FoodWorks Internships
WORKING WITH FOOD FROM FARM TO TABLE

Middlebury FoodWorks is an internship program for students who are interested in any aspect of food systems from farm to table. It’s a new model for internships, combining practical work experience and focused academic instruction in an intensive nine-week summer session.

Middlebury students take a great interest in food, as evidenced by the number of activities and organizations on campus that revolve around producing, preparing, and sharing food. The College offers many courses that touch on different aspects of food and the food economy. You can’t study history, geography, sociology, language and culture, the environment, economics, politics, or many other subjects without considering food.

In response to student interest, we are investigating ways to draw more connections between food-related courses, including a food-studies program. Middlebury FoodWorks provides an opportunity for students to concentrate on food and the food economy over the course of a summer.

HOW IT WORKS
The program provides paid internships to cohorts of students who spend the summer working in a particular community. Each student is hired by a business or organization that is part of the local food system. The students work with mentors who teach them how their business or agency operates and how it is tied to other parts of the local food system. The students all live in the same residence, so there are daily opportunities for them to discuss what they are doing and to learn from one another’s experiences.

The first time the program was offered, in the summer of 2012, there was only one team of 14 interns working in Louisville, Kentucky. Last summer, two teams with a total of 26 interns worked in Louisville and Vermont, addressing

“I am a strong believer that agricultural literacy is one of the keys to the future. FoodWorks exposes students to agriculture and makes them aware of food systems. The more people we have who understand how those systems work, the better off we’re all going to be.”

—CHUCK ROSS
Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets
issues such as microenterprise and economic development; education; health and nutrition; food production, processing, and distribution; food access, safety and security; food equity and social justice; sustainable agriculture; and food policy. According to Vermont coordinator Sophie Esser Calvi ’03, “We’re working in a rural, agricultural

state of about 600,000 people and a small city with about the same population. The overlap is really fascinating.”

Each student is given a $2,100 stipend and placed in a job where he or she will be dealing with some aspect of the food system—working at a restaurant, farm, school, food pantry, poverty agency, or public health agency, for example. The stipend is an important feature of the program. Many students need the income they earn from summer jobs and cannot afford to take an unpaid internship, no matter how valuable the experience might be.

The program facilitates communication between the two groups of interns in Vermont and Louisville. Online communications allow them to get a detailed view of food systems in both locations. Students use Facebook, Twitter, and comments posted on a FoodWorks blog to exchange ideas, involve alumni, and share information about food with interested people who are not part of the program or the College community. Weekly video conferences enable them to collaborate remotely.

THE ESSENTIAL “FIFTH DAY”

For four days each week, the students go their separate ways and focus on their jobs. On the fifth day, they all participate in activities designed to give them a better understanding of the local food system and broader food issues. Fifth-day activities also develop skills that students might not learn through their individual internships. The fifth-day curriculum is an essential component of the program that unifies the thematic underpinnings and enhances the academic relevance of the internships.

More than simple field trips, fifth-day activities often provide opportunities for students to take on service-learning projects, from farm maintenance to harvesting crops. Such assistance is valuable to farmers and other mentors who volunteer their time to teach the students.

Students participating in FoodWorks report that fifth-day activities are a pivotal part of the program. In the words of Vermont intern Katie Michels ’13, “The theoretical and practical balance of the fifth day brought up more questions than answers, and I really liked that. Right now we don’t know how we are going to fix our food systems, but through these experiences, I felt as if we were working toward that.”

Interns in FoodWorks also have numerous opportunities to participate in volunteer and social activities that enable them to engage informally with members of the local food community, further reinforcing and integrating what they have learned through the program.

THE KENTUCKY CONNECTION

Louisville is a regional center for the local-foods movement and is in the midst of changing its agricultural economy from one based on tobacco to one based
on local food production, distribution, and consumption. The timing is right for FoodWorks interns to make a meaningful contribution to that transformation.

Joe Franzen, a local educator who had developed a food-awareness program for Louisville schools, is the fifth-day coordinator in Louisville. He and Ann Curtis, director of Louisville FoodWorks, have tapped into a network of College alumni, parents, and friends with food-related businesses in the area, who help to cover the cost of stipends and serve as mentors to the students.

Interns in Louisville lend their skill and ingenuity to a wide variety of food-related jobs. In 2013, employers ranged from the Louisville Metro Economic Development Department to Fox hollow Farm, a biodynamically inspired farming community in Crestwood, Kentucky, to the University of Louisville’s sustainability lab.

MADE IN VERMONT
To launch Food Works in Vermont in the summer of 2013, Food and Farm Educator Sophie Esser Calvi also drew on Middlebury alumni, neighbors, and local organizations working in food production and distribution. The College’s own organic farm, which is managed by Calvi, was a particularly valuable resource. It not only provided internships for four students, but also gave the other interns in the Vermont cohort a space for discussion and hands-on learning.

Part of the strategy in Vermont is to connect FoodWorks interns with the state agriculture department’s farm-to-plate program, taking advantage of existing connections with state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and farms. The FoodWorks cohort is divided into several teams, each of which focuses on a particular issue—access to local food for low-income people, for example—and proposes practical solutions. In 2013, interns created digital maps of a local orchard, supported regional food distribution at the Mad River Food Hub, gathered feedback to improve state agricultural grant programs, and pursued a number of other projects.

A HEALTHY APPETITE: CHRIS BATSON ’13

HOMETOWN Acton, Massachusetts

MAJOR Neuroscience

After fulfilling the rigorous requirements of Middlebury’s pre-medical track, Chris Batson wasn’t sure what to do next. “I knew that I wanted my life to be focused on food and on health—on the intersection of the two,” he says. “But I needed to gain a greater understanding of food access and agriculture.”

Chris decided to remain in Vermont after graduation and participate in Middlebury’s FoodWorks program. For the next six weeks, he explored many aspects of food production and distribution, learned a lot about how public policy is made, gained some practical work experience, and got a look at a variety of careers that fit his interests.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
For four days per week, Chris worked at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets, mentored by Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Ross and Local Foods Administrator Abbey Willard. His job was to design and conduct a survey to improve the state program that promotes the use of local foods in schools and other institutions.

Analyzing the farm-to-institution program revealed the link between food education, diet, and well-being. “An education program is essential for teaching students and the public the health, environmental, and social benefits of leafy greens, squash, carrots, and humanely raised meats,” Chris notes.

FOOD AS MEDICINE
Fifth-day activities enriched Chris’s knowledge of the overlap between food and health. For instance, a workshop hosted by food educator Lisa Mase ’01 focused on the traditional use of food as medicine.

“We once had a set of health practices related to food,” Chris explains. “In the modern food system, we’ve become disconnected from that.” By cooking a meal in an ordinary kitchen, Masse showed Chris and the other interns how common spices, herbs, and other ingredients can bring the body into balance.

As Chris reflects, “It might be as simple as putting garlic and honey in tea to cure a cold or as complex as improving an educational program, but I learned how I could use food to help myself and others.”
Middlebury’s investment in the FoodWorks program stems from a deep belief in the opportunities and added value it provides for our students. The model has great potential to serve as a centerpiece of the College’s efforts to expand meaningful experiential-learning opportunities in any number of career fields. Several aspects of the program are particularly significant:

- It is the only cohort-based internship program focused on food systems and the food economy, with students working on different aspects of the same issue in the same location.
- The fifth-day curriculum is a distinctive component that holds great promise for replicating in other areas of particular interest to Middlebury students.
- The online component has infinite potential to connect dispersed students.

FoodWorks demonstrates how the advantages of a liberal arts education—providing students with a broad and well-informed perspective on issues, along with the tools to make connections and find creative solutions to problems—can be applied in cultivating students’ interests. The goal is to guide and assist them as they explore a particular passion, while preparing them to be leaders in that field or any other they might eventually choose.

**FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES**

The total cost per student for Middlebury FoodWorks in 2014 will be approximately $5,000. This includes the internship stipends; cost sharing with nonprofits; and expenses for housing, mentoring, and online education. The College is inviting alumni, parents, and friends to sponsor internships. The goal is to raise $150,000—enough to underwrite 30 internships. A generous donor has offered to match gifts to fund this summer’s program, dollar for dollar, up to a total of $50,000.