Chapter 26

Building an Urban Food System Through UDC Food Hubs

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ABSTRACT

The Landgrant College of the University of the District of Columbia embodies the university’s unique mission as the only exclusively urban land-grant university in the United States. With most of the world’s population now living in urban areas, this mission is relevant to cities worldwide. The UDC urban food hubs reimagine our food system as diversified, urban, and encompassing food production, food preparation, food distribution, and waste and water recovery. The hubs utilize bio-intensive hydroponic and aquaponic systems and green roofs to maximize productivity on small urban spaces; kitchens as business incubators and training facilities for food processing and nutrition education; waste and water reuse through composting, rain water capture, and green infrastructure. Each of these components offers opportunities for business startups and capacity building. The hubs also re-connect urban neighborhoods to nature. This chapter describes the urban food hubs, their locations, and the training, wellness, and leadership opportunities they offer to UDC students and DC residents.

INTRODUCTION

The Urban Food Hubs of the University of the District of Columbia re-envision the United States food system as urban, decentralized, and integrated. This stands in sharp contrast to the common association of food production as rural, highly concentrated, and as segregated into discrete entities of food production, food processing, food distribution, and food consumption. Their innovative approach won the Urban Food Hubs recognition by the National Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP)

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of the Association of Public and Landgrant Universities (APLU) as one of the top four innovations in Cooperative Extension in the United States.

The UDC Urban Food Hubs consist of four integrated components - food production, food preparation, food distribution, and waste and water recovery (O’Hara 2015; 2017). These four components incorporate the entire food system value chain:

1. Food production takes place in highly efficient urban food production sites where small spaces are put to use employing more traditional production methods and new technologies.
2. Food preparation takes place in commercial kitchens where raw produce is turned into processed food products, and where educational programs on healthy food options and age appropriate diets are offered to improve nutritional health.
3. Food distribution takes place through a range of options from farmers markets, to contracts with restaurants and specialty grocery stores, to cooperative models like community supported agriculture (CSA) where participating households receive weekly deliveries of fresh produce.
4. Waste and water recovery includes green infrastructure that remediates urban soil and improves water use efficiency, that reuses plant and nutrient waste, and that recovers and reuses water run-off and turns it into a valuable resource.

Each Urban Food Hub is conceived as a business incubator that has the potential to create jobs, provides access to education and training, improves health outcomes, and ultimately improves the quality of life of urban populations, and especially of those who lack access to everything from fresh food, to jobs, and opportunity.

The Urban Food Hubs thus are an expression of the mission of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) and its College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences (CAUSES) as the only public university in Washington D.C., and the only landgrant university in the United States that serves an exclusively urban population. Contrary to the over 100 other landgrant universities in the United States (see Figure 1) whose home states incorporate urban as well as rural areas, Washington DC encompasses no rural areas. CAUSES has therefore a unique mission of re-imagining its own regional food system, and the global food system as urban. With more than 60% of the world’s population now living in cities and metropolitan areas, this mission is critical not only to Washington DC, but to urban communities across the nation and the world.

The UDC Urban Food Hubs are both conceptual and physical, and offer multiple educational opportunities and quality of life benefits to UDC students, DC residents, and neighborhoods. Consistent with its unique mission, CAUSES offers academic programs in nutrition and dietetics, urban sustainability, urban agriculture, water resources management, health education, nursing and architecture. The latter is unusual for landgrant colleges, but urban design, green buildings, and low impact development are of great importance to a program focused on the urban food system and urban sustainability. In addition, the College offers a wide range of community outreach and cooperative extension services including healthy eating, wellness, and green infrastructure demonstrations, health fairs, soil and water testing services, and presentations at schools, community centers, and farmers markets. UDC’s Extension Programs also provide non-credit-bearing education and training opportunities in agriculture, gardening, nutrition, food safety, and natural resources management, but also in health and wellness, low impact development, urban sustainability, and resiliency.