

JAFSCD SHAREHOLDER COMMENTARY



Leveraging university resources to build awareness, support regional food policy, and disrupt dominant narratives guiding food-based development: Examples from the University of Arizona's Center for Regional Food Studies

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Submitted May 16, 2022 / Published online May 27, 2022

Citation: Bellante, L., Carney, M. A., & Owen, G. (2022). Leveraging university resources to build awareness, support regional food policy, and disrupt dominant narratives guiding food-based development: Examples from the University of Arizona's Center for Regional Food Studies. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 11(3), 9–11. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.113.017>

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Keywords

University-Community Partnerships, Regional Food Systems, Food Policy Councils, Counter-Narratives, Archival Activism

Food projects have become an increasingly popular engine for economic development and branding efforts to promote “creative cities” in

the neoliberal context (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2017). However, proponents of food-based development often overlook the uneven impacts of such projects and neglect underlying structural, social, and environmental issues. University researchers can play a key role in raising awareness about these issues, inform food policy needs, and create university-community partnerships that can disrupt dominant narratives and support local initiatives that build capacity, equity, and resilience in regional food systems. Located in Tucson, Arizona—a UNESCO City of Gastronomy—researchers at the University of Arizona (UA)'s Center for Regional Food Studies (CRFS), in collaboration with the Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS), endeavor to accomplish these urgent tasks through several collaborative efforts described here.

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***The UA Food Systems Research Lab:
Mobilizing research and university-community
partnerships to inform local food policy***

Research conducted by CRFS and CLIMAS has demonstrated that the regional food system in southern Arizona faces several critical challenges (Owen et al., 2021). Social struggles in our food system include inequities of power and a lack of diverse representation in local food policy and decision-making, widespread food insecurity and limited access to local foods, the absence of a living wage and just livelihoods for workers throughout the food system, an aging agricultural workforce, inequities between urban and rural populations, and few resources for new and beginning farmers. Environmental struggles include a lack of access to affordable land and water and severe concerns related to the increased incidence of drought, heat extremes, shifts in seasonal temperatures, and pest and weed problems. Our research over the past several years has indicated a need for systemwide investment and planning to support food system growth and address structural inequalities (Kinkaid et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2021; see also Carney & Krause, 2019; Carney et al., 2020).

In 2021, researchers from CRFS and CLIMAS established the Food Systems Research Lab to mobilize university resources, research capacity, and university-community partnerships to support local efforts to address these systemic challenges. In 2015, Tucson was named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. Since then, this designation has expanded interest in the southern Arizona food system and accelerated the use of food-based development as an economic engine. However, food-based development, while promising in some regards, is often dominated by white voices and neoliberal strategies focused on growing food entrepreneurship in metro Tucson. If we take seriously the need to build a more just and sustainable food system in southern Arizona, it is imperative that we research ongoing food-based development efforts, evaluate who is served and who is excluded, and amplify a greater diversity of perspectives in the process. Across Arizona, many individuals, organizations, and businesses are actively working to address the social and environmental challenges evident in our food system.

Through our experiences as community activists and nonprofit board members, our Lab members are well aware of how these endeavors can be greatly strengthened by research support, training, and networking with university partners. Hence, our lab aims to provide the research and insights needed to support these efforts in Pima County through a focus on community-informed research and collaboration with diverse regional partners.

One of the flagship efforts of the Food Systems Research Lab is to inform and help build the capacity of our local food policy council, the Pima County Food Alliance (PCFA). Although PCFA has led several important efforts to advance food policies in Pima County since its formation in 2011, its status as an all-volunteer organization—unfortunately, a common situation among food policy councils—has continually constrained the council’s efforts and diversity of participants. Through a formal collaboration with PCFA, our Lab is committed to providing the research support, assessment, and community-based outreach and training to strengthen PCFA’s efforts. With funding from the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, we have initiated a process to restructure the food council, diversify participation in it through five paid community liaison positions, and increase its organizational capacity by employing a part-time program coordinator and policy analyst. In the coming years, our research lab will support PCFA activities by compiling a food assessment report for Pima County, a best practices guide for food policy councils, and a collaborative action plan for the council.


The Future of Food and Social Justice Project

From 2022 to 2023, CRFS is curating a multimedia, public storytelling project to explore visions for a more equitable, as well as socially and racially just, food system in the southern Arizona borderlands region. While Tucson’s designation as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy has bolstered food-based tourism and high-end cuisine in metro Tucson, the very people, voices, and histories upon which this designation was initially justified—namely, the over 4,000 years of agricultural and culinary activities of Native, Hispanic, and immigrant populations in the borderlands—are all too often excluded. The

“Future of Food and Social Justice” (FFSJ) storytelling project intends to amplify the voices and stories that have been overlooked in food-based development efforts while also centering a *racialized right to food* (Pine & de Souza, in press). A racialized right-to-food approach foregrounds a racial equity lens in asserting that existing food inequities (i.e., widespread food insecurity and hunger) stem from the racialized logics of white supremacy and settler colonialism. By “recognizing the voices, stories, and ‘survival’ of communities of color” (Pine & de Souza, in press, p. 14; see also Vizenor, 1994), our overall objective is to challenge simplistic, exclusive narratives that have tended to prioritize neoliberal visions of development and to ignore struggles for the right to food. FFSJ will uphold and center alternative visions for how a racialized right to food can and should be integrated into community planning, policy priorities, and collaborative efforts.

The stories shared and collected for this project will be published first online through the CRFS blog as part of a special series, followed by print and audio formats (such as a series of episodes on

Nutrire CoLab, a podcast coproduced by CRFS), and then deliberately shared back with communities by the authors themselves, with technical support from CRFS. The storytelling project will also be integrated with our Right to Food + Right to Farm series of teach-ins (workshops, skill-sharing, and community conversations) during the 2022–2023 academic year.

In conclusion, the number of social and environmental problems confronting our food systems presents an urgent need to leverage university resources and research acumen to help address these issues. We anticipate that the several collaborative efforts underway at the Center for Regional Food Studies at the University of Arizona will contribute to documenting the needs and vulnerabilities that exist across different nodes of our food system, highlight diverse perspectives and voices, increase community capacity to effect change, and produce reports and other outputs that can be used to raise awareness and inform positive food systems change for our region. 

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