

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

SPECIAL ISSUE: MORE THAN VALUE\$ IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

More than value\$ in the food system

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Submitted August 11, 2020 / Published online September 21, 2020

Citation: Tobin, D., Belarmino, E. H., & Kolodinsky, J. (2020). Introduction to the special issue: More than value\$ in the food system. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(4), 9–13.
<https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.094.013>

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This special issue draws attention to the diverse values applied to, embedded in, and emerging from food systems. Although scholarship has long recognized that a range of values is at play in food systems—and the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* has been paramount to showcasing this type of research—the dominant perspective continues to elevate a highly centralized model that prioritizes the values of maximization (of yield and profit) above all else. Yield and profit are no doubt important, but the unparalleled emphasis they receive obscures the other important social and environmental values that inform how and why people engage in food systems. As so many food system scholars have previously articulated, what we need for relevant, inclusive, and

effective policies are accurate representations of food systems and the actors who construct and maintain them. The position of this special issue is that transdisciplinary research is critical to ask and answer questions about values in ways that embrace complexity.

Committed to transdisciplinary scholarship, the University of Vermont (UVM) held a faculty/student workshop on values in the food system in July 2019. The workshop was funded by the UVM Graduate College and the Food Systems Graduate Program. UVM has a vibrant food systems program that engages faculty from across the university in collaborative research and was among the first to offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in the field. The workshop brought together graduate students and faculty from across the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at UVM representing the departments of Nutrition and Food Science, Community Development and Applied Economics (applied economics, rural

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Funding Disclosure

This special issue was made possible due to the generous funding from the University of Vermont Graduate College and the Food Systems Graduate Program.

sociology, communication), and Extension. Also present was a public health faculty member from the Evergreen State College in Washington state. Presenters represented the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD) and Texas A&M University.

During the workshop, transdisciplinary teams were formed to leverage different ways of understanding and studying food systems, and to eschew dangerous simplifications that can result from studying complex problems with a single disciplinary lens. The base assumption that guided discussions during the workshop was that both economic and non-economic values play an important role in how actors engage in the food system. Despite our disciplinary differences, the extent to which we agreed on the problems with defining value based on short-term production efficiency alone quickly became evident. Broadly, participants provided examples of how activists, scholars, policy-makers, and the general public have become increasingly aware of the major environmental impacts of the global food system, the growing burden of food insecurity and nutrition-related problems, the persistence and perniciousness of food-system related inequities, and the formidable task of ensuring that there will be enough nutritious food to meet the needs of a growing global population.

Of course, the critique was the easy part. And yet, due to our disciplinary diversity, we were able to identify approaches that have emphasized the importance of values aside from maximization: the three pillars of sustainable development, theories of moral economy, the relationships that distinguish direct marketing from the anonymity of long value chains, the efforts of Corporate Social Responsibility, nutrition-sensitive and pro-poor value chains, and food sovereignty, to name a few. Although each of these examples take a different approach—some working within the system while others seeking to transform the system—they all recognize that the goals, processes, and outcomes of food systems must be about more than producing sufficient calories and making profits. Along with yield and profit, there is also value in, for example, environmental stewardship, taking care of others and communities, and enhancing well-being, even if these often lack monetary valuation. These

are insights that have long been articulated by social theorists, dating back to titans such as Max Weber and Karl Polanyi, as well as contemporary scholars in food systems.

It is the transdisciplinary approach underlying each of the papers in this special issue that builds on this impressive foundation, providing examples of how integrating the theoretical and methodological orientations of specific disciplines allows for more nuance and new insight on the myriad values embedded within food systems and motivating food system actors. We contend that only through identifying commonalities and differences in disciplinary perspectives of value in the food system can we comprehensively address complex problems. In this special issue, we compile distinct perspectives on value and shed light on one sliver of the immense diversity of attributes—besides money—that motivates people selling, trading, buying, and receiving food. As a collection, these papers demonstrate the nimbleness of transdisciplinary approaches investigating values and facilitating research across geographic, social, cultural, institutional, and ecological contexts.

At the same time, we do not want to downplay the challenge of transdisciplinary scholarship. Our philosophical, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological orientations differ by discipline, and so it is little wonder that the silos are difficult to transcend. Working across disciplines requires acknowledging assumptions, harmonizing vocabularies, resolving contradictions, practicing patience, engaging in critical self-reflection, and accepting prolonged timelines. And yet, for complex and nuanced issues such as the myriad values embedded in food systems, we are confident that the extra labor, both productive and emotional, is worth it.

The Special Issue Papers

This special issue of JAFSCD is the outcome of the 2019 faculty/student workshop at UVM. The goal of the two-day workshop was to engage in a discussion about transdisciplinary research, learn from others, and have time to develop the papers that are in this special issue. The final paper produced for this issue is an evaluation of the workshop, which was attended by 13 people. We

begin with the end of the workshop—a paper that resulted from poetic analysis of the workshop evaluations that were collected using a rather standard set of questions with both close-ended and open-ended responses.

Poetic Expressions of Transdisciplinary Food Systems Collaborations by Heiss, Daigle, and Kolodinsky (2020) uses poetic analysis to create understanding of the results of an evaluation of the workshop described above. Poetic transcription transforms participants' responses to interview questions into poetic form. The authors note that this type of analysis is appropriate for and has been used in food systems research previously, but was new to all but one of the workshop participants (Heiss). Six poems emerged from the data, representing the *process of, roles and practices* of participants in, the *expression of value(s)*, and a note about what *was/is missing* in transdisciplinary research. Reading this evaluative paper first provides context for the other papers in this issue.

Balancing Social Values with Economic Realities: Farmer Experience with a Cost-offset CSA by Sitaker et al. (2020) focuses on farmer experiences with a cost-offset community supported agriculture model. One of a series of articles from a USDA-funded project that examined nutrition and farmer economic outcomes related to community supported agriculture (CSA) membership using a qualitative, in-depth interview approach, the paper indicates that farmer participation wasn't all "about the money." Indeed, farmers adapted to clientele needs. They "selected pick-up locations that met CO-CSA members' needs, were responsive to members' food preferences in selecting CSA contents, and allowed for late payments and pickups, though sometimes this placed an additional burden on farmers' time and resources" (p. 30). While a cost-offset CSA can challenge a farm's bottom-line profit, farmers thought that it could also increase their reach and visibility, allow more people access to fresh food, and even lead to policy changes that could benefit direct-to-consumer food systems in the future. Short-term monetary profit was supplanted by long term alternative food system success. The value to participating farmers is in contributing to sustained and expanded markets and a healthy, well-nourished population, in addition to

simply making a living.

Supporting Agricultural Resilience: The Value of Women Farmers' Communication Practices by Daigle and Heiss (2020) uses a qualitative interview methodology to examine the resilience of women farmers in what has been a gendered occupational category. As the authors note, women's farming practices within sustainable agriculture emphasize environmental and social well-being, as well as food quality, over agricultural intensification to increase monetary income. Communication networks, including by gender (or not), crop, experience, and more helped to maintain and increase the resilience of women farmers. Networks not only helped personal resiliency, they also contributed to traditional farm profitability.

Differences in Crop Selection, Resource Constraints, and Crop Use Values Among Female- and Male-headed Smallholder Households in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda by Reynolds et al. (2020) also focuses on gender in agriculture, but in an international context. Using survey data from more than 1,000 households, the authors "provide novel cross-country evidence on how female- and male-headed households, and women and men farmers within households, may prefer different crops and also face different levels of access to resources needed for market-oriented agriculture" (p. 66). Using very detailed quantitative methods, the authors conclude that men have more access to land and grow more market crops compared to women. While a typical economic interpretation would be that women need more access to land and technical support to choose income-producing crops, the authors point to a more nuanced, valued possibility. On less land, women planted a wider variety of crops. Aligned with previous research, these women, who also are nurturers, care about food security for their family members, perhaps valuing the ability to provide directly rather than grow, sell, and use that cash to purchase food. Understanding differences in values by gender, as well as resource differences, cultural norms and agroecology, are important as policy-makers develop programs for rural development.

Helping Farmers with Continuation Planning for Cost-offset Community Supported Agriculture to Low-Income Families by Sitaker et al. (2020) is another in the series of articles from the USDA-funded pro-

ject that examined nutrition and farmer economic outcomes related to CSA membership. This paper describes findings from an evaluation of a structured planning and implementation process conducted during the last intervention year of the study that aimed to help participating farmers sustain the cost-offset portion of their CSA after study funding ended. The evaluation components of continuation plans, farmers' experiences during implementation, their opinions about the planning process, and their future plans revealed a multitude of approaches. Farmers participating in the Farm Fresh Foods for Healthy Kids (F3HK) program used diverse methods to plan, recruit, and raise funds, and adapted strategies to fit their local conditions and farm businesses. Lack of farm resources—time, money, and expertise—was a continual barrier to moving forward. As with full-price CSAs, reciprocity between CO-CSA members and their farmer was a key factor. Farmers were committed to the success of the CO-CSA continuation planning process and most intended to continue the CO-CSA the following year.

Farm Fresh Food Boxes: Relationships in Value-Chain Partnerships by Greco et al. (2020) focuses on the importance of relationships in the development of a farm fresh food box (FFFB) model to provide access to fresh food to consumers unwilling or unable to access other direct-to-consumer value chains. This model uses components representing a CSA share and a short supply chain. The resulting values-based supply chain “refer[s] to both the quality of products sold and the values reflected in the operational decisions about the way product moves through the supply chain” (p. 116). The paper uses data from qualitative interviews of farmer-retailer pairs involved in the pilot for the FFFB project to discuss relationships: shared

values and mutual regard; shared governance (fair, stable pricing of value-differentiated products); and trust, transparency and communication. In the FFFB model, it is not enough to provide a box of produce at a price that consumers will pay. The paper does not provide simple answers that address the challenges of melding the shortest value chain (direct-to-consumer) with a traditionally long value chain (retail markets), nor a magic-bullet approach to a successful short values-based supply chain. Instead, it raises important questions that farmers and retailers must consider when deciding whether to create such a venture. One size does not fit all.

This special issue was the result of the coming together of faculty, graduate students, and experts in the field. We are especially appreciative of the presentations by Duncan Hilchey and Amy Christian, editors of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Their expert presentation and patience in answering student questions was impressive and helpful to everyone - student and faculty alike. Rebecca Seguin-Fowler of Texas A&M University was also generous with her time, offering a professional and personal view of how to lead and participate in successful transdisciplinary research. The initial two-day transdisciplinary workshop laid a strong foundation. It took over a year for student/faculty groups to move their papers to the publication stage. This special issue is evidence that transdisciplinary approaches to food systems research that celebrate both commonalities and differences in disciplinary perspectives of value in the food system can result in comprehensive approaches to address complex food system problems and offer viable solutions.

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