

**Value Chain Partnerships
Phase III, Year 1
Evaluation Results and Discussion**

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Executive Summary

The Value Chain Partnerships project creates and supports Communities of Practice (CoPs) that facilitate information exchange and collaboration to foster healthy value chains. This evaluation was conducted to measure and document the social and policy impacts of the VCP project to determine the extent to which the CoPs benefit Iowa's farmers, communities, and landscapes. Results are based on a 39 telephone interviews conducted with participants of the Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG) and the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG). The response rate was 100%.

The Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG)

Results from the PNMWG interviews provide evidence that PNMWG is helping niche pork producers and enterprises become more competitive and maintain viable operations in a sector dominated by large-scale, undifferentiated, commodity enterprises. Results also suggest that much of this success is due to the convening and catalyzing role PNMWG plays in fostering unique relationships between private sector, public sector, and non profit partners. More than eight in ten PNMWG participants developed new relationships in the past year as a result of participation in PNMWG, for an average of two new relationships per person. More than half of the respondents said they developed new relationships with niche pork producers or niche pork enterprises. Three in four respondents who already knew others within the working group said those relationships were stronger as a result of participation in the working group. When PNMWG participants were asked whether they had initiated or participated in any new collaborations or projects as a result of PNMWG participation, about three in four said they did. As a result of those collaborations, respondents recalled leveraging a total of \$900,712 from various sources, a reasonably close figure to the one compiled by the PNMWG facilitator, who reports the group has leveraged \$1.2 million for PNMWG sponsored projects from sources such as the USDA, University-based non profits, producers' associations, the Iowa Attorney General's office, national commodity pork interest groups, private industry, and lenders.

The interviews reveal that such impressive achievements are made possible by the trust and relationships building aspects that PNMWG engenders. Respondents said PNMWG provides an environment in which participants share information about the niche pork industry and gain new knowledge they can use in their operations. Thus, they clearly stated that the creation of new knowledge in and of itself is not enough; connecting research with the industry is necessary. The ability of PNMWG to apply that knowledge makes the working group important to farmers and the niche pork industry. Information sharing in PNMWG has therefore created a relatively cohesive, yet strongly autonomous unit that has put technical assistance providers in the position of providing real support to more than a narrow range of livestock producers.

The notion that PNMWG is helping participants build a sense of shared identity together is significant and a necessary precursor for building strong relationships and enabling cooperation to take place. One phenomenon that is helping the group create a common identity is the process of distinguishing what they are doing from what others (particularly commodity groups) are

doing. The way in which this has occurred is through communication about the conditions they face. This has led to the emergence of stronger relationships appearing as result of a deeper understanding of the issues and therefore a deeper respect for people who are struggling to confront those issues. As market "competitors" begin to understand and respect each other more, they also begin to create a shared identity. In the process, they begin to rethink the concept of "competition" by gaining a greater understanding of the alleged competition, shifting who they think the competition is, and finally, by reexamining impressions about who is working *against* them by learning who is working *for* them.

While one of the greatest achievements of PNMWG is the trust the group is building among participants, building trust is also one of the group's greatest challenges. The interviews revealed there is a level of competition and outright distrust among some PNMWG participants. However, for the most part, that sense of competition is tempered to some degree by a growing realization that in order for one niche pork business to succeed, they must all succeed. Through PNMWG, some "competing" niche pork enterprises have teamed up to transport product to market, thereby reducing their operating costs. This mutually beneficial arrangement has demonstrated to other participants that collaboration, rather than competition, is a possible alternative in providing the edge they seek to sustain their operations. Respondents invariably reported that PNMWG is improving the viability of niche pork operations in a variety of ways by enabling farmers and entrepreneurs to make better decisions that sustain more viable operations.

PNMWG is also providing benefits to communities (which also serve to benefit niche pork producers and enterprises). PNMWG has helped create new job opportunities, increased the credibility of niche pork work critical for leveraging new partners and resources, and built the capacity of participating organizations and institutions to do work in the niche pork arena. In the process, PNMWG has increased its own capacity to do such work by inviting both public and private sector stakeholders along the value chain to participate in dialogue, research, and action that leads to better, more coordinated support for the niche pork industry.

The Regional Food Systems Working Group

Like PNMWG, RFSWG *"is a place where people are coming together, sharing ideas, talking to each other, and making connections. Better projects, better activities, and better coordination [are] happening as a result."*

Interviews with 20 long-time participants of RFSWG suggest that the capacity of RFSWG to positively impact Iowa producers and communities rests solidly on its ability to cultivate strong, productive relationships, leverage public interest and support for regional food systems work and leverage credibility to change the customs and practices of organizations, institutions, and government agencies. Impacts themselves, these changes occur simultaneously as a feedback loop, gaining momentum and building in size. The interview data suggest that nurturing strong, productive relationships is a precursor to increased public support and is necessary for recruiting new partners and mobilizing related resources. As public support grows along with the recognition that regional food systems can bring opportunities to communities, new partners get the nod from administrators, constituents, board members, and others to join the effort and

change the way things are traditionally done. When new partners get involved, they bring in new resources, generating even more public interest and attention and attracting new partners and resources, hailing perhaps subtle but more widespread change. Together, these factors create a snowball effect that is beginning to alter farm enterprises, education, institutional food service, and organizational practices and goals. RFSWG is also increasing organizational efficiency and capacity in concrete ways, is changing the way people think about public policy in relation to food systems, and is catalyzing efforts to change policies to better support regional food systems.

Nearly all of the RFSWG respondents interviewed said they had developed new relationships in the past year as a result of participation in RFSWG. More than half said they developed new relationships with non profits as well as members of the VCP funded geographically based regional food systems. More than one in three said they developed new relationships with producers and Extension personnel. Of those respondents who already knew someone in the working group, virtually all said these existing relationships had become stronger as a result of RFSWG participation. Three in four respondents said they had either initiated or participated in new collaborations or projects as a result of RFSWG participation. Of those who were collaborating with people beyond the working group, half or more were partnering with economic development professionals, Extension, county government, *and* producers. Among the 75% who engaged in new collaborations, one-third indicated they were able to leverage funding as a result of the collaboration. Respondents recalled leveraging a total of \$754,470 from producers or producers' associations, philanthropies, foundations, University based non profits, farm insurance companies, and government agencies.

Also like PNMWG, RFSWG participants report developing a sense of shared identity when they share stories of problems and progress, and work together to provide solutions to common struggles. Respondents are energized by the process of sharing and the support system this provides, citing such interaction as a key element in continuing such work. Developing a shared identity helps build trust in the group. The process of building trust in RFSWG is somewhat different than PNMWG simply because a sense of competition is more likely to occur between non profits competing for the same grant dollars rather than between producers competing for the same markets. One strand of evidence showed that RFSWG participants may be less likely to share ideas rather than trade secrets at the risk of misappropriation. As a whole, however, RFSWG respondents articulated several collectively held values of the RFSWG group that contribute to high levels of trust and strong relationships among participants. These shared values become standards for cooperation. Shared values, along with a steady level of trust among participants, give rise to interdependent behaviors as participants gain confidence and feel more comfortable asking other people in the group for assistance.

Much like PNMWG, RFSWG has also enjoyed an impressive number of impacts because of its ability to leverage public interest and support. This is achieved in many ways by using strategies (intentional or otherwise) that a) transform knowledge created in the working group into community opportunities; b) change the culture and thereby create indirect job opportunities by increasing public acceptance for people wanting to pursue a career related to local or regional food systems; c) increase public support through endorsement of prominent leaders; d) recruit new partners and resources; and e) prompt participants to expand who they view as possible local partners and encourage them to involve those partners.

In turn, increased credibility and public support enables RFSWG to help participants a) leverage financial support for regional food systems work; b) leverage institutional support for regional food systems work which allows institutional representatives/employees to spend time participating in RFSWG meetings and do better regional food systems work while on the institutional payroll; c) provide better support for farm-based enterprises such as more effective technical assistance or freedom to respond to issues; d) access more effective tools to reach and teach students; e) influence farming practices; f) connect institutions with local producers, g) change organizational, institutional, and government agency customs and practices; h) build organizational and institutional capacity, i) catalyze efforts to change public policies and j) clear up incorrect assumptions about food policy regulations that prevent the adoption and use of locally grown foods.

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Respondent Affiliation

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CONCLUSIONS

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of this evaluation was to measure and document the social and policy impacts of the Value Chain Partnerships (VCP) working groups or Communities of Practice (CoPs) in terms of the benefits they create for Iowa farmers, communities, and landscapes. Communities of Practice are groups of people with similar interests and goals who come together to share information, learn from each other, and/or accomplish mutual goals. By virtue of this definition and the networking function that must take place to facilitate this process, CoPs are necessarily a social group; they do not exist without social interaction. Since the purpose of the VCP CoPs is to facilitate information exchange and collaboration to foster healthy value chains, it is critical to analyze the nature and extent to which this takes place through social interaction. This evaluation therefore aimed to measure the degree to which participants benefit from CoP participation and the way in which the working groups are effecting change in value chains through the work of participating individuals, businesses, organizations, agencies, and institutions. This evaluation therefore focused heavily on measuring the social relationships that were formed among working group members, the quality of those relationships, and what happened as a result of those relationships. We also set out to collect information on relationships that were created or strengthened outside the CoP as a result of participation in the CoP as a way to determine the reach and value of the CoPs beyond direct participation. Such information was expected to inform our knowledge about the way in which CoPs contribute to or enhance the work of the CoP participants.

ABOUT THE WORKING GROUPS

Although VCP Year 1 funds supported the formation and function of four working groups, only two were included in this evaluation. They include the Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG) and the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG). The remaining two—the bioeconomy working group and the flax working group—have since dissolved and/or morphed into other efforts and are no longer supported by VCP funds. They were therefore not included in this evaluation.

Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG)

Established in January, 2002, the PNMWG is a product-specific Community of Practice. The mission of PNMWG is to foster the success of highly differentiated pork value chains that are profitable to all participants, incorporate farmer ownership and control, and contribute to environmental stewardship and rural vitality. PNMWG "provides a forum for groups and individuals interested in niche pork to come together, exchange information, and strategize ways of working together to address the key challenges facing niche pork supply chains. The PNMWG also uses funding from various sources to support projects aimed at addressing these challenges" (<http://www.valuechains.org/pnmwg/>). Over the life of this CoP, the PNMWG has attracted more than 150 individuals to attend quarterly meetings. A steering committee representing nine organizations and five niche pork companies provides oversight for the group, much of which

has focused on initiating research projects aimed at addressing challenges related to niche pork production and marketing. In this capacity, the PNMWG has secured more than \$1.2 million to operate and support nearly 30 research and development projects. Examples include maintaining herd health in the absence of antibiotic use or understanding niche pork production costs, returns, production, and efficiency.

Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG)

Rather than focusing on a particular product, the RFSWG targets its energy on developing community-based local and regional food systems. Value chain producers and partners alike (including support institutions, agencies, and organizations) attend and actively participate in RFSWG meetings. Established in September, 2003, the mission of RFSWG is to support education, conduct research, and facilitate partnerships to increase investment and support of community-based, economically sustainable, and environmentally and socially responsible regional food enterprises. Over the lifespan of the group, more than 400 different people have attended its quarterly meetings while each meeting is attended on average by roughly 40 participants. In 2006, the group revamped its strategy and decided to target traditionally general support on geographically-based regional food systems in Iowa. To date, these areas include the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition covering five counties in northeast Iowa, the six-county Southeast Iowa Local Food Network, the eight-county Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative, and the six-county Northwest Iowa Regional Local Foods System. In total, these regional food systems comprise 25 of Iowa's 99 counties.

METHODS

A total of 39 telephone interviews were conducted for this evaluation—19 were PNMWG and 20 were RFSWG participants. The telephone interview was selected as the most appropriate method to gather information based on the need to gather in-depth, largely qualitative, descriptive data. The interviewer followed a script of mostly open-ended questions, which was e-mailed to respondents before the interview so they could consider their responses in advance. A single person conducted all 39 interviews to maintain consistency and reduce response errors. The interviewer asked respondents to describe impacts that had taken place in the last year which were attributable to their participation in the working groups. The telephone interview format made it possible for the interviewer to ask probing and clarifying questions as necessary to understand the background and context for responses. Every individual contacted agreed to be interviewed, for a response rate of 100 percent. The average interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, with one as short as 20 minutes while several lasted an hour and a half. In all but one case, interviews were conducted with single individuals. The exception was a group of three respondents from RFSWG who were interviewed together because of the joint work they had done on a regional food system. However, their responses (which sometimes differed) were treated as separate cases within the analysis.

Criteria for Respondent Selection

Criteria for selection in this purposive sample included length of time respondents had participated in the CoP, as well as diversity of representation. CoP "leaders" or facilitators selected respondents who had participated long-term since we expected they would have a greater portfolio of impacts from which to draw, as opposed to those attending only a few quarterly meetings. CoP facilitators were also asked to provide names of respondents representing a wide range of sectors to capture the diversity of perspectives within each CoP. For RFSWG, this meant including staff from local and state government agencies including the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, the Iowa Arts Council, Natural Resources Conservation Service Resource Conservation and Development district coordinators, ISU Extension, non profits, producers, people working in transportation and logistics, foundations, community colleges, and more. For PNMWG, the 19 respondents were those comprising the steering team or the "core" participants who had been with the group the longest. These included primarily farmers and other agricultural entrepreneurs (many of whom are also farmers), industry representatives from entities such as the National Pork Board and the Iowa Pork Producers Association, as well as ISU Extension and faculty, USDA Rural Development, and the Iowa Pork Industry Center.

PNMWG RESULTS

Results of the PNMWG evaluation are based on responses gathered from 19 steering team members or "core" participants who have been with PNMWG the longest. These interviews provide overwhelming evidence that PNMWG is helping niche pork producers and associated farm-based enterprises become more competitive and maintain viable operations in a sector dominated by large-scale, undifferentiated, commodity enterprises. Results also suggest that much of this success is due to the convening and catalyzing role PNMWG plays in fostering unique relationships between private sector, public sector, and non profit partners. The analysis that follows details these results and offers additional insights into the impacts of PNMWG on niche pork production and marketing in Iowa.

Respondent Affiliation

Many of the PNMWG respondents (42%) interviewed reported a university, college or Cooperative Extension affiliation. More than one third of respondents (36.8%) reported they were farmers. Approximately one in four reported private sector affiliation as either owners or representatives of niche pork companies (some of these were also farmers themselves). Non profits, industry representatives, consultants, and government agencies were also represented but to a lesser extent (see Figure 1).

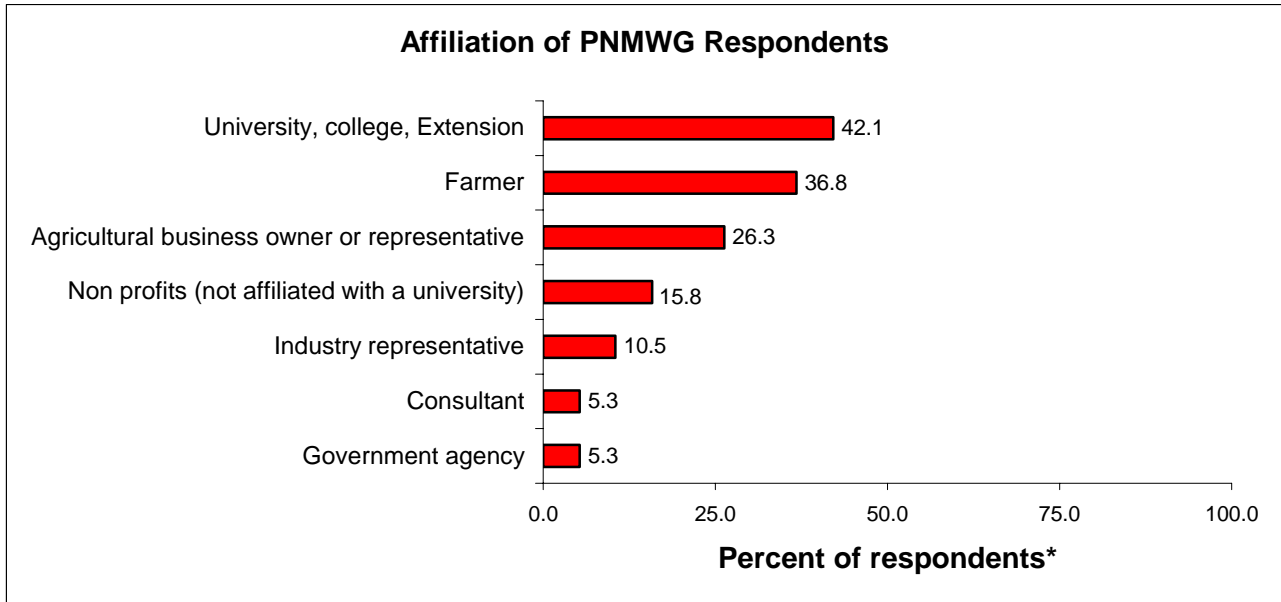


Figure 1: Respondent affiliation

*The percent will not equal 100% since respondents could have multiple affiliations.

Helping Producers, Entrepreneurs, and Service Providers Improve Niche Pork Business Viability

Invariably, respondents suggested in one way or another that PNMWG is helping niche pork enterprises stay in business by improving their viability. The following discussion describes key roles, elements, and features of PNMWG they identified as important for helping niche pork businesses become more viable.

Building New Relationships

"It is basically the relationships that are built [that] is the most important part of being a part of [PNMWG]."

PNMWG is clearly building new relationships. Respondents were asked whether they developed new relationships within the past year as a result of their participation in the working group. Based on their responses, Figure 2 shows that the majority of PNMWG respondents (84.2%) developed new relationships in the past year as a result of participation in the CoP. Given the opportunity for face-to-face interaction at the CoP meetings, it is not surprising that more PNMWG respondents (68.4%) said they developed new relationships with other CoP participants compared with new relationships they developed with people who do not participate in PNMWG (63.2% for PNMWG respondents). However, what is provocative and telling is that within PNMWG, the spread between developing relationships with people *within* the group and people *outside* the group is only a five percent difference, suggesting that PNMWG is effective not only in encouraging the development of relationships within the group but also people

outside the working group. Thus, benefits may not be limited to PNMWG participants, although this evaluation cannot make any specific claims about those benefits given we only interviewed PNMWG participants.

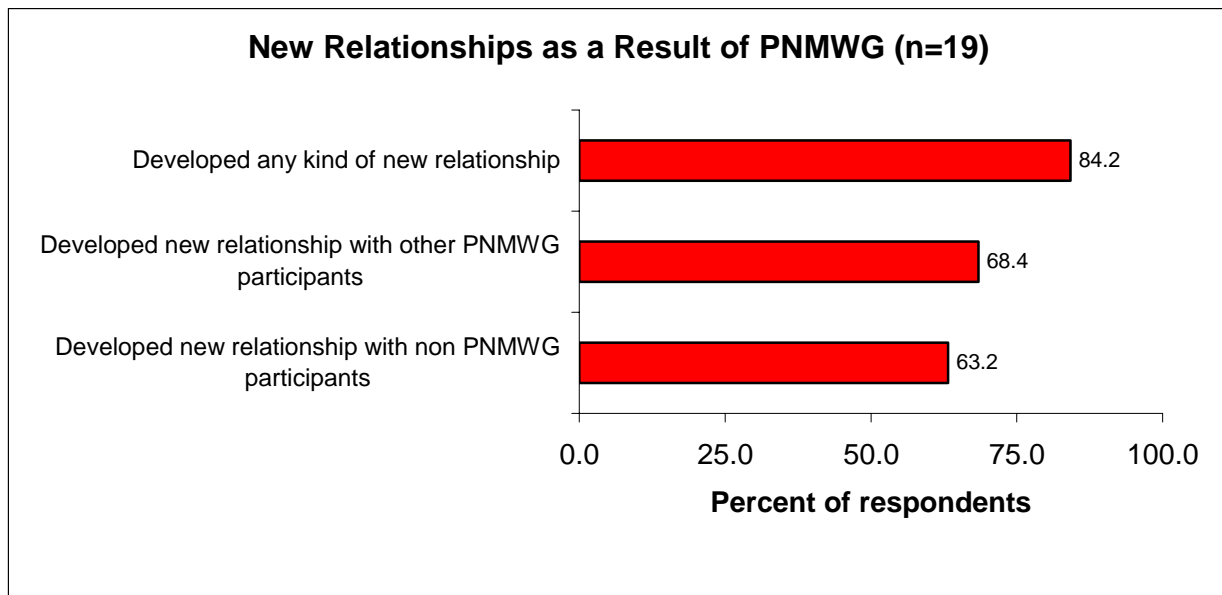


Figure 2: Percent of Respondents Developing New Relationships as a Result of CoP Participation

When respondents were asked with whom they had developed new relationships in the past year, either within the CoP or outside the CoP but as a result of the CoP, PNMWG respondents reported an average of two new relationships ranging from 0 to 4 (SD=1.3). Figure 3 on the next page lists eleven groups with whom PNMWG respondents said they developed new relationships in the past year. We can see from the figures that PNMWG is connecting respondents (56.3%) to niche pork producers and agricultural entrepreneurs who represent niche pork producers. The working group is also connecting PNMWG participants (37%) with ISU faculty and Extension as well as Practical Farmers of Iowa, other non profits, pork industry representatives including the Iowa Pork Industry Center and the Iowa Pork Producers Association, product buyers, processors, food distributors, Leopold Center staff, and people from non Iowa universities and colleges. In general, these data suggest that PNMWG is linking producers to more support providers from the University and non profits, as well as others along the value chain, meaning there is likely to be better coordination (and presumably outcomes) of efforts that support the niche pork industry.

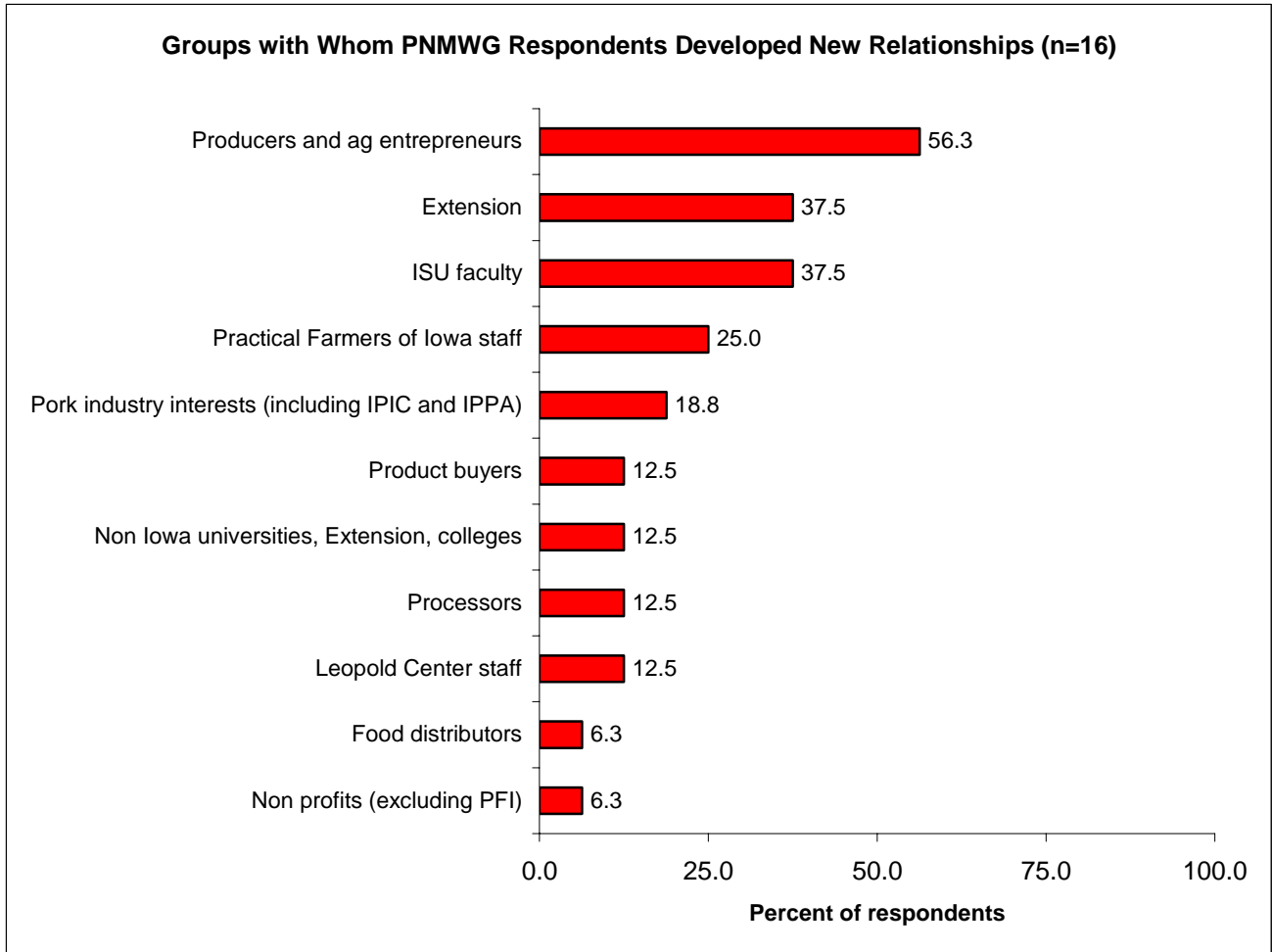


Figure 3: Groups with whom Respondents Developed New Relationships as a Result of CoP Participation

*Percents will not equal 100% since some respondents named more than one group/person.

Strengthening Existing Relationships

Not only is PNMWG stimulating creation of new relationships, PNMWG is also strengthening pre-existing relationships among working group participants. *"I believe that I have stronger relationships with the members now just because of participating and communicating."* The majority of PNMWG respondents interviewed (84.2%) said they knew at least one other working group participant before they joined the working group. Of these, 75 percent reported that existing relationships became stronger as a result of their participation in the working group. Not quite half (43.8%) said that participation in the working group had also strengthened at least one relationship they had with non working group participants.

Creating an Environment Where Information Is Shared

PNMWG provides an environment in which participants share information about the niche pork industry and gain new knowledge that is useful for their business operations. *"If I can find a way to keep my mouth shut, lots of times I learn more by being a part of [PNMWG] and by being surrounded by intelligence."* Another respondent commented, however, that even when talking, PNMWG participants learn. *"It's just a continual learning process—even when you are giving reports back to the PNMWG group, they ask questions and make you think of things in a new light."* PNMWG provides ample opportunities for participants to share their knowledge and experiences because of its participatory, discussion-based format. *"We share experiences [we've had] with packers and processors. We share experiences [we've had] with customers."* While some are more than willing to share information (*"I'm information promiscuous;" "I share market intelligence that I've heard. As independent consultants, people tend to talk to me a little more freely because I'm not tied to any one company or producer group"*), several expressed less willingness to share. One respondent elaborated quite frankly and at length on his reluctance.

I am watching the industry on the ground and our actual markets, and I see that some niche groups—some of the biggest niche groups—are actually hurting a lot of the farmers. I am becoming much more hard-pressed to give out any information because I think that some of the biggest niche producer groups, the leadership of those groups, is really not trying to help farmer. They just are trying to make a lot of waves in the ocean, and their failures are creating burnt bridges that I have to try and cross later. For example, if I fly to California and talk to the people in Whole Foods, they say, 'Well, you know. We tried this niche stuff, and it sounded great but XYZ Company had it in here for three years and it was a disaster because there was no consistency and they lied to us. We don't want to do this anymore. We just want to forget this niche pork.' I see more and more of that and it really is starting to concern me. So I am getting into a kind of protective mode about my business and am becoming less willing to share ideas, to share information. I am a little wary of these large groups [like PNMWG]. Not that I am against sharing information in general, but I see that there are a lot of threats out there from a few companies that are really, really just causing problems.

This sentiment was echoed by two others who remarked similarly:

I would say [I am less willing to share information than I was a year ago] probably because the market is becoming more competitive and...it's not above other [PNMWG participants] to try to go after customers that you've developed over the years.

Hence, while general information is shared in PNMWG, some information is purposely not shared when participants perceive the risk is too high or information is proprietary in nature. The above comments suggest that in PNMWG, information is considered proprietary when the representative or owner of a company perceives the risks of sharing information to compromise its ability to maintain a competitive edge and succeed in the marketplace.

Yet we learned from respondents that much of the information shared in PNMWG does not compromise a company's ability to succeed in the market; rather, it helps companies succeed. One respondent said despite his initial skepticism, the value of PNMWG has become clear to him. According to this respondent, PNMWG creates and conveys new research-based information that is useful to all niche pork producers.

I [was] pretty skeptical [in the beginning]. It was hard for me to pick up the vision and potential value of [PNMWG], but I have to tell you that I've seen a lot of good come out of this thing—not just the networking, but the actual grant projects that have generated new knowledge in some cases or translated knowledge into work that producers could use.

Thus, the creation of new knowledge in and of itself is not important. The ability of PNMWG to apply that knowledge makes the group important to farmers and the niche pork industry. The ability of PNMWG to apply research to on-farm conditions helps participants work through the challenges of their day-to-day operations. "*[PNMWG] has given me more knowledge about the industry and that knowledge, of course, helps our horizons become broader and [helps us] make better decisions and more informed decisions.*"

Helping Producers Find Their Niche

Besides helping producers make better decisions, how else is information generated by or shared within PNMWG benefiting niche pork entrepreneurs? Many of the entrepreneur respondents said they are gaining a greater understanding of the bigger niche pork industry picture, which helps them find their niche.

[Niche pork enterprises] have gotten information [from PNMWG] that they didn't have before that is helping them understand the industry that they are a part of, as well as understand their company's potential within the industry. We now know more names of players and more businesses and organizations than we would have otherwise, and that is an ever-changing list. [PNMWG] makes it easier to keep up with [that list].

The working group is helping participating businesses more effectively and efficiently keep tabs on an ever-changing industry, which is critical to understanding and maintaining their place in the market. "*[In PNMWG meetings], we see other people who are successful one way or another, and it helps us sharpen our focus and also helps us see that we don't all have to be alike.*" Another echoed this notion: "*We are able to better see the playing field to position ourselves and what our role needs to be to find our space in this niche.*" PNMWG provides a vantage point from which participants are able to see the entire spectrum and jockey for position in a dignified and careful manner, which enables participating producers and entrepreneurs to develop a sense of shared identity and cooperate with each other in what can be a cutthroat environment. "*We are friends and we don't see each other as competitors because we have a slightly different niche.*"

Building a Sense of Shared Identity

The notion that PNMWG is helping participants build a sense of shared identity together is significant and necessary for enabling cooperation to take place. One phenomenon that is helping the group create a common identity is the process of distinguishing what they are doing from what others (particularly commodity groups) are doing. "*Our real competition [is]...the big agri-industry like the Smithfields and...the Cargills [who] are trying to look like us but they are not really us.*" While there still remains a sense of competition as evidenced by earlier comments about (un)willingness to share information, that sense of competition is tempered to some degree

by a growing realization that in order for one niche pork business to succeed, they must all succeed. *"We are all on the same team but we are just doing different things."* In order for everyone to succeed in the industry, there is a need to learn from each other and share solutions. *"...All of a sudden everybody else is talking about some of their problems and I realized that some of our problems were the same [as their problems]."* Cautious sharing in PNMWG has created a relatively cohesive, yet strongly autonomous unit that has put technical assistance providers in the position of providing real support to more than just a narrow range of livestock producers.

What has happened with PNMWG [is] that we now have this NRI [National Research Initiative funded] project. It didn't come from [the] Leopold [Center]. It didn't come from ISU. It didn't come from the Wallace [Center at Winrock International] folks or whoever is involved as advisors to PNMWG. It came from PNMWG because PNMWG said, 'We need help with these small family farmers in trying to raise pigs without antibiotics.'

The way in which this has actually happened was the subject of reflection from one respondent who aptly observed that the creation of stronger relationships leads to deeper understanding of the issues and therefore a deeper respect for people who are struggling to confront those issues.

A lot of these folks [in PNMWG], if you were going to profile them down to the psychological level, you would probably discover that...they tend to be folks that like the idea of being...a little different. [They say,] 'The heck with you big pork guys. I can do this.' That only takes you so far because you can't walk around with a chip on your shoulder trying to shove your thumb in everybody's eye. Once you come together and you start to talk on more of a business level or you look across the room and you see [successful niche pork company representatives]...it changes you a little bit. You stop that chip-on-the-shoulder thing and you start to associate yourself [with them] and your identity comes along. Some of the values that some of the 'nichers' who come into the project with tend to become constraints at some point in time...such as, the value of being a small, independent operation. The way the business world tends to work out there is that if you have some success, you will tend to grow and that tends to [conflict with] your original value concept [of being small]. You need to grow in order to make it all work and not get aced out by the competition... If you associate yourself with others [like yourself], you'll start to recognize that in them. Then there is just a natural association with success there that I think is important. The ones that are showing up are having some success. PNMWG has created a sort of loose association that allows for that growth and maturation.

Such growth and maturation contributes to a deeper collective understanding about the realities of the niche pork industry and how people at the table might cooperate to further all of their work, rather than the work of one individual or company. PNMWG has helped make that possible.

Changing Attitudes about Competition

The interviews reveal that PNMWG is changing attitudes about competition among many niche pork producers and businesses. One respondent articulated what he believes everyone knows to be true in the group: There is no way independent producers will get to where they need to go unless they work together. *"[You] step back and realize where you are at and where you want to go. Don't believe that you are going to do it all by yourself because most of us haven't done anything all by ourselves. There is always somebody else out there that has helped you, whether*

you acknowledge it or not." As another respondent commented, "I think [niche pork companies] are probably more ready to explore other ways that they might be working with other people and groups and businesses. I think there is more openness to the idea of collaboration [as a result of PNMWG]." This point was confirmed when a producer participant said in another interview, "We [another company and I] have talked about cooperating in other ways, even about cross selling. There may be times when our salesmen run across people who want [breed-specific] pork [that we don't produce]. We can let them know that we don't sell that but we know where you can get it." The not-so-simple act of exploring the possibilities means it enters the collective consciousness of the group and then "what happens is you begin to see how other people build relationships or alliances [in PNMWG] and it might prompt us to find ways to do that with other vendors or suppliers." These are all significant changes in attitudes that respondents credited to PNMWG because they see successful collaborations in action in a living laboratory. Here, they learn collaboration can and does work, despite all indications of why it shouldn't work.

Trust building takes time and is not without challenges, especially among company owners or representatives who are reluctant to invest in relationships because they believe other niche pork companies rather than commodity pork interests are their competition or alternatively, feel other niche pork companies aren't doing things right and are making it more difficult for everyone. On some level, PNMWG has removed some of the barriers by creating an atmosphere that doesn't force relationships, yet strengthens them over time. This leads to changing attitudes about "the competition," for as market "competitors" begin to understand and respect each other more, they also begin to create a shared identity. In the process, they begin to rethink the concept of "competition" by gaining a greater understanding of "the competition", then by shifting who they think the competition might be, and finally, by reexamining impressions about who is working against them by learning who is actually working for them (whether it happens to be other companies or perhaps Cooperative Extension or non profits). Only through a deeper understanding of each other do they begin to see more clearly opportunities to collaborate that will be mutually beneficial, thereby indicating a milestone shift in the way participants think. PNMWG is therefore stimulating new ways of thinking about best business practices by demonstrating successful collaborative working group projects and collaborative business arrangements. *"For instance, [Jim] and [his company] have quite an extensive organization that he put together with the producers of [breed specific] pork. We don't have that type of thing but it helps us to see how different people put those relationships together to begin to think how we might to that legitimately."*

Kindling Collaboration

"It's about relationships, and it's just good together with these other people and talk. You just never know how one thing might lead to another, and sometimes you are surprised at what can happen."

Changing attitudes about what is possible is one step, changing behaviors is another. Yet evidence from the interviews shows that PNMWG is indeed changing behaviors by kindling collaboration. When PNMWG participants were asked whether they had initiated or participated in any new collaborations or projects as a result of PNMWG participation (Figure 4), nearly

three in four (73.7%) said they had. Collaborations emerged mostly within the working group while 37% of respondents said they had engaged in new collaborations with non working group participants. Of the seven respondents who initiated or participated in new collaborations with non working group participants, at least two were partnering with ISU faculty and product buyers.

Among the 73.7% who did engage in new collaborations, nearly half (42.9%) indicated they were able to leverage funding as a result of the collaboration. Respondents recalled leveraging a total of \$900,712 from various sources, including the USDA, the Leopold Center, the Iowa Pork Producers Association, the Iowa Attorney General's office, the National Pork Board, Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, private industry, lenders, and respondents' own businesses. This figure is reasonably accurate when compared to figures compiled by the PNMWG facilitator, who reports the group has leveraged \$1.2 million for PNMWG sponsored projects.

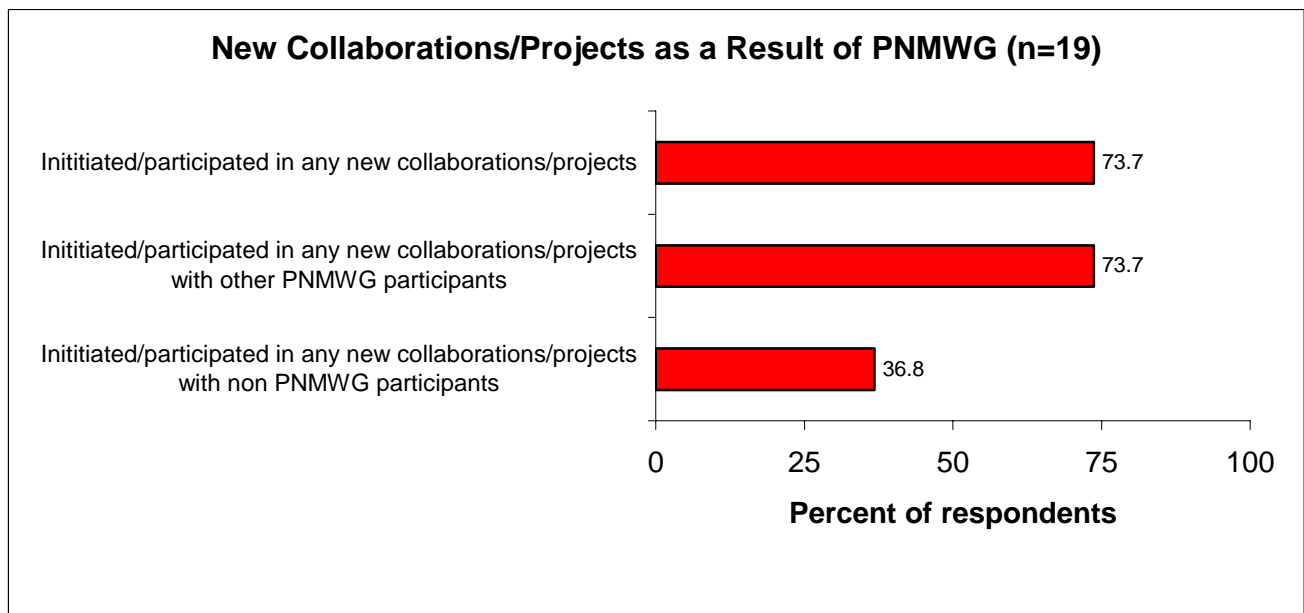


Figure 4: Percent of Respondents Participating in New Collaborations as a Result of PNMWG Participation

Collaboration has been kindled by building trust between market competitors, one of the most significant achievements of PNMWG. The following story makes this point.

I've known [Jim] for some time but I maybe got best acquainted with him at the PNMWG meetings. Then we said, 'We need to visit. How can we help each other?' We talked about this concept of not being competitors so much as being cooperators. So, he said, 'Yes, we need to do that,' and he put his person in charge of transportation in contact with the person who was doing ours. [Jim] slaughters at the same place we do... We have a cold storage unit right close to the packing plant, so stuff just goes over there and then on to our trucks. We have one truck dedicated to go to the west coast almost every week. So, instead of him sending his product on a LTL [less than load] carrier, he sends it on ours at some saving to him and it helps fill our truck. When [Jim] first suggested [this freight arrangement] to his person in charge of transportation, that person's first reaction was, 'Well, they are going to steal our customers from us.' [Jim] said, 'No,

they won't,' and we have had times when customers would say to us, 'I think that we will just buy from you instead of from [Jim].' Well, we have enough trust that we say, 'We really would rather that you didn't. They are our friends.' So, we have built a trust relationship [and] that is growing.

This account was corroborated in a separate interview with "Jim" who said,

[My transportation employee] questioned my wisdom from the fact that [Jerry's company] might be trying to steal markets away from us. I told him that we are all in this together, and that we can help [Jerry's company] because they didn't have a full truck load and that can help us lower our costs. The fact that [Jerry] had the same idea that we did made for a good relationship.

That two "competing" producers had enough trust to cooperate for mutual benefit is significant, especially when they tell stories about the occasional opportunity they have to "steal" markets from each other because not only do they know who their 'competitor's' buyers are but they also have easy access to them in a shared arrangement like this one.

And while one of the greatest achievements of PNMWG is the trust the group is building among participants, building trust is also one of the group's greatest challenges. One respondent related a story that best illustrates this point:

[Tom] was a little wary of me, when we first met. I fended off [a moment of tension] and then went on with it. Instead of becoming angry from it, I continued to learn and build more respect for [Tom because] what [he is] doing is tremendous. At the beginning of the PNMWG meetings, he was always there and then all of a sudden he started saying good things about me. I think that it is building relationships.

PNMWG participants are making the connection between relationships and greater levels of trust. Difficulties notwithstanding, *"When you build relationships, you do build some trust. It's not like there are a lot of secrets, and the more information we share, we find out that it is a big country and there is room for all of us."*

Reducing Operating Costs through Increased Cooperation

One outcome of increased cooperation for the niche pork companies sharing the freight truck is a reduction in operating costs through increased cooperation. *"I would guess that with the increase of sales that are going on this year, it will make a \$20,000 different in fiscal year 2007. And it's part of just working together."*

Increasing Access to New Markets

New relationships developed as a result of PNMWG also increase access to new markets, especially those abroad. *"We have lots of chefs now that buy our stuff and a couple of distribution companies. We are selling to a Japanese distribution company, so we are exporting to Japan."* Another respondent was exploring new markets both in Europe and globally as a result of PNMWG.

I met a farmer in Denmark and we were really impressed with how he was producing his pigs and some of the methods he was using. I got a really good relationship going because of this PNMWG trip...otherwise I would never have met this guy. And since then we formed a kind of partnership and he is helping me to market my pork in Europe and I am helping him. We are teaming up to [enter] global markets for organic pork.

Increasing Sales

New relationships developed as a result of PNMWG are helping niche pork companies enter new markets, leading to increased sales. One respondent summed it up like this: *"PNMWG is certainly a very important part of [our business success]. It's a part, not a whole, in terms of developing new contacts, new customers, and new sales opportunities."* A respondent from the private sector provided a concrete example of this generalization.

We sent out 50 [carcasses] to...Berkley, California. That was not a [direct] result of PNMWG other than the fact that it was a result of ...I know you, you know somebody else who knows [someone in California]. As a result of this kind of coalition building and working relationships, some of that happened because of PNMWG.

An important point to note here though, is that increased sales do not necessarily mean increased profits. Niche pork businesses, with the help of the recordkeeping activities of a PNMWG-supported and NRI-funded project, are beginning to learn just how profitable they are (or are not). Some may be assessing their financial performance on their own.

Right now, we can't supply enough pigs for the market from our own production. We have about 1,800 sows and are producing 500-600 pigs a week, but that is not quite enough for our market at this point. We are not interested in growing a lot from that right now because we want to make sure that we are profitable from this before we [decide to grow].

PNMWG is therefore helping producers understand that increased access to markets, customers and sales does not necessarily translate into greater profitability. A variety of other factors, including an awareness of one's own operation as well as good management decisions, are also important to the viability of niche pork businesses.

Increasing Production

According to the interviews, PNMWG is also helping niche pork farmers increase production, again, not to be confused with increasing profits.

[My business has] changed 100% since we [took part in a PNMWG project]—we changed everything in production. [We use] special farrowing huts that are year-round, tools, fencing—all based on the outdoor European model. We've doubled the pigs per sow per year.

Improving the Financial Stability of Operations

PNMWG is improving the financial stability of niche pork operations. The PNMWG-managed NRI study documenting costs of production has been particularly helpful in this regard.

I think that there are quite a few producers out there who had no idea if they were making money or not because they didn't have a handle on what it was costing them to produce. Likewise, it was difficult to establish a price that was going to be necessary to develop and maintain a sustainable industry because you are going to have to have a price that pays at least costs of production for a sustainable industry, and people didn't know what it was costing them.

The NRI study helps producers learn what their actual costs of production are. As a result, producers are adopting management practices that are saving them money. Cost of production information is also helping them better price their products so they can stay in business and be profitable. As a result, one niche pork entrepreneur *"went to our customers and said, 'You are going to have to pay more money. If you don't pay more money, my producers will not raise hogs anymore.'"* This and other kinds of information help participants *"more effectively market product we already had [and] made us more secure financially and more viable."* One non farming respondent summed it up like this:

The farmers are supposed to be for profits but in the organic pork [arena], it's more idealistic than money making. We don't want to have a bunch of small family farmers raising pigs and selling them for 55 cents [a pound] when their production cost is 60 cents.

The point is that idealistic farmers can only last for so long when they are subsidizing the operation themselves. If they are unable to sustain their operations, their ideals won't do anyone any good.

Improving Business Skills and Competencies

Respondents report that participation in PNMWG is improving basic business skills and competencies in the areas of communication and marketing. This impacts work not only within the group, but beyond. *"I've gotten more skill sets that I didn't have before as a result [of participating in PNMWG]. I have a better grasp of the industry, increased strategic skills, speak from different angles, and better communication [skills]."* Respondents linked improved business competencies with greater success of their enterprise. *"PNMWG ... has allowed us to more effectively market products and be in markets that we would not have been able to access otherwise."* All of these benefits gained as a result of PNMWG participation feed into each other in a continuous feedback loop that helps niche pork enterprises become more competitive. Increased business skills help producers more effectively market their products. This, in combination with new professional relationships, helps them access new markets and increase sales. Then, when a project like NRI comes along that helps them understand their costs of production, they are able to make better management decisions that improve their bottom line. By themselves, none of these positive gains have much of an impact on participating enterprises; together, however, they do.

Providing a Support Network

In addition to building business skills, PNMWG also importantly provides a support network that links farmers to resources and helps them feel more connected to things beyond the farm. These are often overlooked but essential elements in keeping farmers engaged in agricultural activities, which directly impacts public access to supply chains that offer alternatives to the conventional.

When you are a producer out there, and I've been there, you've got your nose to the grindstone and some days you feel like you are the only one. Nobody knows and nobody cares. [PNMWG offers me] an awareness of folks [working on niche pork issues] and puts a name with a face and a phone number—that is a first step.

On the same token, support providers are inspired when they are able to connect with farmers.

The energy [I get] comes when you have a sense of movement forward...that you are actually making progress that is significant and important to addressing some of these challenges that have been identified by the group. The collaboration [of the group] really shows me that I like what I'm doing and that I can help some of these producers and companies be successful.

When respondents were asked to quantify on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree the extent to which they agreed that participation in PNMWG energizes and impassions them to continue and accomplish their niche pork systems work, they provided a mean score of 5.53 (n=19; SD=1.124).

Harnessing Differential Skills to Improve the Industry

An organic phenomenon that seems to consistently emerge from application of the CoP model in agricultural endeavors is a recognition and appreciation for differential skills and knowledge of group participants. Farmers and entrepreneurs participating in PNMWG are recognizing these skills and harnessing them to improve the niche pork industry. This is most certainly tied to the deeper understanding that evolves as a result of stronger relationships.

You have a larger portfolio of expertise out there to draw from when you need some support on something. The way it changes your work is that there are a larger number of connections that you can draw on when you need something on a specific topic. [It] opens up a larger universe of people with skills, and you are constantly looking at ways to figure out how to find places within what needs to be done so these people can help.

While the producers become better connected to support providers off the farm through CoP participation, support providers off the farm get a chance to better serve their clients and ground their work in the field. Both parties benefit.

Creating More Efficient Operations

Most of the previously discussed factors, when combined, imply that PNMWG is helping farmers create more efficient operations. Sharing information about practical business experience

is instrumental in the process, as is research-based information collected as part of PNMWG supported activities.

This may sound a little strange but when I saw the records that PNMWG was helping to develop for the pasture-raised pigs, it helped me understand how much more efficient we could be if we didn't do that and why we could be more efficient. It helped focus our thinking about what was the right or wrong thing to do for us—not necessarily for everybody, but for us.

A respondent from Extension reports similar efficiency gains as a result of PNMWG.

I've been out on a lot of the farms with the NRI grant. I bring the laptop computer and we do the records there but we also do walk-throughs of the facilities and we talk about ventilation and all kinds of management technology things while I'm there on there farm. Do they make changes right then while you are there? Yes. [And] out of the 10 [producers I worked with], I have four to five pretty good studies where we are seeing tens of thousands of dollars difference in operation and competitiveness.

Information gleaned from research projects and shared experiences helps farmers become more efficient, but so too do farmer-led collaborations. As Jerry, the farmer who shares his less-than-load truck space to transport a "competitor's" product to market, remarked, "[Jim] pays us to do that, so it makes our trucking more efficient." And that means both companies save.

Poising Producers to Access Capital

Greater business skills, more efficient operations, and access to scientifically based production research and market data better position niche pork entrepreneurs to approach lenders. PNMWG is putting producers in a better position to capitalize their operations by providing lenders credible information they can trust and use.

I think [PNMWG] has helped to expand the niche pork industry because...[before, niche] producers did not have records as to what the farming enterprise was going to look like, versus a lender [who] would be very familiar with...a hog confinement [operation]. It helps give some validity to the production aspects.

Indeed, another niche pork entrepreneur credited work coming out of PNMWG for helping him secure bank financing for his business. Besides producing reliable market and production information, PNMWG has the potential to influence lenders through more informal channels of communication. One participant interviewed was a former director of a bank who had conversations with agricultural loan officers so they could better understand niche pork systems. "I may have visited with the ag loan officer about some things, but it would probably be a stretch to say that that has changed anything. [However], it may be that we have influenced some thinking along those lines."

Improving Decision Making

Finally, although this point has been alluded to already, PNMWG is improving the viability of niche pork operations by enabling farmers and entrepreneurs to make better decisions that sustain more viable businesses.

In some ways I think that we have a lot smarter farmers out there...in terms of their understanding of their specific place within the whole value chain [and] in terms of the production side. I think we have smarter farmers, more skilled farmers. I [also] think we have better decision making on their part. Hopefully that will translate into viable and durable farms [that] will be around longer.

Benefits for Communities, Producers, and Farm-Related Business Owners

The impact of PNMWG extends well beyond the reach of participating niche pork producers and entrepreneurs. According to respondents, PNMWG is also creating benefits for participating organizations and institutions, communities, and the general public.

Creating New Knowledge and Information

PNMWG is creating new knowledge, information, and materials about niche pork production systems and marketing available to the public. As PNMWG-initiated and -led reports are completed, they are posted online for public access at <http://www.valuechains.org/pnmwg/>. These reports become the basis for Extension training programs. An Extension participant said, *"We wouldn't be doing the NRI [cost of production] study [if it weren't in PNMWG] and all of the followup and educational meetings for that."*

Creating Job Opportunities

PNMWG is helping create job opportunities in three ways:

- 1) By linking market data with entrepreneurs, giving rise to at least one new enterprise which helps producers access new markets.

Actually [my business] came out of a project that I did for PNMWG within the past year. I was doing some consulting and through this project we identified a need [for pork brokering services between producers and buyers] and thus formed the business to meet those needs. [My company provides] great sales opportunities for niche pork companies so they can increase their revenues. [PNMWG has] been extremely helpful obviously because of the business...

- 2) By connecting niche pork businesses with students to work on specific projects, who then later go on to become employees of those businesses.

I brought up the idea that [PNMWG] needed to study transportation logistics, and we ended up using a grad student at Iowa State. He did a good job, and he met [a niche pork entrepreneur at the PNWMG meetings] and he's now been working for [the entrepreneur] for the last two to three years.

- 3) By helping niche pork businesses grow, thereby creating employment opportunities for communities in general.

I talked to another consultant who is [finding markets for niche pork products], some product is being moved, and there are three different companies that are involved right now in what he is doing. When I asked if he needed any help, he said he just needs to hire another person because there is not enough time to do all of the work that is necessary.

Increasing the Credibility of Niche Pork Work

PNMWG is increasing the credibility of niche pork work among ISU administrators and faculty, Extension, the veterinary community, pork industry leaders, and the public. Respondents cite the following as evidence of growing credibility among these groups.

- **PNMWG is changing attitudes within Iowa State University, ISU Extension, and the veterinary community.** When we asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree the extent to which they agreed that PNMWG has changed attitudes of people beyond the working group to be more accepting of niche pork work, respondents responded positively, with a mean of 5.35 (n=17; SD=1.057). Short of interviewing people from ISU, ISUE, and the veterinary community, this is the best evidence we have. However, one respondent cited his own source of support for the claim that credibility for niche pork work is growing within ISU circles as a result of the success of PNMWG.

We administered a survey before our Research Alliance for Farrowing project and again after the project, where we asked vets how viable they thought alternative swine farming systems were. Before the project, on a scale of 0 to 5 where 5 is highly viable, they gave us a 2.2. Then we asked them at the end of the project and we got a 3.9. And the few from that group of 236 vets who had a greater part of their practice with alternative systems gave it a higher viability rating as you might expect. So I think things are shifting. I don't know that we can take all of the credit but we have particularly targeted the vet community and tried to build more engagement between alternative swine producers and the vet community. They really need each other—independent vets and independent producers—and we need to break through some of these attitudes. We are trying to strengthen that relationship and we see that producers are really going to benefit from having a long-term relationship with a vet. That one statistic tells us that vets are more open now than they were three to four years ago.

Another respondent noted with some pride in his voice, *"The veterinary community would have just laughed at us in terms of being able to raise pigs. But over time, ISU started to listen. They didn't listen before but believe me, they are listening now."*

Respondents also report that growing credibility within ISU circles is also a contributing factor to the success of PNWMG. Extension employees report they now get an unofficial

nod to do work in this area because the presence of PNMWG demonstrates a public need for such work.

It's not that we [Extension] never wanted anything to do with [niche pork]. It's that we didn't really have a good way to do that in a manner in which the public could benefit or the niche pork arena could benefit. If we worked with one person, that wouldn't necessarily help anybody else with their specific need. So by being affiliated with a larger organization like the Pork Niche Market Working Group, we've gotten some other Extension field specialists to be involved with it as well.

Several respondents acknowledged that having a formally organized group comprised of diverse and unlikely interests has been pivotal in building and maintaining credibility.

Individually, if I had gone to the veterinary community at Iowa State and said, 'I want to raise pigs without antibiotics, can you help me?' ISU would have laughed at me and you can quote me on that. They would have said, 'Oh, you are going to have all of these bio security [problems but] yes, we can build [you] an isolated farm on top of some mountain someplace.'

- **Commodity pork industry leaders are at the table and are increasingly recognizing the importance of alternative markets.**

I think that we [a commodity pork interest group] are probably more accepting [of niche production] especially on some of the press you are getting...just the knowledge that something is really happening with niche markets.

In return, niche pork producers appreciate the presence of commodity pork industry leaders at PNMWG meetings and the recognition they have received from those leaders.

It's been nice to work with those guys and I think that it is win-win. They have a tremendous amount of resources that are mostly geared for commodity herds and when they find out that there are still small owners and operators who are looking for information and need a little bit of help, it helps everybody.

- **New opportunities are emerging to speak in forums traditionally reserved for commodity pork.** *"We were invited to give a seminar down at the Iowa Pork Congress, which would be a wider group [than niche pork]. [That is] an example of more mainstream acceptance of niche marketing."*
- **Federal agricultural funders are referring applicants to PNMWG to vet proposed ideas.**

[My federal agency] might get a proposal from some company and then the [grant administrators] would say, 'Hey, you guys really need to get this company involved in PNMWG. We might be more willing to fund it, if [you] were.' I think that [our agency] would like to see [producers] plugged in more. I'm not saying that [we] won't fund them unless they go to PNMWG but [we] are using PNMWG as a referral source.

- **PNMWG is making connections between growing consumer demand and increased respect for niche pork products within the industry.**

Five years ago, niche pork production was in some regards looked as sort of a step back in time like 30 years ago. Now, it is clearly looked at as an alternative and that it takes very intense management to be successful at it.

One producer noted that increased respect for niche markets is tied to growing credibility within the pork industry but also growing consumer demand. The two are inextricably linked.

[PNMWG] has given niche groups some viability and legitimacy [when] we realize that there are several people doing it and doing it successfully and that there is a market for those niches, and that people do have legitimate concerns about their food source.

Using Credibility to Leverage New Sources of Support

PNMWG is capitalizing on its increased credibility to help the niche pork industry leverage new sources of support. Increased credibility enables PNMWG to:

- **Conduct new research that is benefiting the niche pork industry.** The breadth of partners in PNMWG means PNMWG is able to set a research agenda based on niche pork industry needs, find funding to support that agenda, assemble the partners necessary to conduct the research, and use results to advance the industry.

A fair amount of the research that I have done that is niche pork related has resulted in discussions within PNMWG...as to what are some of the things that are needed by niche pork producers.

[PNMWG] creates an understanding in an area of niche markets. For example, pork quality is an issue and I am now working with a group on measuring pork quality on the live animal...which probably would not have come about had I not worked in niche market PNMWG types of things.

PNMWG has also influenced research done through ISU, which now supporting the niche pork industry. *"I think the group as a whole, all of the information that it was pulling together, and the focal points that it was creating helped Iowa State itself identify some research priorities."*

- **Better coordinate niche pork work.**

PNMWG is just a platform by which we can get the groups together to do things that are across organizational collaborations. So in and of itself, it doesn't do the work but it allows for the groups that are involved to do the work.

- **Gain support from new sources.**

Being supportive of the PNMWG is one of the goals of the Value Added Niche Marketing committee here at the Iowa Pork Producers Association. ...It is definitely a goal of the committee to be supportive of the organization.

- **Create resources that enable the veterinary community to provide better support to niche pork producers.** As a result of PNMWG, veterinarians better understand the conditions associated with antibiotic free livestock production, which is one branch among many within the niche pork industry.

[PNMWG is] having an impact on the vets as far what types of production strategies seem to be working. I've been at some of the meetings where the vets have been there, practicing vets who work with producers, and they are definitely asking questions.

The publication, *Managing for Herd Health in Alternative Swine Systems: A Guide*, is one example of a resource PNMWG has helped generate that is helping vets better support niche pork producers.

- **Provide opportunities for niche pork producers to connect with institutional buyers.** *"As a result of my involvement in PNMWG, I was invited to Iowa State University and ... the University of Iowa because people [are] getting on the bandwagon, wanting to supply students with this "natural" pork, etc."*
- **Change who Extension is serving as well as the content they offer new clients.** Extension is taking a lead role in not only creating educational materials, but also using those materials in Extension programming. They are also using curriculum material originally designed for commodity production and adapting it for niche producers.

I [co]wrote a niche swine management guide handbook that I wouldn't have done if I weren't involved with PNMWG... We take some of the information that we are getting back from PNMWG, especially the NRI grant part of it [that shows] we are weaning at a pretty low average and that pre-weaning mortality and farrowing management [is] an issue. So we...brought in the University of Nebraska who wrote the original curriculum for [commodity] producers. We partnered a year ago last fall together and rewrote a curriculum so that it fit pen-farrowing niche producers. We hosted two sessions...and had 37 producers [participate].

- **Foster better impressions of Extension among niche pork producers.**

Traditionally, the niche producers put Extension in with the Pork Board—you are only helping big producers and commodity people. I think that has changed a little. It might not be Extension Service as a whole that is yet accepted but parts of it [are] now.

Building Capacity of Participating Organizations

Another finding generated from the evaluation interviews is that PNMWG is building the capacity of participating organizations to do niche pork work. Respondents identified several features of the work that make this possible. In addition to increased credibility which has helped participating organizations leverage new resources, the way in which meetings and relationships are facilitated is also key. According to one respondent, the facilitator is *"good at selling the good attributes instead of saying, 'Everybody else's pork is bad and you are going to die if you eat it. Your drinking water is all polluted because of pork.'"* Emphasizing

the positive is therefore seen as fundamental for generating interest and effectively engaging partners.

What does increased organizational capacity look like in practice for participating organizations, institutions, and agencies? Greater organizational capacity is created when

- **Participants from organizations, institutions, and agencies have access to a broader spectrum of people with different backgrounds and perspectives within the niche pork industry.**

It is great to go to these meetings simply because we have such a variety of folks there. We have producers and those groups are all unique, led by unique individuals who are doing entrepreneurial things. It's very good for me to rub shoulders with them and to know where they are at and what their problems and challenges might be and what their observations on the market might be. In the same way, there usually are representatives there from the National Pork [Board], state level pork producers, and a number of other Extension folks that I don't rub shoulders with all of the time.

- **Relationships within organizations are improved.**

Oddly enough, we are in a fairly large organization here so we don't necessarily network as well as we could. This really gives me a moment to focus on that area with a number of people [from my own organization].

- **Participants deconstruct organizational boundaries.** "[Paul] and I feel it is a whole lot easier for us to talk to each other than it was at one time [when we were just representing] Extension and...PFI."

- **PNMWG participants are offered new leadership opportunities and new spheres of influence.** One Extension respondent said, "I'm on the steering committee for the NRI grant and on the [Iowa] Pork [Industry] Center Advisory Board. I'm on a plan of work committee, so I suppose in those ways I have been an influence."

- **Relationships are strengthened between non-profits and private enterprise.**

[There is] more acceptance [among niche pork businesses] of the role of non-profits and the university supporting niche producers." "[A representative] from the Iowa Pork Producers has been coming [to PNMWG meetings] this past year. They have a niche marketing group and a pork producers association so we [Extension] are working closer with them."
"[PNMWG participants] have a better understanding of what [our non-profit] is doing and I think their comfort level with sustainable agriculture is higher. Their sort of acceptance and acknowledgment of its legitimacy is higher than it has been before PNMWG. I think that it is because of PNMWG's performance.

- **The leadership baton is shared with more non-profits, which engages them in the work on a completely different level.**

It just made more sense for [one non profit] to be the fiscal agent [of a grant] rather than [our non profit]. I think we could build more bridges that way. It meant controlling less money. It also meant our having less responsibility, but there were some reasons for doing it that made a lot of sense.

- **Organizations change the way they do their work to become more effective.**

We are more intentionally trying to focus some of our way of doing work on bringing groups of people together who share common challenges and enterprises to help that group work towards doing something that would help them all. In some ways, it's like we are trying to figure out how to... make it something that is more a feature of our work.

- **Commodity groups invest resources in niche pork work.**

At the National Pork Board...they have a committee...that is all about niche pork topics...I'm finding that that group is...feeling empowered within that organization to do good work and to keep focused on issues that are important. That organization tended to be very much focused on commodities but now they have a strong team within their organization that is very motivated to work on [niche pork] topics.

- **Participating organizations provide better support to the niche pork industry as the result of a better understanding of the niche pork industry and farmers.**

[PNMWG participation] has given us a better handle on what type of issues that producers that are raising niche pork are facing, and it gives us a better handle on what types of materials and educational things producers will need. A lot of the meetings that Extension and us have supported or funded are ideas that came as a result of the PNMWG meetings.

Besides Extension, this is true for non profits as well.

With Field Days, we have farmers sharing what they've done that works and what doesn't work with other farmers. We use those Field Days as a way to raise the issues that we are encountering and we pass on what we think does work. The farmers tell us in their feedback that Field Days is one of their favorite ways of learning. It really allows them to go in and evaluate an operation in the context of the operator and ask questions on the ground. That would just be one way in which I think that we have helped the niche farmers through what [our organization] does.

- **Participating organizations reach out to others beyond the working group to educate them on ways they can better support the niche pork industry. "I did a seminar for [a feed company] on how niche people think... Without PNMWG [that] kind of thing probably would not have taken place."**

Building Capacity of PNMWG to Do Niche Pork Work

PNMWG is not only supporting organizational capacity building among member organizations, but is also building its own capacity to carry on niche pork work, thereby indicating it is functioning as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. PNMWG has emerged as a "whole" by leveraging both internal and external assets to further the work the group is doing. In terms of internal assets, PNMWG has developed a better understanding of the human resources within the group and has harnessed those skills to work on specific projects that benefit everyone. PNMWG has also managed to expand the scope of participating ISU faculty and Extension staff to include niche pork work in their work plans. *"[PNMWG participation] has broadened [my job responsibilities]. I haven't redirected everything into niche; I've just picked up niche and kept*

the others." Related to expanding the scope of work, PNMWG is also increasing the amount of time ISU faculty, Extension staff and non profit organizations spend on niche pork work: *"My position works at a higher percentage on niche pigs than I did before, for sure. I probably did 15% before [PNMWG] and it is probably close to 50% now."* PNMWG is also mobilizing financial investments from internal collaborators to support its activities. *"The Iowa Pork Producers Association [provided] \$4,500 for the niche pork newsletter that we have been doing."* Another respondent reported, *"[Our organization has] not only contributed by participating in it. We have [also] put in over \$100,000 of our own money over the last six years. It's clear that [this money has helped PNMWG] leverage over \$1 million."*

As the previous quote shows, PNMWG has also effectively leveraged external sources of support for its work, which supports its capacity to continue work on niche pork issues. PNMWG is doing this by bringing new people with new knowledge into PNMWG activities. *"Some of the project work that is part of what we've done through PNMWG has brought other sources of expertise to those projects where these people are not member of the working group."* PNMWG is also effectively marketing the diversity of representation and support within the PNMWG group as capital worthy of investment.

The Research Alliance for Farrowing project wouldn't have happened without PNMWG. It wouldn't have [been] funded without PNMWG because we were able to cite as supporters the National Pork Board, the Iowa Pork Producers Association, Organic Valley, Niman Ranch—the whole spectrum—and that had to have had an impact on the people who were reviewing the proposal in the first place. The relationships I was able to cultivate [through PNMWG] in the last year were...foundational regarding our work with pigs.

Stirring the Policy Pot

Respondents were specifically asked during each interview the extent to which policies were changing within their organization and the extent to which public policy was changing in the state of Iowa as either a direct or indirect result of PNMWG. Previous discussions show that while organizational policies have not changed, customs and practices are changing (recall the comment about *"bringing groups of people together who share common challenges and enterprises to help that group work towards doing something that would help them all"*). And while respondents did not claim any public policies had changed as a result of PNMWG, they did say they were working hard at stirring the policy pot.

I have had some discussions with Tom Harkin about the new farm bill. And my ideas for that kind of came from some of the PNMWG stuff. It's about the language in the new farm bill for organic farmers and some of the things they are talking about.

Another believed the conversations he had with elected officials was having an influence in the way they viewed and treated agriculture at the state level. This respondent animatedly recounted a story about his interaction with the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture.

I picked up the phone and I called Bill Northey...and talked to his secretary. I said, '[My company is having] an annual meeting...of all our producers and I just wondered whether Bill cared whether or not we existed or if he wanted to come out and see us.' E-mails went back and forth and he said, 'Mr. Northey cares very much about small family farmers.' I said, 'Well, we'll find

out.' And he showed up at our meeting. A lot of people say they are coming but they don't show up—you know, big shot dignitaries. The point that I was trying to [make] was: Are you serving ALL of agriculture or just part of it? The only thing I ever heard about was corn and soybeans before the election. All of a sudden the word 'livestock' showed up and since then [I've heard terms like] smaller family farms and independently-owned.... I think that obviously we have had an impact with political people. I think that as a result of myself and other PNMWG members, we have had an impact in terms of making Mr. Northey think that maybe agriculture isn't all corn and soybeans and corporate hog farming.

Changing language may be the first step in changing public perceptions, culture, and ultimately processes of governance.

RFSWG RESULTS

[RFSWG] is a place where people are coming together, sharing ideas, talking to each other, and making connections. Better projects, better activities, and better coordination [are] happening as a result.

Interviews with 20 long-time participants of RFSWG suggest that the capacity of RFSWG to positively impact Iowa producers and communities rests solidly on its ability to 1) cultivate strong, productive relationships, 2) leverage public interest and support for regional food systems work and 3) leverage credibility to change the customs and practices of organizations, institutions, and government agencies. Impacts themselves, these changes occur simultaneously as a feedback loop, gaining momentum and building in size. The interview data suggest that nurturing strong, productive relationships is a precursor to increased public support and is necessary for recruiting new partners and mobilizing related resources. As public support grows along with the recognition that regional food systems can bring opportunities to communities, new partners get the nod from administrators, constituents, board members, and others to join the effort and change the way things are traditionally done. When new partners get involved, they bring in new resources, generating even more public interest and attention and attracting new partners and resources, hailing perhaps subtle but more widespread change. Together, these factors create a snowball effect that is beginning to alter farm enterprises, education, institutional food service, and organizational practices and goals. RFSWG is also increasing organizational efficiency and capacity in concrete ways, is changing the way people think about public policy in relation to food systems, and is catalyzing efforts to change policies to better support regional food systems.

Respondent Affiliation

The RFSWG analysis is based on a 100% response rate of 20 respondents. Figure 5 shows a breakdown of RFSWG respondent affiliation. The three major categories of RFSWG respondents represent ISU, ISU Extension, and (community) colleges (35%), non university affiliated non profits (30%), and government agencies (25%). Farmers represented 15% of respondents and in most cases had a second affiliation as well, often with a non profit.

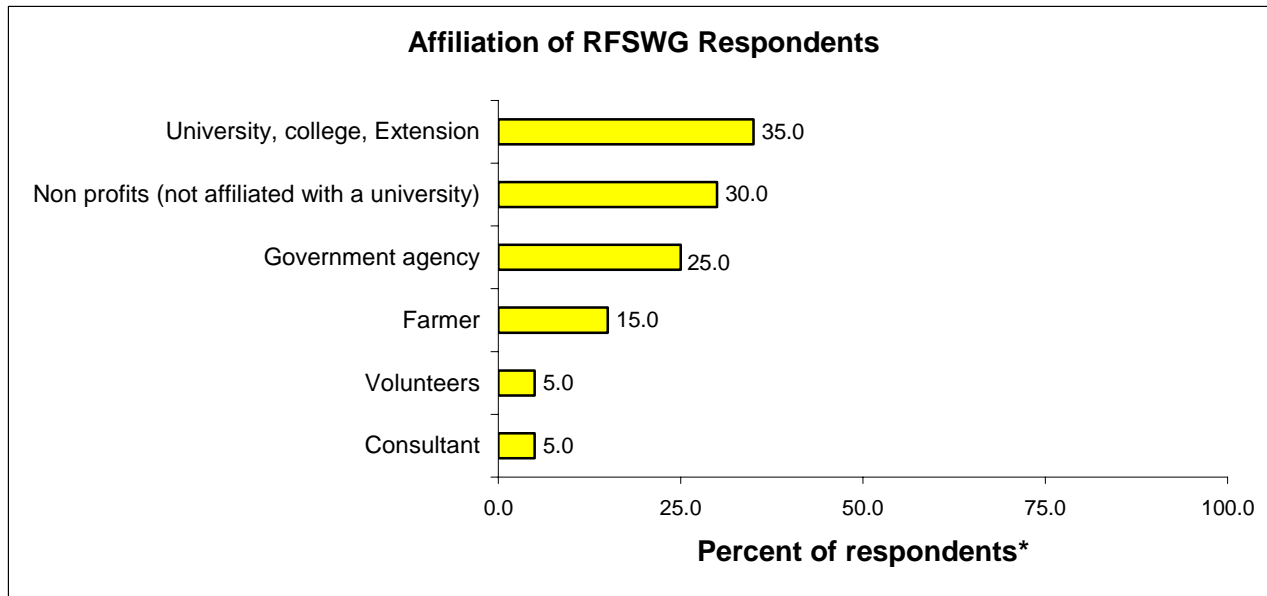


Figure 5: Respondent affiliation

*The percent will not equal 100% since some respondents named multiple affiliations.

Creating Strong, Productive Relationships

"The relationships [in RFSWG] are absolutely critical. They are definitely critical on whether I would have been able to do things without them."

RFSWG is building relationships among participants. This is occurring largely through dialogue with other RFSWG participants, which creates a sense of a shared identity and in the process, builds trust. One of the outcomes of increased trust and a shared identity is that it inspires participants to continue their food system work not only on an individual basis, but also helps respondents align their collective efforts. In the process, the group works together to overcome common challenges and build a network of interdependence.

Developing New Relationships

Respondents were asked whether they developed new relationships either within or outside the working group in the past year as a result of participation in RFSWG. Figure 6 shows that the majority of RFSWG (95.0 %) respondents reported developing at least one new relationship in as a direct result of their participation in the working group. Given the opportunity for face-to-face interaction at the meetings, it is not surprising that 90% of RFSWG respondents said they developed new relationships with other working group participants. However, a more telling testament to the impact of the group is that 85% of respondents said they developed new relationships with *non* participants. RFSWG is clearly connecting people working on behalf of regional food systems both within and outside the working group.

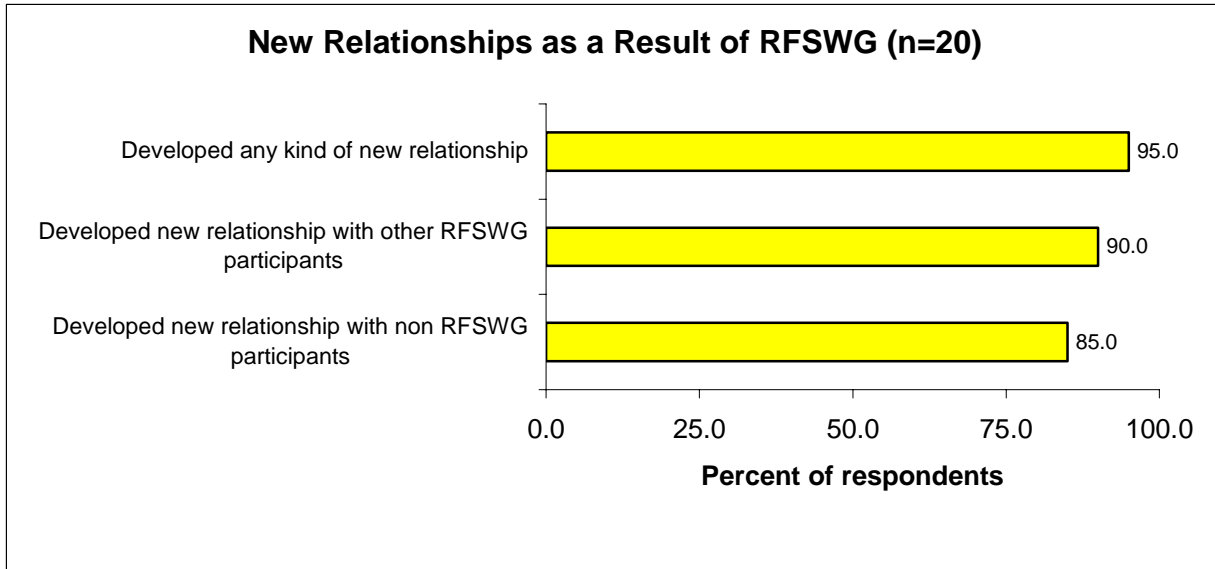


Figure 6: Percent of Respondents Developing New Relationships as a Result of RFSWG Participation

Strengthening Existing Relationships

When queried, 65% of RFSWG respondents said they knew at least one other RFSWG participant before they joined the working group. Of these 65%, all said these existing relationships became stronger as a result of RFSWG participation. For 61.5% of all respondents, RFSWG participation has also strengthened at least one relationship they had with non RFSWG participants.

Creating a Shared Identity

The way in which respondents begin to identify with each other in RFSWG is by sharing stories and experiences. *"Seeing people regularly gives more opportunities to tell each other more about the work that we are doing."* Many respondents find comfort in the discovery they share particular kinds of experiences, namely struggles: *"The bad news is that we have a problem; the good news is that you have the same one that I do."* Yet respondents say they are energized by this and cite "togetherness" as a key element in continuing their commitment to such work. *"People definitely feel validated like they are not alone in the wilderness and they are part of a bigger movement. I think that has helped people stay involved and motivated."* When respondents were asked to quantify on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree the extent to which they agreed that participation in RFSWG energizes and impassions them to continue and accomplish their food systems work, they provided a mean score of 6.15 (n=20; SD=1.226).

Facing common struggles in the paradoxical food and agricultural "wilderness" is one of the elements keeping respondents engaged; another is the sense of empowerment they feel when they work and learn together to make progress on overcoming challenges.

[RFSWG is] keeping us enthused and on task. There gets to be a lot of issues where you run against these brick walls and you wonder where you are going to go next with it. Going to the meetings...gives us an opportunity to get together and realize that there are the continued opportunities and that it is a long process, but we are gaining on that process.

Knowing help, support, and sentiments are available in the group helps "take the stress off...and allows you to focus better." Achieving palpable progress unobtainable working alone is a factor in moving the group forward under the metaphoric shadow of "brick walls" and the "wilderness".

[RFSWG] provides an opportunity to continue a relationship that is based on work or shared goals. The quality that I am identifying is that we are actually getting work done, not just sharing a professional experience. We are actually further progressing the work that we are individually involved in. That is the significance to me.

Such remarks show RFSWG respondents are developing a sense of shared identity by sharing stories of both problems and progress, and working together to provide solutions.

Trust as a Catalyst for Interdependence

"I have seen example of groups that come together and all they do is report on what each organization is doing. That is helpful but it never really gets into collaboration or building trust. The geographic-based groups...show living examples of how organizations are collaborating, which I think engenders more of a feeling of trust."

Data from the interviews provide evidence that RFSWG is catalyzing collaboration. Figure 7 shows that three in four respondents (75%) said they had either initiated or participated in new collaborations or projects as a result of RFSWG participation. When this is analyzed based on working group participation, we found that the majority of respondents (65%) were collaborating with other RFSWG participants while half collaborated with people not participating in the working group. Of the ten respondents who initiated or participated in new collaborations with non working group participants, half or more were partnering with economic development professionals (6 respondents), Extension (6), county government (5) and producers (5).

Among the 75% who did engage in new collaborations, one-third indicated they were able to leverage funding as a result of the collaboration. Respondents recalled leveraging a total of \$754,470 from producers, the Kellogg Foundation, the Leopold Center, county-based community foundations, the Northwest Area Foundation, county Farm Bureau offices, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, the Upper Mississippi Gaming Corporation, Buy Fresh/Buy Local, county Cattleman's Associations, the Iowa West Foundation, the Iowa Wellmark Foundation, the Iowa Department of Public Health, and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture.

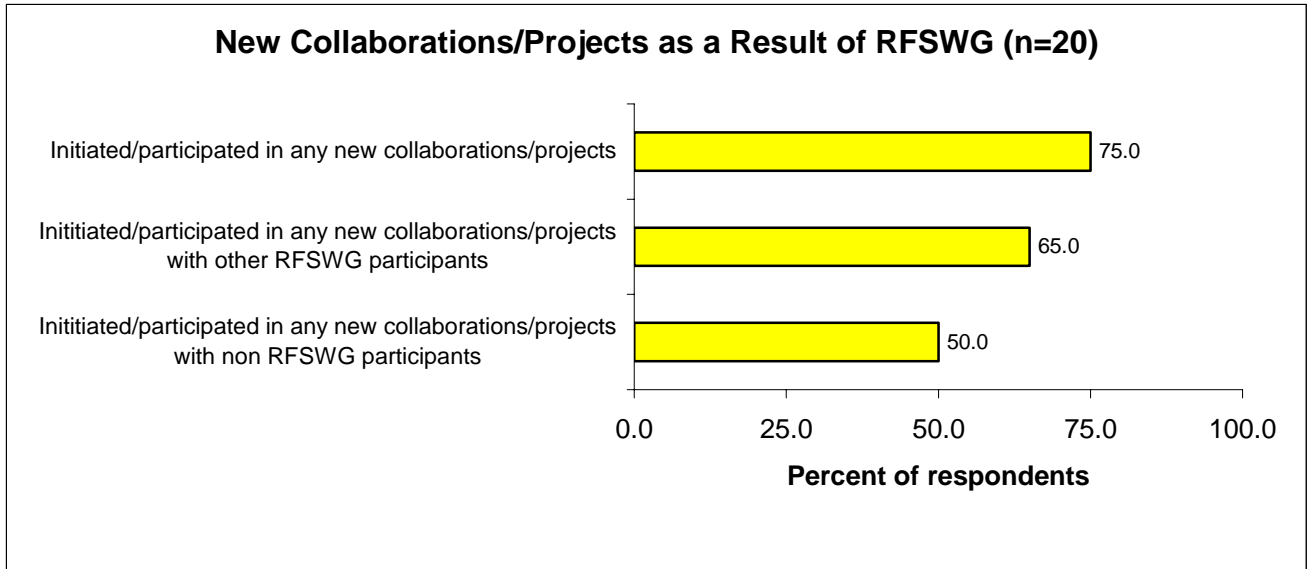


Figure 7: Percent of Respondents Participating in New Collaborations as a Result of RFSWG Participation

Sharing experiences not only helps participants stay focused and engaged, but face time also instills new levels of confidence and trust in each other, which prompts participants to reach out to each other. Regarding trust, one respondent said, *"I find [RFSWG] an open group and people try to stay above board. I don't sense a lot of "hidden" agenda stuff."* Another alluded to trust more obliquely: *"It actually puts a face with the work so it's not just a phone call or an email. You actually have a face and personality, so you build a relationship there."* And as another respondent observed, *"I work better with people that I know... [and] I'm more likely to remember someone I've had a face-to-face conversation with..."* Increased trust in RFSWG participants gives rise to interdependent behaviors as they gain confidence and feel more comfortable asking other people in the group for help. *"Once you shake hands with someone, they know you and it's a lot easier to approach them on a lot of things."*

I know what other people are doing and I feel like these are folks that I can call now because...I feel comfortable enough contacting them for information on what they are doing or what their particular area of expertise is if I need help or a referral." "Knowing where the expertise is and feeling comfortable enough to ask for it has helped our organization and me personally because I've been able to get information and resources from [RFSWG] folks that I've shared with other people in our organization.

It should be noted that we did include a series of questions in the interview to provide a quantitative measure of trust. However this measure proved to be invalid. The premise for posing the series of questions was to evaluate willingness to share information with the working group as a proxy for trust. When we asked respondents whether they shared opinions, advice, or information about their organization with other RFSWG members, all said they did. When we asked them whether they were more willing to share that information than they were a year ago, only three (15%) said yes. The rest said no, simply because they had always been willing to share information. For RFSWG, this question was not valid because a "no" response did *not*

indicate a lack of trust but rather indicated a high level of trust that had not changed over time. The qualitative data is therefore important for understanding the nature of trust within the group.

Defining Standards of Cooperation

Besides identifying the leadership style of the RFSWG facilitator as a key asset for establishing a collaborative learning environment, respondents articulated several collectively held values of the RFSWG group that contribute to high levels of trust and strong relationships among participants. These have become standards for cooperation.

Value #1: Transparency Trumps Turf Wars

[RFSWG] models the kind of democratic organization where we bring unlike minded people to the table. It is a level playing field. No one is power grabbing. No one is saying that they are more important, that their point of wins, that their point of view trumps. I think the very focus on relationships is in fact one of the strongest attributes as much as the networking [is important]... The solutions that we come up with may not be perfect for everyone but they do incorporate and speak to everyone [who] is there. That is a central part of what the regional food system group does.

This same respondent who characterized RFSWG as having an egalitarian group culture, however, noted one counterpoint, remembering a time when trust was low—not in RFSWG but in one of the geographic-based regional food system groups RFSWG supports:

The only time trust issues ever flitted across my screen had to do with a very specific situation in...a subgroup working together, where there was one group member who was clearly concerned about turf establishment. Suddenly, it made several people aware that ideas they were expressing could be appropriated. I think it is a testament to the larger group that I've never thought to myself that if I say this idea, somebody else is going to take it and then it won't be mine and they'll get credit for it. Then they'll run away and become rich and famous and what will happen to me? As soon as we all dump that idea, we will all be happier.

Ultimately, the message this respondent delivers is rejection of turf establishment as a way to accomplish anything of value regarding meaningful food system work, reinforcing values notion echoed by her peers:

If I don't know an answer to something, the bottom-line goal at the end of the day is not to have my name smeared all over everything or get credit for things. My goal is to help as many people as I can, not necessarily through me or my great works but through anybody.

Another put it more succinctly, "*Salvation in our rural economy is not going to [happen] because of something we closely hold to our chest.*"

Value #2: Give and You Shall Receive

While work of the geographically-based regional food system projects is carried out beyond the RFSWG meetings, the meetings themselves are structured around discussion of that work. "*In*

some ways, the [regional food system] projects [within RFSWG] have provided a discussion point but it is the discussion that is much more valuable than the projects themselves." Leaders from each regional food system group are given a chance to update and summarize their progress, after which they solicit input, insights, solutions, and discussion from the group on successes and challenges they face. Again, "The value of the food system working group is not these [regional food system] projects. It's the discussion and the catalyzing..." This forum for discussion becomes a mechanism for collective problem-solving, thereby integrating thought and participation from the entire group into the work, not just from those doing (that particular) work. Participants in the group, rather than serving as passive recipients of information, become actively involved in understanding and advancing the work of each regional food system effort. "There is more democracy, if that is the right word, rather than a reporting out of what each organization is doing. We've moved to that next step where collaboration is sort of the cultural norm." However, one respondent disagreed although the overarching value is still clearly shared. "The ones that are funded right now sort of give updates but in the process, they spend way too much time repeating what we already know. I liked [it] when a lot more people got to speak for shorter amounts of time." Indeed, having the opportunity to provide input and shape the conversation is what keeps some participants coming back.

What is exciting for me about the working group isn't so much the impact it has on me (which is good) but the fact that I'm able to create an impact by being part of the working group. I'm actually helping to create the impact that I get back from RFSWG.

This remark, when analyzed within the context of others discussed up to this point, suggests that the value of RFSWG lies in its ability to empower participants by providing them a sense that what they do does matter, despite a long line of challenges they may be experiencing on a day-to-day basis at home. RFSWG gives participants not only a sense of belonging, but also a sense of self-worth and confidence. "[RFSWG] has given me some strategic confidence ...it seems like the recommendations that I make are being well received and implemented." Some—or maybe much—of the success of the working group seems closely tied to the sense of empowerment respondents say they feel as a result of working within this group. "I get to be a part of [the impact], and people actually seem to think that what I have to say or suggest makes some sense, which is quite delightful from an ego point of view." This sense of empowerment may play an important role in keeping people engaged in this kind of work. "I feel that I have some things that I can bring to people that makes a difference. I wouldn't do it otherwise if I didn't feel that it was making a difference."

Value #3: Let's Be Honest

Favoring transparency over turf wars appears to be only one part of the equation that is helping build trust and strengthen relationships among RFSWG participants. Taking a realistic approach to the work of RFSWG rather than an idealistic one is another.

[RFSWG] is willing to confront some of the issues of the economics of agriculture head-on that many people around the country really want to avoid... Having that milieu is a much better learning environment for me and for [my organization] than people who are trying to avoid reality but are moving ahead anyway.

Another respondent expressed appreciation for the space RFSWG provides for openly discussing community level politics that affect the work participants are doing on the ground and how to overcome some of those challenges. Participants say that in the end, honest appraisals make their work better.

Value #4: Differences Make Us Stronger

RFSWG respondents invariably expressed a genuine appreciation of differences, often remarking that the value of the group was the exposure it brought them to new and different people. *"The greatest thing that [RFSWG] offers is this amazing group of people from so many different walks of life who all have great experience and great knowledge...when you put them all in one place, it's a food think tank."* Another said, *"There is that real sharing of ideas and bringing up new ideas that you get from [different] people. I don't talk to that many economists, statisticians, or marketing people. That's just not part of my daily job. I'm a folklorist in an art agency. An appreciation of diverse people necessarily includes an appreciation for diverse ideas and perspectives."*

I'm probably as prone as the next person to be hanging with people who agree with me, but I also value situations where people don't necessarily agree with me. I'm forced to go back and think through and end up stronger at the end because I've been challenged. This is a very good group to challenge you.

Interestingly, this respondent described a "good" colleague not as one who is agreeable, but one who invests time and energy into listening and formulating a thoughtful response.

When you have good colleagues, they hone what you think and you hone what they think. So you both end up stronger. You don't want colleagues who say, 'Oh, I know exactly what you mean,' and then they leave it. You want colleagues who say, 'OK, tell me more. Have you thought...?' and you do the same for them.

Another respondent noted the practical, utilitarian aspects and benefits of having people with different skills at the RFSWG table. *"We can't all be experts in everything, so if you can meet...a lot of different experts, then you have those connections and relationships and resources to go to."*

Providing Access to Networks

"The working group is a good activity in that it gives those of us who have some relationship to the trade of local foods, a place to know each other and to think together."

The diversity of attendance at the RFSWG meetings provides participants access to people with whom they otherwise might not interact. *"[RFSWG] gave me doors to knock on."* Another respondent mentioned that not only does RFSWG provide doors to knock on, but those doors may actually be more likely to open as a result of connections made through RFSWG, providing presumably better access to exclusive networks.

The Farm Bureau is a hard group to penetrate and the fact that [a representative] is coming at all gives me some reason to learn more about her. I know the Farm Bureau has reviewed some of my data before but I am interested to see if there are ways to get Farm Bureau members a chance to hear what I talk about.

Sometimes respondents suggest they are not so much interested in the benefits that RFSWG offers them in terms of access to networks, but rather the benefits that access provides others they know or serve.

The networking I do [at RFSWG meetings] translates into networking for my students. When I network there and get information, I know what my students are interested in. I have some who are interested in grapes, some in organics, etc. Then I can connect them better with what's happening.

A representative from a government agency put it more strongly:

I told my Bureau chief that this is the most vital tool that I have in my possession... Everyone who contacts me benefits from the knowledge that I receive from [RFSWG]. Knowledge from the group has strengthened my ability to serve my customers.

LEVERAGING PUBLIC INTEREST AND SUPPORT

How is RFSWG leveraging public interest and support? What are the strategies and steps for making that happen? Gaining public interest and support can only be achieved if the public is a) aware of the work and b) believes the effort is worthwhile and credible. And while building credibility may not be an explicit goal of the group, certainly some of the activities the group supports suggests that gaining public credibility is a key step in helping individuals and representative entities within RFSWG accomplish their regional food system goals. They are thus working hard to increase visibility of their work, changing attitudes through education, and enlisting the help of influential people to endorse the work and deliver information about related efforts more broadly.

Transforming Working Group Learning into Opportunities for Communities

"Anytime you have people coming together, working collectively and projects/events are being shared with the group, it does have an effect beyond the group. Clearly, we are seeing a change in attitudes around food and agriculture and RFSWG would have to be considered one of those catalysts for change."

The learning benefits to RFSWG participants involved are unquestionable. Respondents report specific learning outcomes as a result of participating in RFSWG.

I can actually read from the articles about the Farm Bill and get it...not that I like to do that very much.....but [RFSWG] has left me knowing a tremendous amount more than I did, and it continues to do that with every meeting.

Another learning outcome respondents identified is a better understanding of food systems. *"I have learned by getting involved in [RFSWG] that it takes...all of the different parts for this system to work. That has been the biggest eye-opener for me."* Yet learning outcomes are not limited to RFSWG participants. Time and time again, respondents say that the lessons they learn and internalize as a result of RFSWG involvement become the basis for interacting with others. The "eye-opener" respondent quoted above highlights this point by saying,

The Kiwanis [fraternal organization] asked me to speak [to them about a buy local foods campaign]. ... I naturally talked about it being a lot more than me getting growers to grow more. It's a whole system. ...Then that got them to talking, 'You're right. Food is too cheap. People just look at food as being so cheap.' That is an education change. Before [RFSWG involvement], all I talked about was buying local from local farmers. Now I bring in systems even though I don't have a clear understanding of all the parts of the system. All I know is that it is a lot more than buying local food.

These remarks show that some participants are using what they learn at the RFSWG meetings to teach others, which has the unintentional but added benefit of increasing public awareness about the work RFSWG is doing.

Other respondents rely less on happenstance and are more intentional about using RFSWG gatherings as an opportunity to gather information and share it with others in their communities. One respondent said he uses information from RFSWG to promote local agriculture.

We have a lot of industrial ag—in other words, the Corn Growers Association and Soybean Growers. A lot of the big companies like Tyson and ADM are all firmly imbedded in this country, but we don't have a lot of the local food systems in place here. Being able to network [at RFSWG meetings] has allowed us to get access to different research and different studies that we can bring back here to show people. We can continue to educate people that this is a viable alternative and something that can work.

According to some respondents, providing producers and others to practical research-based information helps generate interest from unlikely sources.

Producers who are very anti-organic, anti-anything and traditional are starting to ask some questions....at an arms length but still kind of curious. [They are saying] 'How they are doing that? I don't know how that could possibly work.' But they are starting to engage in conversation more with those who are doing it and are interested.

These remarks suggest that having "proof" such as research or connections to people who are engaged in agriculture that is a departure from the industrialized norm are critical for initiating and sustaining dialogue about the possibilities with skeptics. Respondents say that some progress is taking place indicated by the appearance of stories about regional food system efforts in more "mainstream agriculture" publications. *"We don't see this very often but the Farm Bureau in their annual report mentioned the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative and what is happening there as one of their highlights of important things happening in our county."*

Public acceptance of different kinds of agriculture may be the result of more widespread information circulating around this topic. More than half (52.6%) of RFSWG respondents (n=19) said they participated in activities or events that increased their opportunity to interact with the

community or the general public. As more people become involved in this kind of work, visibility, credibility, and public support are leveraged, which in turn, change culture and language.

One respondent also said that RFSWG is creating new career opportunities by changing deep-seated cultural values that determine what is and is not a legitimate career. Her premise is that by simply using language such as "local" or "regional food systems" to discuss different kinds of agriculture, it changes common parlance and opens people's minds to the possibilities, thereby paving the way to public acceptance. She provided a concrete example to illustrate this point:

I do share [local food system] stuff...with some of my colleagues [and] I hear those words out of the mouths of students...which means ...they have absorbed the idea and they've absorbed it as a possibility in the world. I'm not saying this is [true] across the board for these students but I know that there are several [where this is true]. There is one in particular that is doing a master's in ag education. He plans to teach high school. He comes from a crop farm in south central Iowa, and he's talking about local food systems now. Where is he going to take that 'infection'?

Respondents also suggested it is important for them to create conditions for effective learning within their communities, much like in the RFSWG meetings. They agreed that in order to be effective, learning and sharing must take place in an environment that is neither combative, alienating, nor polarizing. But this can be tricky.

Some of [the community members] are traditional farmers and hog confinement farmers. They see [local/regional food systems] as attacking what they are doing. We are still in the process [of figuring out our approach] because we have to find the balance. At least we are talking about it.

Engaging in dialogue, as this remark shows, is one small, but significant, measure of success, especially when doing something different is construed as an attack on a traditional way of life. Participants are therefore learning to craft messages to garner public support as they interact with farmers, and various agencies and organizations to gain broad-based support for their work.

[The RFSWG facilitator] has come up and visited a couple of times... He's a very positive liaison to community members from both the traditional and nontraditional [farming perspective]. He talks about opportunities, not saying what should be but where there might be opportunities, and he provides information and data. I think that they have been very receptive to him.

Others within RFSWG acknowledged the role local politics can play in complicating their efforts. "There is a layer of politics that I really hadn't anticipated. I thought that [our work] should be a "slam dunk"—that we'd [surely] be involved in this, but that is not the case." Others in RFSWG have taken note of these challenges and are framing the issue in their local area in terms of economic development, hoping this will sideline a potential controversy over what kind of agriculture is "good" for the community. "At the very beginning we emphasized the economic [development] component. [That makes it] hard for anybody to say, "Well, I think that that is a bad idea."

Public Endorsement from Prominent Leaders

Another way in which RFSWG is gaining credibility for local and regional food system work is through public endorsement from prominent figures. While this may not have been an intentional strategy on the part of the project leaders, it has not gone unrecognized by working group participations. For RFSWG, exposure has come from ISU Extension, the ISU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and local government officials, as well as a vast range of supporters.

[Jack Payne, ISU Vice President of Extension and Outreach] is now starting to introduce this on a statewide discussion basis. I just got an email this week [explaining that Extension is] gathering information for a community editorial piece that Jack Payne tends to write. [It will be] about food and fitness and food and farms and how they intertwine—local food for the local community to improve the health of local citizens and the bottom line of local farmers. He mentions the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Initiative as prime examples of that. These discussions are moving into the state level right alongside bio-fuels... That is big, and without RFSWG and the data that they have been providing, as well as what [is being done] in northeast Iowa, there is no way that would have happened.

Writing about regional food systems efforts brings one kind of visibility to regional food system efforts; actually showing up to endorse the effort brings quite another.

Some members of ISU faculty and Extension [Jack Payne], and [ISU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences] Dean Wintersteen came. Those went over wonderfully in the community, just that [they] would take the time...

One of the added benefits of bringing in prominent figures from state institutions to local communities is the effect their presence has on mobilizing local support.

It was from those [ISU] connections that really helped [the regional food system effort] involve the local political and governmental people because they could just see that support walk in the door and they got the chance to talk to them for a few minutes and see a presentation.

This local support then adds another level of credibility to the work. Indeed, one respondent was quite direct about linking the participation of local elected officials to success. *"We've had [a state legislator] involved in a number of our meetings. I think it has led to greater acceptance of the idea. I think it adds credibility."* Respondents say such credibility comes not only because elected officials are in a uniquely public position, but because they increase the diversity of audiences reached. *"[RFSWG] is composed of so many different people that the message can get out there to different groups. The network continues to build this great level of credibility..."*

Increased credibility is inextricably linked to the ability of the working group to change attitudes about food systems work. When we asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree the extent to which they agreed that RFSWG has changed attitudes of people beyond the working group to be more accepting of alternative forms of agriculture, respondents reported a mean of 4.95 (n=19; SD=1.129) meaning that some progress has been made, but there is more work to be done on this front.

Recruiting New Partners and Resources

"It was through the [RFSWG] meetings [that] availed us to other people and other groups that can help us move forward in what we are trying to do."

RFSWG respondents report that participation has expanded their universe of partners and encourages them to develop creative ways to recruit new partners. Some respondents said this happens among participants at the RFSWG meetings.

[RFSWG provides] valuable relationships because you know who might have an interest. Then if something comes in the wind, a project that really might be worth writing up [a proposal for], you already have some idea of who you could work with.

However, the vast majority report that RFSWG helps them engage new partners at the local level. *"Anything I'm doing with non-working group members is totally due to the working group being there."*

When respondents were asked with whom they had developed new relationships in the past year, either within or outside the group but as a result of the group, RFSWG respondents recalled an average of 4.7 new relationships, ranging from 0-9 relationships (S.D.=2.6). An important point to note is that in many cases, respondents said they had developed a litany of new relationships as a result of participating in the working group, but those relationships were formed prior to the last year.

Figure 8 shows a list of 24 different groups with whom RFSWG respondents said they developed new relationships. Note that figures shown represent the percent of respondents who said they developed new relationships with these groups (not percent of responses which was likely to be less given that respondents typically named multiple groups). The diversity of responses is broad among RFSWG participants, likely the result of the community based efforts to reach out and recruit new people. More than half of the 20 respondents said they had connected with the RFSWG supported regional food system groups. Yet RFSWG is also effectively connecting participants with non profits (nearly half of respondents). Roughly one-third of respondents say RFSWG connects them to producers and agricultural entrepreneurs, Extension, and federal agencies, suggesting that RFSWG can and does offer these groups substantial opportunities to connect to regional food system advocates and leaders.

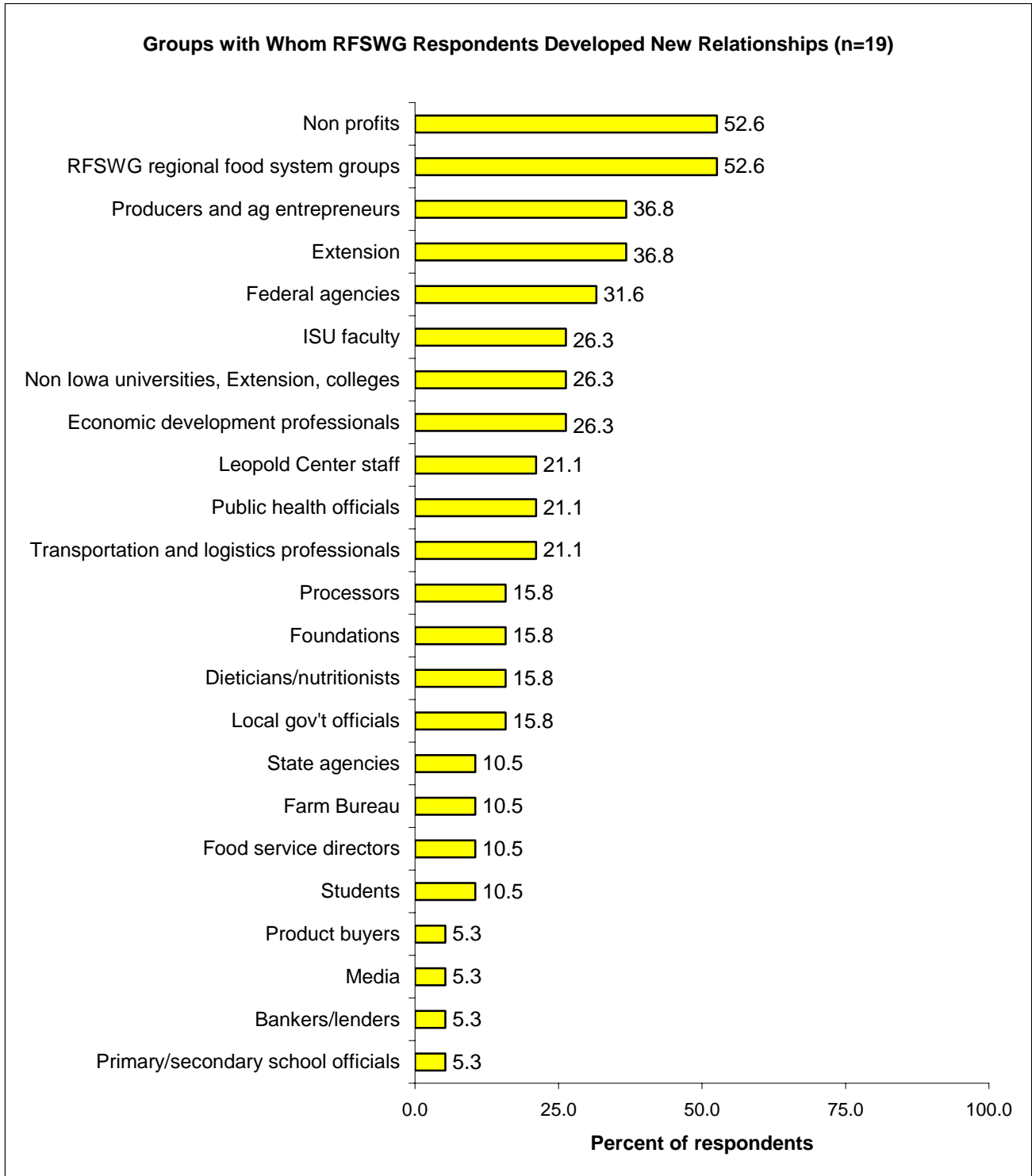


Figure 8: Groups with Whom RFSWG Respondents Developed New Relationships as a Result of RFSWG Participation

The phone interviews also provide strong evidence that RFSWG is 1) helping participants expand who they see as possible local partners, and is also 2) helping RFSWG participants involve those people and their representative agencies/institutions/organizations to build local support for their efforts. One way in which RFSWG is helping participants expand who they regard as possible partners is achieved by expanding participants' understanding about the breadth of food system issues. One respondent said she had never before considered the interest schools and health care institutions might have in supporting a local or regional food systems work. "[From RFSWG] I get ideas for who to tap for support that I may not have thought of before. For example, tapping health care providers and schools, people I hadn't thought of enlisting before." Yet another said she was prompted to make connections with a local entrepreneurs association.

[RFSWG has helped us] identify new partners like the Mayor and the gentleman who is a board member of the [local] Entrepreneurs Association. We need to be sure we know what everyone is doing. I've started attending the entrepreneur monthly meetings keeping in the loop of what they are doing. They were doing a feasibility study for artisan food incubator.

Another respondent said RFSWG participation helped her think more broadly about the best way to elicit food systems change in her area,

Our first reaction probably wouldn't have been [to include] policy people because we tended to think that we wouldn't worry about them until we reached critical mass and got everything else taken care of. But the more we get into it, we find that probably the single common largest barrier may very well be policy itself. So at some of our meetings we had county board supervisors; at other food meetings we had state representatives. We had elected officials. We had people from the FSA offices attend these meetings. The ones we are really leaning on now are county boards of supervisors.

Another way in which RFSWG helps participants expand who they see as possible partners is achieved by showcasing at RFSWG meetings successful, productive partnerships taking place in the state.

In this area, there had not been a lot of cooperation between [my organization] and the RC&Ds. I don't know all of the history behind that. But with...the RC&D in our area [getting] very active in grape and wine production and... also as a result of the RFSWG group, seeing how the RC&D people were deeply involved in this in other parts of the state, I thought, 'Well, that makes sense,' so we started bringing them in and now we are actively participating with them at a number of levels...as it relates to the local food projects.

Several RFSWG participants interviewed for this evaluation realized these are not new resources—indeed, some RC&Ds were established in Iowa as early as 1971. Yet what *is* new is that RFSWG participants are beginning to recognize these and other agencies and organizations as resources, and are then finding ways to connect their efforts.

We are making a concerted effort on a more structural basis to recruit individuals from specific county Extension offices to [join] our group to develop our plan. It's not a new person [but] the utilization of that organization at a different level that is going to increase our effectiveness.

A specific strategy this agency used to get the County Extension office partners onboard was to involve them in decision making by asking them to serve on a county-based committee to award

mini grants to local producers engaged in food production activities.

When we did the mini-grants, we had [the County Extension partners] on the committee. That is how we got some more government officials and the economic development folks to rank [the applications] and discuss the opportunities that are out there and how this is in an upswing. That is probably one of the most beneficial things that we did.

Engaging new partners in small ways such as these gives everyone involved an opportunity to get to know each other better by making joint decisions that affect common constituents. At the same time, it engages partners in feel-good, easy, win-win collaborations that help stimulate economic development.

The ability to recognize and recruit new partners is helping RFSWG participants snowball their efforts. Each new partner helps build a bigger ball, compelling new people to stick with the idea. This impact is not lost on RFSWG respondents.

[The RFSWG facilitator] put us in contact with Kellogg, [which] has opened a number of resources that is now putting us in contact with the University of Michigan, which is going to put us in contact with a multiple number of others. It was a huge snowball effect. Would any of that have happened without our connection to RFSWG? No.

Another made a similar connection, suggesting that new partners beget new partners, although perhaps not formal ones—yet even informal connections are nevertheless critical for the work: *"We were able to share [information] with one of our lenders here...so that they are looking at the future potential opportunities for our region and are then...informing other lenders."* Respondents invariably said that gaining new partners helps RFSWG participants build a stronger resource base. In some cases, new partnerships create financial benefits, while in others, new partnerships create immeasurable but important socio-political benefits.

The RC&D and we were actually asking for money from the board of supervisors to help with our strategic plan and also to set up a specific garden market... I don't know if we'll get any money from them but if nothing else, we get their endorsement.

Respondents mentioned none of the usual critiques of working with new partners, such as the time needed to get everyone on the same page through communicating, educating, and clarifying. We can only speculate this may be indicative of the way in which respondents have deeply internalized an appreciation for diverse partners, valuing the benefits far beyond a serious consideration of relatively small costs.

LEVERAGING CHANGE

The process through which RFSWG leverages public support for regional food systems work has already been described. However, yet to be described is the impact that increased public awareness, acceptance, and credibility, combined with a more informed and skilled cadre of CoP participants, has on local/regional food systems work. This section will make an explicit link between credibility and the ability of CoP participants to leverage local public support; local financial support; extralocal or external financial support; organizational, agency, and

institutional support; and professional time spent on regional food systems work. We also found impacts of RFSWG related to the stability of farm enterprises; education; farming practices; institutional food service customs and practices; organizational/agency/institutional customs and practices as well as increased organizational efficiency and capacity and attempts to change public policy.

Leveraging Financial Support

"In terms of leveraging specific money, it's more about reputation and not so much about a specific project."

The qualitative evidence clearly demonstrates that much of the value RFSWG participants gain from the group is the credibility it brings to their regional food systems work. *"I think it adds more credibility to our local efforts because they see it is being supported statewide."* Another said,

Because of this group, if we had gone out cold turkey and tried to do this, I don't know if we would have gotten quite as good of a response because they could see this as part of an overall effort. We weren't just a bunch of renegades out on our own trying to start something from nothing.

Credibility isn't valuable simply because RFSWG respondents want to gain some kind of recognition for their work. Instead, strong credibility is valued because it's a prerequisite for leveraging a whole host of other necessary resources, which first often shows up as financial support which then evokes expanded local involvement. For example,

[RFSWG and the Leopold Center is] giving [our] group and all the work we are doing instant credibility. As a follow up for that we just got a check from [a foundation] for \$20,000, which is coming to [partner agencies] to continue working on food system planning. Once people heard that [a foundation] supported us again it was like receiving the first Leopold money. We became more credible and worth returning phone calls.

In essence, ISU is vetting the work, thereby doing a tremendous service to regional food system work by lobbying it a lot closer to the goal posts while avoiding the need to invest a significant chunk of local resources into a long-term and complicated public awareness campaign. *"For a relatively small amount of money, the support that you get from being a Leopold grantee and the publicity you get is worth maybe more than the money is."*

Public credibility is a necessary prerequisite for successful fundraising. And as previously noted, Leopold funding provides credibility for a regional food system effort, which can then be used to leverage funding from other public, non-profit, or foundation sources. This is true for all of the regional food systems VCPA has funded through RFSWG. The fact that RFSWG is enabling participants to engage a variety of new and unlikely partners in regional food systems efforts is proving to be a powerful tool in building the capacity of those groups to attract new and useful resources.

Because we can't bring our [whole team to the RFSWG] meetings in Ames, we are able to bring one to three and then that information has gone back to our group. We also brought down the

president of the Farm Bureau Association in [our] county. He took that back to his organization. They then have given us funding for some additional work that we are doing. It's the same [story] with the Cattleman's Association. It's leveraging the resources in our area based on what we hear through RFSWG.

This group has been able to leverage a significant amount of regional (and state) funding and support—in the ballpark of \$150,000—from county community foundations, county Farm Bureau offices as well as the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, county Cattleman's Associations, gaming corporations, the Iowa Wellmark Foundation, and the Iowa Department of Public Health.

However, credibility is also just as important for leveraging private funds as well. One regional food system group leader observed,

[The] Leopold Center has been able to offer a level of credibility when you go to investors and people that can finance this thing. I've finally gotten \$10,000 just this past week from producers. We have two private investors who are looking at that \$10,000 and saying, 'Yes, we are interested. We will probably at least match what [the producers] are doing but we want to visit a little bit now.' They look at everything right down to relationships with things like Leopold too. They say, "Well, Leopold did this so that is some validation that you guys are on track...we just don't want to throw money at something that isn't going to work.

This respondent keenly articulated the value of strategic relationships. While it certainly sounds important, strategic relationships do more than just provide status or names to drop—they bring needed resources to regional food system efforts so they can carry out their work.

Another effective strategy the regional food system groups are using to generate financial support for their efforts is, ironically, giving away limited funds within the region by awarding producer/processor mini grants. This gesture (most are only a few hundred dollars) demonstrates a willingness to invest in their own communities, share nominal wealth, and engage new people in building regional food systems. In so doing, the regional food system teams generate excitement from local agricultural entrepreneurs but also economic development professionals and virtually everyone else who wants to see local businesses grow and thrive. What these regional food system groups are finding is that much like themselves, the recipients of these mini grants are using the money they receive to leverage even more funding and support.

We awarded close to \$3,000 in grants to 14 producers in the five-county region and that was used to leverage \$134,722.60 in funding for 14 different projects. Either the producers got their own additional grants or [they got] additional investment themselves. That was sparked from the \$3,000 that we awarded.

To put this into perspective, the average mini grant award was \$214. Each \$214 grant generated, on average, \$9623 of new funding.

The local and regional leveraging power of the Northeast Food and Farm Coalition initially funded through RFSWG eventually caught the attention of folks at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which ultimately decided to invest in the region.

Let's not forget the \$500,000 planning grant that we received through the W.K. Kellogg Food & Fitness Initiative funding. The invitation to apply for the grant...would not have come without ...

the work that we had done and being selected as a [RFSWG] food system in northeast Iowa.

Thus, the initial \$20,000 this group received from VCPA has grown to roughly \$800,000, a figure that will be outdated by the time this report is released.

Leveraging Institutional Support

The previous sections show the way in which RFSWG is increasing the visibility and credibility of regional food systems work, which in turn, provides these groups access to financial capital. RFSWG respondents also report that increased credibility brought by working group participation builds their capacity to leverage other resources that are equally important for enabling them to do this work, such as respect from both superiors and "subordinates". One respondent implied she had more freedom to do work in sustainable agriculture because

[RFSWG] lends me more credibility with [my employer] the college because it gives me very clear connections to ISU. In the eyes of my administrators, I look more credible because of those ISU connections and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and that I'm a part of a group there. That's important. We need to lend a lot more credibility in the general public toward sustainable agriculture. That is an unintended but positive consequence.

Regarding subordinates, the same respondent said RFSWG participation helps make her a better teacher.

It makes me sound like I know what I'm talking about when I'm in class because I can say, 'Well, this project is going on up here in northeast Iowa, and there is a project going on in this county in Iowa.' It allows me to be better connected as far as getting information about what his happening in the state. It makes me sound smart.

Having credibility gains her respect from her administrators, which translates into institutional support for participation in the working group. The result of this institutional support is a trickle down effect on her students, who benefit from her working group participation because she is more informed and effective in the classroom.

Credibility is critical for helping RFSWG participants gain the institutional or administrative support necessary for allowing them to take part in this work. One respondent representing a government agency said that RFSWG participation has helped her fortify her food system work despite sweeping administrative changes.

[RFSWG] has given me some credibility for what I'm doing with food, which allows me to do more. When our department looked at what I did, even with a gubernatorial shift and a directoral shift, they said, 'We want you to continue this. It's good for us. It makes us look good.'

Credibility is therefore critical to the sustainability of this type of work.

Leveraging Time

Helping agencies and institutions "look good" can play a role in securing institutional support for food systems work. This support is a precursor for allowing staff to spend time on such work.

"We're seeing more interest in the part of my boss [who] is willing to invest some of my time and our resources to working more in the food systems area." Respondents report spending vital and significant time on food systems work, yet no one has attempted to calculate the value of their time.

We haven't begun to put in those kinds of dollar figures. That is overwhelming. If we started putting in people's time, that would be phenomenal with Extension and all of these other professionals and volunteers coming to the table. It should be documented somehow because we often don't recognize that but that is a huge resource.

Better Support for Farm Enterprises

"Some of the signals we have [seen are] the increase in sales of local food."

RFSWG is helping service provider respondents of RFSWG provide better support for producers. Half of respondents said that what they've learned through RFSWG has helped them create, improve, or influence supply chain enterprises or technical assistance programs. Types of enterprises include restaurants, food co-ops, grocery stores, and institutional buyers. Affected programs include those administered by PFI, INCA, the Kellogg Foundation, Buy Fresh/Buy Local, and Extension. It is also helping participating government agencies be more responsive. During one interview, a respondent representing an agency said she was having new kinds of interactions as a result of her growing knowledge about local and regional food systems emerging from her participation in RFSWG. She was becoming a "go-to" person within her agency to field questions about direct markets. This respondent provided an example about interactions she was having with a producer. This producer said he was trying to work with a local institution to get his products on the menu but food service personnel from the institution said they could not buy directly from the farmer because it Iowa food safety code prohibited it. The producer called the interviewee to verify this claim and pinpoint the specific language in State law that prevented him from selling directly to institutions. The respondent, unfamiliar with the language, contacted someone from the Department of Inspection and Appeals. At the time of the interview, she had not yet received one; however, what she did "receive" was

a good relationship with this new appeals person, so it is a new source [of information] for me. I want to make sure what the rule and the code is, and then see whether people are interpreting it the correct way. Either way, I am going to go back to the [institution] and to the producer and I will follow up with everyone involved, and I'm keeping them posted whether it is the answer we want. If it is not the answer we want, we need to see what we can do to get it changed.

These remarks suggest that the answer to this question will not only affect the outcome of this particular case, but future public policy and enforcement.

Other kinds of support that help stabilize farm enterprises include the activities and publicity associated with the work of the RFSWG-funded regional food system groups. Part of the

changes respondents say they've observed have to do with increased interest in buying local food, which helps producers enter new markets such as CSAs and grocery chains. *"We've had two of our three grocery stores really start getting into local foods and actively promoting them where they hadn't before. We'd like to think that we had something to do with that."* While this respondent credited the work of her regional food system group for increasing interest, she also recognized other factors at work which they used in their favor, such as eagerness for keeping an eye on the competition: *"We had representatives from the supermarkets at the meetings [we hosted]. At first, it was just a representative from one of the supermarkets, and then the other guys started seeing this going on so they started showing up."* An increase in the number of markets selling local food products means increased sales opportunities and growth potential for local producers. *"There is a natural food store [owner who] says she has tripled her sales."* At the same time, the availability of amenable markets means producers can spend less time marketing as word spreads and more time growing. *"[Our group helped] start a pilot CSA last year and...I'm hearing they are getting tons of calls wanting to know about next year."* What's good for one CSA may benefit others and prompt creation of new ones.

Impacting Education

Most respondents say that RFSWG is a place for both learning and teaching. While our questions about what they had learned from RFSWG were appropriate, we learned these questions did not quite capture the essence of RFSWG given that many respondents were the ones doing the teaching, both formally and informally.

This year I've been in the mode of being the mouth, so I've been talking about stuff that in general was cooked before that [RFSWG] has influenced, but some of it is material that I have developed that I'm using to take to [RFSWG] as much as the other way around.

Yet for others, the value of RFSWG lies not only in participants' ability to inform other working group participants, but the ability to be informed, which helps them become better formal and informal teachers beyond the working group.

It's a terrific incubator for me to learn what is going on in the Midwest, how that is different from California or North Carolina, for example. Helping to both nourish and speak to and educate a movement that is growing is very satisfying and also gives me insights as I see how people in Iowa take those insights and make something happen with them. Then I can convey those insights that I get to other people who are at an earlier stage or are at an older stage but who aren't asking as deep questions.

For those serving in formal educational positions, they all agree their teaching is stronger as a result of working group participation. Echoing the remark from the teacher who said RFSWG gives her greater credibility in the eyes of her administrators and helps her become a better teacher, another respondent said,

I teach issues in sustainable agriculture and world food issues, and I teach them to people who are taking them because they fill university... requirements. The last thing they are interested in talking about is sustainable agriculture. The more I can tell stories, the more I can attach it to real things.

The takeaway message here is that what may be impacted are the tools she has at her disposal to reach—not just teach—students, and quite possibly the learning outcomes, although measurement of the latter was beyond the scope of this evaluation.

Changing Farming Practices

There is some qualitative evidence that RFSWG may be having an indirect impact on farming practices. As discussed above, educator respondents say RFSWG provides them with real world examples of success as they relate to regional food systems and alternative farming systems. Both of the educator respondents who participated in the RFSWG evaluation interviews said the stories of success they learn about through the working group and pass along to their students inspire them, some of whom are future farmers, to consider an expanded world of possibilities. Said one respondent, obviously touched by the experience,

My students clearly think differently. I have a student who is a pretty stubborn conventional 18-year-old farmer and he would argue with me about the value of the [Iowa] Corn [Promotion] Board and ethanol and...who should be the Secretary of Agriculture in a very friendly way. He called me this summer and said, "I'm doing grapes too." He went through our entrepreneurial classes, and he said, 'I went to this winery and asked what kind of grapes they need and how many they would buy.' That to me is why I am doing this. He's changed. He said, 'I told all these people at school that they should take this class.' I need him more than he knows.

Recalling an earlier remark from the other respondent whose job is to educate, indeed, who knows where these students are going to take this "infection?" Apparently, other young people at school.

Connecting Institutions with Local Producers

The interviews provide some evidence that RFSWG participants are helping institutions in their region connect with sources of locally grown food. One respondent was asked to accompany the owner of several assisted living facilities to a local food auction, where he bought food to serve in those facilities. This RFSWG participant also facilitated a meeting between the assisted living facility owner and a local livestock producer. Another respondent said that local schools had contacted her group to get local food. *"I had to tell them that that is not what this coalition is about; you need to contact producers directly. So, I put them in touch with [local growers], which provide for [other institutions in the region]."*

Changing Organizational, Institutional, and Government Agency Customs and Practices

Impacts of RFSWG can be measured in terms of changes the working group has brought to represented organizations, associations, institutions, and government agencies. Overall, formal policies have changed little within respondents' organizations, agencies, institutions, and

businesses as a result of RFSWG participation. However, 75% of participants say that it has changed the way their organizations and agencies do their work by changing customs and practices, principally by:

- **Providing a successful example upon which to model existing programs and practices:** *"The Community of Practice model is becoming more integrated into [our organization's] grant making...based on the performance [of] RFSWG."*
- **Incorporating a focus on partnering** in competitive grant application processes by rewarding collaborative efforts.
- **Expanding interest in food systems among traditionally non food related disciplines** such as the American Planning Association, based on food system involvement of member organizations.
- **Encouraging the RC&Ds to "spend more time working on local foods because of the resources we have connected with...and actively partner and expand beyond what we have been doing. It definitely was RFSWG that made us see that."**
- **Helping agencies such as the RC&Ds recognize the complementary assets of other local public agencies** such as Cooperative Extension: *"It's the utilization of that organization to a different level that is going to increase our effectiveness."*
- **Encouraging agencies such as the RC&Ds to innovate by partnering with local institutions:**

When we did the mini-grants, we had [Extension] on the committee. That is [also] how we got some more government officials and the economic development folks to come rank those and discuss the opportunities that are out there and how [local foods] is in an up-swing. That is probably one of the most beneficial things that we did... This was kind of a good way to start priming that relationship.

- **Transforming the way Extension programming is conducted at the local level:**

Many times [Extension] threw out the answer to what we thought were the questions in the community... Usually we get a list of programs that are available to us and then we have to go find the audience. This [regional food systems work] is different in that we have the audience, now we need to bring the information to them...RFSWG has helped support what Extension was originally about—that you gather data, you bring in people to assist you at the right time but it really has to be grassroots. It has to be the people making the decisions and asking/responding to the data that has been gathered so they can make informed decisions. Then [Extension] seeks out assistance as we identify where that assistance needs to be. That has been an important role of RFSWG in helping us and providing those resource people that we may not have been aware of or tapped into previously.

- **Changing what Extension staff do:** *"Forty percent of my time now is dedicated to [food and fitness work] and it is a priority. We have written that this is a priority in our county."*

- **Changing what one agriculture-based regional government office does:**
"[RFSWG] has really given this office a real regional work focus... We say we do a lot of things but in this Midwest Iowa office we are really active in working in the food system."
- **Prompting agriculture-based government offices to consider including food systems in agency missions and goals:** *"We are actually having our first meeting of all the field office directors and we are really going to be working on organizational plans and goals. The whole food systems area will be a big part of that."*
- **Influencing adoption of food systems language into one RC&D's five-year strategic plan:**

We have an objective to support the establishment of at least five new value-added ag enterprises by 2012. Under that objective we have a strategy and then some action plans, which pretty much are all tied to local foods. We have a revolving loan fund so we've looked at how can we target local food...I think that looking at the food aspect is probably more of a recent phenomena instead of doing something different with corn, etc.

Building Organizational and Institutional Capacity

Other RFSWG impacts include the effect the working group has had on building the capacity of representative organizations, institutions, and government agencies. Although most of the discussion until this point has already addressed how RFSWG is building organizational capacity, to recap and summarize, it is helpful to note the following:

RFSWG is building the capacity of represented entities by improving organizational efficiency. Greater organizational efficiency is achieved when participants

- **Gain general content knowledge** archived within the group that eliminates the need to spend hours doing their own research, while at the same time offers them yet another kind of education: knowing where to find information, not just what information to find:

I certainly can't be all things to everyone. But through the contacts I've made [in RFSWG], I am able to help so many more people and not spend so much time [helping them]"; " I think that [RFSWG] has made our job easier in the sense that instead of trying to hunt down and find all of these resources, you go to this meeting and it's just everything you need to know and the people you need to know are all right there.

- **Save time, energy, and resources** by learning from others' experiences and mistakes:

There is [only] one of me to do a lot of different things...I don't have time or money or funding or anything else to reinvent what everyone else is doing... so by them sharing with me, I can go [forward] from there.

When I can hear stories of where people have struggled, I'm really happy to let someone else make the mistake so that I don't have to.

- **Avoid duplication of effort** as they become aware of similar work being done across the state:

We can save time and energy by not recreating the wheel and we can put our energy into focusing on other areas that have not yet been established"; "I think RFSWG performs a very important networking function. Most people tend to get out and duplicate what has already been done if there is not something like this out there.

- **Share resources** such as templates and messaging approaches, thereby saving money and time; and
- **Test new ideas** within the CoP to refine them before presenting those ideas in their local area: *"It gives me a whole set of people to bounce things off of when I come up with new ideas."*

In addition to improved organizational efficiency, respondents credit RFSWG for building organizational capacity by

- **Improving participants' general work competencies** as a result of participation via
 - 1) Helping participants develop a greater understanding of meta level issues that require attention before they can carry out their task work. Some of the meta level issues they value most include raising awareness on the importance of leadership development and favorable policy for supporting food systems work, benefits of community support and engagement, and tactics for creative partnering;
 - 2) Connecting participants with others who are doing similar or complementary work throughout the state (*"We are trying to make sure that everyone is on the same page so we can merge our resources"*);
 - 3) Providing access to research-based results;
 - 4) Developing communication skills and messaging abilities (*"[RFSWG] helps me...verbalize [regional food systems] better to other people"*); and
 - 5) Helping participants better understand the people they are serving (*"Knowledge from the group has strengthened my ability to serve my customers"; " The contacts made through this working group has allowed us to offer more support to more producers by introducing us to new partners and ideas"*);
- **Creating an environment that welcomes new ways of thinking** and promotes partnering and systems thinking;
- **Encouraging new ways of operating that engages new partners** and a broad spectrum of business and community leaders; and
- **Building credibility to help participants leverage new social and financial resources** to support their work.

Respondents report that these factors contribute to greater capacity of participating organizations and institutions to carry out food systems and related work. In the case of not-for-profit entities

(including educational institutions, legal non profits, Extension, government agencies, etc), nearly half (47.4%) of respondents who work for one (19 out of 20) said their organization has provided support to a food systems related effort or business as a result of their RFSWG participation. These data show RFSWG is building the capacity of not-for-profits to work in the area of food systems. Types of support respondents from not-for-profit organizations and institutions reported providing as a result of RFSWG included referrals, information, facilitated discussion, and technical assistance.

Improved efficiency, combined with improved capacity, appears to equal improved effectiveness. When we asked respondents representing a not-for-profit organization or agency to indicate whether participation in the working group was helping them be more effective in supporting regional food systems, 95% said "yes."

Catalyzing Efforts to Change Public Policy and Pseudo Regulations

Policy has been slow to change as a result of RFSWG activities. One exception is a policy recently adopted by the Iowa Cattleman's Association (ICA) which supports "further research, development and engagement by the beef industry as local food systems and local processing grow to larger markets for our future." This policy was introduced by an active participant of RFSWG, who is part of one of the regional food systems funded through RFSWG. However, RFSWG may be increasing the visibility of regional and local food systems among elected officials. Seventy percent of respondents said they have interacted with government officials (defined as elected or paid representatives of publicly funded local, county, regional, state, and federal offices) as a result of RFSWG participation. Of those who do, the majority (64.3%) say they are interacting with County Supervisors. More than one in four (28.6%) are interacting with U.S. senators or their staff while one in five (21.5%) are interacting with RC&D staff. RFSWG participants say the working group informs the dialogue they have with politicians.

With Senator Harkin, I've been able to visit him and have good relationships with him. I think that part of that is because of the working relationship I have with Leopold...just in the context of being able to relate back to some of the things that we are talking about [in RFSWG].

Other kinds of dialogue with elected officials are more indirect, but respondents nevertheless say these conversations have the potential to be influential.

I got to give a keynote speech for Colin Peterson for his Farm Policy Forum in Minnesota and [the] Leopold [Center] played a role in that. Colin Peterson chairs the [U.S.] House Agriculture Committee. He is a Minnesota congressman, and I have certainly been able to advance my work in southeast Minnesota and other regions of Iowa because of things I've learned at [RFSWG].... In Wisconsin, I [also] spoke at the Upper Midwest Organics conference and I was speaking immediately before Senator Herb Cole from Wisconsin...Herb Cole is on...the United States Senate Appropriations Committee for Agriculture. Cole was basically about to announce his position, which is quite strong and positive on organics, but he doesn't really get the local foods argument yet. At the same time, I was able to put some interesting content in front of his ears, and you don't know what those ramifications might be in the long haul. He saw and heard people giving me a standing ovation for my economic analysis—that doesn't hurt.

Others say they are trying to influence policy on a more local basis by inviting those

policymakers to meetings. This, they report, is a result of increased awareness about the role public policy plays in promoting viable regional food systems.

Our first reaction probably wouldn't have been [to involve] policy people because we tended to think that we wouldn't worry about that when we reached critical mass and when got everything else taken care of. But the more we get into, we find that probably the single, common largest barrier may very well be policy itself. So, at some of our meetings we had county board supervisors; at other food meetings we had state representatives.

Another tack RFSWG participants say they are taking to address policy is asking questions about specific policies that are not commonly understood. One example of this, as previously stated in the section on Stabilizing Farm Enterprises, is the story about the farmer who said he was told by an institution they could not buy from him because Iowa food safety code prohibited it. The RFSWG participant who told this story, himself a government employee, responded by contacting the appropriate government agency to confirm whether this was true.

Either way, I am going to go back to the [institution] and to the producer and I will follow up with everyone involved, and I'm keeping them posted whether it is the answer we want. If it is not the answer we want, we need to see what we can do to get it changed.

Again, these remarks suggest that asking questions does have the potential to impact public policy and enforcement. Yet there are risks to asking questions. The respondent above qualified his statements with the comment, "I have to be really careful that I do not put myself in a position that I shouldn't be in. I have to be politically correct."

Another RFSWG participant who is both a landowner and affiliated with a public institution is also asking questions, and like the one above, is keenly aware of the risks. He wants to support the entry of new producers into agriculture but described policy challenges that prevent him from doing so.

I [went] to the [local] FSA office as a landowner and [said], 'I want [someone] to raise 10 acres of potatoes [on my land] and I want to take it out of my corn base. What is going to happen?' I needed to get an interpretation on [the policy that penalizes this]. I said, 'Send me as high as you possibly can to get an interpretation and an explanation' because [the local FSA office is] afraid to say. Talking with a friend of mine who has been involved in ag policy development for the last 20 years about this specific subject, he said that actually what happened at the federal level is that fruit and vegetable organizations were... afraid that conventional [corn] producers were going to get into vegetable production. So if you put that [corn base penalty] into [agricultural policy], a conventional producer would be discouraged from going into food production. When you start digging into this, you better be careful who you are poking at because you don't know who is going to get hit. [The local FSA] person told me to take [it] and run it clear up the pole and then you are going to find out where the real objections are. I can do it as a landowner...

As these comments suggest, RFSWG respondents find themselves in the common position of understanding the issues and possibly the policies, but don't always know how government agencies will interpret or enforce those policies depending on the politics involved. Respondents report that RFSWG, to some degree, provides them resources for finding answers to their policy questions but they still encounter challenges when trying to firmly establish how specific policies work in practice.

One RFSWG respondent expressed frustration with the working group in terms of its ability (or inability) to effectively address and change policy. *"When I go to those [RFSWG] meetings, I do not get a sense that they are [addressing policy]... They are leaving the policy stuff up to other people. I don't think that that is right."* While some view this as a lack of will on the part of the working group, others view it as a structural constraint related to their affiliation with public-serving institutions. They say their hands are tied when it comes to supporting favorable regional food system policies.

I have the impression... that really we are not free and clear as university [representatives] to just go buzzing around talking to legislators. There is a chain of command... Even if I were so inclined, I would probably have to think twice about [lobbying for policy] because the last thing I would want to do is imperil or bring some kind of disapprobation on top of the regional food systems working group... I don't think the channels are wide open for a faculty member to jump onto that wagon.

Yet other RFSWG members not associated with the university or government agencies are free and sometimes willing to lobby for regional food system friendly policies. These include people in the private sector as well as representatives of sustainable agriculture non profits. One respondent representing the non profit sector said, on policy,

I spoke last year in Peoria, Illinois to a conservation and food group, and an email from that group has indicated to me just within the last month or two that that presentation led to the passage of a House and Senate bill waiting for the Governor's signature to adopt a Woodbury [Iowa]-type [county-based organic tax abatement/buy local] policy for the entire state of Illinois.

He went on to say that,

[The Community Food Security Coalition] has a Healthy Food and Communities Act which didn't get in the Farm Bill. But funding for the community food program was authorized, but not mandated, so it is not likely to get any money. These are not things that came out of RFSWG directly but they certainly are things that RFSWG contributes to by having the experience and by showing that you can do local food organizing with some sophistication.

Thus, it is clear that RFSWG has engaged and influenced participants who are able and willing to lobby for regional food system policies, but policy efforts are limited, particularly among participants who represent publicly funded institutions. RFSWG participants are, however, able to articulate that politics drive policies that determine the extent to which homegrown food systems are able to flourish. Learning how policies work in practice is just one step in a string of many that are needed to create the conditions that effectively grow strong regional food systems. The following story provides a good example.

In 2007 one of the geographically based regional food system groups supported by RFSWG, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm (NIFF) Coalition, was distributing an Institutional Food Survey to collect information about activities and attitudes towards local food purchasing as part of its Kellogg-funded Food and Fitness Initiative (FFI). During distribution of the survey, personnel from hospitals and nursing homes were reporting they would like to purchase local foods but said state policy prohibited those purchases. Several even reported that they had been written up by state health facility inspectors for making local food purchases and were told they needed to buy all their food from approved vendors.

When NIFF Coalition and FFI leaders learned of this, they contacted the Iowa Department of Public Health for an explanation and written policy of approved vendors. From their contacts at IDPH, they learned that nobody could find language in the Iowa code that supported these enforcement claims and in fact, there is no state policy that requires inspection of fresh whole fruit and vegetable purchases. In a separate incident but at the same time, a representative from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's (IDALS) Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development had been contacted by a farmer. This farmer had tried to sell produce to a health facility but was told by the institution that state policy prohibited it. In the fall of 2007, members of the NIFF coalition attending a Regional Food System Working Group meeting hosted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture shared their story with the group. The IDALS representative who had been in contact with the farmer was in the audience and heard their concerns, and was prompted to follow up by conducting an extensive search of Iowa code. When she could not find reference to such regulations, the representative identified and communicated with the appropriate agency that would most likely address the issue: the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeal's Division of Health Facilities. The Health Facilities Division is the certification agency responsible for inspecting, licensing, and certifying various health care entities, as well as health care providers and suppliers operating in Iowa.

After six months of negotiations, in March, 2008, the IDALS representative reported, "After six months of correspondence with the Department of Health Facilities we have a document that clarifies the purchasing of local fruits and vegetables. [T]he last draft issued left a feeling of skepticism about purchasing locally. [The Chief of the Division of Health Facilities] has revised the document and I feel this is fair and does not discriminate against local purchasing. I had asked her if this ruling would include hospital purchases as well. Additionally, I asked if she would make this available to all nursing homes and inspectors to eliminate the confusion that currently exists." (However, it was the IDALS Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development which ultimately took responsibility to mail the statement out to 402 nursing homes and hospitals across the state.) Below is text from the statement, titled "Purchase and Use of Fresh Produce in Nursing Facilities":

The Department has recently received an inquiry regarding the purchase or use by nursing facilities of locally grown raw agricultural products, such as fresh apples, melons, sweet corn, etc. Although there is no specific rule or regulation that addresses the purchase or use of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, nursing facilities and other health care facilities should follow standard food safety procedures when working with these food items.

All practices related to the safe procurement, storage, preparation and service of any food in a health care facility would also apply to locally grown fruits and vegetables. When considering the purchase or acceptance of fresh produce from any source, the facility should inspect the food and reject or discard any showing evidence of fungal or insect infestation. Any items that have an altered appearance, odor, or texture should be examined and discarded as necessary. All fresh produce should be thoroughly washed before use. Bruised or damaged areas should be cut out before preparing the food. Any fruit or vegetable that has been cut or sliced prior to delivery should be rejected by the facility.

The following is quoted from [the Chief of the Health Facilities Division], *"You can distribute the attached file as you deem appropriate. We think it might be best if you simply reference the Department's position, as reflected by the contents of the attached document, rather than try to describe or characterize it. That way, there will be no misunderstanding. This document would also apply to hospitals. We plan to publish this document in our Spring edition of Insight and will post it as a Hot Notice on the Department's website."* As of April 22, 2008, the information had not yet been posted on the Health Facilities Division's website.

One of the FFI co-conveners reported that a week after the clarification document was released, she attended an FFI county planning team meeting where hospital personnel were delighted to report they had received the letter and were now able to purchase local produce from local growers. The letter, dated April 3, 2008 and issued on IDALS letterhead, reads (italics added):

Dear Nutritionist/Food Service Personnel

By purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers within your community, you not only offer your residents fresher fruits and vegetables; you also provide a boost to the local economy. The Center for Disease Control defines healthy communities in its Designing and Building Healthy Places page as "A community that is continuously creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential."

You can feel good about the additional health benefits you provide to your residents when you purchase local foods, as these foods will generally be fresher and the fresher the products, the more nutrients they contain. Many of the varieties of fruits and vegetables offered through local supermarkets and vending sources are selected for the ability to harvest and transport them, and neither for their flavor nor nutrient content.

We have been working with the Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA), Division of Health Facilities to obtain clarification regarding the ability of nursing homes and hospitals to purchase fruits and vegetables from local farmers. The following statement is from DIA "All practices related to the safe procurement, storage, preparation and service of any food in a health care facility would also apply to locally grown fruits and vegetables."

The document, from the Division of Health Facilities is attached for your reference. Please post this document or keep a copy available for your procurement and food preparation personnel. I hope you will make every effort to support your local farmer and treat your residents to the goodness local foods offer.

If you need help locating local growers, you can utilize one of the many on-line directories such as that offered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship or you may contact [IDALS staff by e-mail or by phone]. You may access our directory through our website at: <http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/agDiversification.asp>.

CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation provides evidence that the VCP project is indeed meeting its mission of facilitating information exchange and collaboration to foster healthy value chains. Interviews with participants show the CoPs are building the capacity of ISU, ISU Extension, Iowa farm-serving non profits, community based organizations, producer associations, government agencies, and other institutions to more effectively and efficiently support diverse farm-based enterprises engaged in activities that contrast in some way from commodity food and agricultural systems. In the process, the CoPs are also influencing commodity partners to change customs and practices. These achievements are made possible by facilitating connections between a vast range of different partners along the value chain, which creates better communication, understanding, coordination, and collaboration. These evaluation results suggest it's not enough to create support networks for producers. To ensure regional food systems and niche markets survive in Iowa, it is also necessary to create and sustain support networks for support providers themselves.