

Defining the “C” in community supported agriculture

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Submitted March 26, 2014 / Revised December 31, 2014, and March 4, 2015 / Accepted March 4, 2015 /
Published online June 8, 2015

Citation: Haney, J. M., Ferguson, M. D., Engle, E. W., Wood, K., Olcott, K., Luloff, A. E., & Finley, J. C.
(2015). Defining the “C” in community supported agriculture. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and
Community Development*, 5(3), 27–43. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.053.009>

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Abstract

Localized agriculture is theorized to provide socio-environmental benefits to the community while ensuring a livelihood for local farmers. Much of the food systems literature refers to such an arrangement as civic agriculture, which is characterized as promoting community development by strengthening social ties among the various nodes of the localized food system. However, there is little literature that identifies the attributes of community and the specific mechanisms through which community qualities

are produced, modeled, or replicated.

This study’s goal is to identify the meaning of community as used in the phrase “community supported agriculture” (CSA) by asking members and operators of local CSAs how they define community within the context of their membership. On-site interviews were conducted at the produce pick-up locations of four CSA farms in central Pennsylvania, resulting in a convenience sample of 97 CSA members and four operators. The survey instrument utilized open and closed-ended questions to collect information on farmer

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and member perceptions of their CSA community, motivations to join, and satisfaction with their experiences.

The results suggest respondents are highly satisfied with products and services provided through their CSA. However, there are statistically significant differences in satisfaction scores across the four sampled farms. These differences support findings drawn from the open-ended questions indicating these CSA farms varied in member-defined attributes of a CSA community. Farm management practices, level of personal interactions, and other factors appear to have significant effects on CSA members' perception of community.

Keywords

civic agriculture; community, community supported agriculture (CSA); satisfaction

Introduction

Civic agriculture theorizes that shortening the distance between farmers and consumers will increase social ties within local food systems, re-embedding agricultural products into local communities and further promoting community development (e.g., Lacy 2000, Lyson, 2004). One commonly cited method of reducing the distance between field and table is through the establishment of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). However, a need exists to better understand whether and how participants' perception of *community* factors into both their motivations for establishing or joining a CSA and satisfaction with perceived benefits of CSA membership. The extant literature suggests that the definition and role of community in CSA is far from clear. Previous studies have surveyed members' attitudes about the perceived role of the community in CSA models without defining the parameters of the core term and, as a result, the nature of the community referred to by participants remains unclear. To help clarify this issue, the current study seeks to explicate the nature of the term community as it is specifically used or addressed by members in a CSA. Our investigation compares the nature of community within the context of four CSA farms

in central Pennsylvania and is based on conversations with farmers/operators and shareholders/members. Although all four farm operators believe strongly in the values and ethics espoused in the CSA literature, details of farm management and CSA operation appear to affect members' perceptions of community. Two main points of inquiry guide this work:

1. How do members and farm operators conceptualize community within their CSA?
2. How do member characteristics and satisfaction with their membership contribute to their perception of CSA community?

Community

While the use of the concept of community continues in social science research, a consensus on the meaning of the term remains elusive. At some level, this plurality of use is pragmatic, allowing for dynamic research in the modern world. Defining community within a research frame, however, is essential when employing a broadly defined concept. One popular conception of community is based on a sense of belonging (i.e., emotional attachment), but a degree of social and economic dependence on place-based networks also is important (Crow & Allan, 1994; Hinrichs & Kremer, 2002). Building upon this, community may be defined broadly as the patterned and structured ways we interact to satisfy our daily needs (Brown, D. L., & Swanson, 2003). It is, therefore, not surprising that interaction remains the key component of *community* for many researchers.

Building upon the work of Kaufman (1959), Wilkinson (1970) defines interaction as the essential property of community. For Wilkinson, community has a territorial element, but the physical locality is not the central concern; the boundary of the physical community space is not fixed or even sharply delineated. The physical locality merely provides a common setting about which diverse social groups could bond to produce collective action. Interactional or Community Field Theory (Wilkinson, 1991) defines community as a field of social interaction without boundaries or fixed structure. Such communities, in theory, have "high

levels of trust, norms of reciprocity, and dense networks of civic engagement, [where] people feel an obligation toward one another and are better able to work together for the common good” (Luloff & Bridger, 2003, p. 206).

Following this line of thought, one essential daily need is food, and so naturally food has been linked with the concept of community. By removing the strict monetary value of the food itself, alternative food networks attempt to shift food from a strictly economic relationship into one more characterized by social and environmental exchanges (Feagan & Henderson, 2009). The *re-embedding* of food in social relations not only increases personal interactions (i.e., community development) within alternative food networks, but also heightens participants’ awareness of local concerns, such as social equity, ecological sustainability, urbanization, and food security (Cox, Holloway, Venn, Dowler, Hein, Kneafsey, & Tuomainen, 2008; Feenstra, 1997; Fieldhouse, 1996; Jarosz, 2008).

Civic Agriculture

Concern over the ecological and social threats associated with the conventional, global food system have led to the evolution of community-based, regionalized food networks. Though systemic and structural change will be needed at the global level to enact more holistic sustainability, such a fundamental shift must first be initiated at the local level, place by place (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996). This return to locally based agriculture and food production is termed *civic agriculture* by Thomas Lyson (2004) because it embeds such goods and practices into the communities where they exist.

Civic agriculture is implemented through a variety of mechanisms, including farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, alternative food cooperatives, and community garden projects. These efforts not only aim to minimize the distances between consumers, producers, and the land, but also help promote social and economic development within consumers’ home communities (Lyson, 2004). Ideally, these developments contribute to a greater social and economic equality among community members (Feenstra, 1997).

Lacy (2000) observes that conventional food systems disempower communities by creating a vertically integrated food chain that puts control in the hands of corporations and the federal government, limits the availability of information about production and transportation practices, and ensures the deskilling of consumers by promoting processed and convenience foods. Moving toward a more civic agriculture would reinvigorate local communities and create a food system in which fresh and value-added foods are made available through both traditional economic transactions and the bonds of social interaction (Kloppenburg et al., 1996). According to Wilkinson (1991), social interaction is what creates and sustains communities by building the community members’ capacity for realizing and obtaining general, positively oriented goals together. Because civic agriculture ventures provide diverse benefits to the locality, they are well suited for both the development *in* the community (economic growth) and development *of* the community (social ties and communion) (Brennan, Spranger, Cantrell, & Kumaran, 2004; Kaufman, 1959; Summers 1986, Wilkinson, 1991). Both of these aspects are seen as necessary for successful community revitalization (Bridger & Alter, 2008). If elements of civic agriculture are implemented, communities could not only begin to recover from damages caused by the vertical integration of our national food system, but could actually flourish by encouraging development and participation in regionalized food networks (Feenstra, 2002).

Community Supported Agriculture

One manifestation of civic agriculture is the popularization of CSAs. Community supported (or ‘shared’ [Fieldhouse, 1996]) agriculture is conceptualized on a continuum between a marketing strategy (instrumental model) and a moral imperative (collaborative model) (e.g., Brown, C., & Miller, 2008; Cox et al., 2008; Feagan & Henderson, 2009; Ostrom, 2007). In a typical CSA, farmers and members agree to share the costs and products of a particular growing season. CSA members purchase a share at the beginning of the season that provides farmers immediate access to capital for purchasing inputs (e.g., seed, fertilizer, labor, and fuel). It also enables them to estimate

the amount of food they need to produce during the growing season. CSA members, as investors, help redistribute the risks associated with agricultural ventures. If there is a poor harvest due to natural causes, every member in the CSA receives less, alleviating some of the losses and costs absorbed by farmers not engaged with a CSA (Fieldhouse, 1996). Lass, Bevis, Stevenson, Hendrickson, and Ruhf (2003) find that most CSA farms are small in acreage; moreover, whether organically certified or not, these farms often use organic or other ecologically sustainable production methods. They also find that farm labor is generally centered on the owner and his or her family, but that interns, hired field workers, and CSA members often contribute labor to meet production demands.

Fieldhouse (1996) indicates that CSAs are “more than a producer-consumer relationship, but rather a collective effort to provide food whilst building community” (p. 43). To foster the community feeling, members are encouraged to be active CSA participants. This occurs in multiple ways—for example, by participating as workshare members (who access produce in exchange for labor) and/or through social and educational events hosted on-farm, including tours, potlucks, and workshops (Lass et al., 2003). Being a CSA member often requires picking up products from the farm or another centralized location, creating an opportunity for interaction with farm staff and other CSA members (Martinez et al., 2010). All of these activities lessen the producer-consumer divide and also promote relationships among members that go beyond maintaining a shared membership in the CSA. In these ways, CSAs enhance public participation, civic engagement, and a reconnection to agriculture that build “a locally-based approach to community revitalization that also incorporates the benefit of...a healthy food system” (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008, p. 94).

While CSAs carry the potential to redevelop communities by offering a diverse number of benefits to both farmers and members, some criticize this movement as operating in ways that serve more privileged populations (e.g., high prices, low access to pick-up points) over the more socially disadvantaged (Allen, 2004; DeLind &

Bingen, 2008; Hinrichs & Kremer, 2002). Another issue associated with the community-building capacity of CSAs is the presence of a usually small, core group that participates in the community part of the CSA, while other members contribute very little. This limits the CSA’s transformative capacity and also places pressure on the farmer and core group to maintain the community side of the CSA, in addition to the agriculture (Cone & Kakaliouras, 1995; Hinrichs, 2000). Conversely, some argue the model of community-building through CSAs is biased toward farmer benefits, in that members contribute both money and labor to the farm, while the farmer does not contribute to members’ daily home and/or job responsibilities. This farm-centric orientation overlooks and/or devalues the importance of broader social relationships in rural communities or localized food system structures (Allen, 2004).

Previous CSA Studies

A number of studies focus on defining the characteristics of CSAs, participant motivations, benefits, and/or deficits. The similarities in the raw data between studies are striking; both CSA member and farmer characteristics and participant motivations for joining are highly consistent. CSA farmers tend to be highly educated and younger than traditional farmers (Ostrom, 2007), while CSA members tend to be middle-class, urban, white, and highly educated (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008; Ostrom, 2007; Pole & Gray, 2013). In surveys of CSA members the majority of respondents are female, and studies suggest that women are key proponents of CSA participation in their households (e.g., Cone & Myhre, 2000; Durrenberger, 2002; Hinrichs & Kremer, 2002).

Participant motivations tend to be dominated by a select group of issues. For farmers, many cite idealistic reasons for creating a CSA farm. Ostrom (2007) finds that farmers perceive the dominant food production system as problematic or inadequate, and seek a solution by forming a CSA. These farmers are often committed to “protecting and restoring the environment” (Ostrom, 2007, p. 105). Alternatively, Worden (2004; see also Brown, C., & Miller, 2008) finds that nearly half the farmers surveyed in the Northeastern United States

are motivated by the marketing potential of CSAs, and an additional 21% of farmers cite increased access to information and advice (i.e., education) through CSA farmer networks as their main motivation. Similarly, Flora and Bregendahl (2012) find 76% of surveyed CSA farmers cite financial motivations, including increased product sales, access to diversified markets, and shared risks. The desire to create or participate in a community generally ranks lower in farmer motivations. For example, only 14% of Northeastern U.S. farmers cite community as a motivation for CSA participation (Worden, 2004).

CSA member motivations consistently involve acquiring fresh, local, and/or organic produce. Additional motivations include supporting local or small-scale farming and/or farmers and stewardship of the environment, including support of sustainable or organic farming methods (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008; Cone & Myhre, 2000; Oberholtzer, 2004; Ostrom, 2007; Pole & Gray, 2013). Pole and Gray (2013) find that motivations differ by member income. Those with lower incomes rank the sharing of risks and socializing with like-minded people higher than members with higher incomes.

The benefits perceived by members are largely consistent with their motivations, but a variety of unanticipated effects are also noted. Ostrom (2007) finds that CSA membership increased participants' awareness of food quality, personal health, and community sustainability, which resulted in altered patterns of consumption. Flora and Bregendahl (2012) find that members who perceive a variety of benefits (e.g., greater social capital) from their memberships are more likely to remain in a CSA. Although member benefits are primarily product-related (e.g., access to fresh, local, and organic produce), Brehm and Eisenhauer (2008) find a significant correlation between the desire for local food and a sense of community attachment. In all, these results suggest that while community is not typically highly ranked by members in their motives or benefits, it remains a significant underlying factor in member decisions regarding CSA participation. Having high community satisfaction may prompt members to further improve their community as a place to live through such actions as CSA

participation. This perspective suggests that the social connections (i.e., community [in the sense used by Wilkinson, 1991]) formed through CSA membership are not perceived by members as an important benefit.

In comparison with members, farmers acquire fewer individual benefits from CSA participation (Flora & Bregendahl, 2012). In fact, a number of studies show that operating a CSA farm does not automatically infer financial viability; the low-cost food environment often prevents farmers from earning a living wage, obtaining health insurance, or saving for retirement (Brown, C., & Miller, 2008; Flora & Bregendahl, 2012; Oberholtzer, 2004; Ostrom, 2007; Pole & Gray, 2013). However, many CSA farmers report a sense of personal satisfaction gained through their farming lifestyle, which included holding to their ecological values (Durrenberger, 2002). Despite this, farmers struggle with high member turnover rates and apathy (i.e., low participation in volunteerism or farm outreach activities). CSA farms with a core-member group are able to sustain higher share prices and thus earn higher incomes (Brown, C., & Miller, 2008). This provides further support for Brehm and Eisenhauer's (2008) data that suggests satisfied CSA members are willing to pay a higher share price as a means to improve their local community and that food is successfully re-embedded into the social and ecological relations.

Customer Satisfaction

The concept of customer satisfaction in the social sciences is heavily pursued by both the scientific and managerial communities. This high level of interest originates from a widely held belief that the principal criterion for success can be measured in terms of customer satisfaction (Bultena & Klessig, 1969). Anderson and Fornell (1994) ascertain that acquiring and retaining customers is the key to financial stability. Given that customers are more expensive to acquire than retain, customer retention should be the focal point of any enterprise. Whether or not a customer remains loyal depends upon their overall level of satisfaction.

A number of CSA studies investigate member satisfaction, with most reporting that members are satisfied or highly satisfied. Further, Brehm and

Eisenhauer's (2008) data indicate that members with high levels of community satisfaction are more motivated to join a CSA. If this is the case, why are CSA turnover rates such a problem for farmers? If customers acknowledge they are satisfied with their CSAs, then products and services may not take into account all of the factors involved in *satisfaction*. This suggests that CSA member satisfaction goes beyond the usual array of products and services, such as fresh vegetables, eggs, and/or meat. Although members may leave their CSAs for a number of reasons, some researchers have proposed that members may leave a CSA because they are unwilling to accommodate the economic (i.e., cost of membership) and/or unanticipated lifestyle changes (e.g., limited pick-up times and/or delivery options, producing more meals at home, using an increased variety of vegetables, and having an increased quantity of vegetables to eat and/or cook [see Brown, C., & Miller, 2008, p. 1298; Cone & Myhre, 2000; Cox et al., 2008; Durrenberger, 2002]) that membership necessitates.

Study Area

Pennsylvania is one of the most agriculturally productive states in the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] National Agricultural Statistics Service, Pennsylvania Field Office, 2010). It also has an active local foods movement, indicated by the number of CSAs in the state and the large membership in one of the Northeast's largest sustainable agriculture organizations (Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture [PASA], n.d.). The Local Harvest online database of local food vendors identified 297 CSAs operating in Pennsylvania in 2013 (Local Harvest, n.d.-a). Eight CSAs specifically served the central Pennsylvania study area; four of them agreed to participate in this study. Each of these CSA farms provided multiple pickup locations throughout the Centre County region, including State College, where the study took place.

Although not all of the studied CSA farms were located within Centre County, Pennsylvania, all of the surveys were conducted at produce pick-up locations within or near the boundaries of State College Borough. The Centre Region differs

markedly from much of the state, and these differences helped explain some of the socio-demographic factors identified in the survey. Specifically, The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), located in State College, accounted for many discrepancies. Both the median age and household income for State College were below the state average, reflecting the large student body associated with Penn State (City Data, 2013). Likewise, the percentage of State College residents with a bachelor's degree or higher was significantly above the state average. In addition to CSA produce, the food environment of the local residents included seasonal farmers markets, 20 grocery stores, and three club stores or supercenters (e.g., Walmart and Sam's Club). In State College, the number of grocery stores per 10,000 residents was lower (1.39) than the state average (2.04) (City Data, 2013).

Methods

The CSAs selected for this study were chosen to represent a variety of production size and number of years in operation. These two variables were chosen based on three factors: (1) evidence that local CSAs were constituted by different growing styles and marketing schemes (Durrenberger, 2002; Local Harvest, n.d.-b); (2) anecdotal information suggesting the historic presence of some CSAs in the study area; and (3) the presence of several new farms augmenting traditional CSA offerings to residents. To select our study CSAs, we first identified those that operated in the rural area surrounding State College. Five CSAs with pickup locations in or near the borough were identified. Of these five, four agreed to participate. Using a purposive case study comparative approach (Yin, 2003), we studied the conceptualization of community as defined by members (participants) and operators (farm owners) of these four CSAs that are distinguished by production size and history.

Member Response Sample and Administration

A convenience sampling schedule was created to facilitate data collection at specific locations, times, and days of the week to ensure a representative sample at each pickup location among the four participating CSA farms. On-site interviews were

conducted between October 11, 2012, and November 14, 2012 (the end of the 2012 summer season), with a total of 101 surveys collected that resulted in 97 useable surveys over the 10 sampling days. Two distinct sampling time frames (10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m.) were used. Farm operators had suggested these two time frames as their busiest periods for produce pick-up. The average face-to-face interview lasted between five and ten minutes, during which interviewers asked questions including those focusing on satisfaction, motivations, participation characteristics, open-ended qualitative questions, and socio-demographics (see Instrumentation below¹). All interviews were exit surveys as the interviewers found that respondents' willingness to participate greatly increased if they were given a moment to unload their CSA items into their vehicle. As a result, the vast majority of interviews took place at or near the respondents' vehicles. Following The Pennsylvania State University's Office of Research Protections guidelines on human subjects protocols, only individuals 18 years of age and older were allowed to participate in the survey.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument included two pages of questions focusing on CSA members' perceptions about community, perceived risks and benefits, motivations, participation characteristics, and satisfaction. The interviewer asked the questions and recorded responses, including those which were open-ended, on the instrument. First, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were members of a local CSA. Those respondents who answered 'no' to this question were disqualified from the remainder of the survey and thanked for their willingness to participate. Next, a series of open-ended, qualitative questions were initiated: *how long have you been a member of this CSA, who in your household made the decision to join this CSA, why did you choose this CSA, do you consider yourself a member of the community based on your CSA membership, what does the community in CSA mean to you, what aspects of this CSA community are important to you, and finally, what do you perceive as the benefits and risks of being a CSA member.*

Following these open-ended items, respondents were asked to rate their motivation levels for a series of 11 possible reasons people commonly join CSAs. These 11 reasons included *feeling towards local goods, physical health/ activity, participation in a work/ farm-share, reducing my carbon footprint, social contribution, essential to my life, value for my money, supporting local farmers, food origin, dietary reasons, and other.* Respondents reported their individual level of motivation for each of the items utilizing a five-point Likert scale that included 'not at all important,' 'somewhat important,' 'moderately important,' 'very important,' and 'extremely important.'

Format of Analysis

Following data collection, each member's questionnaire was assigned a unique number in order to track the data during analysis. Questionnaire responses were transcribed into a Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheet by the interviewer who conducted the survey, but were coded in a collaborative process. These qualitative codes were assigned independently for each question; only the first three responses were coded per response per question. For a majority of the open-ended questions, no more than three responses were given by the informants. For the remaining questions (i.e., questions where more than three responses were given), it became apparent that respondents had repeated their earlier responses but in different terms or specifics. In these cases, no new concepts were being added by coding additional responses. Quantitative data was then imported into SPSS for further analysis.

A series of one-way ANOVAs and Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) post-hoc tests were performed on the mean Likert scale data, including the rating of factors influencing the decision to join a CSA and product attributes (quantity, quality, and variety), to determine if any of the individual farms differed significantly from the others. Following these results, the farms were examined according to production size and length of time in business, and a series of t-tests were conducted on the mean Likert-scale data to determine if these farm groups differed significantly.

the corresponding author.

¹ Copies of the survey instrument are available by request to

Finally, a series of chi-square tests were conducted on the yes/no data that indicated whether respondents considered themselves members of a community based on their CSA membership.

Results

Large Versus Small CSA Farms

We classified the four participating farms as either large ($n=2$) or small ($n=2$) based on their production size (Table 1). The large CSAs had operated at the same location for over five years and produced food on over 10 acres (4 hectares) of land with four to ten full-time employees helping with seasonal production. Not surprisingly, during the 2012 CSA summer season, membership in the large CSAs was greater than the small CSAs, with an average of 180 members receiving weekly produce. Large farms also delivered to members at five different locations throughout the week.

The two small farms included in the study began operations less than five years prior to the study and had 9 acres (3.6 hectares) or less in production. Neither employed outside workers; they relied on the labor provided by household members and volunteers. While the large farms offered supporting enterprises (e.g., meat and eggs), the smaller farms focused exclusively on vegetable production. The average membership of the small farms was approximately 92 for the 2012 summer season, and these farms offered fewer pick-up locations per week (one or two).

Member Socio-demographics

Our analysis of the socio-demographic factors found that over half the respondents were female (68%) (Table 2). This gender ratio differed from both the state and county percentages but was largely consistent with previous CSA surveys (e.g., Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008; Cone & Myhre, 2000; Durrenberger, 2002; Goland, 2002). The two age groups with the largest number of respondents included those ranging from 30 to 39 years (33%) and those 40 to 49 years of age (22%), with a majority ranging from 22 to 49 years (76%). Respondents aged between 50 and 75 years accounted for 24% of the sample. The mean aggregate sample age was 41 and did not vary significantly between farm production size (i.e., crop acreage and number of members) or history subsamples (i.e., length of time in business).

CSA members were asked to report their annual household income for 2011. Of those who reported their income ranges (84 of 97 responses), most fell into either the US\$25,000–US\$99,000 (50%) or the US\$100,000–US\$149,000 (26.2%) income brackets. The median annual household income in our sample was approximately US\$73,100, higher than reported median incomes for both the state (US\$69,282) and county (US\$64,731) but similar to self-reported figures from previously published studies (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008; Cone & Myhre, 2000; Durrenberger, 2002; Goland, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The majority of our sample had obtained a college degree (94.8%), with over half holding an advanced degree (masters or doctorate). When compared with the county and state levels of education, our sample population was much more highly educated than the general populace. Education levels of Pennsylvania and Centre county residents ranged from those who had obtained a high school degree or higher (87.9%, 92.9%, respectively) or a bachelor degree or higher (26.7%, 39.8%, respectively). The present level of education reported by these CSA members was also greater than levels reported in previous surveys (e.g., Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008; Cone & Myhre, 2000;

Table 1. Farm Sample Summary

CSA Farm Type		Number of Surveys Collected	
		Valid %	n
Large	Large 1	27%	26
	Large 2	31%	30
	Average Membership ^a	180	
Small	Small 1	20%	20
	Small 2	22%	21
	Average Membership ^a	92	
Total		100%	97

^a Average membership only for the 2012 summer season.

Table 2. Socio-demographic Profile of Respondents

Socio-demographic Variables		Large Farms ^a (n=56)	Small Farms ^a (n=41)	Aggregate Sample ^a (n=97)	County ^b	Pennsylvania State ^b
— Valid Percentages or Means —						
Gender	Male	32%	32%	32%	52%	49%
	Female	68%	68%	68%	48%	51%
Age	Mean	40	41	41	N/A	N/A
	Median	N/A	N/A	39	29	40
Household Income (US\$)	\$25,000 or less	10%	9%	9.5%	N/A	N/A
	\$25,000–\$49,000	31%	17%	25%	N/A	N/A
	\$50,000–\$99,000	18%	34%	25%	N/A	N/A
	\$100,000–\$149,000	25%	29%	26%	N/A	N/A
	\$150,000 or more	16%	11%	14%	N/A	N/A
	Median	N/A	N/A	\$73,100	\$64,731	\$69,282
Education Level	High school graduate or some college	9%	0%	5%	N/A	N/A
	Bachelor's degree	20%	40%	28%	N/A	N/A
	Master's degree	50%	30%	42%	N/A	N/A
	Doctoral degree	21%	30%	25%	N/A	N/A

^a Percentages may not equal 100 because of rounding.

^b U.S. Census Bureau data (2007–2011).

Durrenberger, 2002; Goland, 2002).

Comparisons between members of the two farm groups (large versus small farms) were made for the socio-demographic factors of gender, age, annual household income, and education level. Findings indicated there were no statistically significant differences between the two group members for any of these factors.

$p < .05$ level) between large or small farms. Four items addressed respondent satisfaction with their CSA membership experience. Respondents were asked to separately rate the produce's "Quantity," "Quality," and "Variety" for the current season on a five-point scale ranging from "Awful" to "Excellent." In addition, a fourth item asked respondents to rate their overall CSA experience

Comparing Farm Groups: How Does Community Matter to Members?

The survey instrument contained a list of 11 possible reasons why people join CSAs. Comparisons made using a series of independent samples t-tests between responses from members of the two farm groups indicated that the mean scores of membership rationale did not differ significantly (i.e., at the

Table 3. Independent Samples t-test for Mean Satisfaction Scores by Farm Category

Items	Farm Group	Mean	Mean Difference	df	t
Quantity	Large	4.20	.56	95	-3.98***
	Small	4.76			
Quality	Large	4.41	.47	95	-4.20***
	Small	4.88			
Variety	Large	4.14	.37	95	-2.50*
	Small	4.51			
Overall Satisfaction	Large	8.70	.91	95	-4.73***
	Small	9.60			

* Significant at .05 level; **significant at .01 level; ***significant at .001 level

for the current season on a 10-point scale. Mean scores were significantly different by farm group for all four satisfaction variables: product quantity, quality, variety, and overall satisfaction (Table 3). Small farms had a statistically significant higher mean satisfaction score for each of these variables. The difference between large and small farm satisfaction scores of product quantity, quality, and variety ranged closely between .37 and .56, but the difference between the mean overall satisfaction increased to .91 between the two farm categories.

Respondents were also asked to answer yes or no to the following question: *Do you consider yourself a member of the community based on your CSA membership?* A series of chi-square tests was performed on these responses. No statistically significant difference was found between large and small farms.

What Community Means to CSA Members

Open-ended responses to the meaning of community in CSA generally fell into three broad categories (Table 4). Nearly a third of all respondents supplied a broad definition of community (community definition code=32%). For example,

although the particulars varied, in general community was defined as a group of people who shared something in common. A number of people struggled to define community (non-answer code=11%) and instead provided a list of benefits obtained through membership, such as organic food or access to healthy food. The remaining responses were more narrowly focused on one or more community attributes, personal motivations, or values (sum of categories=57%).

Member responses from the two farm types differed significantly in their definition of community. More than two-thirds of large-farm member responses (67%) included a broad definition of community (i.e., group sharing something in common), a non-answer, support of farming, and support of farmers. The remaining responses more narrowly focused on community attributes, personal motivations, or values. These specific attributes included support of local people, resources, and the importance of interactions.

Small-farm member responses were also dominated by the top four codes: community definitions, non-answers, support of farming, and

Table 4. Responses to the Question, “What does the community in CSA mean to you?”

Category	Large Farms ^a	n ^b	Small Farms ^a	n ^b	Aggregate Sample ^a	n
Community Definition	37%	54	26%	28	32%	82
Non-answer	11%	16	11%	12	11%	28
Support farm	13%	19	4%	4	9%	23
Support farmer	6%	9	9%	10	7%	19
Interaction	4%	6	10%	11	7%	17
Support local people	5%	8	7%	8	6%	16
Relationship	2%	3	8%	9	5%	12
Resources	5%	8	4%	4	5%	12
Farm gathering	3%	5	6%	6	4%	11
Support local resource	5%	7	2%	2	4%	9
Working together	2%	3	5%	5	3%	8
Interaction (place)	1%	2	4%	4	2%	6
Support local organization	1%	2	3%	3	2%	5
Interaction (resources)	1%	2	2%	2	2%	4
People	1%	2	1%	1	1%	3
Total	100%	146	100%	109	100%	255

^a Percentages may not equal 100 because of rounding.

^b An individual's responses could contain multiple ideas; hence the response count exceeds the number of respondents.

Table 5. Responses to the Question, “What aspects of this CSA community are important to you?”

Category	Large Farms ^a	<i>n</i> ^b	Small Farms ^a	<i>n</i> ^b	Aggregate Sample ^a	<i>n</i>
Product	27%	26	19%	13	24%	39
Local	19%	18	10%	7	15%	25
Community	7%	7	24%	16	14%	23
Personal farmer	12%	12	15%	10	13%	22
Lifestyle	11%	11	10%	7	11%	18
Farm outreach	8%	8	3%	2	6%	10
Convenience	6%	6	1%	1	4%	7
Food origin	3%	3	6%	4	4%	7
Peer-peer	3%	3	6%	4	4%	7
Farming practice	2%	2	6%	4	4%	6
Non-community	1%	1	0%	N/A	1%	1
Total	100%	97	100%	68	100%	165

^a Percentages may not equal 100 because of rounding.

^b An individual's responses could contain multiple ideas; hence the response count exceeds the number of respondents.

support of farmers. However, significantly more respondents focused on the personal, human dimensions of the transaction, including support of the specific farmer and local people, interactions, and relationships. More than one in three (34%) members of the small-farm responses defined community at a personal level through support, interaction, or relationships with specific people; only 17% of the large-farm responses focused on this more individual aspect of community.

Members from the large-farm CSAs more consistently defined community as a generic, broader concept (37%).

Likewise, the two farm types differed in the CSA aspects members believed were most important (Table 5). Nearly half (46%) the large-farm members named the product and its local origin as important aspects of their CSA community. Conversely, only a third of the small farm members named these aspects (product and local) as

Table 6. Responses to the Question, “What are the benefits of CSA membership?”

Category	Large Farms ^a	<i>n</i> ^b	Small Farms ^a	<i>n</i> ^b	Aggregate Sample ^a	<i>n</i>
Product	30%	38	28%	27	29%	65
Lifestyle	19%	24	15%	15	17%	39
Local	15%	19	14%	14	15%	33
Community	4%	5	7%	7	5%	12
Variety	6%	7	5%	5	5%	12
Price	5%	6	5%	5	5%	11
Food origin	6%	7	3%	3	4%	10
Personal farmer	5%	6	4%	4	4%	10
Convenience	2%	3	6%	6	4%	9
Quality	2%	3	4%	4	3%	7
Quantity	2%	2	5%	5	3%	7
Farming practice	2%	3	3%	3	3%	6
Farm outreach	2%	2	0%	N/A	1%	2
Total	100%	125	100%	98	100%	223

^a Percentages may not equal 100 because of rounding.

^b An individual's responses could contain multiple ideas; hence the response count exceeds the number of respondents.

Table 7. What Does the Community in CSA Mean to Farm-owners?

Category	Large Farms	<i>n</i>	Small Farms	<i>n</i>	Aggregate Sample	<i>n</i>
Community Definition	—	—	50%	3	25%	3
Non-answer	17%	1	—	—	8%	1
Support member	—	—	17%	1	8%	1
Interaction	17%	1	—	—	8%	1
Support local people	17%	1	—	—	8%	1
Relationship	17%	1	17%	1	17%	2
Farm gathering	17%	1	17%	1	17%	2
Interaction (place)	17%	1	—	—	8%	1
Total	100%	6	100%	6	100%	12

important. Small-farm members more frequently (39%) cited the community and farmer interactions as key aspects of their CSA involvement.

In general, the benefits cited by the aggregate members were the same across the two farm types (Table 6). What appeared to differ was the strength of personal networks formed by the respondents to either the farmers or their fellow CSA members. Large-farm respondents indicated that fellow CSA farmers and/or members were part of the larger, State College community, whereas small-farm members more readily identified their fellow farmers and/or members as *their* community presumably because of a heightened level of interaction and personal relations.

What Community Means to CSA Farm-owners

Following the initial member survey, the farm-owners were asked a small subset of the survey questions asked of CSA members to assess their concept of community in relation to their CSA. In particular, the farmers were asked *do you consider yourself a member of the community based on your CSA*

participation; what does the community in CSA mean to you; and what aspects of this CSA community are important to you? All four sets of farm-owners affirmed they felt they were members of their CSA community. In general, the results largely mirrored the member attempts to define community, including several community definitions that involved the concept of belonging to a group or having a sense of shared group identity. Surprisingly, most of the individual farm-owner responses focused not on broad definitions of community, but rather specific community attributes, personal motivations, or values (72%) (Table 7).

The farm-owners valued the community (group sharing) and farm outreach aspects most among the various features of their CSA groups (Table 8). Lifestyle and personal relationships, both with members and workshare personnel, however, were also highly rated. The farmers specifically mentioned gaining a sense of personal achievement or enjoyment from receiving positive member feedback (i.e., lifestyle code).

Table 8. What Aspects of This CSA Community Are Important to Farm-owners?

Category	Large Farms	<i>n</i>	Small Farms	<i>n</i>	Aggregate Sample	<i>n</i>
Community	20%	1	40%	2	30%	3
Personal farmer	20%	1	—	—	10%	1
Lifestyle	20%	1	20%	1	20%	2
Farm outreach	40%	2	20%	1	30%	3
Peer-peer	—	—	20%	1	10%	1
Total	100%	5	100%	5	100%	10

Discussion

Despite its location within a college town, the current study replicated the CSA member socio-demographics generally seen in other CSA studies. Survey respondents were predominately female, between the ages of 22 and 49, highly educated, and typically earned higher incomes than most of the local populace. Many of the similarities in raw data with previous CSA studies were striking, but the conclusions reached were often quite dissimilar. For example, Pole and Gray (2013) reported a low sense of community among New York CSA members.

The majority of central Pennsylvania CSA members surveyed in our study were highly satisfied with their CSA membership and most indicated they would retain it. This suggests, at a minimum, that the majority of surveyed members are willing to accommodate any economic and/or lifestyle changes associated with CSA membership, including changes to purchasing, processing, and consumption behaviors (Brown, C., & Miller 2008; Cone & Myhre, 2000; Durrenberger, 2002) and/or felt they were obtaining sufficient benefits from membership (i.e., social capital [Flora & Bregendahl, 2012]). Nevertheless, we found a statistically significant difference between satisfaction levels that correlated with production size and length of time the CSA has been in business. Members of the smaller, newly emerging farms were more satisfied than members of the larger, well established CSA farms. Thus satisfaction not only factored into the decision to remain a member, but was also associated with CSA community perception, as discussed below.

Members of established, larger farms defined community broadly as a group of people who shared something in common. For these members, it was a community of shared interest rather than of relationships, supporting the results of Cone and Myhre (2000). Discussions with established farmers suggested their outreach and education efforts focused more on broader social issues and ethics addressed through CSA membership (i.e., value-added purchasing). Thus, a broader community definition was conveyed to the members through the primary efforts of the farmers. In addition, members of the larger, established farms were

satisfied with their memberships because they believed their participation contributed to a greater good (i.e., broader social and ethical values).

Members of the smaller, emergent farms were more likely to define community on the basis of personal relationships. In other words, members defined their community by naming specific types of interactions or relationships with individuals, including the farmers. These small, emerging CSAs used existing social networks (e.g., families, church groups, and coworkers) and their farm products as a means to relate to members, building interconnectivity. They stressed the building of trust and reciprocity with their members; interactions were seen as equal exchanges. This concept of community was mirrored in the personal benefits listed by the members. Here, community was defined by the interaction of its members; these interactions, for the most part, existed prior to membership in the CSA. The CSAs were benefiting from the pre-existing, embedded social networks of the individual farmers. As such, the emerging farmers were initiating a “collective effort to provide food whilst building community” (compare with Fieldhouse, 1996, p. 43).

The heightened, personal interaction among the small farmers and members provides insight into the significantly higher satisfaction experienced by these members. While both large and small farmers, to a degree, were able to successfully re-embed their products in social and environmental relations, only the small farmers played an integral role in the lives of their members. In other words, there was an inverse relationship between the level of satisfaction and the distance of social relations. When actions were perceived to benefit specific individuals, the personal satisfaction was greater than when actions were perceived to benefit a faceless group. This difference might also be expressed as the difference between building an association based on belief in a common good and a community based on interaction (MacIver, 1931, in Wilkinson, 1991). Alternatively one might speculate that if the smaller CSAs have a more homogeneous membership, based largely on pre-existing social networks, then the farmers may be employing a form of bonding social capital (Flora & Flora, 2003). Likewise, larger farm operators

might be building bridging social capital through diverse and flexible networks, which has been theorized to increase both the community of interest and community of place (Flora & Flora, 2003, p. 219).

Conclusion

Our CSA farm sample was selected to represent the diversity of options present in the central Pennsylvania regional food network and included farms with differing production sizes and years in operation that serve the same semi-urban area of State College. Following Brehm and Eisenhauer (2008), we asked CSA members to define their concepts of community both directly through open-ended questions and indirectly through satisfaction measures. Qualitative analysis of the responses defining the concept of community in CSA indicated that definitions differed significantly between the large, established farms and the smaller, emerging farms. Although member socio-demographics did not correlate with perceptions of members' CSA community, satisfaction was significantly different between the large and small farms. While all members were highly satisfied, members of the smaller, emerging CSAs were more highly satisfied.

The results suggest that the way in which farm operators conceptualized the "C" in community supported agriculture influenced member perceptions of their CSA community. The large, well established farm operators conceptualized CSA communities in a broad sense as contributing to a greater good in social and ethical issues. This conception of a CSA community was then reflected in the responses of the large farm members who defined their CSA community as "a group of people who share a common interest." Conversely, the smaller, emerging farm members defined their CSA community in terms of more personal and specific relationships. This greater degree of personal interaction likely resulted in a heightened sense of CSA satisfaction.

These distinct yet juxtaposed findings present researchers with a paradox. As CSAs first enter the market, they are typically small in terms of both membership and production capabilities. This small and manageable size affords ample

opportunity to foster a strong sense of community relationships through interaction. Larger CSAs, however, may find this level of interaction difficult to facilitate evenly across the membership. Larger CSA organizations, by necessity, often encompass broader geographical boundaries, spreading themselves thinner across multiple distribution sites, thereby limiting the opportunities for interaction within the membership as a whole. We suggest that a key component to maintaining a sense of community within a CSA is to establish a membership threshold at which both customer satisfaction and sense of community are optimum for consumer and producer.

Our findings indicate that with effort, small CSAs can facilitate a holistic sense of satisfaction and sense of community, while their larger counterparts may exist as an intermediary somewhere between a true community-building enterprise and a more disconnected wholesale supplier. Anecdotal observations and owner interviews further support this concept by suggesting that at the center of many CSAs, particularly those that started small, is a core group of individuals who intently personify the notion of community. When these small CSAs expand, the number of members on the periphery of this core group increases, thus diluting the average or overall sense of community and customer satisfaction.

Although CSA membership is growing in the United States, membership turnover is also on the rise (Lang, 2010; Perez, Allen, & Brown, 2003). Our findings suggest that CSAs may retain more members from season to season if they foster a greater sense of community. By increasing opportunities for interaction among the CSA membership, such as potluck dinners and other events, members may find more satisfaction with their CSA experience. Opportunities for interaction in larger CSA operations may be increased by encouraging place-based interactions among the various pick-up location populations (i.e., sub-populations of the CSA membership). Increased interaction at distribution locations could be facilitated through recipes and unwanted produce exchanges, not only fostering a greater sense of community but also alleviating other common reasons for leaving a CSA, like food waste or

unfamiliarity with certain vegetables (Perez et al., 2003; Russell & Zepeda, 2008).

Our findings suggest that if larger CSAs wish to foster an inherent sense of community, they should consider a multiscale approach to facilitate membership interactions. Larger CSAs should encourage smaller-scale, place-based interactions at distribution locations, as well as farm-centered activities that encompass the entire CSA membership. Some individuals, however, may join a CSA more for the food production benefits with the intent of having limited involvement (DeLind, 1999, 2003). These individuals would be on the periphery of the CSA core group but may participate more in the broader community through other social networks (e.g., youth outreach, food banks, or shelters).

Further work is needed to provide insight into the ideal membership or group size at which both holistic community and customer satisfaction may be ideally maintained. Additionally, there is a need to document the social networks that may be used by new CSA operators and the extent of personal interactions seen in such communities. Research into the existing social networks of members, beyond the farm, could explore avenues of opportunity for the CSA operators. Moreover, an examination of the CSA non-core group or periphery members may document how these members are contributing to community-building activities in other aspects of life, placing CSA activities within a wider frame of reference. Other researchers have suggested a link between overall community attachment and CSA involvement (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008), but much additional work is needed to explore this relationship.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank our local CSA farm operators and their members for their assistance and participation in the study. This article reports the results of transdisciplinary, cohort-building research at The Pennsylvania State University conducted in fall 2012 and spring 2013. The authors additionally thank Ryan Scavo, Emily Osborn, and Stephanie Eisenbise for assistance with data collection and collaborative coding. Preliminary project results were presented in poster format at the 19th International Symposium on Society and

Resource Management (ISSRM) in Estes Park, Colorado, in June 2013, where ISSRM participants graciously gave of their time and experience to discuss and critique the project. They too are sincerely thanked.

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