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## greenpaper [grēn-pā-per] -noun

1. a document that shares with those interested in the field of public markets marketumbrella.org's findings and learnings as practitioners
2. statements by marketumbrella.org, not of policy or practices already determined, but of propositions for discussion
3. produced for the policymaking process, they hope to inform interested parties on specific topics in a brief, easy-to-digest format

## Born of a University, Nurtured by a Community | The Development and Impact of the Crescent City Farmers Market

### Executive Summary

Universities that invest in the economic development of their communities—particularly in ways that demonstrate and reflect their core values—not only gain valuable community allies, they become better, more viable institutions themselves. A case in point: – the support lent by Loyola University New Orleans to the Crescent City Farmers Market as they entered into a regional partnership with family farmers, commercial fishers, restaurant chefs, public housing residents, food-loving consumers and more. The goal? Nothing less than to change an influential aspect of the food delivery system in New Orleans – one of the most famous “food cities” in the world.

We call them “ivory towers” because invisible walls separate most universities from the communities in which they reside. Most communities feel little sense of ownership or commitment to their local universities, no matter how much they may actually benefit from their presence. Yet when a university finds a way to demonstrate its core values through a community-based economic development project, its relationship with the community changes from “us-them” to “we.” Partnership gives the community a chance to know its university resident. Knowledge leads to understanding, which builds friendship and commit-

ment. Moreover, by creating economic opportunities together, the university not only contributes to the host community but also learns along with it, and ultimately becomes better equipped to serve its target markets.

### The Case of the Crescent City Farmers Market

In 1994, Louisiana was in the 15th year of an oil-related recession. The state’s economic strategies continued to pit jobs against the environment, creating the false sense that smokestacks equal progress. In New Orleans, professionals were packing their bags and families in the face of shrinking economic opportunities and an explosion in violent crime. Indeed, a general pall covered the city and state.

While working as a publisher at Loyola University’s Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice, I began assembling a framework within which to posit alternatives to the sacrificing of our natural and cultural resources for jobs. Naming my fledgling activity the Economics Project (later to become marketumbrella.org), I set out to explore strategies to fulfill its mission of “initiating and promoting the ecology of local economies.” The Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice agreed to house my project, thereby transforming it into a bonafide University venture.



*cultivating the field of public markets for public good*

200 Broadway, suite 107 New Orleans, Louisiana 70118-3578 504.861.4485

## Food as Common Denominator

In New Orleans, as in many cultures, food is a tremendous unifier—providing a common language that transcends age, race, ethnicity, class, or neighborhood. It's not surprising, therefore, that the idea for our first community-based economic development project involved food.

As a participant in the burgeoning community gardening movement, I learned that civic activist Sharon Litwin was interested in establishing a Farmers Market in downtown New Orleans. Together, we sought to identify everyone who would share in this simple vision. (At this point, we were not seeking support for ecological sustainability. That would come later.) Although our list included City leaders, county cooperative extension agents, nutrition advocates, community gardeners, public housing residents, business leaders, chefs, and downtown residents, we did not know many farmers. They had been chased away, along with the city's once-thriving neighborhood Public Market system, by government red tape, inflexible parking regulations, and a shrinking population that could access only one remaining Market in the French Quarter.

Now we sought to recapture the essential elements of the municipal Public Market system: a low-overhead, initial point of distribution for regional farmers to market their products directly to urban consumers. The three founders — myself, Litwin, and downtown resident John

Abajian—devoted the first year to researching Farmers Markets in other communities. We wrote grants for seed capital, helped to conduct a Planning Commission study for “an interim zoning district for green markets,” identified potential partners, met with stakeholders, and slowly developed an organizational culture of transparency in all decisions, consensus whenever possible, and a general sense of fun. Not surprisingly, most meetings involved food.

Together with stakeholders like the Cooperative Extension agents and farmers with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, we developed rules, regulations, and procedures for the Farmers Market. We contracted with pro bono designers for a market logo, independent from the University's, to reflect the new entity, formed out of partnership between a fiscal agent (Loyola University New Orleans) and the regional community of producers and consumers.

## Enlisting Farmers, Building a Track Record

An ongoing challenge was the enlistment of farmers in our Market. As a lifelong city-dweller with no rural or agricultural experience, I was at an obvious disadvantage. I attended vegetable producers' meetings, organic growers' workshops, and tapped into the networks of the land grant universities and the civil rights-born Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Ultimately, dogged persistence paid off. And once they experienced the Market, farmers were hooked.

Consider citrus grower Les-

ter L'Hoste. We pursued L'Hoste relentlessly, operating on the belief that he'd either accept my pleas to join us or call the police. We were lucky; he agreed to come. L'Hoste was lucky too. His first day at the Market, he brought a truckload of Satsumas, expecting to sell just a few, which would have confirmed his skepticism and freed him from future participation — and our phone calls. Instead, L'Hoste sold his entire inventory in an hour, called for another truckload, sold that, and spent the rest of the morning pondering his new life as a retailer engaged in consumer-driven agriculture.

## New Commercial Infrastructure Yields Many Harvests

That was six years ago. Since then, our experience has demonstrated that Farmers Markets are extraordinarily efficient mechanisms for enterprise development, regional cooperation, creating humane and safe urban centers, capturing people's imagination about all sorts of partnerships and possibilities, and generally cultivating a sense of community. Consider the following abridged list of our accomplishments:

- ⇒ We attract 1,500 shoppers to our two Market days each week.
  - ⇒ Our 50+ vendors travel from as far as two states away to participate.
  - ⇒ The annual combined sales at our two Markets, circa 2001, are approximately \$1 million.
- The economic impact of the Sat-

urday Market alone, two years ago, was estimated at \$1 million.

⇒ We sparked the creation of 15 new businesses and 22 new jobs in the first three years alone.

⇒ We broker new commercial relationships between Market vendors and New Orleans' world-class restaurants through weekly email and faxed newsletters.

⇒ We bridge the digital divide for traditionally low-technology family farmers and fishers by maintaining a Farmers Market website, producing weekly electronic newsletters to subscribing consumers, and maintaining individual web pages for our vendors, thus enabling them to participate in e-commerce;

⇒ We have successfully incubated a model micro-enterprise among single mothers in public housing by using the Farmers Market as an initial point of distribution for their products and as a hands-on enterprise academy;

⇒ We have had a positive impact on public policy affecting regional independent food producers by helping to direct the City's Planning Commission study for "an interim zoning district for green markets" and by developing and publishing food handling guidelines for open air markets;

⇒ We have replicated our efforts in communities across the nation through the distribution and sale of our publications; direct technical assistance to Baton Rouge, St. Francisville,

Covington, Natchitoches, Alexandria, Shreveport, LA, St. Louis, MO, Seattle, WA, Mobile, AL, Houston, TX, Chattanooga, TN, Lexington, KY, and more; and participation at regional and international conferences as guest speakers and workshop facilitators;

⇒ We provide ongoing technical assistance to our market vendors through workshops, use of our resource library, and individualized assistance, all of which has enabled some family businesses to expand well beyond their wildest dreams, selling their products as far away as Japan, for example;

⇒ We have helped to create a community among family farmers and their client restaurants and consumers, which, in one case, resulted in a group effort to harvest the crop and pay the medical bills of an injured farmer who otherwise would have faced certain financial ruin.

### How the University Has Benefited

Likewise, we have created new friends for Loyola. Consumers view the university from a new vantage point: as the institution that has helped to bring life to two New Orleans neighborhoods, as well as high quality to their dinner tables. How many other large institutions get twice-weekly opportunities to restate their social values to an entire community? Owners

of a core group of agricultural businesses now understand that Loyola has developed partnerships and taken risks on behalf of their community. They know and trust the university.

And we've helped Loyola new doors for philanthropy, often from influential sources.

Legendary singer-songwriter Willie Nelson wrote a personal letter announcing Farm Aid's investment in our creative efforts to help small farmers. The Campaign for Human Development, the USDA's community food grants program, and the Ford Foundation have joined in their support.

By relinquishing control in order to engage in a genuine partnership with the community, Loyola gained funding opportunities otherwise unavailable to it and created enormous goodwill among many influential sectors of New Orleans in the process.

And we were launched on the path to financial stability through our collaboration with the Greater New Orleans Foundation on a national initiative of the Ford Foundation to foster regional cooperation, spark rural economic development, and establish an endowment to fund regional economic development work into perpetuity. As a result, we now have a \$500,000 endowment to help fund our efforts long after grant-makers grow bored with investing in operating budgets.

## Synergy Drives Success

In lieu of technical expertise, we responded to the economic malaise, suburban flight from urban crime, and animosity between urban and rural citizens by diving deep into the “faith in action” and “social justice” core values of Loyola University and our founders.

We next sought the appropriate mechanism and willing community partners to create an economic and social community that rewards hard work, risk taking, and mutual respect. We hoped to create a public space that would enhance both the quality of life for urban dwellers and broker new social and commercial relationships between consumers and producers. Six years later, we proudly promote

our region’s more innovative, organic farmers and sustainable fishers. We marvel at the growing sophistication of their businesses and the complex and genuine web of personal and commercial relationships among the vendors in the farmers market. In total, we have created a community of interests, with shared norms that go well beyond the explicit rules and regulations of the farmers market.

In a rapidly changing market for higher education, those universities with the clearest grasp of their mission are the best positioned to survive and thrive. In the for-profit sector, if you clearly communicate what you are doing and why, you are more likely to be more effective

at aligning your competencies. The same is true for those working in the non-profit sector — civil society. A community-based economic development partnership that demonstrates the university’s core values enriches both the university and the community it serves, boding well for the long-term viability of both. ■

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200 Broadway | Suite 107  
New Orleans, LA 70118 USA  
tel: 504-861-4485  
fax: 504-861-4489  
admin@marketumbrella.org  
www.marketumbrella.org

*learning, sharing, growing*

Dedicated to cultivating the field of public markets for public good, we define public markets as “recurring assemblies of vendors marketing goods directly to consumers in a public setting.” Learning, sharing and growing, marketumbrella.org cultivates community markets that utilize local resources to bolster authentic local traditions. We believe that ambitious social, health, environmental and financial goals are achieved if trust and respect are present. We envision communities of market umbrellas, like flowers in the field, opening all over the world for the public good.

Founded in 1995 as the Economics Institute and operated under the auspices of Loyola University’s Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice until 2008, marketumbrella.org is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3.