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## Strategic storytelling: Reflecting on the past, present, and future of INFAS

Rachael Budowle<sup>a\*</sup>  
Virginia Tech

Benjamin Cousineau<sup>b</sup>  
Emory University

Michelle Miller<sup>c</sup>  
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Julie Grossman<sup>d</sup>  
University of Minnesota

Brandy E. Phipps<sup>e</sup>  
Central State University



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### Abstract

The Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS) connects food system scholars, educators, and action-researcher activists across the United States. As a collaborative network endowed by the W.K. Kellogg Founda-

tion, INFAS envisions a U.S. food system that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. With several new members joining the INFAS Executive Committee in 2023, 12 past and current members embarked on a facilitated “strategic storytelling” effort in lieu of strategic planning. We did so to

<sup>a\*</sup> *Corresponding author:* Rachael Budowle, PhD, Collegiate Associate Professor, Honors College, Virginia Tech; and INFAS Executive Committee Justice Chair; [rbudowle@vt.edu](mailto:rbudowle@vt.edu)

<sup>b</sup> Benjamin Cousineau, MS, PhD Candidate in Nutrition & Health Sciences, Emory University; and INFAS Coordinator.

<sup>c</sup> Michelle Miller, MS, Senior Researcher, Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin–Madison; and INFAS Executive Committee Organizational Development Chair.

<sup>d</sup> Julie Grossman, PhD, Professor, Soil Agroecology and Organic Food Systems, Department of Horticultural Science, University of Minnesota; and former INFAS Executive Committee Justice Chair.

<sup>e</sup> Brandy E. Phipps, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Life Sciences, Central State University; and INFAS Executive Committee Chair.

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collectively understand the past and present of INFAS before planning for its future; craft an outward-facing story to better communicate with the broader INFAS membership, prospective members, and partners; and share our personal stories to build stronger relationships with each other. Two sessions produced these personal stories and a timeline of key events and characters that we coalesced into a shared story. Augmented by annual reports, internal records, and external sources, this reflective essay shares that story organized by broad chapters across over 15 years of INFAS activity, including Prologue: Influences & Origins; Chapter 1: Formalizing the Network; Chapter 2: Reorienting Toward Equity; and Chapter 3: Reorganizing to Do the Work. The essay concludes with the Epilogue, wherein we acknowledge long-term goals to integrate community leaders in the network and support underrepresented scholars and students despite tensions of time and capacity constraints; the need for larger infusions of funding to catalyze and amplify collaborations; and limitations imposed by the incentive structures, bureaucracy, and exclusivity of academia. Finally, we look toward the next chapter in our story by deepening our investment in projects and pilot programs that engage our broader membership and advance our vision of a sustainable and just food system.

### Keywords

INFAS, network, food systems, agriculture, equity, sustainability, justice, storytelling, triple rigor

### Introduction

The Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS) connects food system scholars, educators, and action-researcher activists across the United States. As a collaborative network, INFAS envisions a U.S. food system that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. Its mission is to facilitate its members in their efforts to:

- Catalyze frontier work in food systems research, higher education, extension, and institutional change that we can achieve much better together than by working alone.

- Increase our capacity to help build the U.S. food system's resilience, sustainability, and equity.
- Raise the visibility of research-based insights into food system problems and solutions, including increasing racial equity.
- Diversify who is doing food systems work in academia and in action-focused research, education and extension (INFAS, n.d.-a).

In its current iteration, INFAS includes 329 individual members from 110 academic institutions and 38 non-academic organizations and networks, along with six independent scholars in the U.S. Members commit to supporting the INFAS vision and mission, sharing a range of resources to enhance collaboration, and cultivating relationships within and beyond INFAS. Since 2020, an executive committee comprising a chair, an at-large member, a finance chair, and four working group chairs who lead critical priorities governs INFAS with support from a part-time paid coordinator.

The 2023–2024 academic year welcomed a new executive chair and two new executive committee members amid the departure of the then-chair and several long-serving members. We embraced this leadership transition as an opportunity to engage in what we call “strategic storytelling” in lieu of more formal strategic planning to collectively understand and share INFAS's history and begin to tell the next chapter in our story. This essay shares that story by documenting and critically reflecting on our network's past and present to help envision our future. We begin by sharing our broad approach to strategic storytelling. Then, we present a timeline of key INFAS-related events identified through this storytelling process, marked by what we understand as a prologue and three main chapters of the INFAS story. We close with an epilogue identifying the themes and tensions in our current story and the ways we are authoring our future story to better achieve the INFAS vision and mission in coming chapters.

### Strategic Storytelling Approach

The INFAS strategic storytelling approach emerged as executive committee members, including several who had newly joined, looked toward

potential strategic planning needs in late 2023. Some members voiced concerns around strategic planning given past negative experiences outside of INFAS. Concerns included intensive workload and time commitment with relatively little payoff, difficulty implementing strategic plans into action, and planning fatigue. Despite strategic planning's efficacy and meaning-making potential, both generally and in academic contexts (Mallon, 2019), these reservations track with prominent critiques that it can be overly rationalistic, incremental in terms of achieving vision and change, largely disliked by faculty, and particularly ill-suited to complex networks that do not resemble typical organizational structures—like INFAS (Boivard, 2008; Ginsberg, 2011; Quinn, 1978).

Committee members with a longer service tenure noted that INFAS had undergone a major re-visioning and reorganization leading up to and in 2020. One member offered that onboarding new members by sharing that vision and how it emerged would be helpful prior to any new strategic planning efforts. Moreover, onboarding could help reground existing members in INFAS's values. A newer member added that what we needed was not strategic planning but “strategic storytelling”—that is, collectively sharing INFAS's historical foundations and values through individual and shared narratives without, necessarily, aiming to change its existing structure and approach.

The food systems literature itself shows that storytelling can be a transformative alternative to a range of conventional research, action, and evaluation approaches. For example, storytelling has countered dominant historical narratives and research methods in food sovereignty efforts (Arthur & Porter, 2019; Budowle et al., 2019). In addition, the Appalachian Foodshed Project showed that narratives provide generative avenues for understanding complex problems in food systems, illuminating hopeful potentials for transforming them toward justice in ways that overly rationalistic approaches—like strategic planning—cannot (Niewolny & D'Adamo-Damery, 2016). Additionally, the Most Significant Change method, wherein participants share stories bracketed by specific time periods and domains of change with multitiered

story-sharing and selection, provided exploratory indicators for Michigan food systems work evaluation (Fink Shapiro et al., 2021). Former INFAS executive committee chair Christine Porter's concept of triple-rigorous storytelling—ethically, emotionally, and epistemologically rigorous case studies of community-based organizations' food systems leadership in Food Dignity that strive toward relational credibility—especially inspires our approach (Porter, 2018).

More broadly, storytelling supports self- and group-understanding, information-sharing, and connection to history and community (Maggio, 2014; Mattingly & Garro, 2000; Miller & Solin, 2015). We engaged in strategic storytelling to help us achieve three main goals that align with these fundamental aspects of storytelling: to (1) collectively understand where INFAS has been to inform where we should go and how to get there; (2) craft an outward-facing story to better communicate with the INFAS broader membership, prospective members, and partners; and (3) provide a more holistic and relational alternative to strategic planning, allowing executive committee members past and present to share their personal stories relevant to INFAS and come to know each other better as human beings.

### *The Storytelling Process*

After aligning on our strategic storytelling goals, we contracted a professional facilitator with whom some past and current executive committee members had worked successfully on multiple food systems and sustainability projects in the past and who is conversant in subject matter relevant to INFAS, but more importantly, has expertise in collaborative facilitation. We explicitly requested support in story-gathering, listening, and condensing to guide future action without engaging in a formal strategic planning process.

Ultimately, this facilitated process occurred in two consecutive multihour sessions during scheduled monthly executive committee meetings in February and March 2024 via the Zoom videoconference platform. The sessions included current executive committee members, the INFAS coordinator, and two former INFAS leaders who had deep historical memories of the network. The facil-

erator also connected with select former members who could not attend these sessions.

In the first session, the facilitator framed our broader purpose as (1) reflecting on and documenting our past by telling our individual and shared INFAS stories and listening to others' stories; (2) collectively imagining and beginning to draft the next chapter in the INFAS story; and (3) bringing the "authors" together with respect and creativity to tell and write the story. The facilitator recorded this session and summarized it prior to the following session.

The first session began by splitting participants into three smaller groups in Zoom breakout rooms to respond to the following prompts and then share a summary with the larger group:

1. What's your story? How did you get involved in food-related work?
2. What's a story or situation that motivates or inspires you to do this work?
3. How did you come to INFAS? What drew you to this group initially?
4. What's the most significant change you've experienced (or been a part of) as a result of your engagement with INFAS?
5. What excites you the most when you imagine the future of INFAS?

The second session focused on coalescing, reviewing, and editing individual stories into a shared story. This included identifying broad, past waves and experiences in a group timeline, including key events and characters. We then reviewed this information to identify and acknowledge tensions in the INFAS story; while we appreciate and want to cultivate key approaches to achieve our mission and vision, tensions within INFAS itself and academia writ large often compete with and limit these approaches.

### *A Note on 'The' Story*

We, the authors of this essay, include current and past members of the INFAS executive committee and the INFAS coordinator. Its contents emerge from stories shared by 12 current and former members who participated in this strategic storytelling in the ways detailed above. However, this

participation does not encompass the entirety of the INFAS executive committee's past membership nor, certainly, its broader membership or partners. As such, this story is based on some members' individual and collective recollections, experiences, and interpretations, which are necessarily incomplete. We acknowledge that there are likely gaps, tensions beyond those that we collectively identified, and inaccuracies in our story. A team member with expertise in qualitative and storytelling methodologies that necessitate ample member-checking took the lead in drafting this essay as a written manifestation of the story, drawing on that experience to aim to ameliorate gaps and tensions. Wherever possible, we have supplemented with documentation from INFAS annual reports, internal records, and/or external sources to help tell a fuller story. Finally, while we acknowledge INFAS origins and influences in the Prologue below, we largely bound our story to INFAS itself; that is, we acknowledge that INFAS exists within greater social, political, and historical contexts and stories but stay sharply focused on our own story for the purposes of this essay.

### **The INFAS Story**

We first shared an abbreviated version of this story during the fourth annual INFAS virtual summit in April 2024. Below, we share the extended version produced through our full strategic storytelling effort.

#### *Prologue: Influences and Origins*

While its origins are myriad, the sustainable agriculture movement in the U.S. emerged in response to productionist agricultural turns that came to a head in the farm crisis of the 1980s with the dissolution of long-standing farming communities and numerous ecological and social costs (Pfeffer, 1992). A minority of academics across the country who disagreed with these federally sanctioned turns joined with farmers and their communities to respond to the crisis and engage with this movement. INFAS's origin story emerges from this context.

The prologue to INFAS is marked by early efforts to organize such academic work, including a newly established journal, formal and informal meetings, the founding of numerous centers, and

the creation of endowed chair positions. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), which “support[s] holistic solutions across ... integrated systems” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, n.d., para. 2), including strong and equitable food systems, provided critical support for many of these efforts and the endowment that formed and continues to support INFAS (INFAS, n.d.-e). For example, the foundation fully subsidized the journal *Agriculture and Human Values* from 1984 to 1986 to provide an outlet for publishing scholarship on food and agriculture from a range of disciplinary perspectives (Haynes, n.d.).

Within a few years, several academic and research centers arose from partnerships with farm and community organizations, primarily housed at 1862 land-grant universities, such as the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University,<sup>1</sup> the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture,<sup>2</sup> and the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.<sup>3</sup> WKKF took notice and, in 1994, supported the Consortium of Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (CSARE). CSARE was a joint effort between the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska<sup>4</sup> and CIAS with a mission to support the growing farmer-academic network. It published quarterly *Inquiry in Action* newsletters through the remainder of the 1990s and helped to organize regular meetings with academics that seeded new centers. In 2000, CSARE hosted a gathering with 25 representatives from centers at Cornell University, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Michigan State University, University of California, Davis (UC Davis), University of California-Santa Cruz, University of Maine, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska, University of New Hampshire, University of Wisconsin, and Washington State University. However, the consortium struggled to sustain financial support and dissolved in 2002.

Throughout approximately 1998 to 2011, WKKF endowed chaired professor positions to further advance this work at Iowa State University, Michigan State University, North Carolina State University, The Ohio State University, University

of Arizona, UC Davis, and University of New Mexico. Many of these chaired positions are situated within centers for agricultural sustainability, environmental farming, regional food systems and studies, and sustainability studies. Key to INFAS’s subsequent formalization, the Agricultural Sustainability Institute (ASI) at UC Davis formed in 2007 under the leadership of WKKF endowed chair Tom Tomich.

In approximately 2004, a group of these chairs, leaders at other academic sustainable agriculture centers, and others informally convened before the first WKKF Food & Society meeting in Pittsburgh. The group discussed a sense of decline in support for sustainable agriculture centers and noted a shift in terminology and emphasis at WKKF from sustainable agriculture to food systems, and especially the foundation’s priority area of supporting vulnerable and thriving children. In turn, this contributed to a shift toward considering issues of power, community, food access, and health within the loose network.

### ***Chapter 1: Formalizing the Network***

Following this prologue, the early years of INFAS formalized this previously informal network of scholars (i.e., WKKF endowed chairs and former CSARE participants) by establishing an endowment and host institution, mission, overarching goals and broad strategies to reach them, and governance approaches. In 2009, Tomich used WKKF funds to hold a national symposium, through which the burgeoning network participated in a facilitated design meeting at UC Davis. There, participants coined the name “Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability.” WKKF formally coalesced this network of endowed chairs with a US\$1.5 million endowment for INFAS to respond to emerging needs and opportunities to reduce human and environmental vulnerability across the food system. Under Tomich’s leadership, ASI at UC Davis volunteered to host INFAS and the endowment in perpetuity. Its original description and mission were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.leopold.iastate.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://misa.umn.edu/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cias.wisc.edu/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cfra.org/>

The Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS) is a national network of scholars with an overall purpose of science, outreach and education to ensure resilience in the US food system. The Network has been created to identify, assess and make visible critical trends and vulnerabilities in agriculture and food system sustainability, and to engage resources and capabilities to forge collaborative solutions.

Productive tensions emerged around INFAS goals, such as focusing on WKKF's priority of supporting vulnerable children or agricultural research (including funding, for example, for graduate students). At this time, INFAS solidified overarching goals reflecting both its origins and WKKF priorities by supporting:

- A corps of diverse, well-trained individuals prepared to lead initiatives to address agriculture and food system challenges;
- A stronger, broader consensus on priorities for research, education, and outreach in food and agriculture, which are relevant to society;
- Science-based evidence in support of food system sustainability—including improved access to healthy food for all U.S. children, with particular emphasis on improved outcomes for our most vulnerable children—made available to community advocates and policy makers;
- Increased media attention on the issues of agriculture and the food system; and
- Better strategies for informing policy-makers at all levels about farm and food policy choices and their consequences, particularly those which affect child hunger and malnutrition in the U.S.

The inaugural INFAS meeting occurred in 2010 after the second National Symposium on Food Systems and Sustainability at UC Davis. INFAS members developed approaches to achiev-

ing collaborative solutions for food and agricultural systems to sustain health, society, and the environment. The group reached a consensus on major action items to do so, including (1) hiring a coordinator dedicated to ensuring network and project success, (2) developing a project proposal to submit for federal funding,<sup>5</sup> and (3) establishing an executive committee.

The executive committee comprised 10 members whose role was to (1) advise Tomich, as an ex officio member, on the allocation of endowment and startup funds, and (2) facilitate feedback and communication from network members to Tomich and the dean of the UC Davis College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences regarding the management of endowment proceeds and INFAS activities. Six regular members included WKKF endowed chairs, who were distributed initially across west, southwest, north central, northeast, and southeast geographical regions in the U.S. These first members served staggered two-, three-, or four-year terms to provide overlap and continuity, ultimately establishing a rotation of new members serving three-year terms, replacing retiring members and learning from existing members. In addition to Tomich representing ASI as the INFAS host, three additional ex officio members included a graduate student, an extension and outreach representative, and a representative from the Real Food Challenge (a network of students and universities working toward building a healthy, fair, and green food economy). The intention to include these student members demonstrates a long-standing INFAS objective to support young scholars and emerging leaders, although it is unclear whether student members ultimately served on the executive committee as intended.

After two years of formalization in 2012, INFAS included 25 members from 22 institutions. Hosting in-person annual INFAS meetings was an important early strategy to support communication among and beyond these members, including engaging those young scholars who could benefit from the network. These often occurred in conjunction with related events, such as the Agricul-

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<sup>5</sup> INFAS members submitted a preproposal, *Resilience, Resistance, and Risk in the U.S. Food System*, to the National Science Foundation, but it did not receive funding.

ture, Food, and Human Values Society and Sustainable Agriculture Education Association (SAEA) meetings. Despite a modestly growing membership, networking opportunities, and an established executive committee, INFAS experienced challenges in achieving its goals due to lack of coordinated support.

Accordingly, in 2012 the executive committee invested most of its annual funds in supporting a network coordinator position, held by Joanna Friesner at UC Davis from 2012 to early 2020. At each annual meeting, INFAS members provided input to develop a work plan with priorities for the next year. With approval, refinement, feedback, and evaluation provided by the executive committee, the coordinator managed and executed the work plan. Additionally, the INFAS research subcommittee formed to identify and act on research opportunities, including those relevant to food systems risk and resilience.

Following these early formalizing years, the original WKKF endowed chairs began to retire. Mentoring the next generation of scholars and leaders only grew as a priority for INFAS at this time. This was especially true at land-grant universities (although, at this time, we note that membership mainly included predominantly white 1862 land-grant institutions) where the vast size of agricultural programs made it difficult for those who had similar values and interests to “find” each other. At this point, INFAS began to grow in both size and inclusivity. Institutions without WKKF endowed chairs could select individuals to attend annual meetings, regardless of position or chair appointment (though still largely limited to one member per institution). This began an important period of reimagining for INFAS, drawing on the passion of interdisciplinary thinkers housed in disciplinary departments and institutions who were looking for inter-institutional connection, including many graduate students, post-doctoral scholars, and early career faculty. For many, INFAS provided the connection they were seeking and a forum to share perspectives and ideas.

### *Chapter 2: Reorienting Toward Equity*

In 2012, the INFAS annual meeting occurred in conjunction with the WKKF Food and Commu-

nity meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. There, the network began to grapple explicitly with reducing inequity and vulnerability in the U.S. food system, as opposed to its more prominent focus on sustainability science, previously. The executive committee adapted its mission to align with this emerging priority as follows:

The Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS) is a national network of university and college educators, researchers, and activists, who collaborate in analysis, synthesis, and problem-solving with practitioners to increase U.S. food-system resilience; to illuminate critical trends and common stewardship of public goods essential for food systems, such as water, biodiversity, ecosystem services, and public institutions; and to reduce inequity and vulnerability in the U.S. food system.

While the mission now included equity, it had not yet become the central organizing principle that it is today, and productive tensions around the extent to which INFAS should focus on equity continued. Sometime during this chapter, WKKF directly urged INFAS to move its efforts beyond workshops and conversations among the endowed chairs; equity in the food system gained traction as a unifying focus that demanded such broader collective engagement and action.

The 2013 annual meeting included related discussion, interrogation, and reassessment of INFAS values, goals, and priorities, revealing the need for professional facilitation to create a network design plan. A core design team of eight (and later, nine) members led this effort with support from a facilitator who was steeped in social justice and change strategies, ultimately seeking broader member and stakeholder feedback. Here, a focus on equity began to take further shape, with the plan emphasizing the need to engage a broader range of food system stakeholders and expertise around structural and systemic issues of social justice related to race, class, and gender. At the same time, the team recognized barriers to achieving these goals (e.g., funding, support for collaborations, support for external stakeholder participation, time constraints).

Several in-person meetings and workshops over the next year supported the core design team to eventually develop and implement a formal equity statement. A multiday core design team workshop at UC Davis in early 2014 helped to define shared understandings of pivotal concepts, such as ‘community,’ ‘poverty,’ and ‘structural racism,’ and the need to uplift local voices speaking to and addressing these issues from multiple regions and contexts. Notably, this workshop included two community leaders from outside the INFAS majority academic membership who provided key expertise on these concepts. After solidifying the statement, the core design team met in Cary, North Carolina, in November 2014 to plan how best to integrate its commitment into the network and support the membership to do so. There, it developed INFAS member responsibilities and expectations that remain in place to the present day. These include supporting the vision, equity, and mission statements; incorporating them into one’s own work; and modeling best practices in campus-community relationships (INFAS, n.d.-d). Then, in December 2014, the team hosted “Ensuring Equity: The Potential of Activist-Academic Collaborations” to refine and advance its equity statement. Over 50 participants from academia, policy groups, community organizing networks, and non-profit organizations attended. Participants shared stories about experiences with food systems inequities and discussed opportunities and potential partnerships for addressing equity. They provided feedback on the draft equity statement, urging a preamble to provide greater context. Together, these meetings supported INFAS to clearly state that its leadership and membership recognized multiple forms of oppression and, therefore, were committed to moving toward equity in the food system.

Building on the above revised mission, this commitment manifested in a vision statement more clearly centered around both sustainability and social justice in the food system:

We envision a US food system that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. This requires structural equality such that race, class, and gender no longer determine health out-

comes, social status, or economic opportunity and that healthy, restored agroecosystems and fisheries are achievable.

Moreover, these efforts culminated in the INFAS Statement on Equity in the Food System, finalized in 2015. The statement includes three key points that continue to inform INFAS work today:

1. INFAS is a network of educators and researchers who are dedicated to all aspects of food system sustainability and committed to supporting, learning from and partnering with activists in our communities. We recognize that our food system is profoundly inequitable and institutions of higher education hold power and privilege that can be used for good or harm. Equity in opportunity, food access and health outcomes is a non-negotiable foundational principle of a sustainable food system and a core value and commitment for us.
2. To help build equity in the food system, we are focusing on the barrier of structural racism. We recognize multiple forms of oppression; so we also will focus on gender and class oppression, and the intersections among race, class, and gender that shape barriers and opportunities to equity.
3. We make a commitment to collaborate with communities of practice and place through our research, education and convening capabilities to better understand, communicate and find solutions to how food system disparities affect the experiences of those most affected by systemic inequities. We will strive to work with and respect community members as leaders, co-creators of knowledge, co-formulators of questions and co-facilitators in building solutions as we endeavor to create a more just food system for all people (INFAS, n.d.-c, para. 1–3).

In addition to sharing this statement at various meetings and on the INFAS website, it appeared in a special issue on Labor in the Food System in the

*Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD), which marked an early instance of partnership between INFAS and JAFSCD that continues today. There, authors urged a transdisciplinary and systemic approach that refused an “either/or scenario where the Network focuses on the science and practice of environmental or economic or social sustainability in the food system” (Friesner & INFAS Co-creators of the Statement on Equity in the Food System, 2016, p. 27). This ameliorated earlier tensions and emphasized a focus on interdependencies necessary to addressing food systems challenges.

In the years following this reorientation, additional panels and workshops supported INFAS leaders and members to explore and share how to implement their equity goals. One included an INFAS-hosted panel at the 2015 WKKF meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, titled, “The Role of Academic Institutions in Creating Equitable Food Hubs and Food Systems.” The panel included INFAS leaders and explored how academic institutions, at their best, can serve as catalysts to co-create strategies for building a more equitable food system, serving as anchors of support for the grassroots work that is happening in communities. Additionally, 26 INFAS members attended a three-day anti-racism training in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2016, including an INFAS-supported workshop, “Food System Equity and Action from the Individual to the Network,” hosted by People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. That workshop produced an action item to lead a panel later in 2016 at the SAEA meeting, “Building Racial Equity into Higher Education for Sustainable Agriculture.”

Moving beyond panels and workshops, as WKKF had urged previously, this chapter of INFAS closes with three main concrete actions focused on reorienting toward equity and forging grassroots and community partnerships. First, INFAS joined the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, “an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and rural communities” in 2017 (*About us*, n.d., para. 1). Second, INFAS began developing a pilot mentoring program for graduate student fellows at Historically Black Colleges and

Universities (HBCUs) in 2017, which supported three students in the 2018–2019 academic year, all of whom shared their work in a July 2019 webinar entitled “Structural Racism in the Food System: Perspectives from Black Women Scholars.”

Third, several executive committee members participated in the Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities’ *Challenge of Change Commission and Report*, which was partially supported by WKKF (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities [APLU], 2017). The commission included “prominent university, government, non-governmental organizations, and business leaders” (APLU, n.d.-b, para. 1) and aimed to harness “the vast academic, research, and leadership capabilities of public research universities to address the interdisciplinary challenges of food and nutrition security” (APLU, n.d.-b, para. 1). The report recommended actions for “required by public research universities to meet global food needs by 2050” (APLU, n.d.-a, para. 1). However, the INFAS executive committee saw the commission’s findings as overly focused on “feeding the world” without addressing equity and structural racism in the food system. Therefore, they revisited and supplemented the final Challenge of Change report by viewing it through the lens of structural racism, in *A Deeper Challenge of Change* (Ammons et al., 2018).

The report and its supplement revealed ongoing gaps between some in the broader academy and INFAS, with its vision for a more just, sustainable, and equitable food system. However, this supplement allowed INFAS to deepen its commitment to the network based in several key assumptions, including that (1) change happens through the power of networks; (2) INFAS provides space for marginalized ideas and ways of thinking to gain legitimacy; (3) INFAS can support people with the power for making change outside the academy to exert influence on the academy, as members and subnetworks within INFAS are the liaisons with those communities; and (4) INFAS can work for institutional change without the requirement to first address broader food systems structures.

### ***Chapter 3: Reorganizing to Do the Work***

While the previous chapter reoriented INFAS toward equity by naming it, committing to it, and

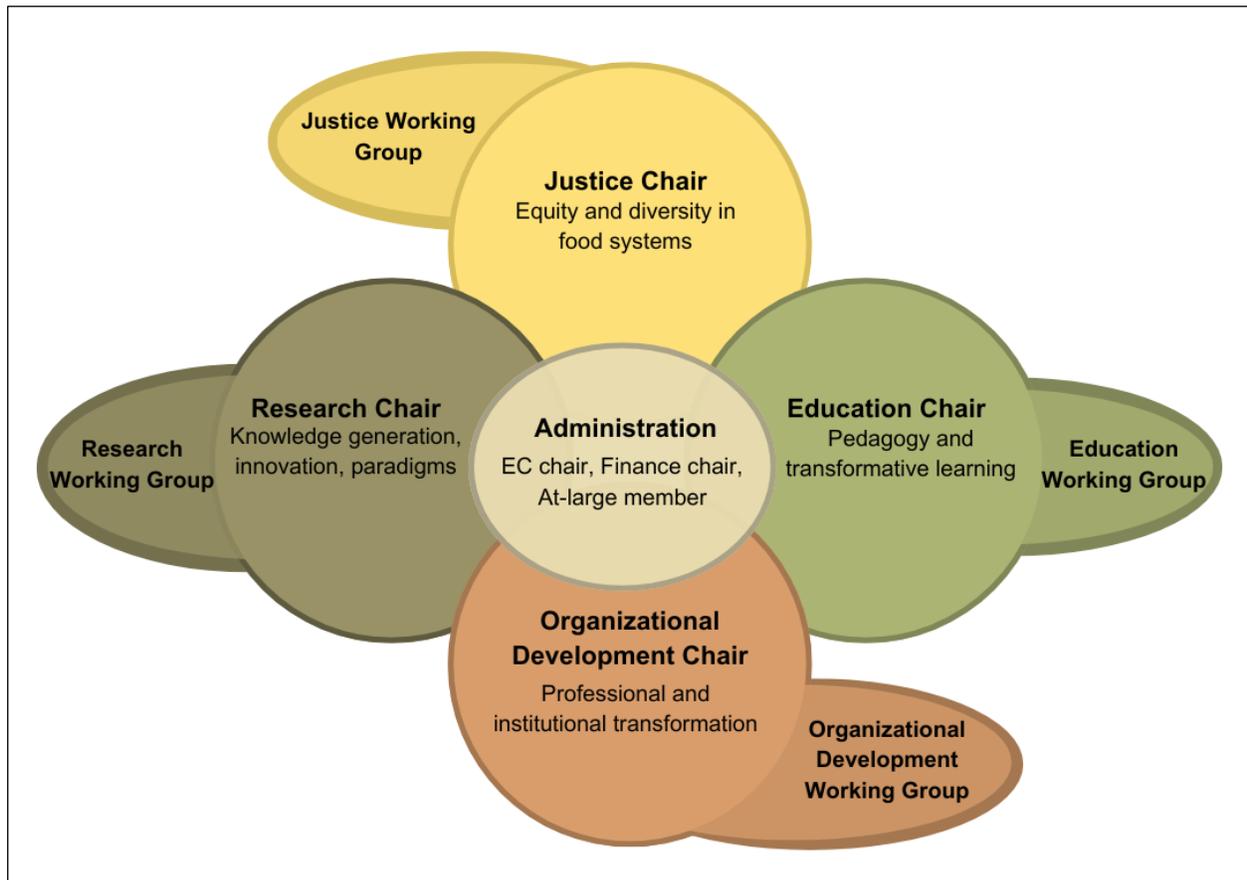
exploring how to do it, the next chapter, beginning in approximately 2020 and continuing through the present, marks a full reorganization grounded in equity, justice, sustainability, and catalyzing related frontier work through concrete projects. At the beginning of this chapter, Tomich and Friesner left ASI at UC Davis, although they remained active in INFAS. The executive committee also moved further away from the model of leadership primarily including WKKF and other endowed chair positions or representing academic centers and institutes at 1862 land-grant universities and instead began embracing participation from a variety of academics at a range of institutions and ranks.

Most notably, the reorganization moved

INFAS to a working group–led structure (see Figure 1). The working groups include Education, Justice, Organizational Development, Research, and, initially, Extension (community-university knowledge sharing and action-research collaborations).<sup>6</sup> Crucially, these working groups reflect activities that the academy, writ large, engages in or could better engage in to support an environmentally sustainable and socially just food system. Working group chairs compose the executive committee, alongside an administration led by an executive committee chair and supported by a finance chair situated at UC Davis, which continues to host the INFAS endowment.

This administration also includes an at-large

**Figure 1. INFAS Governance and Working Group Structure**



<sup>6</sup> The Extension Working Group initially was included in the 2020 reorganization. However, recognizing that other organizations—such as the Racial Equity in the Food System Workgroup at Michigan State University—were already leading strong Extension efforts in alignment with INFAS’s mission and vision, the Extension Working Group ultimately dissolved in 2023. This allowed chairs and members to put greater focus and energy toward initiatives led by the Organizational Development Working Group.

member. For the first time, in 2022 INFAS held an election for this at-large member position. The executive committee announced the open seat to the greater membership, who could nominate themselves or any other INFAS member as a candidate. After circulating biographies for nominated candidates, actively involved members over the past year (i.e., those who participated in working groups, special projects, etc.) could vote via an anonymous Google form to elect the at-large member. Voting members elected a community leader to the role—a key step forward in INFAS realizing its goal to better partner with communities doing food systems organizing and justice work on the ground. Given that community leaders do not have national professional and academic service integrated into and rewarded in their jobs as faculty do, the executive committee moved to provide an annual honorarium for the at-large member to support their participation.

The reorganization shifted a large investment of annual endowment funds from a full-time coordinator position to a part-time coordinator who supports INFAS administration, allowing working group chairs to receive and invest modest annual budgets in designing and implementing action around the revitalized INFAS vision and mission, which appear at the beginning of this essay. Chairs collaborate with working group members who join from the greater INFAS membership, guide decision-making, and select their own chairs internally in concert with the executive committee. Beyond the coordinator position and working group annual budgets, through which the action of INFAS mainly occurs, endowment funds support a range of special projects and activities governed by the executive committee.

The reorganization included newly developed executive committee “by-guidance,” which provides living structural guidelines for key INFAS processes and functions, such as governance, decision-making, conflict resolution, membership, and budgeting. Those structural changes have allowed INFAS to create, reinvigorate, and amplify several critical internal network processes that support membership development. For example, in 2021, INFAS published its first annual report since 2015 and continues to do so to share its activities with

members and partners transparently. Also in 2021, INFAS hosted its first virtual summit, an event that now occurs annually in the spring. This event engages the larger membership in updates and workshops, including participation in working group breakout sessions often focused on garnering input and feedback on key activities. The virtual summit allows members and partners to participate in INFAS without the onerous travel costs associated with past in-person annual meetings. That year also launched annual INFAS awards; nominated by members and selected by the executive committee, these include the Stepping Up, Committee Service, and Overall Impact awards, which come with modest gifts that recognize past or current members’ efforts to support the network and its core work. Additionally, members voted on a new INFAS logo in 2022.

Notably, INFAS membership grew steadily but slowly in earlier chapters from 2010 through 2019, increasing from approximately 25 to 65 members during this time. In part, this relatively small membership seems due to an emphasis on endowed chairs and/or representatives from centers and institutes, institutions instead of individuals, and predominantly white 1862 land-grant universities. Not until the reorganization chapter with the above network process changes and explicit outreach to multiple members at numerous institutions, including minority-serving institutions and non-academic organizations and networks, did membership begin to increase substantively each year, from 91 initially to over 300 members at present. This includes four members from Tribal Colleges and Universities, 33 members from HBCUs, and 32 members who are students.

With this growth and budgetary reorientation, INFAS has supported both executive committee members and the greater membership, including graduate students, to attend multiple meetings and events. These include an Agriculture of the Middle event at the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Conference; the Black Urban Growers Conference; the Intertribal Agriculture Council Conference; a Land-Grant Partners Summit that coincided with the First Americans Land-Grant Consortium Conference; the Professional Agricultural Workers Conference; the Southeast Climate & Energy Net-

work Convening; and continued long-term coordinating support for and sponsoring of the SAEA Conference. Some of this support has engaged members to help shape deeper policy, action, and/or reflection, building on INFAS's established history with doing so. For example, two research teams informed the development of a Food System Planning National Community of Practice; the at-large member supported the Wallace Center Food Systems Leadership Network Racial Affinity Groups; and members were invited to participate in the United Nations Food Systems Summit (Anderson et al., 2022).

Beyond supporting participation in meetings, the reorganization has allowed INFAS and its working groups to implement several concrete projects and pilot programs. For example, the Organizational Development Working Group completed a project that included hosting webinars, creating a directory, and, ultimately, publishing a journal article on identifying resilience strategies for academic centers and institutes engaged in food systems transformation work, including those who regularly participate in INFAS (Gwin et al., 2024; INFAS, n.d.-b). The Research Working Group regularly supports special issues in *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* (FiSFS) related to INFAS work, including on "Achieving Food System Resilience & Equity in the Era of Global Environmental Change" (Miles & Hoy, 2023). Recently, that working group also launched a special project providing financial assistance to underrepresented scholars, including junior faculty and Ph.D. students, to publish their work in peer-reviewed agroecology and sustainable food systems journals. The Education Working Group also edited a special issue on "Critical and Equity-Oriented Pedagogical Innovations in Sustainable Food Systems Education" in FiSFS (Valley et al., 2023). Following a session on "The Immense Debt Owed to Tribal Nations by Land-Grant Universities: Where to Begin?" (see Gavazzi & Low, 2022) at the second annual INFAS virtual summit, the Justice Working Group launched a project to inventory truth and reconciliation strategies employed at these 1862 land-grant universities, with an eye toward identifying better practices. Projects often benefit from a partnership with JAFSCD, wherein INFAS may support two relevant special

sections each year. Past special sections have included "Fostering Socially and Ecologically Resilient Food and Farm Systems Through Research Networks" (in partnership with eOrganic and U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture [USDA NIFA]) (Hilchey, 2024) and "Justice and Equity Approaches to Student Food (In)Security" (Budowle et al., 2023).

With leadership from the Education Working Group and the broader executive committee, this chapter included substantive movement toward long-held INFAS goals of supporting both equity and junior scholars through multiple graduate student fellowship programs. First, building from the earlier chapter's pilot, INFAS will soon enter its fourth year of partnership with the Carver Integrative Sustainability Center at Tuskegee University, which hosts the HBCU Graduate Fellowship Program for students pursuing degrees in food systems, agriculture, natural resources, or related fields. From 2020 through 2023, the collaborative Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC)-INFAS Tribal Fellowship Program similarly supported Native American graduate students studying food systems, regenerative agriculture, natural resources, and/or nutrition. Both programs have provided students with a modest stipend, networking and professional development opportunities, and mentorship from INFAS member volunteers. Indeed, these mentoring opportunities have demonstrated perhaps the most effective way to date that INFAS has moved from internal executive committee activities to engaging the greater membership.

Building from best practices gleaned from these and other successful programs, INFAS members and partners at multiple universities developed and submitted a US\$20 million proposal, "NextGen Growing Season: Preparing BIPOC students to enrich US food and agriculture" to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) "Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals" funding opportunity in late 2022. Although the proposal did not receive funding, reviewers ranked it in the top category as "outstanding." In 2023, after supporting three cohorts, the IAC paused its participation in the Native American graduate student fellowship program due to organizational changes. Despite these

challenges, INFAS has continued moving toward equity, young scholar support, and community leader partnership following strategic storytelling.

### Epilogue

The above chapters tell the story of INFAS as a network striving to collaborate toward an environmentally sustainable and socially just food system for over 15 years. The prologue from the 1980s to the early 2000s coalesced a loose network of academics aiming to partner around sustainable agriculture and with each other on a national scale. In its first chapter, from approximately 2009 to 2012, the creation of INFAS formalized this network (mainly including endowed chairs at 1862 land-grant universities) with a WKKF endowment that continues to support INFAS today, along with its mission and governance structure. From 2012 to 2019, in its second chapter, INFAS reoriented toward equity alongside environmental sustainability through workshops, panels, the INFAS Statement on Equity in the Food system, the *Deeper Challenge of Change* INFAS supplement, and piloting an HBCU graduate student fellowship and mentorship program. In its third chapter, from 2020 until the time of this strategic storytelling effort in 2024, INFAS reorganized to better do its core work through a working-group–led structure and concrete projects.

Reflecting on this story together in our strategic storytelling process, we noted that a move toward a more inclusive membership and leadership

structure has led to a surge in and more engagement with members over time. Increasingly, we have aimed to integrate community partners, leaders, and expertise into our network and to support underrepresented scholars and students, both of which were revealed through the story as long-term INFAS goals. However, we also noted that we continue to grapple with some of the same challenges and tensions identified in earlier chapters. While the working group structure supported by part-time coordination has allowed us to turn our attention to our core work through concrete projects, as individuals, we continue to experience time and capacity constraints in this professional service–based network. While our collective knowledge and expertise is powerful, both larger INFAS-led external proposals submitted over the years have not received funding, thereby limiting our ability to catalyze larger collaborations (although multiple members noted that even failed funding proposals have helped to further coalesce a shared vision and trajectory). And while we have aimed to make space for community and non-academic partners, INFAS remains a predominantly academic network. More specifically, we identified a range of ongoing productive tensions emerging from what we appreciate and hope to cultivate in the future, as shown in Table 1.

In the next chapter of our story, we expect to continue grappling with these tensions. We plan to deepen our investment in projects with seed funding infusions and leadership support to *catalyze from*

**Table 1. Productive Tensions in INFAS Work**

INFAS Appreciates and Wants to Cultivate:	Tensions
Engaged food systems scholarship by, with, and for people who are working locally and authentically but connected through a larger network.	Academic incentive structures often remain counterproductive to engaged scholarship, and we all have limited time and capacity to plug into a larger network.
Stability, influence, and infrastructure of higher education institutions and the academic systems that maintain them to affect food systems sustainability and justice.	Higher education institutions are slow moving, bureaucratic, and often inaccessible, especially for underrepresented and undersupported scholars and community partners.
An academic network that includes, follows, and is responsive to community leaders doing the frontline work.	Academics often speak their own language, making it difficult to create a sense of belonging for community leaders within the network.
Tangible, localized results and measurable progress by tackling things that we can finish.	We want to tackle big things that we may never finish, focusing on systems change even when it remains difficult to see and measure progress.

tier work and increase our capacity to help build U.S. food system resilience, sustainability, and equity. We also plan to expand on successful pilot projects that *diversify who is doing food systems work in academia*. For example, in the 2025–2026 academic year, we are building on our current and former fellowship programs to pilot the INFAS Food Systems Fellowship (INFAS FSF) for underrepresented and under-supported graduate students who are committed to more ethically and equitably engaging with communities in their present and/or future work. Notably, this program will invite community leaders as featured speakers, providing them honoraria for sharing their time and expertise with students. The INFAS FSF, therefore, will help to advance two long-term INFAS goals and alleviate the second and third tensions detailed in Table 1. Additionally, the at-large member will reflect on her experience as the first community leader on the otherwise academic-led executive committee by identifying successes and challenges (e.g., time commitment, bureaucracy, gap between academia and community-driven action), future project opportunities, and by-guidance updates to support other community leaders who serve in the role. In an effort to more deeply engage the broader membership beyond mentoring opportunities and the virtual summit, the Justice Working Group is seeking to fund projects proposed and led by members. These efforts occur amid uncertainty and direct challenges to both higher education and the just and sustainable food systems that we seek. Accordingly, in early 2025 the executive committee sent a message to our members reiterating our commitment to the INFAS vision and mission.

As noted above, we assume that this vision and mission happen through networks and the many people within them. Numerous members, partners, working group participants, executive committee members, and chairs have made INFAS's work possible for over 15 years; we recognize many of them by name in the Acknowledgements section of this essay. However, we also explicitly want to recognize Christine Porter, who served as INFAS executive committee chair from 2019 to 2023, given that this paper is part of a festschrift celebrating and extending her work—and honoring her after she walked on in 2024. The third chapter of

INFAS, which we characterized as a reorganization to do the work, occurred with her vision and leadership. Christine would urge and support us and others to do what she called “the capital-W Work of justice.” Christine understood how to create the scaffolding necessary to take INFAS to this next level of organization, thereby amplifying our shared w/Work. She had a sixth sense for good ideas and a healthy appetite for systems change. She encouraged many of us to bring our authentic selves to the network and Work, leading by example. We also note that Christine explicitly made space for and/or directly invited women of color, scholars from minority-serving institutions, junior faculty, community activist leaders, and non-tenure track faculty to the table at the executive committee and in working groups, some of whom have shared that they would not have seen themselves at that table otherwise. Through these efforts, she helped to further infuse equity into INFAS itself. Finally, we believe that Christine would be happy that we are telling the *story* of INFAS in this essay, given her commitment to triple-rigorous storytelling in food justice research.

For us, strategic storytelling included three key components, all of which in some way align with Christine's concept of triple-rigorous storytelling and research—emotional, ethical, and epistemological (Budowle & Porter, in press; Porter, 2018). First, strategic storytelling included creating intentional space for participants to share their own narratives about what brings them to the network's shared work. This aligns with emotional rigor, in that it clarified individual perspectives and the human experiences that inform each person's commitment to the network. It also helped us to forge stronger relationships with each other through increased understanding. Second, it included the process of collaboratively telling a narrative network history with past and current leaders to facilitate shared understanding of the work. Aligning with ethical rigor, this helped to articulate the collective values that shape our shared approach and define our work and partnership. Third, we ultimately created an outward-facing narrative product to share that story with other members and partners. This final component aligns most closely with epistemological rigor, in that it systematized and

codified the “data” that emerged from our individual and shared narratives.

We suggest that other networks and organizations may apply and adapt these three components to engage in their own strategic storytelling processes as an alternative to strategic planning. However, strategic storytelling may not be suitable in all contexts—or even for INFAS in future moments. Notably, all three components occurred without attachment to defining specific action steps for the future, unlike strategic planning. This lack of attachment was useful in our specific moment, during which we were onboarding several new leaders at once and moving out of a major reorganizational chapter. Also, we emphasize that strategic storytelling may be less useful in more formal organizations and more useful in those for which strategic planning may be less appropriate or culturally relevant, such as some higher-education contexts and in organizations that function as diffuse networks, like INFAS.

In sum, our strategic storytelling effort fulfilled its promise by helping the executive committee collectively understand the origins and foundational values of INFAS. Above, we have begun to envision where the next chapter might take us. Moreover, this essay has helped us to share that story with readers, including the INFAS broader membership, prospective members, and partners who can help us work toward our vision and mission in INFAS’s next chapter. Finally, this effort helped us build stronger relationships within and beyond the current executive committee. As “a fundamental way of giving meaning to experience” (Mattingly & Garro, 2000, p. 1), storytelling helped us participate as our authentic selves. Individual stories included professional and personal interests in, experiences with, and passions for the core work of INFAS, including food production; accessibility, health, and nutrition; environmental systems and sustainability; and social movements and justice. To a person, these stories showed that while a diffuse network

approach has challenges and tensions, it amplifies our individual work and supports us to feel like we are a part of the greater Work toward food systems transformation and justice.

In this vein, we end with a quote from a former executive committee member who articulated a critical aspect of the INFAS story, when it was primarily a network of endowed chairs at 1862 land-grant universities: “There’s a logic to membership as an institution rather than individuals, but it’s the individuals who make it work.” While INFAS has changed substantially since then, our story remains one of a network comprising people who are committed to collaborating toward an environmentally sustainable and socially just food system, together. 

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