



Remote Internship to Support Enterprises (RISE) for Local Foods

Program Summary for 2020-'21

Brief Program Summary

Across the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns changed the way food is accessed and prepared as more people began cooking and consuming meals at home. To compensate for the loss of food service and other sources of revenue, many farms and fisheries tried pivoting to direct marketing to remain viable during the pandemic. Direct marketing offers an additional revenue stream for local-food producers, processors, and retailers in business if demand from the wholesale sector slows due to events like economic or public health crises. However, not all producers had the time, skills, or flexibility to adapt to a business model focused on individual consumers. Competency in direct marketing necessitates familiarity with technologies many small producers lack.

To address the lack of technology and direct marketing skills among small local food business owners, The North Carolina Local Food Council (NCLFC) developed a new internship program in the fall of 2020 called the *Remote Internship to Support Enterprises (RISE) for Local Foods*. The goal of the RISE for Local Foods program was to match the skill sets of paid student interns with regional food, farming or seafood organizations and businesses (Host Sites) that wanted to engage in direct marketing and/or improve social media and their overall online presence due to impacts of COVID-19. The program was designed to help the Host Sites improve their profitability by connecting directly with local consumers while offering university students meaningful experiences and hands-on skills assisting producers and retailers to remain commercially viable during a drastic economic downturn. Because of the pandemic, all work was done remotely through virtual platforms to keep businesses and students safe.

The specific goals of the RISE for Local Food program included:

- Goal 1: Enhance the commercial viability of local farms, fisheries, and producer organizations by providing training and technological support to do direct marketing and improve online presence.
- Goal 2: Provide university students with meaningful and paid experiences that develop hands-on skills related to food systems operations.

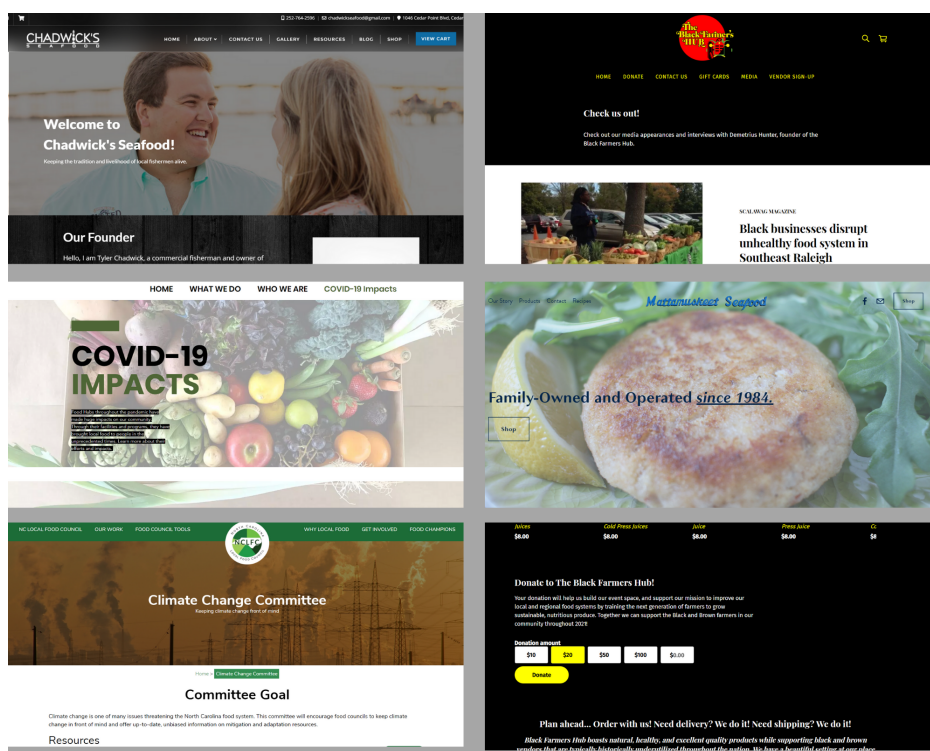
Impacts of the RISE for Local Foods Program

Between November 2020 and April 2021, the seven university interns worked closely with their Host Sites supporting various organizational and community needs. The Host Sites included two farmers markets (Carrboro Farmers Market and Greensboro Farmers Curb Market), two food hubs (Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA) and Black Farmers Hub), and three organizations, Resourceful Communities, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture (NCDA), and North Carolina Sea Grant (NCSG). Within the Host Sites, interns worked closely with numerous vendors, producers, and fisheries to provide marketing and logistic support. In addition, interns worked peripherally to support producers affiliated with the Chapel Hill Farmers Market and the Organic Growers School during the internship.

Goal 1: Enhance the commercial viability of local farms, fisheries, and producer organizations by providing training and technological support to do direct marketing and improve online presence.

Among seafood processors, farmers, and small food businesses, direct marketing had become critical to generating revenue outside of wholesale food service, even before the impacts of COVID-19 were felt. Competency in direct marketing and, more specifically, establishing an online presence, requires familiarity with technologies that not all small producers have. The seven RISE interns worked with Host Sites to address these challenges in the following ways:

- Websites were created and updated for North Carolina producers and food hubs. Mattamuskeet Seafood Company, Diamond Shoals Shrimp Company, Carolina Gold Oyster Company, and Chadwick's Seafood had websites built from the ground up. The website for Downeast Mariculture, an oyster hatchery and nursery, was redesigned to highlight its family-centric operation. In addition, throughout the course of the RISE program, the interns collaboratively created or updated 18 individual web pages including a page on the impacts of COVID-19 on food hubs, a donation page for the Black Farmers Hub, and an oyster promotion page for the NCLFC. With regards to one intern's work with NC fisheries, Barry Nash (NCSG) said that the intern had "made a significant contribution to improving the competitiveness of Mattamuskeet Seafood and Carolina Gold Oyster Company."



Top Left: Website designed and built for Chadwick's Seafood. *Top Right:* Web page created for the Black Farmers Hub highlighting media appearances. *Middle Left:* Web page detailing COVID-19 impacts on food hubs. *Middle Right:* Website designed and built for Mattamuskeet Seafood Company. *Bottom Left:* Updated web page for the NCLFC regarding climate change. *Bottom Right:* Imbedded donation interface for the Black Farmers Hub.

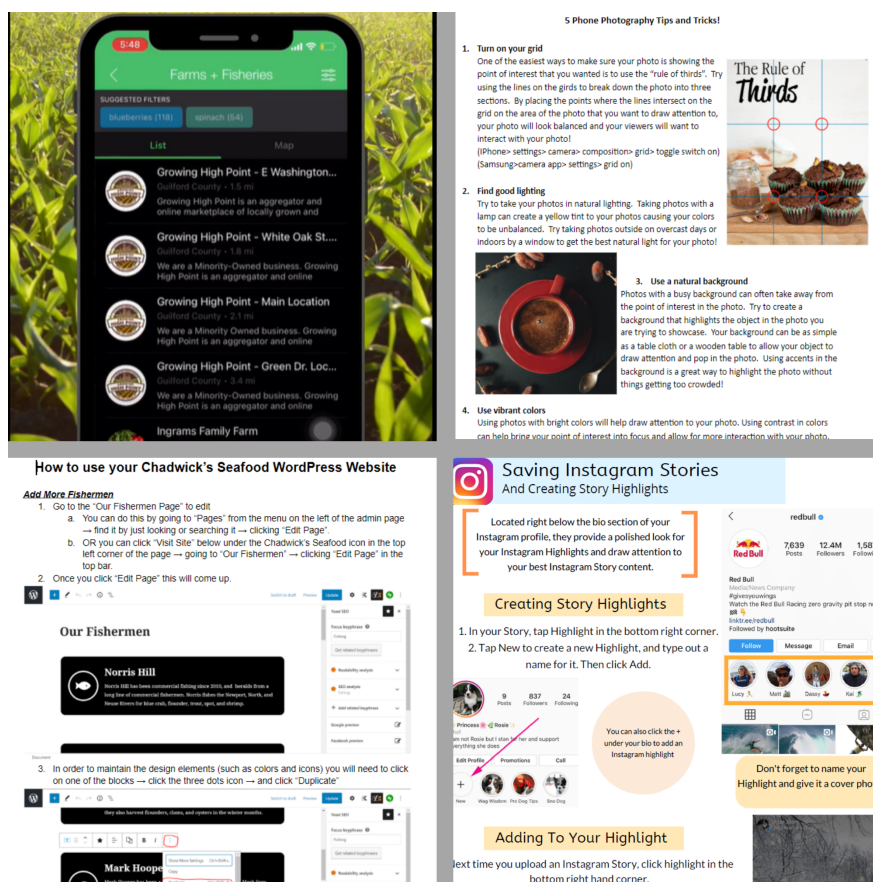
- Over 45 graphics were designed by the RISE interns to be shared via the Instagram and Facebook accounts of Host Sites and related producers. Among the graphics were a Holiday Market campaign for the Surry County Farmers Market and an Oyster promotional campaign for NCSG and the NCLFC. Other social media posts included recipes, job postings, and infographics.
- The interns also collaborated with Host Sites to design and distribute newsletters to targeted communities. Eleven newsletters were created for Grocers on Wheels/Black Farmers Hub including a series in February highlighting the history of Raleigh's Black communities. Various graphics, product advertising, vendor biographies, and event promotion was also present in the newsletters for other organizations such as the Carrboro Farmers Market.
- To support Host Site goals, the intern cohort created 6 videos, including promotional and educational material. For NCSG and the NCLFC oyster promotional campaign, two RISE interns collaborated to create a video highlighting oyster growers. With BRWIA, an intern supported the creation of a video highlighting the Double-Up Food Bucks and Senior Voucher program.



Top Left: Promotional material for an agriculture career workshop (Instagram). *Top Middle:* Instagram post for Surry County Farmers Market's Holiday Market. *Top Right:* Newsletter blurb from the Black Farmers Hub. *Middle Left:* Newsletter blurb from Carrboro Farmers Market. *Bottom Left:* Event promotion for the Black Farmers Hub. *Bottom Middle:* Local food recipe posted on Instagram. *Bottom Right:* Instagram photo that was part of the NCLFC's oyster promotion campaign.

- To increase the long-term impact of the program, interns developed presentations, tutorials, and guides on technology and marketing for farmers, fishers, and other vendors. A manual was made for the Carrboro Farmers Market detailing the process of setting up an Instagram account, the

importance of a social media presence, and guidance on how to be successful on the platform. For the Greensboro Farmers Curb Market, a similar Instagram guide was created as well as a guide on how to use Facebook, how to take high quality photos that feature vendor products and how to solicit more views. In conjunction with the building of one vendor's website, a guide on use of the WordPress platform was created with tutorials on updating, adding, and maintaining the new site. In addition to written guides, video tutorials were developed supporting farmer and vendor education on social media, asset (i.e. businesses) creation for the NCDA's Visit NC Farms app, and consumer-use for the same app.



Top Left: Video tutorial demonstrating use of the Visit NC Farms app for consumers. *Top Right:* Guide to taking higher quality photos. *Bottom Left:* Guide to using and updating a client's WordPress website. *Bottom Right:* Instagram guide highlighting how to get started and how to be successful on the platform.

- Interns conducted research projects on a variety of topics of interest to the Host Sites. An intern with Resourceful Communities focused on researching the feasibility of trading products between food hubs. Through client interviews, capacity assessment, and data collection on the distances and logistics of trading, insights were gained about the possibility of inter-food hub trading in NC. In addition, research was conducted comparing numerous platforms for website construction, product aggregation, and online sales for use by vendors and producers to make informed decisions about direct marketing.

Goal 2: Provide university students with meaningful and paid experiences that develop hands-on skills related to food systems operations.

The RISE for Local Foods program sought to pair the knowledge and organizational strength of North Carolina producers and food hubs with the technological and marketing capabilities of North Carolina university students. The RISE program was designed to be mutually beneficial with Host Sites receiving intern support and interns receiving paid hands-on learning and skill-building in marketing, research, and local food systems. The program intended to provide meaningful intern experiences to support skills development while increasing their personal knowledge of food-systems careers as well as the opportunities and challenges local producers have providing food for local consumption.

In addition to their individual projects with Host Sites, virtual professional development opportunities were provided throughout the RISE program for the intern cohort. These training sessions included:

- An introductory training on “Online Sales Platforms” that introduced interns to various available platforms, providing a comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of each. Interns were able to apply this knowledge in their work with Host Sites.
- A “History of the Local Food Movement” session provided background on the current development and established space for discussion surrounding definitions and key issues facing local foods. One intern shared that this training “made her question and consider ‘local foods’ and what that means”.
- In January, interns were offered the chance to attend Level 1 Racial Equity Training led by the Center for Environmental Farming Systems’ (CEFS) Committee on Racial Equity in the Food System (CORE) team. One RISE intern commented that in this training she “not only learned about racial equity and how it applies to [her] work as a RISE intern, but how to promote racial equity through the larger mission of [the organization she works in].”
- The intern cohort spent time together with the intern coordinator identifying specific ways to put their RISE experience into words for current and future resumes.
- Interns participated in a DISC[®] Assessment workshop focusing on their personal communication styles and how to better lead and communicate with people of differing styles in the workplace. One intern reflected that this assessment and subsequent training helped him to “analyze [his] work style in a constructive way.” Another intern shared: “the DISC test that we took is something that I believe will benefit me in the future as I pursue other jobs, and was a good source of self-reflection.”

The following are quotes shared by interns about their personal experiences with the RISE for Local Foods program:

- Intern 1: “This internship has helped me solidify my goal of wanting to work in agricultural advocacy in the future to help advocate for the 2% of the world population that feeds and clothes us every day...I want to be an advocate for local producers and to help them be more successful.”
- Intern 2: “Through this internship, I have gained knowledge about the [food] system, network, food hubs, how they work/operate, and much more. I have seen the impact local food systems can have in these unprecedented times of a global pandemic and how we should incorporate local food in our lives for better health and to support local farmers and organizations.”
- Intern 3: “Throughout this internship I have learned so much about my community and my local food systems. I have a much better understanding of the level of support that local growers need, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have even expanded my knowledge of seafood production, which is something that is well outside of my area of expertise. Going forward, I plan to continue working within my community, and the marketing knowledge that I gained during this internship will help me with that.”
- Intern 4: “Being a part of an internship that has been positively impacted by the pandemic in regard to sales and helping farmers, I can see how technology can truly bring people and communities together in a whole other way...Without this experience, I do not think I would have as much confidence to pursue a career in Local Food and Agriculture.”
- Intern 5: “I have learned more about local food systems and how groups across the state are working to stabilize and localize food systems in North Carolina. I’m very thankful to...[RISE program supporters]...for putting together an incredible opportunity to grow professional skills in a framework that is flexible and accessible to college students.”
- Intern 6: “While I have taken classes in agriculture before, learning about farmers and fishers' experiences first hand was much more immersive. I learned about the various steps that go into production, from growing and harvesting, to developing sales and social media. Furthermore, I learned about the various challenges that farmers and fishers face, particularly with technology...since doing work directly with farmers and growers, I have developed an interest in local food work and supporting those who provide us with what we need. Growing up, my dad worked for a local triangle-based grocery store, but I never considered supporting local foods through my own career. Since starting this internship, I have begun applying to local food jobs in addition to the more traditional jobs I had already been applying to.”

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The RISE for Local Foods program was created as a direct response to the commercial disruptions in the state’s local-food systems caused by COVID-19. The program was designed and implemented over the course of a few months and, as such, challenges arose during the program that provided valuable lessons on possible improvements to the program that could be made in future years. The following are challenges and lessons learned that arose in the pilot year of the RISE program.

While the remote aspect of the RISE program made it possible for the internship to run during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also brought about challenges in logistics and relationship building. All communication between each party occurred virtually, with both the intern cohort and Host Sites noting that in-person communication and site visits would have been helpful, especially at the start of the program. In addition, both the intern cohort and Host Sites felt that in-person events/activities would have

been beneficial to supporting a group culture of collaboration. While these “group activities” occurred for interns over Zoom, in-person components would have been more effective with regards to these goals. Finally, the intern cohort noted computer fatigue as a challenge. One intern commented that with the majority of university courses taking place online through the pandemic, having a remote internship often “blurred the lines between school, life, and work.” Given these challenges, however, the virtual nature of the program was still vital. It allowed for the flexibility of both space and schedule, where interns could work safely from home and easily balance school and work. **Thus, in future years, a hybrid model is recommended.** A remote program with in-person components (such as interviews, meetings, site visits, and team building activities) would improve the effectiveness of the RISE program.

With the planning and implementation of the RISE program being a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program did not begin until late October/early November. The majority of the interns, especially those working with farmers markets, found that the first 1-2 months of the program were quieter workwise until after the new year when things began to pick up again. A few Host Sites struggled to provide work for the interns during this time and a few interns felt they did not have a strong understanding of their Host Site’s work until the new year when projects began to pick up. In addition, schedule-wise, the internship spanned two school semesters, meaning schedules were adjusted part way through the internship to account for the change in student courses. **In subsequent years, it is recommended that the program begin at the start of the school semester, either in August (Fall semester) or January (Spring semester) to address these challenges.**

Conclusions

The RISE for Local Foods program was designed to improve the direct marketing capabilities of North Carolina farmers, food hubs, and fisheries impacted by COVID-19 while providing paid university interns an opportunity for hands-on learning and skills-building in food systems work. With regards to this first goal, Barry Nash of NC Sea Grant notes: “RISE was hugely beneficial to my recipients, who are sharing their deliverables with friends, family and associates to the extent I'm still getting requests for website assistance. There is a strong, ongoing need for technology assistance among seafood products that another RISE effort can satisfy.” Another successful component of the RISE program was that overall coordination and financing came from the NCLFC and partners. As a result, Host Sites who might not have had the resources or time to manage paid interns were given access to the wealth of knowledge that the RISE interns provided. Angie Bloom of the Greensboro Farmers Curb Market comments that the RISE program “was very critical for us during a time when our resources (time and hours) were minimized due to increased duties related to COVID and less budget for support staff due to less income”. Susan Hill of Down East Mariculture states: “our website looks amazing, and we could not have afforded this luxury” without the support of the RISE Program.

In terms of our second goal and the intern cohort, the RISE program introduced them to important aspects and conversations surrounding local foods as well as highlighting the challenges that NC producers face, especially in a public health crisis. As demonstrated, the knowledge and skills that the interns gained through the RISE program will follow them in their personal and professional lives. To summarize the experience, one intern shared: “My understanding of the food system and the challenges that

farmers/fishers/food hubs face has become stronger, and I feel more prepared when it comes to discussing these problems and what to do about them.”

Acknowledgements

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