



## FOOD SYSTEMS INSTITUTE

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July 27, 2018

Mr. Mike Kensler, Director  
Office of Sustainability  
Langdon Hall Annex  
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear Mike,

The Auburn University Food Systems Institute (AUFSI) is honored to learn that our Food Entrepreneur Working Group is being included in the Auburn University Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System report (STARS) as an innovative program that furthers economic sustainability across Alabama. Food entrepreneurship offers not only sustainability but hope and possibilities in rural Alabama counties, some which have more than 10 percent unemployment.

With an investment in the Alabama food industry jobs are created both from direct industry employment and through related industries in the state. Therefore, we set out to make food entrepreneurship a viable opportunity rural communities as well as urban area, by reaching out to those who have a product suitable for commercialization but lack the skills to operate a business. Our goal for the Food Entrepreneur Working Group, a partnership between AUFSI and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, is to assist budding entrepreneurs, including small farmers, by providing a central source of food business information and resources.

The hallmark project of the initiative has been the Food Entrepreneur Conference, held annually each spring since 2013. Aspiring entrepreneurs, small farmers, and small business owners are invited to receive advice on topics such as selling to a big box store, labeling and testing regulations, food safety, financing, and marketing. Experts from the Alabama Department of Public Health, the Alabama Grocers Association, and ACES have regularly contributed and watched the event grow impressively – from less than a dozen attendees in 2013 to 52 this past spring. Keynote speakers have included Alabama entrepreneur Patricia “Sister” Schubert Barnes of Sister Schubert’s Homemade Rolls; Trey Simms, one of the founders of Dadeville-based Wickles Pickles; and, this year, Stacy Brown, founder of Chicken Salad Chick, who started in her own kitchen in Auburn a decade ago and now has more than 80 locations throughout the Southeast.

The event has not only given entrepreneurs the tools and contacts to grow their business, but it has provided them an opportunity to network with others in different stages of growth as food

business owners. Given the increasing interest in the conference and attendees' desire to continue to foster these connections, this year our working group began disseminating an e-newsletter to share information about other relevant events, give updates on our own conference planning, and allow attendees to directly re-connect with us and each other.

The Food Entrepreneur Working Group has received national accolades, honored with the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) 2016 Partnership Award for Innovative Programs and Project, as well as university acclaim through the President's Outstanding Collaborative Unit Award in 2017.

We are committed to the changing lives of burgeoning food entrepreneurs and to providing a boost to the state economy through our outreach. We are proud of what we have accomplished so far and look forward to the continued growth of our annual conference and related efforts.

Sincerely,



Jean Weese, Ph.D.  
Professor and Food Safety Specialist  
Director, Food Entrepreneur Working Group  
Associate Director of the Auburn Food Systems Institute