

## VALUE CHAIN COORDINATION COLUMN

### Turning supply chains into value chains

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JAFSCD is delighted to share this **inaugural column** on the topic of value chain coordination. We define VCC as the development of relational infrastructure—networks, information channels, and partnerships—that support thriving and sustainable regional food economies. JAFSCD also announces a **new series of program, policy, and practice briefs** focused on value chain coordination. This series aims to synthesize the current knowledge on coordinating values-based food supply chains into concise, high-impact, practitioner-focused briefs. The series and associated articles are being curated by a JAFSCD Value Chain Coordination Editorial Circle made up of the scholars and practitioners below, who will also jointly produce this quarterly column.

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**A**t a moment when food systems stakeholders are navigating supply chain disruption, market consolidation, and increasing climate-driven risk, questions of how best to retain or expand benefits for small and midsize farms and food businesses are increasingly urgent. Across various geographies and markets, value chain coordination (VCC) has emerged as a critical lever for addressing these challenges. In this inaugural column, we introduce VCC—a concept that bridges many concerns of JAFSCD readers—and suggest a few topics the series may address. We also provide some context on the first brief, which focuses on how VCC offers a pathway to address challenges associated with institutional purchasing and harness this strategic opportunity to support regional and sustainable food producers.

In the context of a growing bifurcation in agri-food systems between large-scale commodity supply chains and direct marketing relationships, VCC represents a deliberate response—one that is focused on actively forging connections across stakeholders to strengthen and extend market opportunities for regional producers (De Master, 2018; Lyson et al., 2008). As these markets diverge, producers, intermediaries, and consumers committed to values such as environmental stewardship, regional economic development, and public health outcomes can all benefit from dedicated coordination capacity to establish purchasing mechanisms and relationships that prioritize shared values across the food supply chain.

On its own, a supply chain is the infrastructure, actors, and activities through which products move from production to consumption, often national or international in scope, with a focus on maximizing efficiency and minimizing cost (Diamond & Barham, 2011; Stevenson et al., 2011). A value chain, however, is often place-based and designed to reflect the priorities of the community they serve and share benefits fairly among partners. Common value chain priorities are farm or produ-

cer identity and financial viability, environmental sustainability, food access, worker well-being, animal welfare, and culturally or ecologically relevant products. Incorporating these values requires education, innovation, and long-term, relational approaches to marketing, all of which can be accomplished through VCC.

In practice, this work often includes sharing market information; facilitating connections and convenings; mobilizing resources; and translating the needs and constraints of different actors to balance economic viability with shared social, environmental, and place-based values. Such coordination depends on both hard and soft infrastructure:

the facilities, equipment, and information systems that enable product movement, as well as the contracting practices and trusted relationships that sustain it (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011). Effective coordination, in other words, is fundamentally relational and ongoing (Rocker & Smith, 2022).

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has examined values-based supply chains as strategic alliances characterized by transparency, trust, shared ethics, and mutual benefit, in which producers are treated as partners rather than interchangeable inputs (see, for example, Stevenson et al., 2011).

JAFSCD has played a foundational role in advancing this scholarship, including through a special issue published more than 15 years ago that helped establish values-based supply chains as a distinct area of inquiry within food systems research (Hilchey, 2011). This work has generated important insights into the mechanisms of coordination, including governance structures, the role of intermediaries, and tools for sharing benefits as well as risk equitably across the supply chain (Diamond & Barham, 2011; Horst et al., 2011; MacCallum et al., 2014).

The emergence of value chain coordination as a named role and field of practice grew out of two

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key insights developed through local and regional food systems work. The first illuminated how values-based supply chains have distinct characteristics among supply chains: they add value to products across steps, share values across chain actors, and benefit enterprises while building rooted local and regional wealth (Diamond et al., 2014; Porter, 1985; Ratner & Markley, 2014; Stevenson et al., 2011; Stevenson & Pirog, 2008). The second elevated the importance of “soft infrastructure” in the effective functioning of value chains, identifying coordination roles that mitigate the financial risks associated with overcapitalizing hard assets and strengthen overall value chain capacity.

This progression is also legible in federal farm policy. Twenty-first-century farm bills reflect a shift from early interest in direct-to-consumer markets, such as farmers markets, toward market diversification via local and regional enterprises. By 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s working definition of a food hub had broadened to recognize more business models, specifying that food hubs “actively manage” value chain functions (Barham et al., 2012).

On the ground, this evolution was already underway. Hubs like Red Tomato had transitioned from brick-and-mortar operations to brokerage-based models, increasing financial sustainability and reducing burnout. In the early 2010s, Sarah Fritschner, coordinator of Louisville (Kentucky) Farm to Table, modeled a public-interest broker role that generated US\$9.70 of farm income per US\$1.00 invested by the Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund in a farm-to-institution market connection program (Davis et al., 2015). Such examples informed Eleanor Starmer and Jim Barham’s leadership in USDA in creating the 2016 Food LINC program, developed with philanthropic partners, which codified value chain coordination and centered the soft infrastructure—the relationships, trust, knowledge, and norms that scaffold market connections and undergird the efficient use of physical infrastructure (Rocker, 2019; USDA, 2016).

Prior conceptualizations of this function, notably, had used the term *facilitation* rather than *coordination*. Research on and evaluation of the Food LINC program revealed that no single coordinator performs all roles in a regional system. The coordination and sharing of the roles proved more crucial than one individual “doing it all” in a particular regional system. This work also suggested that future funding models for value chain coordination should encourage actors to share roles for resilience and efficiency across the regional system.

This literature has helped establish value chain coordination as a dynamic field shaped by deep collaboration between aca-

demics, practitioners, and public agencies. The new JAFSCD Program, Policy and Practice Briefs series focused on value chain coordination will follow and extend this collaborative tradition by highlighting on-the-ground value chain coordination practices to inform community development and food systems transformation. Some briefs will serve as accessible primers that introduce key concepts and frameworks, while others will offer deeper dives into specific programs, policies, or practices drawn from real-world experience. Together, they are intended to support learning across experience levels and organizational roles.

### **Brief Development and the Editorial Circle**

As noted above, the VCC series is being led by an editorial circle of scholars, professionals, and practitioners from across the U.S. with deep expertise in both researching and actively coordinating value chains in many geographies and market contexts. Members of the editorial circle bring perspectives from academia, nonprofit and cooperative organizations, public agencies, and value chain intermediaries, many of whom are directly engaged in the daily work of coordination. The series is supported in part by funding from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service.

Ahead of the series launch, the JAFSCD Editorial Circle curated a collection of topics of high importance and immediate impact, based on input

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from a survey of JAFSCD readers and a series of key informant interviews, to identify pressing issues and emergent opportunities in value chain coordination. This first round of briefs will cover a range of critical topics, such as financing the hard and soft infrastructure of coordinated value chains, and market matchmaking strategies for connecting aligned supply chain stakeholders.

We recognize that the contexts in which value chains operate, as well as the policy, market, and environmental conditions that shape them, are constantly changing. As such, effective value chain coordination requires flexibility, experimentation, and a commitment to learning over time. This series is intended to offer lessons, rather than blueprints, for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers working to strengthen communities through food systems change. Each peer-reviewed brief will contain operationalized terminology, actionable recommendations, and links to resources for more information.

### **The Inaugural Brief: Unlocking Institutional Food Purchasing: Contract Strategies for Values-Based Sourcing**

A subgroup of the editorial circle, Katie Barr, H Nieto-Friga, Jodee Smith, Elliot Smith, and Ashton Potter—composed of practitioners actively working to create and coordinate value chains across the U.S.—has taken the lead in drafting the inaugural

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brief. This brief draws on their shared experience coordinating values-based institutional procurement, where scale, public accountability, and mission-driven goals often intersect.

The authors review the specific challenges of working with institutional purchasing systems, including a breakdown in plain language of the contractual design elements that limit market participation for small and mid-sized producers. They identify strategic leverage points to navigate the operational realities that govern institutional decision-making and facilitate viable market access that supports regional and sustainable producers.

### **We Want to Hear From You!**

We invite input from practitioners, professionals, scholars, and policymakers engaged in this work. We see this series as a living body of knowledge, responsive to new evidence, evolving practice, and shifting conditions. Readers are encouraged to share feedback, suggest topics, and contribute insights from their own experiences in designing, practicing, and sustaining coordination in values-based supply chains.

If you have questions about or suggestions for the series, please be in touch with Associate Editor Anaya Hall, PhD, at [anaya.hall@uky.edu](mailto:anaya.hall@uky.edu). If you'd like to submit a topic for a brief, please follow this link:

<https://surveymonkey.com/r/jafscd-query> 

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