The Role of Collaborative Community Supported Agriculture (cCSA): Lessons from Iowa

National SARE Conference
August 14-15, 2006

Corry Bregendahl
North Central Regional Center for Rural Development
corry@iastate.edu
Overview

- Study background
- Lessons from producers
- Lessons from members
- Impact on community development
- Implications for alternative food system advocates
Study Background

- **Purpose**
  - To understand unique contributions of cCSA to communities
  - To identify benefits and challenges of cCSA participation
Study Background

- Partners
  - Funded by Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
  - Iowa Network for Community Agriculture
  - Advisory committee of CSA organizers, producers, and members
  - Coordinators of Iowa’s cCSAs
Study Background

- Definition of ‘collaborative’ CSA
  - Almost all CSA is collaborative
  - For-profit CSA in which multiple producers collaborate to provide food/fiber products for CSA in which no single producer has sole responsibility
  - Four CSAs in Iowa met this criteria
Study Background

● Methods
  – Surveyed/interviewed current and former cCSA coordinators, producers, members
  – 26 producers responded
    ● 70% response rate
  – 189 members responded
    ● 46% response rate
Who Are Producers?

- 38% are former cCSA producers
- 62% of respondents are female
  - Compared to 36% of conventional operators
  - Compared to 53% of Upper Midwest CSA operators
Who Are Producers?

- Average age: 45
  - Compared to 55 of conventional operators
- 91%: Income from cCSA meets less than half of household financial needs
- Nearly all participate in other direct markets
Benefits to Producers

- Access to knowledge about alternative production practices
- More informed decisions about
  - Starting new farm-based businesses (like single proprietor CSA)
  - Expanding or diversifying existing farm-based businesses
- Access to support network
- Small/new producers can participate
Benefits to Producers

- Instant, bigger, broader market access
- Crop or production “gaps”
- Focus on preferred products
- Product complementarity vs. competition
- Risk management
  - Low risk
  - Shared responsibility
  - Income stabilization/diversification
Challenges/Opportunities

- Insufficient income
- Lack of control
- Differential investment
- Accountability can be blurred
  - Reputation tied to performance of others
  - Member impressions based on collective performance
  - Potential for confusion over responsibility/quality of communication with members
Challenges/Opportunities

- Accountability can be blurred (cont.)
  - cCSA members—communicate 13 min. p/wk with producers
    - 27% say it’s too little time
  - “Dual” members—12.3 min. p/wk with producer
    - 9% say it’s too little time
Challenges/Opportunities

- **Producer investments in communication**
  - **cCSA producers**—3 hours total per week
    - Average time with other producers: 1.5 hours
    - Average time with members: 1.5 hours
  - **sCSA producers**—2 hours total per week
    - Average time with other producers: .75 hours
    - Average time with members: 1.25 hours
Who Are Members?

- 45% are former members
- 82% of respondents are female
- 51% have annual household income > $70,000
- 88% are urban
Benefits to Members

Top 10 Benefits of Participation for Members

- Support local farmers
- Access healthy and nutritious foods
- Support the local economy
- Support small farmers
- Support local agriculture
- Access fresh, tasty food
- Access organic food
- Support agriculture that reduces chemical inputs
- Reduce food miles
- Support alternative agriculture

Percent of members who receive these benefits
Benefits to Members

- Benefits in order of strongest agreement
  - Financial (community oriented)
  - Environmental
  - Human
  - Social
  - Cultural
  - Political

- The more diverse the benefits, the more likely members are to stay.
Challenges/Opportunities

Top Reasons for Leaving

- My household was out of town too often: 42%
- Sometimes there was too little produce: 42%
- Farmers’ markets are more suitable: 41%
- Distribution time was inconvenient: 39%
- Didn't know how much I would receive each week: 35%
- Sometimes there was too much produce: 35%
Impact on Community Development

- **Business incubation**
  - 35% of producers started new businesses or expanded or diversified existing farm-based operations

- **Workforce development**
  - 63% of those with off-farm jobs in agriculture credit CSA for job

- **Innovations in marketing**

- **Agricultural/rural opportunities for new and young farmers**
Implications for Alternative Food System Advocates

- Consider potential for collaborative alternative food system models to serve as:
  - Business incubator
  - Business incubator for women/minorities
  - Youth/rural population retention strategy
  - Marketing innovation laboratory
Implications for Alternative Food System Advocates

- Strengthen community involvement to improve producer profitability and viability by
  - Harnessing eaters’ sense of responsibility to support local economic development
  - Implementing local policy mechanisms to fund alternative food system development
For the full report and more information, visit us online at:

http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/csa/index.html