

Teaching Tips/Notes



Connecting Undergraduates to Dairy Farm to Fork

Introduction

It is no surprise that people have become disconnected from the origins of food as the number of farms in the United States has steadily declined for almost a century and significantly declined since 2007. As the number of farms decreased, options for food prepared outside of the home have dramatically increased including an abundance of fast-food restaurants, take-out options from restaurants, convenience foods, and commercially prepared frozen meals. These options have consequently displaced home prepared meals using locally produced whole foods. As a result we live in society lacking basic food literacy and some believe this change has contributed to the obesity epidemic. One of the learning outcomes of the undergraduate course Food Literacy at Utah State University is for students to define food systems and sustainability. The goal is to give students the opportunity to reconnect with the origins of the food they consume, while aiming to dispel myths about food from farm to fork.

Procedure

Collaborations were made with a representative from the Dairy Council of Utah/Nevada to arrange a fieldtrip for undergraduates enrolled in Food Literacy. The fieldtrip includes a bus ride to tour one of the largest local dairy farms in Cache County, Utah, followed by a presentation and sampling of dairy products at the dairy processing plant Gossner Foods in Logan, Utah. The farm tour is scheduled as one of the weekly three-hour labs as part of the Food Literacy course.

On the bus ride to the dairy farm, the representative from the Dairy Council educates the students on the dairy farm's background, practices and owners. She then allows students to ask any questions they have about dairy farming and milk such as the benefits and drawbacks of pasteurized milk versus raw milk consumption and hormones in milk. At the dairy farm, students tour a carousel milk parlor, view milk tanks and cooling systems, interact with calves, and take a hayride viewing different barns housing various age-groups and stages (pregnant and not milking) of dairy cows. Students learn about how the dairy cows are tracked digitally, which assists with peak nutrition from their nutritionist allowing for optimal milk production, prevention of antibiotics in the milk supply, and monitoring of the health status of each individual dairy cow. Students are given time to ask any questions they have about the dairy farm and processing procedures to the dairy farmers guiding the tour.

After the dairy farm tour, students ride the bus to the same processing plant the milk goes to from the farm visited. At Gossner Foods' dairy processing plant, students watch a video presentation highlighting the history of the plant and the many local farmers that supply the milk to produce their high-quality cheese, ultra-high temperature processed milk, and delicious ice cream. Students are then given time to ask a Gossner employee any questions they may have. If the processing plant is running, the students are able to watch workers on the cheese production lines. At the conclusion of the processing plant visit students enjoy sampling a variety of Gossner milk products.

Assessment

The Food Literacy course has now participated in the dairy farm tour for four semesters. Each semester students are surveyed on whether they would recommend the tour for future students and nearly the entire class responds in agreement. One student said, "Being able to see the process of farm to fork is extremely eye opening" and another student, "I knew farming

was a lot of work, but there is a lot I never thought of.” The majority of students indicated that the dairy farm tour gave them a more positive perception of dairy foods and farming as shown by this students’ comment of surprise by the “strict process to ensure safety and quality.”

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