

\$5 million USDA grant to advance community food systems

By Krishna Ramanujan

To foster the growth of equitable, healthful and sustainable community food systems, Cornell will receive \$1 million of a five-year, \$5 million multistate project.

The "Food Dignity: Action Research on Engaging Food Insecure Communities and Universities in Building Sustainable Community Food Systems" project is led by Christine Porter, Ph.D. '10, an assistant professor of public health at the University of Wyoming. The project, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, grew out of Porter's Cornell Ph.D. dissertation in the field of nutritional sciences.



Christine M. Porter

Alexa Naschold admires cabbage at the Linderman Creek community garden that the Town of Ithaca founded in 2009.

The Cornell share of the grant will have education, research and extension components -- and includes the development of a new cross-disciplinary undergraduate minor in sustainable food systems at Cornell and the University of Wyoming.

"There is tremendous opportunity at this moment to help advance local, sustainable community food systems, and for scholars and academics to better understand how these community food systems work, how they get built and what are the challenges," said Scott Peters, the project's Cornell lead, an associate professor of education who is soon transferring into the horticulture department.

Growing and selling food is just one part of such food systems, he said, with issues related to jobs, social justice, community building, leadership, and cultural and economic development all at stake.

"The goal of this project is to invest in citizen solutions to food system issues," said Porter. "On a research level, we'd like to learn from all the wisdom on the ground, and then help to inform and connect the movement in terms of what's missing, and use this information to inform the USDA and land-grant universities on how we can be partners to support this work."

The new undergraduate minor in sustainable food systems will help prepare students to engage in such efforts around the world, said Peters.

Research will include work from social, natural and biological scientists and agronomists on community food systems. The scholars also will seek to aid community members who are already conducting research.

The extension component involves community food initiatives in Wyoming, Alameda County, Calif., Brooklyn, N.Y., and Ithaca. The Ithaca initiative will involve the Whole Community Project of Cornell Cooperative Extension, a

collaborative effort of organizations and individuals in Tompkins County to support the health and well-being of children and youth and address issues related to obesity, sedentary lifestyles and food injustice.

Each initiative will serve as case models for how extension can be done more effectively. Also, small grants administered through these initiatives will invest in citizen solutions to their own food system issues.