

Local Food Leader Certification: Pilot Evaluation

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach
Farm, Food and Enterprise Development

The Local Food Leader certification is an individual skill development course for beginning local food practitioners and local food supporters. Local Food Leader teaches several foundational competencies critical to successful involvement in community food systems development. The goal of the certification is to increase capacity for local food practitioners working on food systems programs around the United States. This certification includes an in-person workshop followed by online modules; after completing these, participants have the option to attend a train-the-trainer workshop which qualifies them to manage various components of the certification in their own communities.

This project was funded through an Agriculture Marketing Center subcontract with additional support from community partners. The following report details the impacts, successes, challenges, and findings from the pilot Local Food Leader Certifications. This report is organized by workshop findings, followed by online modules findings, conclusion, and next steps.

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Local Food Leader Certification

Program

The Local Food Leader certification program consists of an in-person workshop followed by four online modules for full certification.

From February 2018 – January 2019, the Food Systems Team hosted Local Food Leader in-person workshops in a total of seven states. They also offered online-only participation to additional pilot partner states (see Table 1). A total of 183 people participated in the workshops, of whom 112 registered for the online modules to complete certification; 24 participants completed the full certification. Of those that received their certification, 23 individuals participated in the Local Food Leader Train-the-Trainer course and are able to teach the basic certification course.

Table 1: Participant counts by state and enrollment in each level of the program.

	Certification			Train-the-Trainer	
	In-Person Workshops	Online Modules		Training	Trainer Agreements ¹
		Partial Completion	Full Completion		
States					
Alaska	24	11	3	3	2
California	-	-	1	1	1
Colorado	21	6	3	3	3
Southern Region	-	3	1	1	-
Iowa	30	27	7	5	3
Kentucky	-	2	1	1	1
Nebraska	-	20	3	3	3
North Carolina	11	7	2	2	-
Pennsylvania	46	20	2	2	-
Texas	40	13	1	1	1
U.S. Virgin Islands	11	3	0	1	-
Totals	183	112	24	23	14

Certification learning objectives

- Understand global, local, and community food systems.
- Organize coalitions that work towards collective community goals and assist in the development of mission, vision, and core values.
- Manage and facilitate conversations effectively between dynamic groups of people.

¹ After participating in the train-the-trainer course, individuals sign an agreement and pay a fee to offer Local Food Leader training within their own locations or in partnership with the Iowa State Food Systems team.

- Utilize an equity lens with food systems development.
- Understand community processes that include facilitation, project management, partnership, and building successful teams.
- Provide partners with tools and resources for developing various food systems sectors: production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and resource management (grants, best practices, research, etc.)
- Engage and empower community partners to work collectively towards a vibrant, healthy community food system that meets the needs of the participants and community members.
- Know about tools that exist to create food systems reports.
- Develop successful teams for successful project implementation.
- Construct plans of work, project scopes, and budgets.
- Understand the uses and types of logic models.
- Create evaluation tools that showcase project outcomes.

Evaluation Methods

The following report details findings and feedback from the Local Food Leader workshops and online modules, including analysis of quantitative and qualitative results collected through anonymous surveys. All quantitative results were analyzed using Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel; all qualitative results were analyzed using NVivo; findings shared in this report represent the most-discussed themes. This report first presents data from in-person workshops, followed by online modules.

Workshop Evaluation

Workshop participants were asked to voluntarily complete an anonymous paper survey the day of completing the workshop. There was a 69% completion rate for the workshop evaluations. This survey consisted of sections on usefulness and statements of agreement.

The quantitative results were collected using a scale of one to five, or strongly disagree to strongly agree. Strongly agree (5) and agree (4) were grouped; findings are displayed for both the individual states and aggregated results.

The qualitative responses were collected through open-ended questions, and common themes were identified based on responses to the following questions:

- What was the most helpful component of the workshop?
- What is one thing you will change in your work after participating in this workshop?

Workshop Findings

The following sections detail the findings from the Local Food Leader pilot workshops hosted in Iowa, North Carolina, Texas, Alaska, Colorado, Pennsylvania and the US Virgin Islands between February 2018 and January 2019.

Evolution of Workshops

At the beginning of certification development, partner organizations, or hosts, were identified to offer each workshop and publicize locally. Workshops were offered first in person, and participation in online modules was optional based on desire to receive full certification. Hosts supported by providing space for the workshop and confirming the location for in-person workshops, confirming the agenda, and providing place-based materials and presentations if desired.

Reflections and observations were shared between teachers after each workshop to improve program content. Initially, a pre-then-post evaluation was conducted; however, due to a low response rate for the pre-evaluation, this transitioned to a post-then-pre evaluation for participants to record both knowledge levels at the same time.

The pilot allowed for confirmation on the most effective schedule and agendas for workshops; confirming design of accessible documents (printed slide decks, page numbers, and section tabs); appropriate fees for program sustainability; levels of certification including train-the-trainer; online module content; and needed program materials, such as partnership agreements with hosts.

The agenda and activities for the workshop were adjusted based on feedback from participant evaluations. More group activities were added to each workshop section, and sections of the agenda were moved to allow the sections to build off each other. Additionally, the team realized more time was needed for deeper discussions in both the Working in Food Systems and Equity sections of the workshop. The Evaluation section was moved earlier on the agenda for a lunch evaluation activity. This allowed for participants to actively evaluate a topic rather than choosing a hypothetical project to evaluate on their own.

Usefulness

The workshops consisted of six sections with the following objectives:

Working in food systems: understanding of potential collaborations; new awareness of ways food systems connects across asset areas; new understanding of what is happening locally.

Equity, a foundation to our work: new understanding of different perspectives; increasing ability to have inclusive conversations and be open-minded; identifying new activities to discuss challenging topics; developing ability to share and lift up others.

Leadership: understanding of personal values; identifying how values relate to leadership styles; understanding various qualities of leaders.

Evaluation: understand the difference between systems, project, and program evaluation; ability to develop an evaluation logic model.

Facilitation and capacity-building: identifying new facilitation strategies; increased confidence in facilitation techniques; understanding the difference between program management and facilitation.

Professional development: identifying personal professional development needs and desires; understanding the importance of a professional development plan; understanding the different types of professional development.

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which each section of the workshop was useful. The following figure displays the overall usefulness for each section from greatest to least.

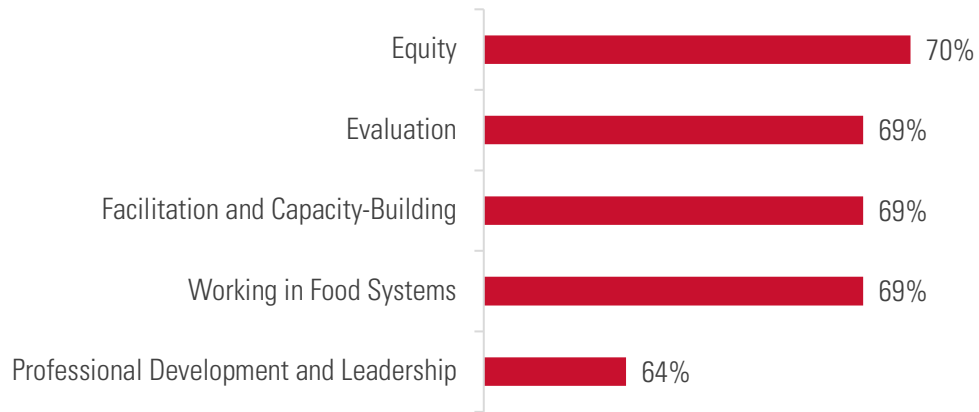


Figure 1: Overall usefulness.

Equity was rated as the most useful section of the Local Food Leader workshop, followed closely by evaluation, facilitation and capacity-building, and working in food systems. Equity was also consistently seen as useful in the individual state workshop results as well (see Table 2).

Table 2: Usefulness by state.

	Total %
Iowa	
Equity	89%
Evaluation	65%
Facilitation and Capacity-Building	63%
North Carolina	
Evaluation	70%
Facilitation and Capacity-Building	70%
Equity	50%
Texas	
Facilitation and Capacity-Building	71%
Evaluation	58%
Equity	54%
Alaska	
Professional Development and Leadership	79%
Evaluation	79%
Facilitation and Capacity-Building	74%

Colorado	
Equity	83%
Working in Food Systems	77%
Evaluation	71%
Pennsylvania	
Working in Food Systems	93%
Professional Development and Leadership	71%
Evaluation	68%
U.S. Virgin Islands	
Equity	88%
Working in Food Systems	88%
Facilitation and Capacity-Building	75%

The Local Food Leader workshop increases awareness, understanding, and confidence to work with individuals, organizations, and institutions to develop community food systems. This evaluation shows that equity and evaluation were consistently seen as the most useful sections of the LFL workshops. This is reflected in the overall findings for usefulness as well as the individual state findings, where four of the seven states rated both equity and evaluation in the top three sections (see Table 2). It's interesting to note that while facilitation and capacity-building was present in the top three ratings in five of the seven states and working in food systems only in three of the seven states, both sections resulted in an aggregated total of 69%.

Networking was the most common theme discussed in the open-ended section of the survey. Networking is a critical component of food systems work and is an underlying factor for successful projects. Many participants shared their appreciation of having multiple opportunities to connect with others both through workshop activities and built-in networking breaks. One participant stated that "networking connections through the food systems activity" was a useful component, while another respondent shared that "having feedback from others in the group-learning [settings]" was helpful. "Meeting a diverse group of leaders that can help drive this conversation further after today" was shared by another participant.

Participants were able to learn about organizations, programs, and projects occurring in their community and region through networking breaks. "It was useful to have so many different voices and communities heard in the room . . . [and] hear perspectives and programs," one participant shared. Another respondent discussed they felt it was beneficial to "learn from others in the group about what's happening with our local and regional food system." Some participants provided feedback that contained aspects of networking such as, "seeing beyond myself and in the institution where I work to connect with others who are actively working to improve the local food system."

Other common skills that emerged included: "the food systems diagram" and "developing common language," which provide context for working with partners and allowed participants to begin thinking about their role in the food system. Other participants described personal growth through understanding "self-work and working in food systems" as the most helpful pieces of the LFL workshop.

Statements of Agreement

Participants were asked to rate each of the following statements for agreement. The following figure displays the overall findings for each statement from greatest to least.



Figure 2: Overall statements of agreement.

The majority of participants, overall, indicated they learned something new from the workshop; this was also consistently rated highly by participants in the individual state findings (see Table 3).

Table 3: Statements of agreement by state.

	Total %
Iowa	
I learned something new from the workshop	95%
I would recommend this workshop to others	95%
The workshop was helpful for my professional development goals	79%
North Carolina	
I learned something new from the workshop	90%
I would recommend this workshop to others	80%
The workshop was helpful for my professional development goals	70%
Texas	
I learned something new from the workshop	88%
I obtained new ideas for partnership development and community engagement	67%
I feel confident in my work with communities in regard to food systems development	57%
Alaska	
I feel confident in my work with communities in regard to food systems development	84%
I learned something new from the workshop	83%
The workshop was helpful for my professional development goals	83%

Colorado	
I learned something new from the workshop	94%
I have a better understanding of working in food systems	89%
I would recommend this workshop to others	82%
Pennsylvania	
I learned something new from the workshop	87%
I have a new understanding of engaging new partners in food systems development	83%
I have a better understanding of working in food systems	80%
US Virgin Islands	
I learned something new from the workshop	88%
I have new ideas of how to engage with new stakeholders	88%
I would recommend this workshop to others	88%

The LFL workshop teaches individual skills and use of tools and resources within the context of food systems. The above results signify that, overall, participants learned various new skills, tools, and resources taught in the workshop. This finding is reflected both in the overall statements of agreement results, as well as the individual state results, where learning something new from the workshop was rated the highest in six of the seven states and found in the top three in all of the seven state results. It could also be inferred that participants felt this workshop was worth their time and helpful to their work, as most (75%) of participants responded that they would recommend this workshop to others. Food systems development, professional development, and community engagement were additional themes that emerged in the individual state results; these topics are also reflected in the open-ended sections of the survey.

Many participants responded that they hope to think more critically about the food system, understanding its complexity and the multitude of stakeholders who come into play. For example, one participant stated they hope to “consider much more carefully all parts of the food system network.” Other participants described their plans to include local foods in their work and utilize the framework discussed in the workshop to “pursue local food.” Others mentioned continuing research on the food system and utilizing various skills taught in the workshop, such as facilitating food systems conversations and utilizing a strategic approach for partnership development.

The LFL workshop additionally teaches tools for professional development and evaluation. Many pilot participants shared that they will use the professional development plan worksheet and discuss their goals with their supervisor to strategize how they can further their work. Other ideas included using the food systems sector and assets networking poster within their organization as a method for “determining areas that need addressing,” and utilizing the personal values activity to further understand “work-life balance.” The evaluation section teaches use of logic models and ways to specify project outcomes and goals, while providing ways to measure successes and impacts. Participants shared that they will utilize the evaluation logic model in their work to enhance methods of measuring project and program success. Other participants also described how they will use new evaluation skills to address systems change, such as creating metrics for “increasing food security.”

Engaging various community members and organizations for partnerships was another common theme discussed in the open-ended sections of the survey. One participant explained their hope to “engage more in the community and understand how to better serve them,” as well as considering connection to a larger

scale, such as having a “clear vision of broadening the food system conversation” or using an “equity lens for creating a shared vision and commitment.”

Participants additionally valued workshop content on food systems development, practices, and activities that they could incorporate into their individual work and organizations. Participants discussed various aspects relating to partnership development, tools, methods, and collaboration for engaging their community, stakeholders, and partners in food systems work.

Workshop Conclusion

Participants in the Local Food Leader pilot workshops, in general, felt that components of equity, evaluation, and food systems were beneficial to their work. This is reflected through both the individual state and overall findings for usefulness. Equity and evaluation were consistently seen by participants across all seven states as some of the most useful sections of the pilot workshops. However, the open-ended section of the survey overwhelmingly showed participants value networking.

This evaluation shows that the pilot workshops successfully taught the LFL learning objectives, as exhibited in the statements of agreement. Most participants (89%) felt strongly that they learned something new from the workshop. Although this statement was rated the highest, a majority of participants agreed with each of the six statements. The lowest rating was agreement for having a new understanding of engaging new partners in food systems development (60%).

Continuing these pilot workshops, a third series of Local Food Leader workshops were hosted in national “hubs” (Iowa, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Oregon) in the fall of 2019. The evaluation report for this third series provides further insights into workshops’ successes and impacts. The evaluation report can be found [here](#).

Online Module Evaluation

The following sections detail the findings from the Local Food Leader online modules. The certification consists of four online modules focusing on the following topics:

- Module 1: Local Food Leaders in Community Food Systems
- Module 2: Methods of Engagement and Leadership
- Module 3: Creating Teams and Tools for Success
- Module 4: Evaluation

Participants were asked to voluntarily complete anonymous online surveys after each individual module and after full course completion. There was a 21% completion rate for the surveys, overall. The surveys consisted of sections on satisfaction and statements of agreement.

Quantitative results were collected using the following scales for the following subjects:

- Overall satisfaction: one to seven (very dissatisfied to very satisfied);
- Presentation of information: one to five (very poorly to very well);
- Statements of agreement: one to seven (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Qualitative responses were collected through open-ended questions and common themes were identified based on responses to “What was the most helpful part of the module?”

Online Module Findings

The Local Food Leader certification teaches several foundational competencies critical for successful involvement in community food systems development. While the workshop focuses on individual skills and use of tools and resources, the online modules expand on those skills and concentrate further on intensive curriculum geared for knowledge and behavior change.

Satisfaction

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with each module as well as the full course on a scale of one to seven (strongly dissatisfied to strongly satisfied).

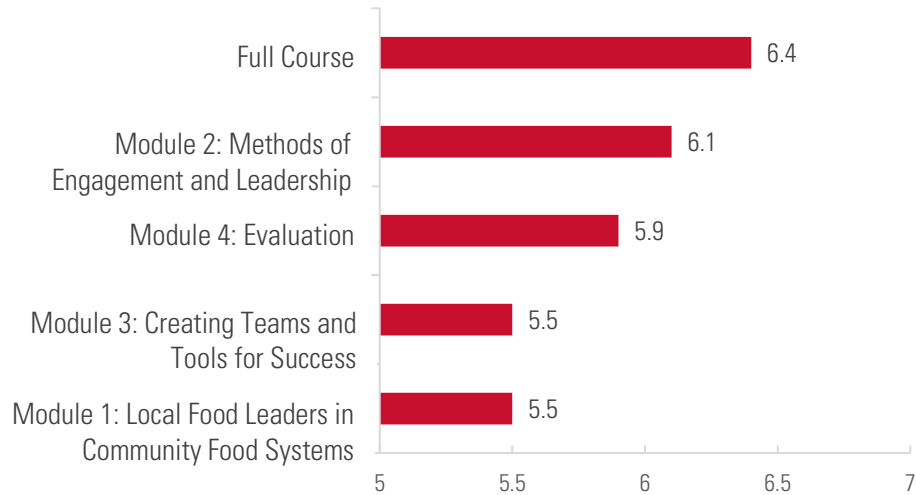


Figure 3: Overall satisfaction.

Local Food Leader teaches several foundational competencies critical for successful involvement in community food systems development. Participants were satisfied with both the individual modules as well as the full certification, resulting in a range of 5.5 to 6.4. Module 2 was rated the highest of the individual modules with an overall satisfaction of 6.1. This module focuses on leadership and engagement, providing information on various methods for engaging and managing coalitions. One participant described that this module provided “great resources;” another shared that they learned multiple practices that they could implement into their food systems work.

Participants were also asked to provide insight as to how the online modules contributed to their individual work. Participants shared that they will use the plan of work taught in Module 2 to help with their team planning. One participant described how some of the resources shared in Module 2 (methods for engagement and leadership) contributed to their “grant work plan.” Another respondent shared they had “several ideas . . . to implement in [their] current food system work.”

Participants were asked to rate how well teachers presented information for each module as well as the full course on a scale of one to five (very poorly to very well).

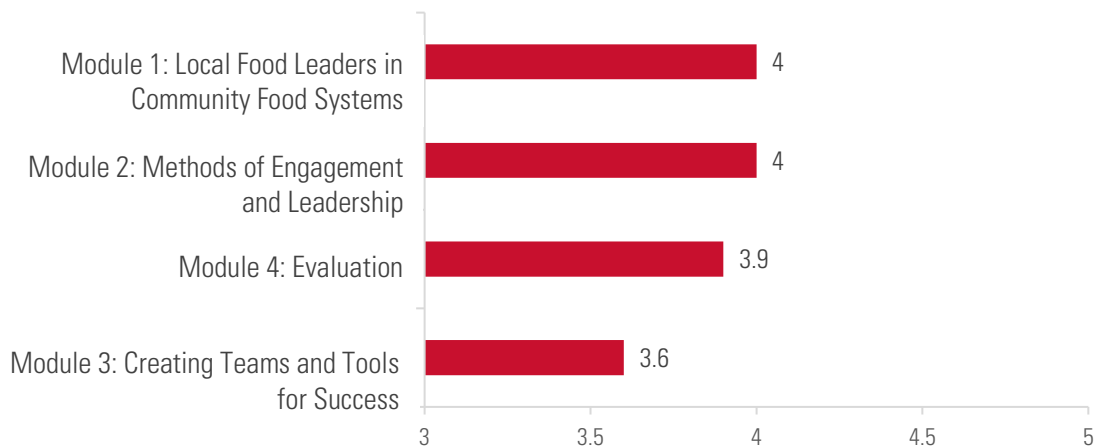


Figure 4: How well information was presented.

According to results in Figure 4, the average for how well information was presented for the full course was 3.9, representing that most participants felt the course was taught well. One respondent elaborated, “Presenters were well qualified and presented great information.” A few participants shared they felt this certification provides good “baseline knowledge” and a “wonderful opportunity for folks new to systems change work to understand the foundation to successful program planning and development.”

One of the most discussed topics in the open-ended portion of the surveys was related to strategic doing and collective impact. Many participants shared they appreciated learning these methods for engaging and developing coalitions and realized their useful application for “real-world scenarios.”

The structure of the online modules consist of presentations, readings, additional resources, and various assignment types incorporated throughout each module. Many of the readings are provided as supplemental instruction that relates to presentations by Iowa State Extension and Outreach staff in addition to external partners. Content directly relates to activities and quizzes within the modules. Many participants shared they felt the recorded presentations were more helpful than the readings that were dispersed throughout the course. One participant described “the online presentations incorporated graphics that were very helpful for understanding the topics”; another shared that the videos were “very helpful and succinctly presented.”

Statements of Agreement

Participants were asked to rate each of the following statements for agreement on a scale of one to seven (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Table 4: Statements of agreement by module.

	Total %
Module 1	
I know different processes for engagement in food systems work	89%
This module helped me consider equity as part of the food system	86%
I have improved understanding of policies that are connected to food systems	69%
I feel more confident about my work in food systems	66%
Module 2	
I have new skills to develop coalitions	93%
I have new skills to develop project teams	90%
I feel more confident about building partnerships in my food systems work	80%
This module shared new ideas for being inclusive through different engagement strategies	80%
I developed new leadership skills that are relevant to my position	67%
Module 3	
I understand the importance of equity in team development	76%
I have new techniques for engaging creatively to discuss food systems opportunities	76%
This module taught me new skills for building effective teams	72%
I am aware of new resources that will be beneficial to my position	56%
I have more confidence in building budgets for food systems projects	48%
Module 4	

This module helped me understand the difference between program, project, and systems evaluation	75%
I understand how to evaluate the impact of my work	75%
I am prepared to make evaluation plans for my work	71%
Full Course	
I feel competent in developing coalitions, food policy councils, and collective action groups	100%
I feel competent in discussing issues of equity in food systems work	90%
I feel comfortable in facilitating challenging discussions	86%
I feel knowledgeable of equity in food systems	71%

The online modules expand on skills learned within workshops and concentrate on intensive curriculum geared for knowledge and behavior change. The results in Table 4 indicate that participants felt most knowledgeable and aware of components related to team development and equity. 100% of respondents who completed the full evaluation claimed they felt competent in developing coalitions, food policy councils, and collective action groups. Nearly all respondents (93%) in Module 2 felt they learned new skills to develop coalitions, followed by 90% of respondents learning new skills to develop project teams.

Participants also felt they gained skills for building effective teams, as evident in the Module 3 findings. One participant shared after completing the certification, “I enjoyed being able to think more critically of how to best construct a successful team,” and another participant expressed they received the “most information from the building effective teams portion” of the certification. One participant also shared that as a whole, this certification provides a good knowledge base and introduction to local food systems and further focuses on “team formation around regional food systems.”

Equity, which is a critical component of food systems work, was also highly rated in the statements of agreement. For example, considering equity as part of food systems was highly rated within Module 1 (86%), and understanding the importance of equity and team development was rated the highest within Module 3 (76%). One participant shared in relation to Module 1 that the “equity pieces were very clear and compelling.” The majority of respondents in the full course evaluation felt competent in discussing issues of equity in food systems work (90%) and felt knowledgeable about equity in food systems (71%). Equity was also found by workshop participants to be the most useful section of the LFL workshop. From this evaluation, it can be concluded that the Local Food Leader online modules successfully taught participants to think critically about the relation of equity to food systems.

Online Modules Conclusion

This evaluation shows that the Local Food Leader online modules successfully taught the certification objectives and further developed individual skills and competence in food systems work. Participants felt that components of equity, team development, coalition management, and facilitation were beneficial to their work. All respondents that completed the course said they felt competent in developing coalitions, food policy councils, and collective action groups. One participant shared that this certification provided them with additional insight and “ideas to be more inclusive.” Another participant expressed gratitude for the certification and stated they “gained a better understanding of group dynamics, leadership, and resources.”

The online modules also supported behavior changes relating to facilitation and evaluation methods, plans of work, and food systems common language. Participants stated they will regularly use the community food systems networking diagram and food systems language taught in certification as a way to facilitate meetings and create shared language within coalitions. One participant stated that they will use resources provided to develop coalitions and “create a project proposal for [a local] initiative.” Participants also expressed that they will use plans of work within their own team(s) and create evaluation plans to better measure and understand their work’s impact.

Pilot Certification Conclusion

The Local Food Leader Pilot Certification was successful in teaching certification objectives and demonstrating food systems competencies for beginning food systems workers. The majority (77%) of workshop participants said they would recommend this program to others and 88% claimed they learned something new. All online modules participants felt competent in areas relating to coalition development, equity, and facilitation. Community engagement and professional engagement were consistently seen as beneficial in both workshop and online modules evaluations. Participants across the board felt that having the ability to connect and network with others in the course was helpful for understanding course content and learning about their community food system.

Some participants shared that an interactive platform for engaging with other participants would have been beneficial to the learning. In response to this feedback, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, Local Food Leader certification has been modified to entirely virtual trainings in response to COVID-19; this also addresses the need for online food systems education nationally. The virtual certification features a blended delivery method where online modules are integrated with virtual workshops, allowing for increased interaction between participants and opportunities for group activities and discussions.

This response is in line with suggestions during the pilot certification that an integrated platform would have been helpful. One participant elaborated they would have like to have “more interaction with other people taking the course.” The first virtual cohort was hosted in the fall of 2020. Virtual cohorts will be offered each spring and fall. For more information on these virtual offerings, please contact Kaley Hohenshell at kaleyh@iastate.edu or visit www.extension.iastate.edu/ffed/cfs.