The Power of the Tribal Dollar: Highlighting the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project’s Food-Purchasing Program

By Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot)
B.S., Nutrition, M.A., Community Food Systems
Acknowledgements from First Nations Development Institute

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About the Author

Valerie Segrest is an enrolled member of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe and works as the Community Nutritionist and Native Foods Educator for Northwest Indian College’s Cooperative Extension Department. She is a graduate of Northwest Indian College and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Nutrition from Bastyr University. She also earned her M.A. degree in Community Food Systems from Antioch University in Seattle, and is currently pursuing Ph.D. studies at the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington in Seattle.

As an independent, creative and outspoken American Indian woman, she has developed a new perspective in addressing issues of health and social justice for Indigenous peoples. Her goal is to restore health and well-being to her tribe and other Native communities by combining traditional Native food and plant knowledge with modern scientific findings. While studying to be a clinical nutritionist, Valerie began to deepen her awareness and knowledge of the gifts of her Native ancestors. She became less interested in talking about calorie counting, carbohydrates and protein intake and more driven to get people connected with the source of their foods.

Now, Valerie is committed to creating culturally appropriate health systems in tribal communities and exemplifies dedication to tribal wellness through community-based research that impacts health disparities. In 2009, she co-authored the book “Feeding the People, Feeding the Spirit: Revitalizing Northwest Coastal Indian Food Culture,” which has become a tribute to the movement among tribal people in western Washington to improve individual, family and community wellness through revitalizing their traditional foods. From this book, Valerie has developed a basic nutrition curriculum entitled “Honor the Gift of Food” that empowers students to develop their own healthy eating behaviors through sharing modern approaches to a traditional foods diet. She also creates and designs community gardens as well as researches and writes a monthly column for her blog and community newspaper on local and wild foods of the Pacific Northwest.

Valerie has served as the coordinator of the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project to collectively develop innovative and effective ways to build community food security through exploring tribal food assets and access to local and healthy foods.


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Introduction

We are witnessing a revolution throughout Indian Country. Testimonies of community gardens, agricultural training programs, traditional food and nutrition curriculum, seed banks and farm-to-institution projects are all measurements of the undeniable food renaissance happening in tribal communities across the nation. Perhaps the most inspirational aspect to our food revolution is the community building that emerges from these various initiatives. However, community building happens in small, seemingly infinite steps and finding quantifiable measurements can appear to be impossible.

Quality education, human safety and a clean environment are all common measurements of improving community health and so is economic opportunity. As we strengthen our community food systems, what are the economic implications of our efforts? How do we measure the parallels between health, food security and a sustainable economy? The answer may be what moves more tribal governments and leadership to join our efforts, take action, and commit to community food initiatives.

Tribal leaders have two large primary responsibilities. One is to sustain and improve the physical environment for their community members. This is done through constructing roads, houses, community service centers and educational spaces. The other role is to maintain the social fabric of a community by protecting sovereignty and treaty rights, and by engaging community members through general council meetings, elections and other public forums.

Many current forms of citizen engagement tend to be transactional and focus on all of the deficiencies and problems in our respective communities. Ultimately this promotes isolation, consumer mindsets and self-interest. How do tribal leaders, from all sectors of community, begin to shift the conversation from problems to possibilities? In other words, how do we maintain, or weave together the social fabric of our communities in a way that promotes transformational engagement and active citizenship?

Food is a good place to begin. Historically, it was our food systems that held us together as a people. In many ways, we were part of a truly advanced economy that supported our individual gifts, our collective power as a people, the protocols of generosity and measured our accountability as cultivators of the land. When our governments can prioritize the restoration of our food systems we can begin to work towards a collective communal transformation that promotes a society focused on gifts, one that relies on the successes of each other and empowers its own citizens.

Food is about investment in not just businesses, but also in the health of the community. By supporting food security projects, and other innovations around food, tribes have the ability to spend a dollar that comes back tenfold. One such innovation is the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project’s Food-Purchasing Program.
This program, funded in part by First Nations Development Institute, is an ongoing effort in the Muckleshoot tribal community focused on openly discussing the power of tribal dollars and the impact on the local food economy and local vendors. Moreover, this program gives voice to cooks and others who work in community kitchens across the reservations, empowering them to have a voice in food purchasing and demanding better access to quality foods that are served to tribal members in tribal venues across the reservation.

Native communities have numerous kitchens that span reservation communities. These kitchens are located in senior centers, schools, tribal offices, tribal colleges and in other institutions. In many instances, the food that is prepared and consumed in these kitchens is purchased from large vendors located off reservation. In total, these institutional kitchens spend millions of dollars on food. In many, if not most, Native communities across the United States, these food purchases are done in isolation and not coordinated between institutions and programs.

In the Muckleshoot community, tribal cooks began to openly talk about their large economic impact on local food vendors and also talk about the quality of food delivered to their kitchens from these vendors. In many instances, these conversations documented the huge profits that off-reservation vendors made from kitchens in Native communities, but noted the frequent occurrence of poor quality of food that was delivered to Native kitchens.

This issue of food purchase and food quality raised two questions for our community: 1) how can we improve coordination among tribal programs to save money on food purchases and 2) how can we improve the quality of foods served in our community kitchens?

In thinking about the purchasing power of tribal programs, and also the quality of foods in our community, the Muckleshoot Food Purchasing Program drew on the concept of “buying clubs” that have been formed in many communities across the United States. A buying club is basically a group of individuals who band together to collectively leverage dollars and resources, increasing purchasing power, to get better access to prices, goods and services from vendors. The overall implication of buying clubs is that a group of people are better positioned to make market negotiations compared to just one individual.

Can this concept that has typically been used at the household level be transferred to a tribal community? Can programs work together to negotiate better prices and better quality goods from vendors? The following is a case study that examines the implications of a tribal purchasing program on the Muckleshoot Reservation in Auburn, Washington.

The Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project’s Food-Purchasing Program

Community Overview

There are approximately 2,500 enrolled members of the Muckleshoot Tribe and nearly 4,000 American Indians living on or near the reservation. Tribal community kitchens, include the Seniors’ Program, Tribal School, Youth Facility, Early Childhood Education Center, Daycare Center and the Health and Wellness Center’s Café. Serving more than 1,200 meals per day, these tribally-operated kitchens are a significant food source for many.
The scope and magnitude of these kitchens’ impact on people’s diets make them an invaluable venue for creating large-scale change in eating habits as well as identifying cost savings through an organized purchasing program.

**Analyzing Food Purchases of Community Kitchens**

An analysis of food purchasing was conducted based on 2012 food-purchase reports provided by each kitchen’s food vendors. From these reports, the top 10 foods served across all kitchens were identified. These were determined based on the highest amount of money spent and the highest quantity of that particular food ordered.

After analyzing food purchases, group discussions that included all of the kitchens’ tribal cooks were held in order to identify food distributors currently under contract with the kitchens, as well as the quality of services each distributor provided. Tribal cooks discussed a variety of topics related to food distributors, including troubleshooting methods, quality of customer service, challenges to ordering, and a description of each kitchen’s purchasing and receiving processes.

**Findings from Food Purchase Analysis and Cook Conversations**

The analysis of the previous year’s food purchasing provided a snapshot of exactly what foods were offered in all of the Muckleshoot kitchens. Out of the top 10 foods most frequently purchased, seven were identified as foods that can be procured from our own traditional and accustomed harvesting grounds and reservation lands. These include beef, buffalo, halibut, salmon, berries, apples and potatoes. Quantity and cost of these foods provided solid numbers for the food distributors to work with. This helped them make a more comprehensive and realistic offer regarding the cost savings and benefits of moving to a cooperative purchasing system.

Eight different food distributors were identified as current suppliers of the Muckleshoot kitchens and each kitchen operated as a stand-alone customer account. The unique challenges of each kitchen were shared during discussions with tribal cooks and largely focused on purchasing and receiving deficiencies as poor customer service and troubleshooting. Nearly every kitchen shared the same challenge of food distributors making deliveries of food items they had not ordered and upon alerting their supplier of the mistake, they would refuse to correct the error or offer a refund to the kitchen for the incorrect delivery.

On several accounts, food vendors would deliver product that was not consumable (i.e. mushy watermelons, fish with worms, rotten produce) and then refuse to refund or replace it. Most of the time those foods were the day’s menu, making it hard for cooks to prepare a healthy, well-rounded meal for the day. These discussions clearly defined the need to integrate tribal cooks into the decision-making process of identifying a quality food distributor for all kitchens.

**Tribal Cooks Ask the Questions**

In August 2013, the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project, in collaboration with several tribal programs, hosted a “Food Distributors Symposium.” We invited all staff involved in the daily operation of each kitchen to attend, and eight food distributors were invited to make presentations about their services. In total, a group of 32 tribal cooks and kitchen staff, program administrators and other interested community members were in attendance for the vendor presentations.
The invitation to food distributors specifically outlined expectations of their presentations. Each food vendor was allotted a 15-minute slot with a 10-minute question-and-answer session led by the tribal cooks. During this time, they were asked to discuss benefits of cooperative buying and cost savings involved, their companies customer service guarantee and methods to troubleshooting. Tribal cooks were encouraged to facilitate the 10-minute question-and-answer sessions with their own scenarios and inquiry.

As an outcome of the “Food Distributors Symposium,” tribal cooks reported feeling empowered by just being able to have a voice and be a part of the decision-making process. Kitchen administrators reported a better understanding of the challenges their staff faces on a daily basis as well. The food distributors appreciated being able to speak to all kitchens in a genuine way and in a clearly defined format.

In addition to empowering cooks, the presentations yielded some important economic benefits for food purchases. On average, each vendor presented distribution plans that offered cost savings of nearly 10% across all kitchens as well as the opportunity to purchase higher-quality foods (i.e. organic, local, fresh). The troubleshooting and customer care questions led by the cooks at the end of each distributor's presentation assisted cooks in understanding customer care and service priorities of each vendor.

Ultimately, staff and administrators from seven of our community's kitchens were able to vote via ballot on their top two preferences, and one food distributor came out as an overwhelming favorite. This vendor currently services four of the seven operating kitchens across the reservation.

**Discussion**

By examining the diverse system of each kitchen and listening to our tribal cooks’ unique challenges, many opportunities were identified to strengthen our community food programs and build a sustainable economy. The initial objective was to review the kitchens’ budgets and identify the cost-saving benefits of cooperative purchasing across all of our kitchens. However, greater insight into challenges were made by taking the opportunity to inspect how quality of service from food suppliers affects access to healthy meals. By setting every cook up for success with an organized purchasing and receiving system, increasing customer service awareness and cultivating confidence in kitchen staff, we uphold our ability to offer better-quality meals to the community.

On that note, the cost savings are undeniably tremendous. Without giving away sensitive information regarding the tribe's food budget, here is a practical and hypothetical financial breakdown of a 10% savings. Say the average food budget for a tribe to sustain six community kitchen programs were at $1.4 million and they were to receive a 10% cost savings by simply purchasing from one food distributor. That is a savings of $140,000 in one year. That savings allows dollars to be used for other community needs and services.

Looking at the possibility of procuring seven of the top 10 foods purchased across all kitchens begins to show us cost savings that will happen in as few as three years. For example, with more than $40,000 being spent on blueberries, strawberries and blackberries, a unique opportunity for tribal members to become berry growers and make a decent living selling to just the community kitchens is identified. While that money may not be direct savings from the bottom-line budget, it is money that stays in the community and supports a tribally-operated business. This same model can be identified for a buffalo and cattle rancher, or an apple orchard, or a tribal fisherman.

This study helped identify the potential for saving the tribe a good amount of money by just consolidating our purchasing. It also recognized the points of intervention within the currently operating food system that have potential for community building to take place. Basically, the collective purchasing power of the
kitchens means ordering in larger quantities, creating an economy of scale that both reduces expenses and gives them more buying power, to influencing vendors to provide healthier and more culturally-appropriate foods. Locally-grown foods, which may have been financially out of reach of individual kitchens, will become more accessible.

**Conclusion**

In revisiting the two main responsibilities of tribal leadership to provide a safe physical environment and maintain the social fabric of a community, the findings in this study are irrefutable. Not only would the tribe save money by supporting a cooperative buying model for its kitchens, it could potentially create more jobs for tribal members in the near future. These prospective employment opportunities include tribally-owned food businesses where community members become an integral part of their food system while simultaneously strengthening our food security and sovereignty. By moving to a cooperative purchasing model, tribal leadership is also supporting the voice of tribal cooks, which honors the democratic process. In this way, tribal cooks become active citizens who also shape the way we do business and that is what transformational engagement is all about.

Social fabric is created from a sense of belonging and shaped by the wisdom that only when we are connected to the whole do we truly begin to understand how our individual success relies on the success of others. Maintaining the strength of that fabric is a collective effort that involves all aspects of community health – from education, to safety, to a clean environment and a stable economy. Tribes have immense potential in shaping a meaningful economy that is inspired by a rich and ancient food system. We can do this by focusing on our gifts, putting the power in the hands of our own community members, and by promoting an associational life. After all, what we eat is about honoring the connection we carry with all living things, and that is what nourishes us physically, mentally, spiritually and communally. It is also what can cultivate our economic system in a meaningful way, grounded in social capital and generosity.