Alumni Continue Work for Sustainable Food Systems

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Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urel_news/2320

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Alumni Continue Work for Sustainable Food Systems

After graduating from Morris, alumni Naomi Olive ‘13 and Jared Walhowe ’09 continue to work on food systems and sustainability.

As a campus dedicated to sustainable initiatives, the University of Minnesota, Morris is enriched by students who investigate and expand the area of food systems. For alumni like Naomi Olive ‘13 and Jared Walhowe ’09, the food sustainability work to which they have devoted their lives began at Morris.

Naomi Olive ’13 is the sustainable agriculture and food systems program associate for the University of Minnesota’s Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships. Olive works on several rural grocery projects, including a USDA-funded one that would allow locally grown produce to enter wholesale markets through rural grocery stores.

“At Morris, I studied political science and environmental studies, with a focus on food systems. The connections I made with faculty and staff, as well as key community members involved in local foods systems work helped me build a solid foundation,” Olive says. “I am motivated to do this type of work by my passion for building community through sustainable food systems.”

This passion is evident in Olive’s dedication to rural vibrancy. Whether forging partnerships between local farmers and retailers or working to divert unsold produce to food shelves and meal programs, Olive has made a marked effort to improve rural food systems.

Jared Walhowe ’09, program coordinator for the Minnesota Food Charter Network and the Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute, also has devoted a great deal of time and energy to food systems. Walhowe first worked in hunger relief, building relationships with farms, orchards, gardeners, and residential fruit tree owners to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables in food shelves and meal programs. He initially became interested in this field of work after taking Food, Culture, and Agriculture at Morris.

“Through my classes at Morris I looked more deeply into my own food experiences,” says Walhowe. “I started to critically examine food systems, agriculture, sustainability issues related to food, and food justice.”

Students at Morris have many opportunities to become involved in food on campus and in the surrounding region. In addition to exploring food systems in course work, students help plan and care for the campus gardens, help organize and volunteer at monthly Community Meals, assist with the Morris Area Farmers Market and help coordinate Taste Buds, a hands-on food literacy project for children, in partnership with the Morris Public Library. Mary Jo Forbord, Morris Healthy Eating coordinator and registered dietitian/nutritionist, says Morris helps students cultivate their interests while exploring food system impacts on sustainability.

“We engage students in the food system, and their work makes a positive difference here,” says Forbord. “What students learn and experience is transferable to wherever they choose to live. When their experiences influence their career trajectories, the positive impact is multiplied for us all.”

For more on sustainable food efforts in Morris, visit morris.umn.edu/sustainability.