

4.2 CSA Structure and Organization

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Lecture Outline: CSA Structure and Organization

A. The Organization of Community Supported Agriculture Operations

1. Types of CSA organization
 - a. Farmer-run CSA – Farmer actively manages production system, often hiring both field labor and an administrative assistant/CSA manager to manage distribution, outreach, billing, etc. (most common CSA model)
 - b. Community-run CSA – Often a community-initiated CSA where grower is hired to produce crops and community organizes distribution and outreach
 - c. Shared management CSA – Often a community-initiated CSA, where the community supporters actively participate in assisting in administration, outreach, distribution, and some farm labor
2. Potential roles and responsibilities within Community Supported Agriculture programs
 - a. Farmer/operator – Manages agricultural production system (e.g., crop planning; manages work crew; tractor work; engages in day-to-day field activities)
 - b. CSA manager – Manages public relations, share distribution, community outreach, billing, membership recruitment, newsletter production, special events coordination
 - c. Field crew/labor – Field work (tractor work, planting, irrigation, cultivation, harvest, and pack), distribution/delivery, staffing markets
 - d. Core group – Averages 5–12 people and includes farmer(s) and CSA shareholders. May accept responsibilities including: administrative responsibilities (see CSA manager, above), special events/festivals, addressing legal issues, developing low-income share program, or contributions of expertise in any area (see Appendix: Core Group Responsibilities for a sample of the roles filled by CSA core group members)
3. Variations and innovations on the CSA model
 - a. Mixed vegetable CSA – Most common form of CSA, providing a wide diversity of fresh annual vegetables
 - b. Fruit and vegetable CSA – Many CSAs offer fresh fruit that is produced by the CSA farmers themselves, or through purchasing from other growers, as part of their shares (or as supplemental shares)
 - c. Grains, beans, seed CSA – A small number of CSAs offer rare varieties of fresh grains, beans, and seeds as part of their offerings
 - d. Meat, dairy, and other products – Many CSAs purchase meat and dairy products from other producers and offer them as part of their shares. Many CSA operations are now purchasing bulk food (e.g., tropical fruits) and food supplies from wholesale distributors and reselling these items to their shareholders in order to accommodate the “one-stop shopping” that many consumers prefer.
 - e. Multiple farm efforts – Many CSA operations have teamed with producers of different crops to collectively supply the wide diversity of produce and other foods that consumers prefer. Example: Two Small Farms on California’s Central Coast, a CSA made up of two farms that occupy two distinct climate zones, allow the growers to produce both cool-season and heat-loving crops for their CSA members.

B. A Profile of Community Supported Agriculture in the U.S.

What does the CSA movement look like and how well is it meeting the economic and social goals commonly associated with it? (Adapted from CSA Across the Nation: Findings from the 1999 Survey. Center for Integrated Agriculture Systems. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin at Madison. See CSA Research Bibliography in Unit 4.0)

1. Characteristics of U.S. CSA farms in 1999
 - a. Geographical distribution of CSAs – CSA programs are concentrated in 3 geographical areas: the Northeast, the West Coast, and the North Central states. Over 50% of CSA farms are located in 7 states. These states have large metropolitan areas with many consumers meeting the common profile of CSA subscribers (upper middle class, well educated, urban).
 - b. Years in operation – Range of 1–15 years with an average of 5.5 years in operation
 - c. Size of operation – CSA operations tend to be smaller than U.S. farms in general, with over 70% of respondents producing on between 10–49 acres. Eighteen acres is the median size of CSA farms surveyed, with a median of 3 acres devoted solely to CSA production.
 - d. Business structure
 - i. 63% sole proprietorship; 12% partnerships; 14% “alternative forms of organization” (e.g., cooperatives and nonprofits)
 - ii. In addition to CSA, many farms sell produce through other direct market venues (e.g., farmers’ markets, farm stands, and/or wholesale); 58% used at least half of their crop land for CSA; 37% used more than 90% of their land for CSA, indicating that many farms focused on CSA as the primary farm enterprise.
 - e. Land ownership – A significant proportion of CSA farms did not own the land they operated on; 27% indicated owning no land, and 17% reported owning less than 10 acres. Most CSA farms obtain land from other land owners through a variety of means (e.g., lease). 21% of respondents reported having alternative land tenure arrangements (e.g., with nonprofit conservation organizations, churches, universities, etc.).
 - f. Hired labor/workers used on CSA farms – Range of hired workers: 0–50; median value: 2–3 workers. Many farms rely on family and/or shareholder labor.
 - g. Cultural practices used – A majority (94%) reported using organic and biodynamic production practices: 41% Certified Organic; 43% Organic (practices non-certified); 9.5% Biodynamic; 4.4 “other”
 - h. Core groups – 72% of CSA farm respondents had no core group. Of the 28% of CSA respondents with core groups, 16% of the core groups served in an advisory capacity and 12% had decision-making powers. In this survey, CSA operations with core groups had a \$10,000 higher median annual income than CSAs without core groups.
 - i. CSA operator characteristics
 - i. Ethnicity – 97% White/Non-Hispanic, 1% Hispanic
 - ii. Gender – 61% male, 39% female
 - iii. Age and experience – CSA farmers tend to be younger (25–54 years of age) and with fewer years of farming than principal farm operators surveyed in the 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture
 - iv. Education – Highly educated, with 95% of primary farmers having attended or graduated from college
 - j. Farm and family income data – Median gross CSA income: \$15,000; median gross farm annual income: \$20,000–\$30,000. Over 60% of CSA farmers reported less than \$10,000 in non-farm income.
 - k. Community activities and special events – 81% provide special events at their farms including: potluck dinners, farm tours, and educational programs for children. 51% of the responding CSA farms offered some type of low-income program for community members. CSA farms with core groups offered the majority of community activities and low-income programs.

C. Challenges Commonly Faced by CSA Farms

1. Production complexities – In order to provide for the desires of their shareholders, many CSA operations produce more than 30 different crops. This makes crop planning, cultivation, harvest, and crop rotation very complex and thus requires a great deal of knowledge and management oversight.
2. Administrative complexities – Correspondences with shareholders, billing, distribution of shares, coordinating community support events, etc., all require significant amounts of time and skills in building a social organization
3. Turnover in shareholders – As CSA shareholders do not always continue from year to year, recruitment is an ongoing responsibility. Shareholder retention rate averages 60–70%.
4. Pressure of providing high quality and diversity in shares on a weekly basis
5. Customer preferences that lie outside the format of the CSA (e.g., more choices in crops)
6. Labor challenges – CSA farms are almost continually planting and harvesting a wide diversity of crops throughout the growing season. As with any fresh vegetable or fruit operation, harvesting, weed management, and post-harvest handling on a CSA farm represent a large proportion of total farm labor and require careful oversight.
7. Community involvement – Involving community members/shareholders in farm labor or activities requires additional training and management oversight
8. Land security – Like other forms of sustainable agriculture, which involve considerable investment of time, money, and materials, and investment in the development of soil fertility and infrastructure, CSA operations share the challenge of access to affordable lands close to urban areas where CSA farming usually thrives. Innovative ways of creating affordable and secure access to land are being developed and are addressed in Unit 6: Land Tenure Options.
9. CSA income and expenses
 - a. Expenses – As CSA shares sold to members do not cover the cost of initial capital investment for farm equipment, CSA farmers will need to seek sources of financing (e.g., approach banks with business plan or make large purchases as they become possible within the farm budget) to cover major start-up costs
 - b. Income – Many CSA farmers report difficulties in receiving adequate returns for their labor, and lack adequate health care and retirement security. Transparent budgeting and educating members about the true cost of production are essential in building a supportive and knowledgeable CSA where the needs of both farmer and shareholders are met.

D. Community Supported Agriculture Training and Education Opportunities

1. UCSC CASFS Farm & Garden Program – Provides a six-month residential training program in organic farming and gardening. Includes CSA curriculum and training (see: www.ucsc.edu/casfs).
2. Education and Training Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture – See: www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/AFSIC_pubs/edtr.htm for a comprehensive listing of colleges, Universities, and nonprofit organizations providing educational opportunities in sustainable agriculture
3. Robyn Van En Center – Information clearinghouse on CSA (see: www.csacenter.org)
4. Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT) – CRAFT is a cooperative effort, currently made up of 16 organic and biodynamic farms in New York and Massachusetts, organized to enhance educational opportunities for farm interns. Every other week from April through October, interns from all participating farms gather at one farm for a visit and/or workshop. Each visit includes an overview of the farm as well as a hands-on demonstration of one or two specific topics, including CSA-related topics.

5. Angelic Organics' CSA Learning Center – The CSA Learning Center is a nonprofit resource center (501(c)3) that provides opportunities for diverse community members, prospective farmers, and CSA shareholders from the greater Chicago area. Projects include youth education programs, models for developing low-income CSA shares, and technical assistance and training programs for regional producers (see: www.csalearningcenter.org).

Appendix: Job Descriptions for the Genesee Valley Organic Community Supported Agriculture (GVOCSA) Core Group (a participatory 160-member CSA)

One Clerk

- Keep minutes at monthly core group meetings
- Report on action items at end of meetings
- Check up with people who have accepted assignments

One Registrar

- Keep membership list up to date
- Serve as one of several contact people for information about CSA
- Prepare list of members for large/bulk mailing

Eight Distribution Coordinators (4 coordinators for each pick-up day)

- Each coordinator covers 4 to 5 distribution days during the 26-week season
- Coordinator arrives early to distribution point to check distribution list from farm against boxes in cooler
- Oversee work of helpers who prepare bulk produce and boxes for pickup
- Check in members as they come for shares
- Collect money
- Distribute flyers or recipe sheets for the week
- Stock tables with vegetables for shares
- Break down, clean up, and return necessary materials to farm
- Submit bulk orders and payments to farm
- Assure coordination among other distribution coordinators
- Organize annual meeting to review procedures, train new coordinators
- Ensure necessary supplies (e.g., bags, boxes) are available; makes sure cooler is working properly
- Follow up on repeated no-shows for pick up
- Make sure leftover food goes to soup kitchen or local families

One Website Manager

- Manage GVOCSA website: add and remove recipes and news, answer queries, add links, archive newsletters

Two Schedulers

- Oversee member sign ups for work dates at farm and on distribution
- Prepare copy of schedules for mailing to members (members are responsible for finding replacements and trading work times; they are asked to inform the scheduler of changes made)
- Receive weekly attendance reports from farmers and distribution coordinators
- Reschedule members who miss work slots

One Special Order Coordinator

- Arrange with other farms for additional products on need basis
- Prepare sign-up sheets so members can place orders
- Collect money and forward to farms
- Arrange for pick up and distribution of products

Two Treasurers

- Set up bookkeeping system
- Collect deposits from members before season begins
- Prepare member contracts
- Help new members fill out contracts
- Collect payments and deposit in bank account
- Put up reminders when payments are due
- Pay farmers
- Pay bills for Core and distribution expenses
- Arrange for scholarships for members who need them
- Make monthly reports to Core on state of finances
- Prepare end-of-season financial report

One Farmer

- Report to monthly Core meetings on what has been happening at the farm
- Represent the farm at Core meetings

Two Newsletter Editors

- Collect articles, recipes, jokes and announcements for bimonthly issues of newsletter
- Format, copy and mail/e-mail newsletter to members
- Oversee big annual mailing of beginning-of-season information to members

Two Outreach Coordinators

- Design outreach plan for recruiting new members
- Oversee mailing of annual letter with 3 CSA brochures to each member
- Write press releases for church, temple, environmental groups' newsletters
- Make presentations on CSA at meetings, or arrange for farmers to do so
- Line up media opportunities for farmers to publicize CSA
- Make special efforts to recruit low-income members

One Winter Share Coordinator

- Sign members up for winter shares
- Arrange for distribution site
- Hold meeting with members who sign up
- Recruit helpers for distribution from among members buying winter shares
- Oversee food delivery to site, distribution, and clean up

One New Member Coordinator

- Identify new members who need guidance of experienced member
- Recruit experienced members and make pairs
- Twice during season, check in with experienced members to make sure pairs are functioning well
- Get report from pairs at end of season

One Social Coordinator

- Arrange for early-in-season picnic
- Arrange for a few people to bring snacks, provides nametags, and encourages members to linger and socialize at pick-up stations
- Organize end-of-season banquet

One Phone/Art Project Person

- Call members each week to remind them of distribution work
- Designs posters or signs when needed

Ad hoc Children's Committee

- Help farmers design and develop play area for children
- Collect toys for farm

