



# Generating Equity within the Food System Through Institutional Purchasing

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## 1. Introduction

Higher education purchasing plans offer a unique opportunity to enrich disenfranchised communities and create equity within the food system (Barlett, 2011). Universities have implemented food initiatives such as purchasing plans, outreach, and on-site growing. To increase purchasing from local or BIPOC vendors, institutions can use metrics-based or relational approaches, or a combination of the two. Schools in contracts with food service providers can struggle to implement such changes (Barlett, 2017). Loyola University Chicago is a private Jesuit university in the Rogers Park neighborhood committed to environmental sustainability (Loyola University Chicago, 2021). Loyola has a sustainable dining area called the Engrained Cafe offering locally sourced vegetarian preparations. The goal of this research is to examine the barriers and opportunities to expand the sustainable purchasing policy at Loyola in a way that is valuable and applicable to other institutions in similar situations.

## 2. Methods

This research was conducted via interviews with Aramark and Loyola staff. Two representatives from Aramark with expertise in sustainability and supply chain management provided responses. The interview focused on the current food purchasing process, challenges to purchasing from local and BIPOC vendors, improvement measures, and the future direction of the landscape. Data from interviews was categorized using the interview questions as a framework. Additional interviews are in progress with staff spearheading sustainability and urban agriculture in Loyola's School of Environmental Sustainability. This research was approved by Loyola's IRB.



Figure 1. Students produce food at Loyola's Winthrop Gardens

## 3. Preliminary Results

Loyola's main campus is served by Aramark. Aramark sources food from a small group of vendors. Chefs are given responsibility to order food. Summarized in Tables 1 and 2 are current efforts, barriers and improvement measures for purchasing more products from local or BIPOC vendors.

Table 1. Aramark responses on barriers and opportunities to increase purchasing from local vendors.

| Question                    | Response Summary  |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Current efforts</b>      | Aramark pursues relationships with local businesses, farms, and food hubs.  |
| <b>Barriers</b>             | Insurance requirements, seasonality mismatches, health and safety requirements, like Good Agricultural Practices certifications, third party audits, and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Plans.  |
| <b>Improvement measures</b> | Greenhouses and hydroponics can work to counter the seasonality issue to produce desired foods yearlong. Food hubs can help small farmers aggregate food without enduring the negative consequences of trying to increase production. A new Farm-to-Institution project aims to build relationships with food hubs. |



Figure 2. Damen Student Center Dining Hall

"Food safety is Aramark's number one priority with procurement relationships. The insurance and inspections required for partnership with Aramark—including GAP certification requirements for produce growers, HACCP plans, and third party audits for all processors and manufacturers—can sometimes pose legal and financial barriers for some local and small vendors."

"Aramark relies on aggregators or food hubs that can both manage the relationships with multiple growers, and group products from many farms into one large order. These organizations are critical to the local food system infrastructure because they allow small farmers to participate in institutional buying in a way that does not put undue risk on their businesses by trying to scale up too quickly."

Table 2. Aramark responses on barriers and opportunities to increase purchasing from BIPOC vendors.

| Question                    | Response Summary   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Current efforts</b>      | Purchasing from Minority owned businesses exists but is very small relative to other efforts. The Responsible Sourcing Supply Chain Group works to build relationships with diverse suppliers.   |
| <b>Barriers</b>             | Barriers are similar to those for local vendors. Meeting health and safety requirements is costly and lengthy. Certification requirements are an obstacle for BIPOC producers..  |
| <b>Improvement measures</b> | Enterprise-wide initiatives exist to strengthen relationships with minority owned businesses to assist with meeting requirements and gaining certifications. These initiatives serve to help increase the amount of sourcing from BIPOC vendors. |

## 4. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the barriers and opportunities present in procuring local and BIPOC produced foods at Loyola University Chicago. To date, interviews have been conducted with Aramark staff. The main barriers identified include the inability for vendors to produce sufficient quantities of product to meet the institution's demand. Another barrier relates to seasonality; local growers may not be able to provide specific foods when out of season. Finally, meeting certification, safety, and insurance requirements require extensive time and financial costs that can be prohibitive for small-scale producers. Aramark has implemented relational programs with farmers and currently utilizes food hubs to address some of these issues. Upcoming interviews with Loyola staff will provide additional insights. An important area for future research will be to learn more about the perspectives of vendors themselves through interviews with local and BIPOC producers to ensure that changes in institutional purchasing work well for all parties involved.

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