessibility.** These two factors of difficulty have been combined because they share issues. Availability and accessibility of information became difficult when more in-depth research was required. An example of this is farms sub-sector. While trying to ascertain the number, locality and type of farms for the 8 counties, it was found that this information was typically not published and only maintain by one or two sources. When contacting the sources it was learned that the information was not available to shared because of confidentiality standards. Thereby, limited information could be recorded in the Comprehensive database.

**Coverage Area.** As stated above, the Greater Cincinnati Area covers 8 counties. With the time constraints and issues with availability and accessibility of information, regional coverage became a difficulty. For instance, when researching for governmental agencies one of the many things that had to be considered were jurisdictional controls for the county and its independent municipalities. Learning the power structure of each county consumed an extraordinary amount of time.

As a means to minimize the difficulties experienced and improve the overall process, several recommendations were made. Two of which were to: 1) modify the coverage area, and 2) specify key questions asked. Instead of covering all eight counties for the CFA it was recommended that the Cincinnati Food Congress centralize its coverage area to 4 or 5 counties. This would allow the Cincinnati Food Congress to set short-term achievable goals that would build momentum and generate interest by publishing determined results. The second recommendation was the development of focused questions that would be formulated to allow the Cincinnati Food Congress to obtain the essence of information that it was seeking. In order for the focused
questions to be beneficial, the Cincinnati Food Congress would have to establish the actual food related problem that would be the center of its research.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

Although research for the Comprehensive Database did not provide a complete picture of the Greater Cincinnati Area food system, it did allow the Food Congress to highlight potential study area opportunities to focus the Cincinnati’s Community Food Assessment. The study area opportunities are:

- Nutrition/school-based study,
- Sustainable food system study, and
- Government and non-profit agencies connectivity.

**Nutrition/School-Based Study**

While contacting schools within the Greater Cincinnati area to determine if they had any health and nutrition related programs a couple of things were discovered. One was that some of the local schools did not possess a comprehensive course or program on nutrition for their students. Nutrition was only briefly addressed in their health class. The second thing that was discovered was the Ohio Wellness Program. In 2004, the federal government passed a law that required all schools to develop a wellness committee that would oversee that schools met with certain health and nutrition standards for its students. The law was to be effective at the beginning of the 2006 school year. One of the requirements for this committee was to ensure that breakfast and lunch programs served foods that met with local nutritional standards.

With the information gleaned from the research, the Food Congress could focus its research on the problems with nutrition (healthy food choices) in the Greater Cincinnati school systems. It could also look at how the food choices within the school system have changed over the last 10 to 15 years. The effects of these changes food choices, such as the rising incident of obesity and diet related illness in our youth. What some schools are doing to address this problem if anything. The Food Congress could also look for possible local resolutions, such educational seminars, setting limits on vending machines and other food choices within school as well as how our local health and nutrition based organization could assist schools in addressing this problem.

**Sustainable Food System Study**

The promotion of a sustainable food system was an integral part of the Food Congress’s mission. Research could take the form of look at the level of food sustainability through determining the number of farms—produce and livestock—that reside in the local area as well as how many grocery stores, restaurants and other food retailers purchase from the local available food supply. Study could also address the national epidemic of declining farms at the local level as well as allow the Food Congress to identify specific problems that exist between farms, farmers and
potential purchasers of local food in order to raise awareness and to propose methods to promote a more sustainable food system.

This study could encourage a resurgence of the Cincinnati Chef’s Collaborative in the Greater Cincinnati Area that formally held similar goals and ideals on local sustainability.

**Government and Non-Profit Agencies Connectivity**

The final opportunity that was yielded through researching food related resources in the Greater Cincinnati Area was found in the area of government and non-for-profit agencies for the promotion of food security. In contacting government agencies such as the county health dept to determine the different food programs and resources available in their county, it was found that most did not have that information readily available.

From this, it thought that the Food Congress could produce a report that dealt with the relationships of government and non-profit agency in their similar missions and how they could work coherently together to meet the needs of clients while promoting self-reliance. This study could identify the people being served. That is: are the recipients of these programs young, old, disabled? How often or long has person received assistance? Whether or not adult recipients have any marketable skills? Also, I thought from this study we could produce a directory listing the various resources available in the Greater Cincinnati area.

This opportunity provides a potential opportunity for the Food Congress to collaborate with the Cincinnati Community Chest, since they have a similar goal and objective.

**CONCLUSION**

Although many challenges exist in the Greater Cincinnati Area’s food system, there has not been any recently assessment of the magnitude of the problems. By performing a Community Food Assessment participants have an opportunity to learn more about their local food system in order to promote change actions. The data gathered to this point by efforts through the Food Congress has established a foundation for this to be realized.
The CINCINNATI Food Congress

The Cincinnati Food Congress (CFC) is an interest group consisting of representatives related to the food system in the Cincinnati Region. The participating groups have a diversity of interests ranging from farmers to processors to food workers to consumers. We hope that the CFC will be a forum for diverse groups to collaborate on issues related to food production, distribution, and consumption in the Cincinnati area. It is an effort initiated by the University of Cincinnati's Community Design Center based on a two-year food project conducted by the UC Niehoff Urban Studio. The following is a summary of a few possible goals and actions.

Guaranteeing food security for every citizen.
- Examining availability of affordable and nutritious food in low income neighborhoods
- Conducting a Community Food Assessment to identify opportunities for change in the Cincinnati food system
- Improving transportation from public housing and elderly housing to groceries

Exploring the economic development potential of the food industry.
- Helping small vendors and worker-owned stores acquire low-interest loans

Educating consumers on the nutritional and environmental implications of their food choices.
- Production of literature mapping out locations of groceries, community gardens, WIC clinics, emergency food providers, and foodshare sites

Incorporating sustainable development strategies for the Cincinnati food system.
- Minimizing the negative environmental consequences of agriculture and food production, packaging, transportation and disposal
- Preserving farmland and promoting sustainable agricultural practices

Increasing urban agriculture to enhance the urban environment and to provide additional sources of food and employment.
- Establishing new community gardens, solar greenhouses, rooftop gardening, and composting programs
- Improving access to equipment and information for producing produce

Reducing the reliance on the emergency food system.

Strengthening the links between urban and rural areas.
- Promoting “farmer-to-family” initiatives

Information compiled from "Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City"

To get involved, please contact Frank Russell or Alan P. Marrero

Community Design Center
Niehoff Urban Studio