

# **Alternative Efficiencies at LaFarm**

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## **Introduction**

Efficiency is traditionally associated with quantitatively determinate metrics: The maximization of production, reduction of costs, optimization of workers, etc. In companies and organizations that deal in production in some manner, these definitions of efficiency are inseparable from the economic framework in which they participate. This scope of determining improvement is too limiting and fails to accommodate the complexities of human behavior (Pirson 2010). Alternative views of efficiency, focused on more humanistic ideals and less on production-based objectives, bring forward more holistic methods of improvement that allow for greater levels of stability, engagement, collaboration, and adaptability (Pirson 2010).

LaFarm is a community farm, organized by Lafayette College through the Office of Sustainability. The farm provides food for the campus and community while integrating curriculum into its sustainable growing practices. The multifaceted nature of LaFarm makes it an ideal system to apply this idea of alternative efficiency, as it maintains a combination of production-based goals alongside social and educational initiatives. Over the years, the maximization of production has become a large focus of LaFarm. The reliance on production to determine the success of LaFarm has grown so large that internal conflict regarding the negative worker impact of overproduction is now a major point of discussion between stakeholders at LaFarm.

This pattern of increasing production efficiency has taken the focus away from the alternative efficiencies needed to sustain and grow the non-productive initiatives of LaFarm. Educational and community-based goals have not grown nearly at the same pace as production has. This in part can be attributed to cultural changes, as LaFarm is no longer a small grassroots project like it was when created in 2013. This also can be attributed to the lack of investment in developing systems that allow for the continual growth of relationships and networks needed to foster a healthy, holistic organizational environment (Lemcke 2021). The type of environment community farms should embody.

We live in a digital world. This is a fact even a farm can't escape. Having an informative and engaging platform permits social interaction and provides educational value in ways physical production simply can not. LaFarm's current site is one plagued by underutilization, fragmentation, and a rigid inability to foster continual development upon its social and community initiatives. Their current online structure demonstrates inefficient methods of communication that cripple organizational unity.

In this report, we will explore the struggles presenting themselves within LaFarm, alongside why something as simple as a website revamp can pave the way for a stronger, more interconnected community.

## **Social Context**

Community farms offer space for people to enjoy the outdoors, organize movements, and create their food impedance. Being outdoors in and of itself is beneficial and can contribute to the emotional well-being of community farmers. Typically farm work includes physical activity which contributes to the benefits of community farms. Humans evolved to feel safe in natural

environments, and community farms offer a respite from built environments that can help reduce stress (Baur 2022).

Beyond the physical benefits, community farms can help generate access to clean and healthy foods which when positioned in food deserts can become crucial to the well-being of local residents (Baur 2022).

There is a growing trend across higher education to integrate campus farms into the offerings of the institution. Lafayette recently added the environmental studies major and is not alone in this trend of creating more curricula centered around environmental education and sustainability. Campus farms have become the obvious extension of these courses where students can get hands-on lab experience with the principles they are learning about. While these principles are typically not heavily science-focused on the agricultural side of growing food, some students do learn these aspects of farming while others get to learn more about the food loop (Francesca 2023).

This hands-on experience can help broaden the scope and understanding of students learning about these topics in class. The farms not only serve the campus and students but also the community and work as education settings for students to learn about community engagement and development. Assignments focused on outreach and community building are common and facilitated by these campus farms (Francesca 2023). Community gardens are more than just teaching tools at universities and have a rich history of meeting the needs of the local community. In St. Louis, a study of the community gardens in the area showed that they were most used by low-income communities to meet their nutritional needs (Wang 2022).

LaFarm began taking shape in 2008 with inspiration from Dickinson College Farm. The first form of LaFarm was a composting program that materialized into “Corn on the Quad”

where students planted corn in certain areas across the main campus quad. The project received great reception and with growing environmental consciousness across campus, Lafayette students received funding from the Clinton Foundation and college administration to create a permanent agricultural establishment (LaFarm History).

Space at Metzger was selected for the garden and the community helped out by building a fence and rainwater harvesting system. Clubs and classes contributed to the effort in planning, executing, and purchasing equipment. By 2011 LaFarm was a functional farm run by head farmer Sarah Edmonds. They began selling produce that was being grown, integrating their work into campus events, and engaging with the community. Since then the farm has continuously added new equipment, hosted classes and labs, and continued to evolve their engagement with the campus and surrounding communities. In 2014 the farm grew in size to 3 acres and hosted more and more classes (LaFarm History).

### **Political Context**

The intricate dynamics within LaFarm, reflective of broader challenges within higher education, highlight the need to address individual well-being and the systemic structures that shape these experiences. As we continue to explore alternative efficiencies, it is crucial to examine the political context within which LaFarm operates, considering the diverse roles and perspectives of key stakeholders.

The most involved member of LaFarm is the Head Farmer, who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the farm, educational integration, community outreach (such as food donation), and the hosting of events and volunteers at LaFarm. Through our research and discussions with the Head Farmer and other stakeholders, we've identified issues regarding workload balance on the farm, and communication gaps prevalent between LaFarm and those on

campus. From 2018-2021, LaFarm had seen significant growth in its produce yield, going from 6361 lbs to 17312 lbs of produce. In the alternative efficiency scope, we have found similar issues still present at LaFarm, with our sources mentioning the high level of production as a strain that has reduced time allocation to other non-production-based initiatives at LaFarm, such as the newsletter and annual report that have not been updated since the last farmer's departure. This situation is not one our group can directly address, as the most feasible solution is to hire another farmer, which has been recently denied by the college.

The transitory process between head farmers has highlighted the need for a more sustainable network and platform of communication. During the transition between farmers in 2017/18, the old LaFarm site was abandoned, leaving years of information, interactions, and events to the void of the internet. The latest farmer transition in 2021/22 resulted in a loss of networks developed over the tenure of the former farmer. Through our interviews, it was revealed that the current Head Farmer did not inherit the network of curricular integration that was previously developed, which had led to some communication issues between LaFarm and the other stakeholders on campus. Due to the noncontinuous network, there are worries that there could be a perception of lower engagement, as the new networks developed may not be as well understood or integrated into the legacy systems as well ones previously created. This network disruption also reduces the capabilities of continuous development for ongoing initiatives on LaFarm as those efforts do not have a centralized hub of communication.

The Office of Sustainability, established in 2016, helps guide sustainable development, initiatives, and policy at Lafayette. LaFarm falls under the domain of the Office and reports directly to them, but we separate them as stakeholders due to the independent nature of the head farmer position alongside the non-unilateral opinions held by the two parties. Through our

interviews with those in the Office of Sustainability, we found a desire to increase the quality of their respective multipurpose missions: production, education/campus integration, and community outreach, but frustration surrounding the lack of funding from the school to accomplish these initiatives. While production isn't necessarily in the scope of what we are trying to accomplish, the Office will need to gain funding in order to hire additional staff, an outcome our solutions can potentially assist in. This is especially important, as they view any reduction in produce yield as a failure of improvement for LaFarm. Part of the mission of LaFarm is to show students how to engage in economically feasible, but sustainable farming practices. The Office is worried about a cut-back in production potentially demonstrating ineffectiveness in their sustainable growing practices. This possible perception of failure is cited as a reason for not reducing production goals to ease farmer workload. If they would like to continue growth sustainably, more internal support is needed for LaFarm, to help push for additional funding that could be used to hire additional staff.

The Office also conveyed that they would like to see more integration between LaFarm and those on campus. Under the former Head Farmer, there seemed to be more engagement directly on campus than present day. While we don't have the data to support the claim, this is the perception of the situation which is arguably just as important, as this is a system based around the development of relationships with LaFarm. Seeing as the new Head Farmer did not inherit the developed connections between LaFarm and the campus community, this worry about lower engagement further highlights the need for a more continuous hub of integration for LaFarm's network of interactions and involvement. If there are future changes in the Head Farmer position or other structural changes in how LaFarm is managed, having this central

communication can help allow for a smooth handoff of activity and prevent permanent disruptions in the relationships that have spent years forming.

There are hopes of having more events at LaFarm, such as a visit during one of the major campus tour days which would be a huge boost in visibility for LaFarm and be an important factor in early exposure for new students at Lafayette. Many current students haven't visited LaFarm, as demonstrated by a poll taken during our final presentation, where well over half of the ~30ish attendees admitted to never visiting. We did not conduct official surveys as to why people haven't visited LaFarm, but our discussions with students identify a general lack of knowledge surrounding LaFarm as a major factor for non-visitation. Students know LaFarm exists, but that is often the extent of conveyable information they can provide. As an example, LaFarm's site does not have an events page for those interested in learning more about what they do or involving themselves. These sorts of communication breakdowns are prevalent within the apparatus of LaFarm. The Office needs to generate excitement and interest around LaFarm if it would like to see more integration within the campus or to promote its efforts as a reason to attend Lafayette. They can not hope to do this if information is inaccessible or fragmented between the various college-site domains.

The same rationale regarding the issues of fragmentation and non-continuity can be applied to community engagement as well. If students have trouble learning about LaFarm, we cannot reasonably expect community members to fare any better at navigating the information barriers present. Community integrated initiatives such as LaFarm's farmstand, a pay-as-you-can produce stand, recently moved to increase access to community members as demonstrated by a statement from the Head Farmer, Josh Parr: "The farmstand has moved over the years, and we're hoping this new spot will be a convenient location for College Hill neighbors as well as faculty,

staff, and students.”. The updated location for the farmstand is not present on LaFarm’s website and is only accessible if a person already knows what the farmstand is. People can not look up what they don’t know exists and small changes of integration can combat these gaps in communication to better accomplish the goals of the Office of Sustainability.

The LaFAB (LaFarm Advisory Board) is the last major stakeholder we were able to conduct interviews with. The Board consists of professors and faculty at Lafayette, and they engage in quarterly meetings with the Office of Sustainability and the Head Farmer. In those meetings, they help facilitate discussions regarding the direction of LaFarm as well as mediate/advocate for issues presented by LaFarm. In previous meetings, they have discussed hiring additional farmers, integrating a semester-long lab at LaFarm, infrastructure investments, production levels, and other educational and community-focused initiatives. The LaFAB also engages in efforts outside of these quarterly meetings to further the objectives of LaFarm through less formal discussions and advocacy efforts. Historically, Lafayette professors integrate their education in some manner with LaFarm, either through trips during the semester or projects and initiatives revolving around LaFarm. For example, according to an article, written by Shiloh Harrill, from *The Lafayette* newspaper: “With Professor Benjamin R. Cohen of the Engineering Studies department, LaFFCo members formed the Lafayette Food and Farm Studies Salon (FFSS) as a way to remain active while learning from home. This initiative was open to students involved with LaFarm and local community members. Every week, members would read a piece or watch a film related to food and agricultural justice”. Benjamin Cohen is a longtime member of LaFAB and one of the most involved participants in the college's sustainability efforts. Through our interviews with him and other members of LaFAB, our team was able to further identify issues regarding the integration of initiatives such as the Lafayette Food and Farm

Studies Salon, the continual problem of worker sustainability, as well as the struggle to promote and gain traction for LaFarm.

The underutilization of LaFarm's resources became apparent to our group when we were shown the old LaFarm website; the years of information not being brought over to the current site raised concerns. Similarly, the information from the Lafayette Food and Farm Studies Salon has not been integrated into the farm's website and is relegated to a Google document that is at risk of being deleted, due to the owner losing access to their Lafayette student accounts.

Members of LaFAB also confirmed their awareness of the issues of maintaining a sustainable work-life balance for the head farmer position throughout the years, citing the importance of a farm-based around sustainable farming to promote worker sustainability as well. A commonly shared desire for another worker was put forth as the best next step to address those concerns, alongside expanding the missions of LaFarm. Again, there was frustration due to the lack of financial support from the school, which is much needed if the school would like to see growth within this system. LaFAB members helped our team identify weaknesses in the promotability of LaFarm and the lack of internal support needed to help push for more funding. For instance, Lafayette sends out surveys gauging student interests that they then use to formulate mission statements and allocate funding based on. Few students fill out these surveys, and even fewer support LaFarm. A more holistic, promotable, and engageable site could help create a network of students more involved with LaFarm who are willing to advocate their support through these various feedback systems employed at Lafayette, in turn increasing the likelihood of the college allocating funding towards LaFarm.

Navigating the intricacies of LaFarm's political context, it becomes evident that the pursuit of alternative efficiencies extends beyond the farm's boundaries to encompass the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders involved.

### **Economic Analysis**

LaFarm beginnings were funded with grant money from the Clinton Foundation and Lafayette College administration. By 2012, Sarah Edmonds was hired as an employee of the college to manage the farm which cemented the financial structure. Lafayette College currently contributes \$11,000 to the operating budget, as well as paying the salary of the food and farm manager, which is currently Josh Parr. Produce that is grown by the farm is sold through three main markets, Lafayette College Dining Services, The Kellen Foundation which is a local wholesaler, and the weekly on-campus farm stand. Revenue from these three markets feeds back into LaFarm to help fund the next season's crop.

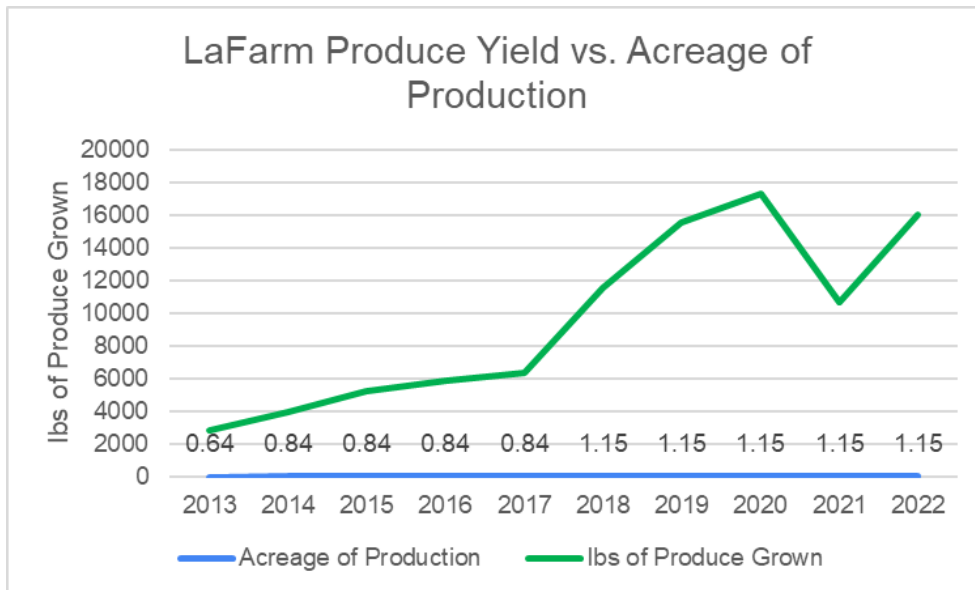
Since 2013 when production was first tracked, LaFarm has been annually increasing their production quantities and keeping those levels high which has led to issues of workers feeling stressed to maintain production and not able to focus on the educational pursuits of LaFarm.

### **Technical Context**

All data and graphics in this report were created from LaFarm data and supplied to us by the Head Farmer, Josh Parr. Through the years, LaFarm has been an intersection of education, sustainability, and community. However, since 2013, it is apparent that the production aspect of LaFarm has taken over the limelight for the farming operation. Referencing Figure 1, it is clear that the yield of produce experienced tremendous growth over the years, even with production

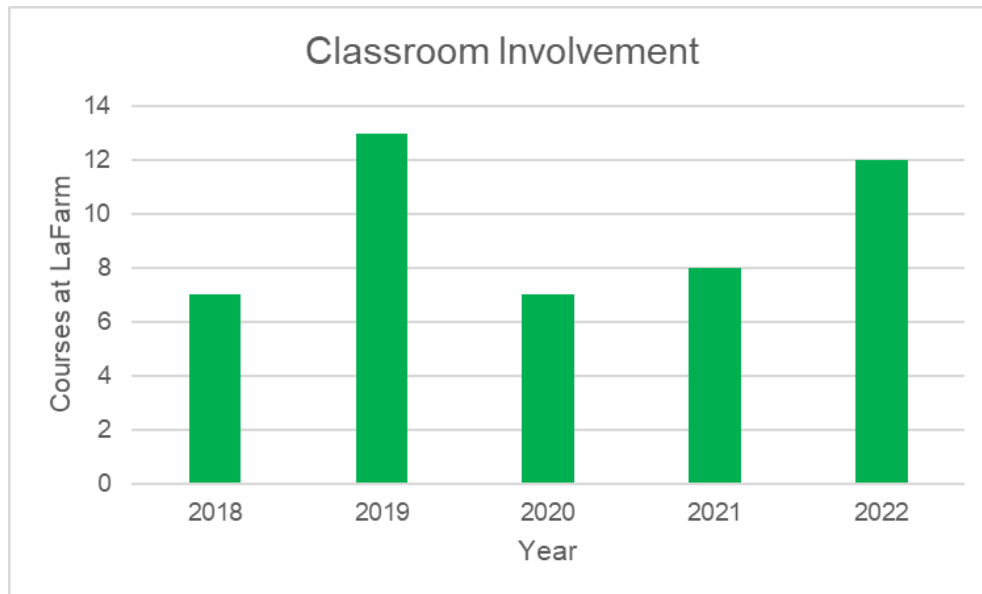
acreage barely increasing in the same timeframe. It should be noted that the increase in production from 2017-2020 can be attributed to the same person working as the head farmer. Each growing season provides experience with the land and niche knowledge for how to optimally grow produce. In 2021 there was a change in personnel with the head farmer position as well as a drought that occurred; this explains the sharp downtick in production yield for 2021.

**Figure 1**



However, in considering alternative efficiencies, we must note the importance of LaFarm’s educational mission. Referencing Figure 2, when examining the classroom involvement at LaFarm, it shows educational outreach has not expanded on pace with the produce yield. However, the drop off in total classes at LaFarm from 2019 to 2020 can largely be attributed to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Still, even when considering Covid-19 complications, the stagnation of classroom involvement at LaFarm remains apparent.

**Figure 2**



To address the challenges facing LaFarm we suggest reinstating the former LaFarm website data as well as incorporating an integrated feedback system for the LaFarm website will create substantial improvement in the alternative efficiency scope considered in this project.

The historical online data of LaFarm fosters a sense of community by connecting past, present, and future stakeholders. It provides a shared history that unites visitors, workers, LaFarm Advisory Board members, and the broader Lafayette College community. This shared narrative not only strengthens the sense of belonging but also attracts individuals and organizations seeking to align with a community-oriented and historically grounded initiative. The documentation of past events hosted at LaFarm also becomes a promotional asset. Along with a dedicated staff, the farm can attract attention and interest from individuals who resonate with its mission by highlighting successful events, guest speakers, and community gatherings. Becoming a dynamic marketing tool, showcasing the farm's capacity to host engaging and impactful events that extend beyond traditional farming practices. The wealth of information

encapsulated in past records, including alternative farming practices, salon discussions, and events hosted at LaFarm, not only contributes to a rich tapestry of the farm's journey but also serves as a compelling narrative for prospective stakeholders. Additionally, LaFarm can showcase its evolution and commitment to innovation in sustainable agriculture. The narrative of the farm's journey, supplemented by documented successes, becomes a powerful testament to its adaptability and responsiveness to the dynamic changes of the community structure that surrounds LaFarm.

The integrated feedback system would serve as a bridge, facilitating communication, enhancing collaboration, and promoting a holistic understanding of LaFarm's operations among its diverse stakeholders. Ultimately it would provide visitors, workers, and stakeholders a platform to share insights, observations, and suggestions to be compiled on a platform for other users to access the information captured. Currently, there is no proper outlet for most Lafayette students to offer feedback on extended experiences regarding LaFarm. There exists an end-of-semester survey for paid student workers sent out by Joshua Parr. However, the main drawback is that paid student workers represent a small fraction of the total participants at LaFarm. For student volunteers, there is a QR code in the greenhouse to allow check-in for all students. However, this metric effectively only tracks the number of attendees and does not gain sufficient feedback from a much larger percentage of the student body. An archive of LaFarm experiences would break down silos and enable a continuous exchange of information between the practical aspects managed by the Head Farmer as well as the academic perspectives brought forth by professors wanting to engage their classes with LaFarm. By fostering transparent communication, this system would bridge the gap that currently hinders the integration of practical experiences and academic insights. By capturing the perspectives of visitors, workers,

and academic contributors, the system generates valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current operations. When considered in conjunction with the goals set by the Office of Sustainability, this now accessible data can inform any LaFarm patron about events or opportunities, provide information on farming practices, and ultimately shape a visible path of historical growth. In this way, the system becomes essential to ensuring the farm's overall health, aligning its educational outreach goals with production objectives while fostering innovation and adaptability.

The proposed enhancements to the LaFarm website would take the form of two additional links among the existing list of LaFarm sites. A simple graphic of what this enhancement would look like is shown in Figure 3.

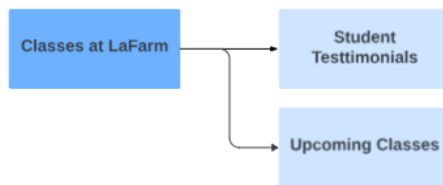
### Figure 3



The “Classes at LaFarm” section, would land a web user on a page with a “Student Testimonials” and “Upcoming Classes” section as depicted in Figure 4. The Student Testimonials section would preview several student responses regarding their educational experience at

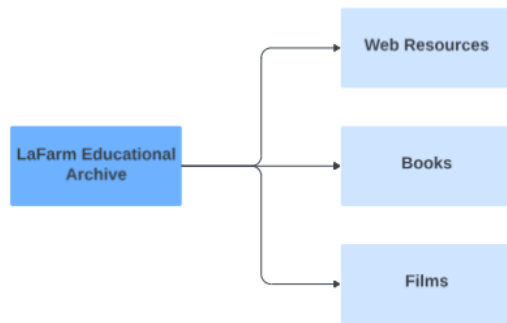
LaFarm. The only prompted question for the response being, “How did LaFarm aid in your educational growth?”. This would provide students, professors, and LaFarm staff with at least some form of data collection regarding the educational outreach goal of LaFarm. Additionally, the Upcoming Classes section would list any classes that have a component that takes place at LaFarm, whether that is only once a semester or more consistent LaFarm visits. This would provide prospective and current students with access to course offerings and schedules.

**Figure 4**



Further expanding the educational outreach of LaFarm, the “LaFarm Educational Archive” would land a web user on a page offering a comprehensive repository of learning materials shown in Figure 5. These materials would include online resources, books, and films all about farming, community gardens, or college farm practices. The majority of this information would be pulled from the old LaFarm website; a process that would surely involve sifting through the old website information to formulate the desired content for the newly integrated sections.

**Figure 5**



All the components of the proposal for enhancing the LaFarm website would surely involve a software infrastructure professional to be completed. Initially, during the extraction phase, any redundant, outdated, or irrelevant data that is not a book, film, or online resource would be purged and not added to the new LaFarm site pages. The LaFarm website runs on a content management system (CMS), called WordPress, with PHP as its programming language. This enables historical data incorporation through built-in functionalities or plugins and would be a relatively straightforward task since the script from the old LaFarm website can be used. However, the design of the new website must reflect the current website's overall theme, ensuring a unified user experience while mirroring the main site's navigation structures, typography, and color schemes in the new sections. Consistency is crucial, especially when presenting historical data and event information, as it aids in crafting a cohesive narrative about LaFarm's legacy and operations.

A dedicated staff member's role becomes paramount in the maintenance and content strategy of the Student Testimonials page. Moreover, the technical upkeep of the new website is an ongoing commitment. This involves routine CMS updates, security checks to safeguard against cyber threats, and regular data backups to prevent loss. The staff member must also engage in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) practices to enhance the website's visibility and

ensure that the content aligns with LaFarm's broader marketing and outreach goals. It requires careful planning, consistent design integration, and a commitment to content creation and technical maintenance, all of which underscore the need for a dedicated staff member. This addition serves as a portal to LaFarm's rich historical and operational narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Efficiency, traditionally measured by quantitative determinants such as production maximization and cost reduction, has been a central focus for LaFarm. While these objectives align with the economic framework within which the farm operates, they fail to capture the broader goals of community engagement and education. Alternative perspectives on efficiency emphasize more humanistic ideals, focusing on stability, engagement, collaboration, and adaptability. In the case of LaFarm, these alternative efficiencies are critical for sustaining and expanding its non-production-based initiatives, which encompass educational and community-oriented goals. In today's digital age, having an informative and relevant online platform is essential for fostering social interaction and providing educational value. Unfortunately, LaFarm's current online structure is underutilized, fragmented, and inflexible. These issues hinder its ability to effectively communicate and promote its initiatives. A website revamp is identified as a simple yet crucial step towards strengthening LaFarm's interconnected community. Moreover, universities are increasingly integrating campus farms into their academic offerings, providing students with hands-on experience and opportunities for community engagement and development. Data analysis reveals the remarkable growth in LaFarm's produce yield over the years, emphasizing its success in production-based metrics. However, this success has not been matched by equivalent growth in educational outreach and community engagement

efforts. To address these challenges, the integration of historical website data and the incorporation of a feedback system for educational experiences is proposed. Such a system would enhance communication, collaboration, and understanding among stakeholders, bridging the gap between practical farm operations and academic perspectives. LaFarm's journey reflects the evolving landscape of community farms in higher education, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to efficiency that accounts for both production-based and humanistic objectives. To ensure the sustainability and growth of LaFarm's diverse initiatives, a renewed focus on alternative efficiencies, online presence enhancement, and transparent communication is essential.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank all the Lafayette faculty and staff for their time in the interviewing process that allowed us to gather all of this information about the current operations and sentiments regarding LaFarm, as well as in-house data collected that allowed us to gather a deeper understanding of trends at LaFarm.

## **Generative AI Disclosure**

OpenAI's ChatGPT 4 LLM was used in the ideation and outlining process of this project and paper. We prompted the model with background information and we asked it to help organize ideas.

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