

University Influence in Urban Food Systems

Guest Editor Julie M. Fox

Introduction

Food systems have a great bearing on the quality of urban life (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Urban university influence on food systems begins at the highest levels and is strengthened by the collaborative commitment of diverse stakeholders. Because of critical factors such as food security, potentially polarizing assumptions, and multiple stakeholder agendas inherent in food systems, urban universities are uniquely positioned to provide a foundation to advance learning and developments needed to make a significant difference in urban food systems. Entire urban university communities, with a multitude of internal and external influences, are addressing food system opportunities and challenges at local, regional, and global levels.

A variety of literature examines and portrays food as a complex interplay of cultural, economic, social, political, and technological forces (Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007). To address this complexity, urban university faculty, staff, and students are engaging with a variety of local community partners, neighborhood residents, global industry collaborators, alumni, donors, the media, and other public and private stakeholders. In addition to focusing on the fundamental need of feeding the growing world population, urban universities are recognizing the value of individual expertise and the collective capacity to nourish the people, the environment, and the economy.

Diverse perspectives have led to definitions of food systems that often include descriptors such as local, regional, global, community, sustainable, resilient, inclusive, equitable, healthy, or culturally relevant. Each of the terms carries specific meaning and context. Across campus, initiatives and conversations about food have the capacity to bring out the full potential of the university. From dining services and real estate to academic units, student life, advancement, engagement, and public relations, urban universities influence urban food systems.

Food systems feature characteristics of a complex adaptive system, both in structure and effects (Nesheim, Oria, & Yih, 2015). In addition to single-factor interests, transdisciplinary investigation of food systems have progressed beyond compartmentalized approaches to explore multi-dimensional aspects, such as the

- National Science Foundation (NSF) investment of \$72 million for innovations at the nexus of food, energy, and water systems;
- Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) Healthy Food Systems, Healthy People initiative linking research, Extension, and academic programs that focus on integrating nutrition, health, environment, and agricultural systems;
- United Nation HABITAT's World Urban Campaign that provides insight on food security and sustainable urban development; and
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation's Food for the Cities community of practice with more than 2,500 members from 114 countries.

Article Overview

This themed issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal illustrates how urban universities lead and contribute to food system teaching and learning; research and innovation; outreach and engagement; and resource stewardship. The articles address multifaceted issues of food security, policy, production, culture, and justice. Common themes emerging in this issue include the

- essential approach of collaboration;
- value of diverse voices and perspectives;
- influence of distinct urban contexts; and
- complexity of food system issues.

In the first article, “Planning for Food Systems: Community University Partnerships for Food System Transformation,” authors Whittaker, Clark, SanGiovanni, and Raja, make a case for deliberative food-system planning and policy rooted in collaborative and diverse partnerships that span public, civic, and private sectors. They emphasize that urban universities have both the responsibility and extraordinary opportunity to be a force of transformation in creating equitable community food systems by harnessing the integrated power of research, education, and civic engagement. Their article illustrates the growth of food system education in the United States. They present two community university partnership projects in New York, providing urban and rural context. In the article, they discuss their participatory action research framework and summarize lessons learned about university collaborations in communities where they are not embedded.

Food systems and urban environments have shifted over time, as detailed in the “Farming Chicago” article. Rosing and Block explore higher education’s role in food systems in Chicago, the third largest city in the United States. Numerous examples demonstrate how individual urban universities and multi-institutional projects are building on the city’s extensive history of food production, advocacy, policy, and planning. One example includes development of the Chicago Higher Education Sustainable Food Systems Network of university, community college, and technical school faculty and staff in the metropolitan area. Another asset-based approach to food system support is the Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project that provides a public resource which also supports student learning and faculty research. In addition to collaborative research and community engagement, universities are working together on community-engaged curriculum that improves access to knowledge resources, technical assistance, direct research support, and certificate and degree programs. The deep history, current priorities, and vast network of players in the city, presents both opportunities and challenges as urban universities consider the large role they play in the local food system, as researchers, educators, community conveners, food buyers, and more.

To better understand food-system change and inform food-system improvement efforts, Neff, Laestadius, DiMauro, and Palmer report on how oral history interviews with low-income, older adults near John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland were used as a teaching tool in an eight-week graduate course. As a result of this qualitative research, often marginalized voices were recognized, valued, and included in the discussion of priorities as food systems and urban environments continue to change. Lessons learned extend beyond the initial investigation objectives, to include the value of student engagement with older adults in the community.

Reaffirming the land-grant mission, the University of the District of Columbia is building economic development capacity and quality of life in underserved neighborhoods through Urban Food Hubs of the College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences (CAUSES). O'Hara reports these Urban Food Hubs engage local partners and are designed to improve access to fresh food, address health deficits, and create jobs. Each of the five Urban Food Hubs addresses unique characteristics of the community and consists of urban food production, food processing, food distribution, and the management of waste and water. In addition to academic degree seeking students, CAUSES reaches a large number of non-degree-seeking students through workforce development, certificate programs, and continuing education programs. While impact measures are still to be defined, this intense focused approach serves as a model for other urban serving universities interested in contributing to the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental conditions.

In the case study about the Ohio State University, Fox analyzes the institution's collective approach to urban food systems. Food-system components explored in this qualitative research included teaching and learning; research and innovation; outreach and engagement; and resource stewardship. Findings from this study indicate considerable collaborations, emerging impacts, natural tensions, and ongoing opportunities to continue maximizing university resources to advance the complex sustainable urban food system agenda. Discoveries from this interpretive analysis can guide urban university leaders, from small and large institutions, to collectively make strategic investments aligned with all aspects of the university's mission.

The book bibliography by Ritchie offer perspectives for a variety of urban university decision makers interested in urban agriculture, designing food spaces, and sustainability on campus. The reviews highlight the newest research and practical recommendations to meet growing expectations of the campus community to include urban food-system concerns in research, teaching, and service, as well as the overarching sustainability efforts of the university.

Conclusion

Urban university involvement in food systems is significant to sustainable urbanization. The articles for this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal were selected to provide a variety of perspectives for urban university leaders to better understand the broad scope of food systems and related factors. Some of the studies focus on specific university solutions to community challenges, while others illustrate comprehensive approaches to food-system developments. Authors share the importance of diverse perspectives and collaborative approaches. They address distinct urban contexts and the complex nature of food-system issues. All of the articles include constructive conclusions and applicable resources. Relevant insight can benefit all urban university leaders.

This issue of the journal can be used to create conversation around related topics. For example, a viable urban ecosystem extends beyond food systems to other issues that are closely related, such as rain-water and storm-water management; community green space; energy and material flow; and the integration of ecological, economic, social and human health factors (Barthel, Parker, & Ernston, 2013; Decker, Elliott, Smith, Blake, & Rowland, 2003; Su, Fath, & Yang, 2010). Members of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) can use these articles to reflect on current understanding and encourage one another to better appreciate and build upon

the impacts, face the challenges, and create new ways to come together to improve the many aspects of urban food systems. Sustainable urban universities and sustainable communities depend on it.

References

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Resources

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) Healthy Food Systems, Healthy People, <http://www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/agriculture-human-sciences-and-natural-resources/healthy-food-systems-healthy-people>

National Science Foundation (NSF) investment of \$72 million for innovations at the nexus of food, energy, and water systems, <https://foodenergywater.wordpress.com/category/infews>

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation's Food for the Cities Initiative community of practice, <http://www.fao.org/fcit/fcit-home/en>

United Nation HABITAT's World Urban Campaign, <http://unhabitat.org/urban-thinkers-the-city-we-need>

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