



Key Components of Success:

What institutions need to know to move beyond procurement policies and build partnerships for an equitable food economy

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In this series of articles on institutional investment in regional food economies, we have shed light on the historical context of the institutional market channel, we have explored how we have arrived at this inflection point for institutional food procurement, and we have highlighted examples of institutions taking innovative steps to advance this work nationwide. In this final piece, we'll explore what key components of success are required in projects that develop the infrastructure we need to supply institutions with food that builds wealth and health for marginalized communities.

To start, we acknowledge the leadership of the many groups who have laid the groundwork of advancing values-based institutional purchasing of food like Farm to Institution New England, Healthcare Without Harm, Real Food Generation, and the Center for Good Food Purchasing, among many others. Their research and activism helped elevate the importance of increasing the demand for food that is fair, nourishing, and regionally sourced. At the same time, leaders like The Common Market, networks like the Wallace Center's Food Hub Community of Practice, and

others have shown that without equal attention paid to developing our capacity to supply this food, we won't realize system-wide transformative change. We know that such massive change requires new infrastructure that must be built with the producers and communities of color who are central to an equitable food economy (and not *for* them), and the work of engaging institutions to invest in that infrastructure is slow, necessary, and immensely promising.

Through our research in developing the Wallace Center's [Institutional Investment Accelerator](#) program, we have identified three key components of successful projects that engage institutions, communities, and producers in this work. Naturally, each project we encountered was unique in its place, stakeholders, and strategies: there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to this work. Nonetheless, each success story we found shared the following key traits, and we hope they offer directions that support other, similar efforts nationwide.

Key Component #1: You Need A Leader

Firstly, without a fierce commitment from leaders to this slow-moving work, no effort to shift these systems can be sustained. In every example we discovered of an institution making these 'upstream' investments (those targeted at the root challenges of purchasing regionally-sourced, sustainable, equitable food) there was a strong, determined leader guiding the work. Often, there were multiple of them, each active in their respective institution.

Each institution using its own purchasing process, but regardless of the structure, it is pivotal to have an internal advocate pushing for these types of programs. Ideally, this person is in a position of leadership and who understands both the intricacies of their institution's budget and the complexities of sourcing products from small-scale food and farm businesses. This doesn't have to be a person at the highest level of leadership- but the greater this individual's ability to navigate and influence the institution's budgetary decisions, the more progress the project can develop.

In some examples, leaders in the institution's sustainability department championed their effort to source locally- citing the institution's commitment to environmental sustainability as the driving force behind the need for such investments (e.g. Ed Hunt , Sustainability Coordinator at UNC-Pembroke). In others, a leader in the economic development department pushed the work forward citing the potential that local sourcing has for local farm and food businesses- and their community at large- to be self-sufficient and have sovereignty over their food economy (e.g. John Hendrix, Director at the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' Economic Development Department). Some examples had leaders from multiple stakeholder groups working in concert to build more shared power across the institution purchasing the food, the businesses supplying it, and the communities consuming it (i.e. the Union City Culinary Center project in Alameda County, California).

Key Component #2: Focus on Supply and Demand without Sacrificing Equity

Thankfully, there's no shortage of programs and nonprofit efforts aimed at elevating the importance of shifting institutional purchasing behavior. Groups like those mentioned above have built their own approaches to harnessing the potential energy that procurement holds, and these approaches have been invaluable in pressuring institutions to consider the sustainability, equity, and economic impact of their food budgets. However, our efforts haven't paid equal attention to supporting the small producers and food manufacturers (especially those who are people of color) whose products are the very lifeblood of these programs. This imbalance has set up the "good food" movement to over-promise and under-deliver results. In order to tackle the harmful racial and economic inequities that are tied to status quo institutional foodservice, it is crucial to prioritize support to BIPOC producers and food processors whose businesses' success is essential to an equitable food economy.

Each of the successful examples of institutional investment we encountered in our research embraces this truth, and the institutions established intentional partnerships with the producers and infrastructure-builders needed to supply the sustainable, local, equitable food they sought to purchase. UNC-Pembroke worked with nearby farmers in its largely Lumbee indigenous community as well as its campus food

service department to meet each end of the value chain's goals simultaneously: the school constructed a walk-in cooler on campus for local farmers to store produce safely and allow Fresh Point (the Sysco-owned distribution company) to incorporate this produce into campus dining. And by leveraging its Food Innovation Center facility, Oregon State University has played a small but pivotal role in a USDA-funded local food initiative to design and supply market-ready, locally-sourced fish and protein patties for institutional foodservice groups and buyers.



Key Component #3: Reciprocity is Key

When it comes to building racial or economic equity into institutional food, what is perhaps more important than any one food contract or financial transaction between buyer and supplier is the development of an honest, reciprocal relationship between partners. Large-volume institutional food service depends on scaled-up production, processing, and distribution: there's no way around that. The ability to scale a food business in our economic paradigm depends on access to capital, land, and other resources that have been stolen from and/or made inaccessible to BIPOC communities for centuries.

To even come close to shifting this very real, ongoing structural inequity, food buyers must make investments that actively undo it. Therefore, whether through a specific purchasing policy or pledge, or through making their own values-based procurement commitments, institutions who purport to champion "resilience", "equity", and even "sustainability" through their food service budgets must make intentional financial and relational investments in farm and food business owned by people of color. And the investments they make must knowingly counteract the legacy of the institution's role in maintaining these inequities- without an honest accounting of how we have arrived at this unlevel economic landscape, how can we hope to change it? This means that institutional leadership must honor the contributions, worthiness, and sovereignty of these producers and stakeholders of color- and share decision-making power with them.

The most promising examples of institutions doing this shared strong institution-to-community relationship pathways, often nurtured through community coalitions. The ARC partnership in Alameda County, CA mentioned above involves Kaiser Permanente and Food Service Partners signing legally binding agreements to achieve community impact metrics that have been established in partnership with the local Emerald Cities Collaborative and a coalition of community leaders. The entire project is a relationship defined by power sharing, and it is a bold step toward establishing an equitable, integrous food service program for Kaiser. See article two in this series to learn more about promising examples of equity-driven institutional investments in food supply chains.



Looking Forward

The future of institutional food could be a bright one. With the renewed interest in supporting small farms, the increased awareness of the importance of these small businesses, and the innovations that abound throughout the sector, there's plenty to be excited about. However, we are going to have to continue dedicating resources and committing ourselves to the slow, complex work of building strong and regional value chains that can meet our anchor institutions' needs. We each have a role to play in supporting the suppliers and the buyers of the institutional food world. If we can learn from the success stories mentioned and in previous pieces and if we continue prioritizing support to producers and processors of color, we may well realize our shared dream of an honest, equitable, resilient food economy for all.

About the Wallace Center

[*The Wallace Center at Winrock International*](#) is a national nonprofit that brings together diverse people and ideas to co-create solutions that build healthy farms, equitable economies, and resilient food systems. Wallace has been a leader in the development of healthy regional food and farming systems for over 35 years, working to scale up the supply and positive environmental, social, and economic benefits of regional, sustainably produced food. We seek to affect systems change to bring benefits to the environment, to communities, and to the farmers and food businesses that are the building blocks of a healthy and equitable food system.

About Kitchen Sync Strategies

[*Kitchen Sync Strategies*](#) believes a smarter, healthier food economy is built around people being in relationship with their food and their farmers. We provide brokerage services to regional suppliers and institutional food buyers, and we provide consulting for stakeholders building stronger, fairer regional food economies.