

Appendix: Lettuce Learn

Individual Reflections

Jackie Nester

My experience as a prior graduate student volunteering for Food at First was transformative. What began simply as volunteering to feed people in need became much more as I gained greater knowledge in the subjects of poverty, inequality, and food system sustainability. As a student in community planning and sustainable agriculture, the concepts of injustice and inequality were commonly taught in courses such as theory and sociology. While these courses were critical in my ability to understand how these concepts continue to prevail in society, my coursework ultimately fell short in teaching me how to be an agent of change.

Food at First was my introduction to how social justice and food systems are connected. One of the reasons I joined in the efforts of Food at First was because they placed a high priority on human dignity by not questioning patrons. However, Food at First, like many food pantries, still faced challenges in providing regular access to fresh produce. The lack of access to healthy food to those in need was a concern shared by our student group, which spurred efforts including starting a donation garden and gleaning from local farms to supplement the fresh food supply. We would regularly lead efforts throughout the summer to harvest, clean, and process vegetables from local farms to have fresh food for our monthly meals at the kitchen. Even though we were using fresh produce to make meals for the patrons that we ourselves would eat, we recognized that our efforts were a stop-gap solution to the larger issues around food insecurity and poverty.

Efforts like gleaning and processing food for our monthly meals served as a reflection that our current food system does not prioritize healthy food as a right, but rather a privilege. Throughout our efforts to bring fresh food to the meals, our group often reflected on the root causes for why organizations like Food at First must exist. In addition, there were many opportunities where we could reflect on our own privilege and assumptions, such as our goals early-on to involve patrons in gardening without recognizing barriers to participation, such as: physical ability, interest, or time.

Food at First was vital for me to be able to take abstract concepts, like injustice and inequality, and place them in a local setting. Food at First patrons gave those ideas a face and a name, which was motivating in bringing attention to the subject of food insecurity locally. The pragmatic challenges in getting enough volunteers and keeping the efforts of Food at First going are difficult in it of itself. Yet those challenges often played part in our critical reflections of our food system, and how we as scholars and community members can take part in bringing positive collective change.

Gabrielle Roesch-McNally

Food at First gave me an opportunity to engage in community food security in a way that my educational experience as a PhD student at Iowa State University, studying sustainable agriculture, did not. In particular, I was eager to take part in the development of a community garden in service of providing more fresh fruits and vegetables for the Food at First customers

who came to regular meals and food pantry distributions. There is plenty of evidence that fresh fruits and vegetables are lacking in many free markets or soup kitchens so the need is real. As a graduate student in Iowa State University's Sustainable Agriculture program, I was also thinking along the lines of how to produce more food that is directly consumed by humans rather than producing large-scale commodities, such as corn and soybean, seen across much of the Midwest landscape, which is primarily used for livestock feed and biofuel production not human consumption.

Also, growing food for people feels good. Iowa is a net importer of food, in other words, we are a food insecure state despite the fact that the state has more land devoted to agricultural production than any other in the U.S. Story County, where Ames and Iowa State University are located, is one of the most food insecure counties in the state of Iowa. In a place that regularly champions the call for 'feeding the world,' it felt important to participate in a community garden in pursuit of growing real food for neighbors and fellow community-members.

Community gardens are incredibly important for not just growing food but also growing community. They are spaces where people come together, share stories, recipes, songs and generally build a sense of belonging. Roesch-McNally et al. (forthcoming 2017) found that Food at First was incredibly effective at building community among those who participated in the meal and pantry programs. As a student participant, volunteer, and garden leader, I can attest to the fact that I felt greater belonging among the other volunteers, my student colleagues, and the broader Ames community that participated in Food at First meals, pantry distributions, or garden efforts as a result of my engagement in the community garden and meal program.

The struggle of course, exists in the reality of building a community garden. I often felt disappointed and discouraged by the lack of volunteers who would show up at the garden. In particular, I had hoped, perhaps naively, that more members of the Food at First community, including those who are food insecure, would more actively participate in the activities in the garden—planting, harvesting, or joining in on cooking/preserving efforts. For the most part, our garden volunteer team was made up of graduate students in Sustainable Agriculture, and while I built better connections with this group of people, I often felt regret that our efforts had not attracted more members of the community. Maintaining and engaging volunteers is difficult. We tried a lot of strategies for bringing people into the garden but due to many factors, including my own naiveté in assuming that low-income, food insecure folks necessarily want to or are able to join in on garden activities, most people did not join in on the garden activities. Many organizations struggle to build strong volunteer leadership and sustained engagement. Our group wasn't alone in our experience but this aspect of building the garden was a truly difficult one. Despite the lack of participation by many members of our community, the overwhelming response was positive. People loved the extra fresh goods at the market and at the meals. I felt valued for contributing to the growth, care, and harvest of the garden bounty despite wishing that more people would participate in such efforts.

I maintain my appreciation for and desire to produce food for my community through the development of community gardens. Food at First is a great example of a model that largely works in ways that don't stigmatize people and genuinely brings a diverse group of people

together. Fundamentally, however, we need to transform our agricultural system into something that is more holistic, that, at its core, produces healthy food for all not just industrial commodities that serve to distance each of us from the consequences of our food choices. Participating in the development, maintenance and harvest of the Food at First community garden helped me to pull apart the layers of our complex food system to better understand the whole. That experience provided me with the curriculum and ultimately the knowledge to more fundamentally examine the failures of our food system while celebrating the sweetness of coming together over a fresh tomato, grown in the earth, among friends.

Emily Zimmerman

Food at First provided me with an opportunity to extend my scholarship as a PhD student outside of academia, and facilitated my engagement within my broader community.

As a biophysical scientist, much of my training prior to coming to Iowa State University to pursue my PhD and during my PhD centered on understanding the biophysical characteristics and relationships within our agrifood system. Consequently, the lens with which I had approached the agrifood system was often keenly focused on biophysical parameters and their relationships, such as biodiversity, hydrology, and biogeochemical cycles. My involvement with Food at First afforded me the ability to begin to understand the agrifood system outside of the biophysical lens, and encouraged me to bring critical questions of social justice into focus.

Situated within one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world, the state of Iowa touts itself as ‘feeding the world’ through its industrialized, concentrated, highly efficient, and consequently, low-cost agrifood systems. Yet, as my lens expanded from a simplified biophysical approach to include socioeconomic, governance, and social justice approaches through my work with Food at First, it became increasingly clear that this food system was not even feeding Iowans. In fact, Story County, where one of the country’s premier agricultural universities, Iowa State University, is located has the highest rate of food insecurity in the state: 15.4% (Feeding America, 2014). I didn’t understand; from a biophysical lens, our soils, hydrology, and climate should perpetuate and abundance of healthful, accessible, and affordable food. Certainly, in this state of rich biological resources, we should at least be able to feed ourselves.

During my time spent at Food at First, once a month cooking meals and in the garden and at the market during the summer, I learned that challenges in our agrifood system cannot be solved through my biophysical lens. Admittedly, this has been a difficult lesson for me. Trained as a biophysical scientist to ask ‘unbiased’ questions, to analyze data, and to report statistical *p*-values, incorporating socioeconomic, governance, and social justice into my understanding of the barriers and leverage points in our agrifood system has led to a much more complex picture. The picture is much larger than I had initially envisioned, its landscape far more nuanced, and its focus warranting of several lenses—not just my biophysical lens. Importantly, Food at First not only helped me recognize the value of these different lenses, but also provided a space to talk about and experience these lenses. Working with other members of the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture and members of the Ames community who were passionate about

community food insecurity was an opportunity to collectively and collaboratively explore ways that we could actively challenge our agrifood system, including through the garden.

Food at First serves a critical need to the food insecure in our county while I recognize that the efforts are mere stop-gaps to much larger, system-level problems in our food system (e.g., poverty, low wages, lack of affordable and accessible services, and equity). I am grateful for the opportunity to work alongside members of my community to engage in our local emergency food system, and for the lasting impact this experience has had on my understanding of our agrifood system.

Maritza Pierre

Being involved with Food at First has been my principal exercise of social justice since I joined the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. Most, if not all of us, joined this program because we are eager to see changes in the way the food system operates. Having a specific interest in food security, I was appealed to by the work of the Food at First organization and decided to contribute. After all, community gardens are advocated by many as the quintessential way of dealing with food insecurity. It thus became imperative to me to become involved. I soon realized that the actual contribution of the garden to the organization and to the community in general, while difficult to measure, is questionable. To me at times, the volunteers have the highest interest in keeping the garden operating. I want to emphasize that this is just a perception. The people who come to distribution do not volunteer in the garden, which might be due to lack of transportation and the various responsibilities that can limit their availability. It would be interesting to find out via surveys their views on the importance of the garden. One can argue that the garden not being an initiative by the visitors of Food at First can explain why the sense of ownership that could yield participation is missing. This garden was in some ways imposed on them by yet another group of well-intentioned people. There is evidently a dissonance between the intended effect of the garden and its actual effect. The garden has yet to become a community garden in the real sense of the term. These are factors that I did not anticipate in my eagerness to be useful. Participation should be factored in at the beginning of any social justice endeavor to ensure that the ideals and strategies are shared with the community to be affected by such endeavor. I also yearn to have people from the general community embrace the garden more. I understand however that the location of the garden might be a limiting factor. Moreover, we do not all see food justice in the same light. I think the next step for Food at First could be to engage the community as a whole including Food at First's visitors in conversations about the topic. We might find ways to address some aspects of this issue in our community. What impact exactly are we having? This is a question I have asked myself many times. We may not be able to do much as a small group of students with a modest garden but if the community of Ames decides to explore community gardens as one mean of tackling the symptoms of a bigger food system problem, there is definitely a potential for more effective actions.

Carrie Chennault

Prelude

I wish I had kept a journal back when the garden started in summer 2013. Thinking back on those days, I remember the excitement I felt having the opportunity to grow produce with community and for community. But more importantly, I would like to recall the uneasy interwoven-ness of my motivations, aspirations, and experiences gardening for the first time. That summer—and in the summers since—I spent a lot of time with my hands in the soil, a phrase often used in our graduate program. Only later, adopting a lens of racial biopower, did I come to consider the ways in which I was thus enacting relations of whiteness (Slocum & Saldanha, 2016; Guthman, 2008). Yet I cannot dismiss the significance of forming a deep sense of belonging with the garden/ers as a “project of actively *connecting* with the more than human, rather simply *seeing* connection” (Gibson-Graham, 2011). Perhaps like many of my fellow gardeners, I wanted a space to learn about gardening and develop deep relationships—I found moving out-of-state for graduate school and the process of research isolating. From gardening, I could reap the therapeutic benefits of sunshine, earth, and friends, not to mention subvert an agricultural political-economic engine that differentially provides “good” food to some but not others (Minkoff-Zern, 2012; Guthman, 2008). The more time I spent in the garden, the more palpable grew the tension between practicing social justice and reinforcing oppression.

Reformulations

Then, as now, I typically explain why I garden at Food at First in terms of self-care, community, and social justice. The only difference now is perhaps a greater degree of nuance and problematization of these theoretical categories. When I read Foucault in class and recognize that we know ourselves through our relations to power and knowledge, I map that to my experiences at Food at First. When I hear food insecurity framed as an individual decision or action, I know it is much more than that. I can theorize food security as wrapped up in a contextual web, a history of practices and knowledges that embed individual bodies, communities, and society in relations of power. Likewise, when I see the binary and oftentimes oppositional categories of social and environmental—or human and nature (or man and woman)—I long for connection via an “equality in diversity,” but frequently experience instead a reductionist discursive formation of environment as resource (Shiva, 1989/2002, pp. 5-6).

Despair and hope

I spend time reflecting on, fretting about, and then finding comfort and reassurance in our work at the garden. The fretting comes from a fear of falling short of our lofty aspirations of social justice. Apt critiques suggest that we produce the very conditions of injustice that we seek to overturn by propping up an emergency food system that serves as a tax deduction and waste disposal opportunity for wealthy agrifood corporations that “channel surplus food to low-income people of color” (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). Moreover, our garden has not stabilized enough to provide much needed community resources beyond food, such as skill-building or even employment (Miewald & McCann, 2014). Building community beyond a segment of our

graduate student cohort will take more than providing fresh fruits and vegetables, important though they may be.

Can a group of relatively privileged, university-affiliated, busy graduate students who typically move away in a few years establish trust with community members who have serious reason to distrust us? I don't know. We will keep working on it. For now, I do find solace in Gibson-Graham's refusal to overlook alternative economies that define and legitimize practices of sharing situated outside of the normal economic relations of the late capitalist and neoliberal order. As a community enterprise, we are comprised of elements of the diverse economy: volunteer labor, publicly accessible privately owned property, sharing, and donations (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy, 2013, pp. 12-13). Our practice of diverse economies provides a new opening for understanding food practices belied by mappings of community food movement-reformist alliances to neoliberal food enterprises (cf. Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011, pp. 95-96).

Slowness and in-betweenness as praxis

We recognize that social justice is a slow, long process, and choosing *not* to grow and share food from the garden simply is *not* an option—not that the wealthy agrifood corporations have left us much choice in the matter. Holding together in tension and in contradiction our production of new socially just discourses, practices, and feminist, more-than-human ways of belonging alongside dominant discourses of food security, emergency food systems, and charity, we produce and are produced by both. Put differently, we perform both ways of being in spite of our best intentions.

Ultimately, my praxis supports a deep, abiding optimism that the cracks and slips are there, the interstitial spaces in which we already slowly have begun to chip away at the dominant material-discursive formations of power. While we may personally experience an uneasiness holding together the contradictions of our location between dominant and alternative discourses, rather than frame our work with emergency food systems as (aligned with the) politically neoliberal, I suggest along the lines of feminist scholars like Mohanty (1984) and Katz (1992) that the contradictions of in-betweenness open up a space for political acts of social justice. Working at a donation garden, then, becomes a form of praxis, a way to do community differently.

A perspective from Agronomy, Andrea Basche

After my first volunteer shift with Food at First early into my graduate studies at Iowa State University, I was instantly committed to their cause. In many ways my praxis with Food at First was *the* defining experience that provided for me the social justice lens which was lacking in my research on the environmental impacts of commodity crop agriculture. Unfortunately, the biophysical sciences do not often enough take into account elements of the broader social contexts from which their studies emanate: issues such as power dynamics, generation of knowledge, or social, racial and environmental justice. My volunteer experience with Food at First allowed me to develop a more complete picture of the food system in the state of Iowa. Sadly, that picture demonstrated for me the cognitive dissonance between what the mission of

the university claims to be and what it is actually promoting in its agricultural work, meant to fulfill the popular mantra to ‘feed the world.’

Preparing regular meals with Food at First was a humbling and sometimes difficult experience. The difficult aspects for me came from seeing firsthand the quality of regularly available food to those seeking food assistance, often items that are heavily processed and non-nutritionally dense. There was never a shortage of desserts, breads, or meat. Fruits and vegetables were usually available but not with the same regularity or abundance as other processed foods. Each time I would “shop” for items at the pantry to prepare a meal, it was a reminder of what our food system produces in excess and would otherwise be destined for the dumpster. Our work to grow fresh produce at the garden as well as additional harvesting and processing efforts from other local farms were very time intensive endeavors. They also did not scratch the surface of need, assuming 50-100 people attend a daily meal and we aimed to provide some amount of their daily recommended servings of fruits or vegetables. My experience with Food at First was a closer look at how we handle hunger as a society and led me to question how sustainable a charity-based approach is. I found all of these aspects of the volunteer experience to be quite challenging, but rewarding and instructive nonetheless.

Organizations such as Food at First are ultimately a Band-Aid for solving the broader economic and equity aspects of food. What I learned from Food at First is that ‘feeding the world’ often looks more like inequities based on economics and the overproduction of less nutritious food. The dominance of that feed-the-world narrative ultimately distracts from the bigger concerns of the food system, which are far more nuanced than increasing agricultural production. Reducing inequities in the food system requires talking beyond food and looking at economic issues related to trade, fair wages, sustainable working conditions, and affordable housing, to name a few.

Hannah Dankbar

Being involved with the Food at First Garden, distribution, and meal program allows me to interact with the industrial, emergency, and community food systems. Being uniquely situated in the middle of these three systems, sometimes simultaneously, gives me space to reflect on the implications of each system and see the complexities associated with each. I became involved with Food at First my first year of graduate school in order to contribute to food security in my community. As an added bonus, taking breaks from campus to work in the garden is a rewarding, and stress-relieving task.

As a graduate student in sustainable agriculture and community and regional planning, I am often frustrated that there is not much emphasis on planning for a sustainable food system. The American Planning Association has highlighted factors that contribute to hunger and other inequalities, such as economic inequalities and inequities in resource distribution, in their Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability (2000). These topics are commonly discussed in relation to housing, transportation, utilities and other infrastructure that planners traditionally focus on. Further, planning theorists consider concepts that directly support the goals and objectives of food justice and food sovereignty. Susan Arnstein developed a ladder of participation that evaluates the level of citizen empowerment in the planning process (1969). Participatory

planning, planning that engages the community in decision making, is a new approach to planning that directly supports the six principles of food sovereignty (Healey, 2012; Schiavoni 2009). Because of these overlaps, it is frustrating that conversations in the planning field often do not include food systems. One of the reasons that I became involved at Food at First is because I believe in community food systems where people are actively involved in ensuring their neighbors have access to socially acceptable and nutritious foods. Food at First is the organization leading this charge in Ames, Iowa. As I moved through my graduate studies I became more interested in how to engage communities in their food systems; the garden provided an opportunity to do this.

I began working in the garden during the second year that the garden existed. When I first began, I was excited about the mission of the garden. I assumed everybody in town would want to help out. Now I am completing my third season working in the garden and I understand how difficult it can be to engage a committed core of community volunteers. There are logistical barriers, such as the location of the garden, although the garden was located on a bus route, it was still difficult to access for many people in our community, and the time of our workdays. The volunteers we have had in the garden have been great; they have learned a lot about gardening and are deeply concerned about our food system. However, the struggle to maintain high numbers of volunteers has caused the garden leaders to question our goals and capacity.

Spending much of my time on campus talking and reading about the ideals of food justice and successful examples of how it is put into action, I naively assumed that people who already volunteered at and/or visited the Food at First pantry would be excited to work with us in the garden. When I had conversations with Food at First guests by giving garden tours or cooking demonstrations at food distributions, I learned that people faced a lot of challenges of just getting to the distribution and did not necessarily have extra time or energy to devote to a community garden. I heard a lot of gratitude for the garden; I know our work is appreciated and that there is a need for it. Learning about the challenges that contribute to food security directly from the people I sought to engage was the most powerful thing I learned during my career as a graduate student. As somebody who has a lot of privilege, understanding the need for equitable access to housing, transportation and healthcare is a powerful lesson I will take with me as I move forward with my career.

Over the past four seasons, the garden leaders and I have learned about growing food, our emergency food system, our larger agrifood system, and our community. As students we continue to cycle through GPSA, I hope that the garden and our partnership with Trinity Reformed Christian Church and Food at First continue. As a transdisciplinary program, I hope that GPSA students continue to work together to keep the garden healthy and productive and continue to address the issue of community engagement. Running a community garden can be difficult on its own, let alone with a lot of turnover, but GPSA students have shown their commitment to contributing to the Ames community no matter how long we are here for, and I expect this to continue in the future.