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FoodDignity

Practice Brief

Academic Programs in Food Systems

This practice brief describes academic programs in institutions of higher education within the broad domain of sustainable food systems. Common best practices and themes as well as challenges, specifically related to community engagement, inherent in these programs are identified. Finally, we discuss proposals for programs at University of Wyoming and Cornell University and related research potential.

Programs & Structure

As community food work has grown more vibrant in recent years and calls have concurrently been put out to transform agricultural education (National Academy of Sciences, 2009), the creation of sustainable food systems academic programs has increased at universities and colleges in the United States. Many are situated at land-grant institutions, but liberal arts colleges with strong environmental emphases have developed such programs as well. While some programs focus on more traditional aspects of ecological production agriculture, others embrace the interdisciplinary social and cultural aspects of food systems as is more frequently recommended in the literature (Francis et al., 2008; Jordan, Andow, & Mercer, 2005; Parr, Trexler, Khanna, & Battisti, 2007). Programs are structured in a variety of ways, such as:

- *Majors*- e.g., Green Mountain College; University of California, Davis
- *Minors*- e.g., University of Vermont; Virginia Tech
- *Concentrations within larger environmental or sustainability programs*- e.g., Ithaca College; University of California, Santa Cruz
- *Certificates and continuing studies* - e.g., University of Massachusetts, Amherst
- *Graduate programs*- e.g., Tufts University, Montana State University

Common Themes

While each program is unique, common themes and pedagogical approaches appear throughout many (Galt, Clark, S. F., & Parr, D., 2012), including:

Themes	*Pedagogy*
Sustainability	Transformative
Justice	Experiential
Sovereignty	Problem-based
Ecological/Agroecology	Learner-centered
Local	Interdisciplinary/Transdisciplinary
Health/Nutrition	Values-based
Civic/Community	Critical Self Reflection
Systems-thinking	Service Learning

The experiential and values-based nature of these programs has been demonstrated to be transformative for students (Battisti, Passmore, & Sipos, 2008; Galt, Parr, Kim, et al., 2013). Notably, many programs require some sort of experiential project, activities, and/or engagement with a community or campus partner within the food system, as is also recommended in the literature (Lieblein, Østergaard, & Francis, 2004).

A closer look at well-developed and assessed programs:

- Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems major at UC Davis
- Civic Agriculture & Food Systems minor at Virginia Tech

Big Picture Risks:

- Students may not progress beyond making individual, food consumption behavior changes, avoiding active engagement in food system citizenship (R. E. Galt, Parr, Kim, et al., 2013).
- Proliferation of academic and specifically degree programs may lead to the professionalization of a grassroots movement, precluding community expertise (Boyte, 2004; Illich, 1976).

Community Partners

Community members have various roles in food systems academic programs:

- Guest speakers
- Hosts for hands-on field experience for students
- Partners for community food systems projects and service learning
- Active stakeholders in the development and implementation of curricula (. Galt, Clark, S. F., & Parr, D., 2012; Østergaard, Lieblein, Breland, & Francis, 2010)

Community engagement provides for rich, beneficial real-world experiences and learning outcomes for students, however, less is known about outcomes for community partners. While participation in these programs can be beneficial for community members, it can also be problematic (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003).

Challenges

- Expenditures of time, often with little or no financial compensation
- Frustration in dealing with unprepared students
- Lack of appreciation for practical knowledge vs. academic knowledge (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2000; Jordan et al., 2005)

Recommendations

- Provide financial compensation, such as a stipend for teaching and projects or partial salary buyouts for longer-term curricular development
    - Permanent funding should be provided by universities when initial grant funding used to establish the program expires
- Focus on *collaborative* partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002)
- Integrate capacity-building for successful partnerships into student coursework, including discussions of appropriate behavior and emphasis on community expertise
- Facilitate development opportunities for community partners to create/learn best practices for collaborating with students
- Involve community partners only where their input is truly desired and needed (Cervero & Wilson, 2005); avoid unnecessary meetings and committee time
- Seek out community gatekeepers who may already have an established relationship or interest in working with the university, yet could also create connections with additional community members
- Include practical, “lay” readings alongside more “rigorous” academic readings

Program Implementation for Food Dignity

In fulfillment of Food Dignity goals, both Cornell University and the University of Wyoming will implement food systems academic programs. The proposed components of the programs draw from lessons in the literature, existing programs, and Food Dignity experience with community partners.

Cornell University is currently in the process of proposing a standalone food systems minor.

- *Interviews*- with representatives from programs at Portland State University, University of California, Davis; University of California, Santa Cruz; and Virginia Tech. Interviews notably

emphasized the role and methods of engagement with community partners as a means of developing best practices and for privileging community knowledge in the upcoming minor.

- *Workshops*- inviting representatives, both academic and community, from such existing programs to reflect on their own process in establishing and maintaining programs and partnerships. These will inform the minor and also help build academic-community relationships for the program.
- *Advisory Committee*- after gaining further insight and appreciation for collaboration in the workshop series, a joint academic and community advisory board will develop and implement the proposed minor.

University of Wyoming will implement a food systems track as part of the newly approved Sustainability minor in Fall 2013.

- *Advisory committee*- interdisciplinary team of faculty and students along with select community gatekeepers who will collaborate for successful food systems projects, student-community partnerships, and curricular development
- *Introductory & Capstone courses*- common to the entire minor. The introductory course will include capacity-building for student projects and proposals. The capstone course will allow students to work directly with a community partner on an applied food systems project.
- *Seminar series*- 1 credit course in which students will become familiar with the local/regional food system, facilitated by faculty but largely taught by community members. In addition to content about the food system, the course will focus on best practices for working with community partners. Community partners will receive teaching stipends, provided by Food Dignity. The university should fund stipends upon Food Dignity completion.
- *Development series*- for participating community members to co-create best practices for working with students within the food systems track and generally in campus-community engagement work.

Future Research

Much of the research on campus-community partnerships and service learning has focused on assessing learning outcomes and experiences for students, while far less attention has been given to assessing outcomes and experiences for community partners (Blouin & Perry, 2009). As the food systems track at the University of Wyoming develops, we plan to assess outcomes for community partners in a way that mirrors assessment techniques for students in food systems programs such as critical self-reflection of competency development (R. E. Galt, Parr, & Jagannath, 2013). Additionally, we will document the impact of student participation in community organization goals and compile community-generated best practices for collaborative campus-community food systems work.

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