

Cultivate Michigan

2022-2023 MARKETPLACE SERIES EVALUATION REPORT



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MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for
Regional Food Systems



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Introduction

The purpose of Cultivate Michigan Marketplace events is to provide opportunities for local and regional food suppliers and institutional food service buyers of all scales to network and connect around local food. Events are hosted within regions of Michigan to best facilitate connections between buyers and sellers of local food of different sizes and scales. A series of five Marketplace events held between 2022 and early 2023 were coordinated and hosted by the [Michigan Farm to Institution Network \(MFIN\)](#), [Michigan Department of Education \(MDE\)](#), and local hosts, including [Michigan State University Extension \(MSUE\)](#), and supported by grants from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Specialty Crop Block Grant Program and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. MFIN is coordinated by [Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems](#) with support from MSUE.

The report that follows outlines evaluation results of a series of five Marketplaces held between late 2022 and early 2023. Many types of institutional buyers attended including staff members from early care and education sites (ECEs), schools, hospitals, and universities. Grantees participating in [10 Cents a Meal for Michigan’s Kids and Farms \(10 Cents a Meal\)](#), namely ECEs and K-12 schools, were also encouraged to attend. Food suppliers of any scale were welcome, and attendees included farmers, food product makers, food hubs, and distributors.

At each event, institutional food buyers were stationed at tables around the room, and food suppliers rotated to meet with buyers of their choice during a two-hour timeframe. Buyers and suppliers were provided with an “event passport” that shared a brief introduction to the event and detailed information about attendees’ institutional food programs or farm or food businesses, including contact information, gathered through an electronic registration survey. Suppliers were also given a list of products of interest by attending institutional buyers and institutions were given a list of products that attending suppliers could sell, also based on information shared through the registration process.

The series of five events held across Michigan between April 2022 – March 2023 are listed in the table below. An event for the Northeast region of Lower Michigan was originally scheduled in March 2023 in Alpena, MI, but it was cancelled due to low registration. The MFIN network has continued to seek other ways to offer assistance in that region of the state.

Table 1: Cultivate Michigan Marketplace Events in 2022-2023

Date	City	Venue	Local Hosts
April 12, 2022	Grand Rapids	Blandford Nature Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — City of Holland — West Michigan Growers Group — MSUE Community Food Systems
January 12, 2023	Kalamazoo	Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — KVCC ValleyHUB — MSUE Community Food Systems
March 6, 2023	Detroit	Eastern Market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Eastern Market
March 20, 2023	Ann Arbor	Trinity Health, formerly known as St. Joseph Mercy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The Farm at Trinity Health — MSUE Community Food Systems
March 23, 2023	Flint	Flint Fresh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Flint Fresh Food Hub — MSUE Community Food Systems

Evaluation Results

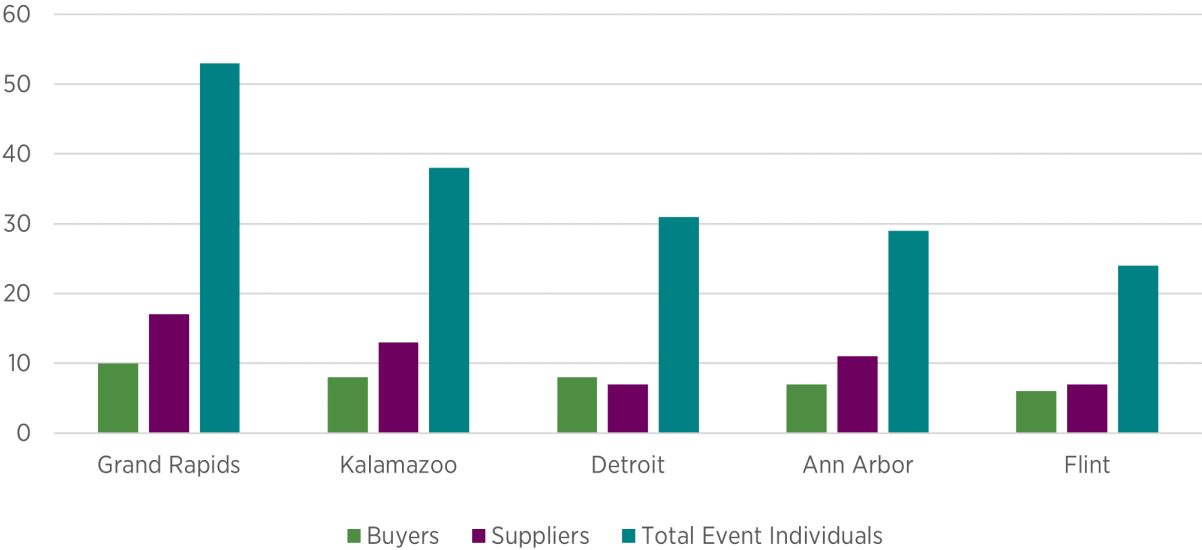
The following information shares findings related to attendance and evaluation results from paper surveys that participants were asked to complete before they left their respective event(s). All attendees were required to check-in upon entering the event by signing a sheet to verify their name and organization. Institutional buyers and suppliers received separate evaluation surveys that included open response and multiple-choice questions, as seen in the table at the end of the report. Not all attendees completed a survey, and the response rate varies with each question. We summarize overall attendance and evaluation results, before sharing about results from each event.

GENERAL ATTENDANCE

Marketplace attendance varied across all events, as seen in Figure 1. The first event in Grand Rapids had the highest number of attendees (53) and the final event in Flint had the lowest number of attendees (24).

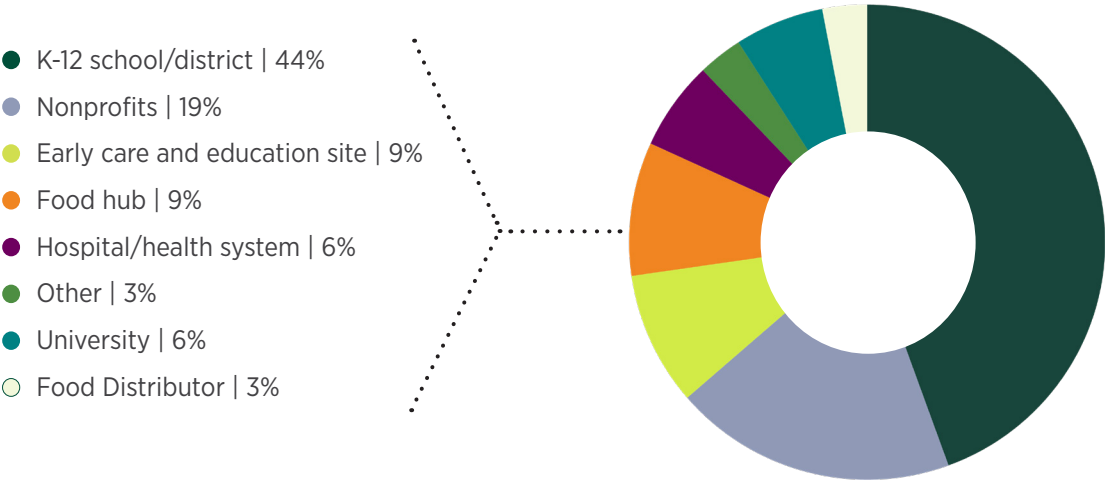


Figure 1: Marketplace Event Attendance by Attendee Type



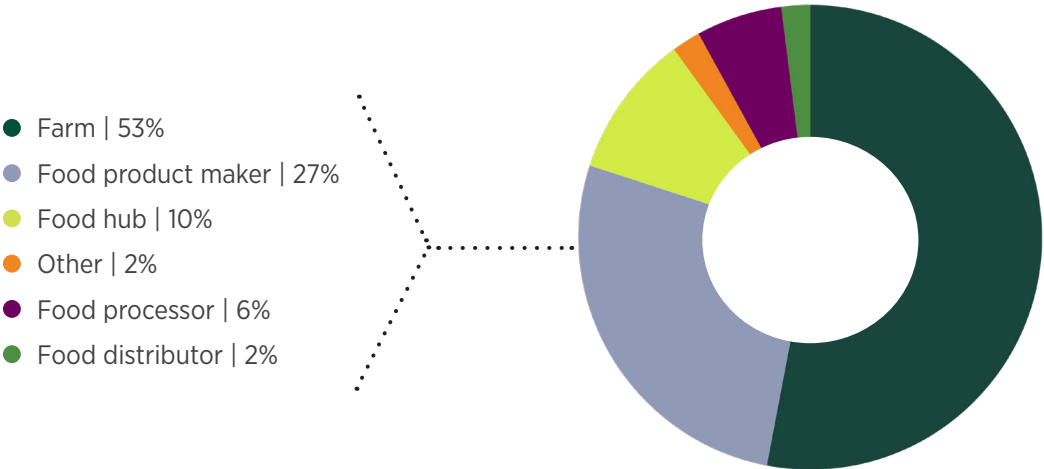
Across all events, attendees represented 32 different institutions and 49 different farm and food suppliers. Additionally, individuals from 12 different organizations supported the event as co-hosts, event coordinators, or representatives to share programmatic resources with attendees (ex. MDE had a booth for 10 Cents a Meal). Eight different types of institutional buyers attended, including: K-12 schools and districts, nonprofit organizations, ECEs, food hubs, hospitals and health systems, universities, food distributors, and other (hospitality business). The breakdown of these different buyer types is shown in Figure 2 below. The most common type of institutional buyers were K-12 schools/districts (14, 44%) and ten of those were 10 Cents a Meal grantees. Two of the ECEs that attended were also 10 Cents a Meal grantees.

Figure 2: Different Types of Institutional Buyers that Attended Marketplace Events



Six different types of suppliers attended, including farms, food product makers, food hubs, food processors, food distributors, and “others,” such as a produce auction business. The breakdown of these different supplier types is shown in Figure 3. The most common type of suppliers were farms (26, 53%), food product makers (13, 27%), and food hubs (5, 10%).

Figure 3: Different Types of Food Suppliers that Attended Marketplace Events





EVALUATION SURVEYS

Across all events, 28 institutional buyers and 37 suppliers completed evaluation surveys. The Marketplace with the highest response rate was Grand Rapids when 46% of buyers and 35% of suppliers completed surveys. The Marketplace with one of the lowest response rates was in Flint when only 7% of buyers and 16% of suppliers completed surveys.

Overall, feedback was positive towards the events. All responding institutional buyers (19) and suppliers (32) said yes to the survey question, “Would you recommend the Marketplace event to someone else?” Collectively, 11 buyers reported 19 different farmers or food suppliers that they planned to contact after the event. Likewise, 21 farmers or food suppliers reported 27 different buyers that they planned to contact. Many buyers and suppliers shared feedback about the event, including suggestions to improve it. The most common suggestions shared by both buyers (63%) and suppliers (55%) were related to a desire for more attendees at each event.

Both institutional buyers and suppliers were asked about their level of agreement with a list of statements about the event. Respondents could indicate strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), or strongly agree (4) to the statements seen in Table 2. Results can be found below in the [Appendices](#). Overall, buyers had the highest level of agreement with the statement about making new purchasing connections (3.6). They had the lowest level of agreement with the statement about the event helping to strengthen a relationship (3.3). Overall, suppliers had the highest level of agreement with the statement about planning to contact at least one buyer (3.7) they met at the event and the lowest level of agreement with the statement about learning something new at the event (3.3).

Table 2: Buyer and Supplier Statements in Evaluation Surveys

Buyer Statements	Supplier Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I learned something new about options for purchasing local foods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I learned something new about options for marketing local foods.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I made new purchasing connections that I did not have before. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I made new sales connections that I did not have before.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I strengthened a relationship with a food supplier from whom I can purchase local foods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I strengthened a relationship with a food buyer to whom I can sell local foods.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I strengthened a relationship with a farmer from whom I can purchase local foods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I plan to contact at least one food buyer I met today.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I plan to contact at least one farmer I met today. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I plan to contact at least one food supplier I met today. 	



GRAND RAPIDS

Attendance:

Nearly 60 people attended the first Marketplace event in Grand Rapids since the pandemic had paused all in-person events. Those who attended included 17 individuals representing 10 different institutional buyers, 29 individuals representing 17 farms and food suppliers, and 10 individuals representing seven partner organizations to support the event.

Top Evaluation Findings from Buyers:

All 10 buyers who responded indicated that they strongly agreed to the six listed statements and that they would recommend the marketplace event to someone else.

“

“This was a great, efficient event that yielded great results.”

- GRAND RAPIDS BUYER ATTENDEE

Top Evaluation Findings from Suppliers:

All 11 suppliers who responded indicated that they agreed to all four listed statements and that they would recommend the marketplace event to someone else.



KALAMAZOO

Attendance:

Nearly 50 people attended the Kalamazoo event following the KVCC ValleyHUB Summit—a farm to institution-focused event for current and potential ValleyHUB partners—including: 10 individuals representing eight different institutions, 16 individuals representing 13 farms and food suppliers, and 11 individuals representing seven partner organizations to support the event.

“

“[I’m] seeing new and eager buyers.”

- KALAMAZOO SUPPLIER ATTENDEE

Top Buyer Evaluation Findings:

All responding buyers (6) indicated that they strongly agreed to all six listed statements.

Top Supplier Evaluation Findings:

All responding suppliers (7) stated that they planned to sell more local foods as a result of the event. All eight responding suppliers stated that they would recommend this marketplace event to someone else.

DETROIT

Attendance:

Several factors influenced this event's attendance. First, it was scheduled on one of the days of the Michigan Farmers Market Conference, a popular event for stakeholders who may be also interested in farm to institution connections. Second, several individuals canceled at the last minute due to a common illness that was prevalent in the community at that time, as well as some who canceled due to the unexpected snow and sleet that made driving to the event potentially hazardous. Nonetheless, 30 people attended the Detroit event including 14 individuals representing eight different institutional buyers, 11 individuals representing seven farms and food suppliers, and six individuals representing four partner organizations to support the event. A representative from a U.S Senator's office also attended the event to meet the buyers and suppliers and learn more about institutional purchasing of local foods in the state.

“

“More local farmers!”

- DETROIT
BUYER ATTENDEE

Top Buyer Evaluation Findings:

All buyers (6) indicated that they agreed to three statements: they made new purchasing connections, they strengthened a relationship with a farmer, and they planned to contact at least one food supplier.

Top Supplier Evaluation Findings:

All responding suppliers (5) agreed to the four listed statements.

ANN ARBOR

Attendance:

Nearly 30 people attended the Ann Arbor event including eight individuals representing seven different institutions, 13 individuals representing 11 farms and food suppliers, and eight individuals representing five partner organizations to support the event.

Top Buyer Evaluation Findings:

Only three buyers completed evaluation surveys and all stated that they would recommend the marketplace event to someone else.

Top Supplier Evaluation Findings:

All responding suppliers (7) agreed to the four listed statements and stated that they would recommend this marketplace event to someone else. All responding suppliers (7) provided names of businesses that they planned to follow up with.

“

“People are very excited about more local options.”

- ANN ARBOR
SUPPLIER ATTENDEE



FLINT

Attendance:

Nearly 30 people attended the Flint event including six individuals representing six different institutions, 11 individuals representing 10 farms and food suppliers, and seven individuals representing six partner organizations came to support the event.

Top Buyer Evaluation Findings:

Only two buyers completed evaluation surveys, and both indicated that they agreed to all listed statements except “I plan to contact at least one food supplier.”

Top Supplier Evaluation Findings:

All responding suppliers (6) agreed to the four listed statements.



Reflection

Evaluation findings show that this Marketplace series was successful in reaching the goal of connecting institutional buyers to suppliers, although additional evaluation would be needed to understand attendees’ follow through on connecting with new contacts they met at one or more events. Across all events institutional buyers and suppliers agreed to many of the listed statements in evaluation surveys, such as connecting to new buyers/suppliers, strengthening relationships with buyers/suppliers, and learning new options about local food purchasing/marketing. Many buyers and suppliers listed different businesses and organizations that they planned to contact following the event. Importantly, all responding buyers and suppliers stated that they would recommend the Marketplace events to someone else.

While the Marketplaces were successful in a variety of ways, the hosts also took away new learnings from conducting this series of five events. First, event attendance can be influenced by a variety of reasons. While there may be strong interest in attending an event, as evidenced through registration numbers, many factors can negatively impact an individual’s ability to attend on the day of the event, such as staffing shortages, greater and/or more unpredictable workloads, or ongoing health concerns such as COVID-19 and other illnesses. Perhaps potential attendees may also have a greater preference for virtual events or online communication and networking compared to pre-pandemic times.

SCHOOLS CITED REASONS FOR NO-SHOWS AS BUSY SCHEDULES AND FULL WORKLOADS.

Second, K-12 schools/districts and ECEs staff members showed strong interest in attending Marketplace events, however, this audience was often the most unpredictable in their ability to attend when the time came. This could have been due to reasons previously mentioned, all of which are exacerbated in their fields in this period of the pandemic. Following the Kalamazoo event, MDE team members began making calls to no-show schools to explore this pattern with attendance versus registration further. The main reasons cited by staff from schools who

had registered and responded were busy schedules and workloads. For example, one attendee stated that Thursdays, a common day on which Marketplaces in this series were held, were their busiest day of the week as they have a variety of deadlines and payroll paperwork to submit. Marketplace organizers tried to keep

this in mind when planning future events for other days of the week and overall, three events were held on a Tuesday and two were held on a Thursday. In the past, Marketplace events held in 2018 were prioritized for Monday late afternoons through early evening, partly to minimize competing activities for potential attendees, including farmers as Mondays are a less common day for farmers markets. An additional action that the MDE team took to address attendance was phone call reminders to registered schools and ECEs at least two days prior to the event. This may have helped boost attendance with some of the remaining events, however, school and ECE staff attendance seemed to remain unpredictable.

On December 6, 2023, a Cultivate Michigan Meet the Buyers event was conducted by the same Marketplace team with a similar purpose and structure to Marketplaces, but within a different venue and context. The event took place at the annual, multi-day Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, and Farm Market Expo (GLEXPO) in Grand Rapids, MI. Twenty individuals representing nine institutional buyers attended to connect with farmers attending GLEXPO. Suppliers were not required to register for this event because it was considered part of their GLEXPO registration. Unlike the Marketplaces, individuals representing resource providers for farm and food businesses across the state also attended. Providers shared information about their grants, services, and programs with attendees during the event, and that information was also compiled in a handout to share as a resource. Pairing the event with an existing, popular conference and the dual functions of the event — networking and resource sharing — were well received by attendees and could serve as a potential model for other events.

A POTENTIAL MODEL THAT WAS WELL RECEIVED BY ATTENDEES WOULD PAIR THE EVENT WITH AN EXISTING, POPULAR CONFERENCE TO STACK NETWORKING AND RESOURCE FUNCTIONS.

As we look to the future, these Marketplace events are effective matchmaking opportunities for institutional buyers and farms and food businesses seeking to connect and meet potential partners at the regional level. Following the pandemic, our food system continues to adapt to supply chain disruptions, staff capacity challenges, and more, so much so that it seems to have changed the reception and interaction of in-person events from previous years. Event organizers should continue to tailor each event to the conditions and needs that their communities are currently experiencing to create effective and successful Marketplace events. Further investigation into lowering barriers to attendance and evaluation of longer-term success and impacts of relationships around local food developed at these events are needed as well. Through these learnings, we can continue to support farmers, local food suppliers, and institutional buyers meet their respective goals of selling and purchasing local foods in Michigan.



Appendices

Table 3: Institutional Buyer Evaluation Responses Across Events

“Because of today’s event...”	Average Score				
	Grand Rapids (n=13)	Kalamazoo (n=6)	Detroit (n=4)	Ann Arbor (n=3)	Flint (n=2)
I learned something new about options for purchasing local foods.	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.7	4.0
I made new purchasing connections that I did not have before.	3.7	3.3	3.8	3.7	3.5
I strengthened a relationship with a food supplier (farmers market, food hub, processor, and/or distributor) from whom I can purchase local foods.	3.7	3.3	2.5	3.0	3.5
I strengthened a relationship with a farmer from whom I can purchase local foods.	3.5	3.3	3.0	2.5	3.5
I plan to contact at least one farmer I met today.	3.8	3.5	2.8	3.0	3.5
I plan to contact at least one food supplier (farmers market, food hub, processor or distributor) I met today.	3.7	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.0

Table 4: Marketplace Supplier Evaluation Responses Across Events

“Because of today’s event...”	Average Score				
	Grand Rapids (n=13)	Kalamazoo (n=8)	Detroit (n=5)	Ann Arbor (n=7)	Flint (n=6)
I learned something new about options for purchasing local foods.	3.0	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.8
I made new sales connections that I did not have before.	3.2	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.5
I strengthened a relationship with a food buyer to whom I can sell local foods.	3.3	3.7	3.4	3.1	3.6
I plan to contact at least one food buyer I met today.	3.4	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.7

Table 5: Evaluation Questions for Institutional Buyers

Question	Response Type	Response Options
To what extent are each of the following statements true from your participation in this Marketplace event?	5-point Likert scale (agree or disagree)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I learned something new about options for purchasing local foods. – I made new purchasing connections that I did not have before. – I strengthened a relationship with a farmer from whom I can purchase local foods. – I strengthened a relationship with a food supplier (food hub, processor, and/or distributor) from whom I can purchase local foods. – I plan to contact at least one farmer I met today. – I plan to contact at least one food supplier (food hub, processor, or distributor) I met today.
Please list any farmers and food suppliers you plan to contact after this meeting, if any.	Open ended, text entry	
Do you plan to purchase more local foods as a result of the event today?	Multiple choice	Yes/No
What was the most important thing you learned at the event today that you can use in your work?	Open ended, text entry	
Which farmers and food suppliers were not present at this event that you would like to learn more about?	Open ended, text entry	
Which local food products would you still like to learn more about at a future Marketplace event?	Open ended, text entry	
How can we make future Marketplace events more effective?	Open ended, text entry	
Would you recommend this Marketplace event to someone else?	Multiple choice	Yes/No

Table 6: Evaluation Questions for Suppliers

Supplier Question	Response Type	Response Options
To what extent are each of the following statements true from your participation in this Marketplace event?	5-point Likert scale (agree or disagree)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — I learned something new about options for marketing local foods. — I made new sales connections that I did not have before. — I strengthened a relationship with a food buyer to whom I can sell local foods. — I plan to contact at least one food buyer I met today.
Please list any food buyers you plan to contact after this meeting, if any.	Open ended, text entry	
Do you plan to sell more local foods as a result of the event today?	Multiple choice	Yes/No
What was the most important thing you learned at the event today that you can use in your work?	Open ended, text entry	
Which institutions or other food buyers were not present at this event that you would like to learn more about?	Open ended, text entry	
Which marketing opportunities would you still like to learn more about at a future marketplace event?	Open ended, text entry	
How can we make future Marketplace events more effective?	Open ended, text entry	
Would you recommend this Marketplace event to someone else?	Multiple choice	Yes/No

VISION

CRFS envisions a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the country, and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on Good Food: food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable.

MISSION

The mission of CRFS is to engage the people of Michigan, the United States, and the world in applied research, education, and outreach to develop regionally integrated, sustainable food systems.

ABOUT

CRFS joins in Michigan State University's legacy of applied research, education, and outreach by catalyzing collaboration and fostering innovation among the diverse range of people, processes, and places involved in regional food systems. Working in local, state, national, and global spheres, CRFS' projects span from farm to fork, including production, processing, distribution, policy, and access.

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