

Introduction—and invitation—to the Food Dignity special issue



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Over the course of five funded years and with five million dollars, three dozen community food justice leaders and academics across three U.S. states and nine organizations collaborated on action and research about community food justice, security, leadership, sustainability, and sovereignty. We called this collaboration *Food Dignity*. If you read this special issue, you will hear 20 voices (and about a dozen more, indirectly) presenting some of what we have learned since first proposing the

Food Dignity collaboration in 2010 and also striving to make useful sense of it, for ourselves and for you.

In this opening set of essays, leaders of the five community organizations partnering in Food Dignity each describe how and why they chose to collaborate in this project and reflect on their experiences with it (Daftary-Steel, 2018; Neideffer, 2018; Sequeira, 2018; Sutter, 2018; Woodsum, 2018a). Then we discuss how the three of us—the project PI, a community leader with decades of experience in community activism, and a non–

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tenure track academic team member who joined the project a little late—ended up being the ones leading this project to its close, including guest editing this journal issue (Hargraves, Porter, & Woodsum, 2018).

Our guiding research question in Food Dignity was about how U.S. community-based organizations—such as the five that collaborated in the Food Dignity project—do, can, and should promote food security, community leadership, and equity. However, in addition, our struggles in the project to form a collaborative team surfaced another crucial question: how can community and university co-investigators and organizations form a productive, rigorous, ethical, and equitable action-research partnership? This question compelled us for three reasons. First, our participation in the Food Dignity project necessitated that we try to answer it for our own work together. Second, in nearly every one of the dozens of conference presentations we made, a version of this question was the most common one audiences asked us, no matter what the ostensible topic was. Third, and most importantly, we believe this question must be answered in order to produce the most relevant and rigorous answers to the primary research question about how community organizations can and do contribute to healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems that can feed us all now and still provide for our grandchildren in the future. The *Collaborative Action Research* section of this issue shares a collection of papers about how we worked together and what we learned. They describe the values we outlined for accountability and aspiration (Hargraves, 2018a), how we spent our grant money (Porter & Wechsler, 2018), and how we developed and implemented our case study and collaborative pathway model research methods (Hargraves & Denning, 2018; Porter, 2018a). Finally, Woodsum examines the costs to community organizations of doing community-based action research (2018b). Mundane as some of those papers might sound, we think each offers something that is breakthrough. This includes breaking through the “fourth wall” that can prevent our professional selves from showing up as humans in our work, including acknowledging human struggles and our

reproductions of systemic inequities.


The *Community-led Food Justice Work* section shares some of what we learned about how and why U.S. community-based organizations work for food justice. “Learning from Community-designed Minigrant Programs in the Food Dignity Project” examines how the five community organizations designed and managed a US\$30,000 minigrant program in their communities (Hargraves, 2018b). “‘Ultimately about Dignity’: Social Movement Frames Used by Collaborators in the Food Dignity Action-Research Project” empirically identifies the social movement frames food justice leaders are using publicly, and within the more private confines of our collaboration, to diagnose the problems, identify solutions, and motivate people to get involved (Gaechter & Porter, 2018). Two papers assess community-based food production. “Growing Our Own: Characterizing Food Production Strategies with Five U.S. Community-based Food Justice Organizations” focuses on programs and strategy (Porter, 2018b). The next paper, “What Gardens Grow: Outcomes from Home and Community Gardens Supported by Community-based Food Justice Organizations,” examines multiple forms of positive outcomes (Porter, 2018b). The commentary closing that section, “Going Public with Notes on Close Cousins, Food Sovereignty, and Dignity,” situates the work of these five communities and of our collaboration in the context of international movements for food sovereignty (McMichael with Porter, 2018).

The final section, *Further Reflections*, offers more perspectives on community-university partnering: from graduate students in Food Dignity, steeped in the academic norms of research but situated in between academic and community sides of the project (Bradley et al., 2018); from a researcher on cover crops conducting participatory action research with urban gardeners (Gregory & Peters, 2018); and from faculty members at a teaching-focused college working to develop meaningful and equitable community-campus engagement opportunities as part of their curriculum (Swords, Frith, & Lapp, 2018). The essay that opens that section summarizes the formal education work we did in Food Dignity (Porter, 2018d).

Although the papers in this special issue are

written to stand alone, we have also designed this volume with an eye toward a collective wholeness if it is read like a book. We invite readers to notice at least three things if reading this issue as a whole. One, the mix of voices and styles across these papers range from first-person reflections by community leaders working on the front lines of change to formal, heavily referenced reports by university-based researchers. Two, we share a diversity of processes and methods for inquiry into remaking community food systems, with personal and organizational journeys as important to answering our research questions as examinations of outcomes. Three, this collection of papers about our collaborative research on sustainable community food systems goes beyond issues of food production, distribution, and access. This triad reflects that tackling a problem as wicked as food security and sustainability entails both an ethical mandate and an epistemological need for diverse and inclusive ways of knowing and working. The tensions and strains we have wrestled with are inherent in

this project's attempt to reach for equity, and will be inherent in any effort that seriously addresses the structural and historical challenges facing many communities. We are fiercely proud of our collective accomplishments and also humbled by our feelings of frustration and shortfalls relative to the standards we set for our work.

Finally, we invite you to notice what is not here. For all the diversity we have strived for, a formal, scholarly style of analysis and presentation still leaves out important ways of knowing. This collection of articles is only one way that we are communicating our discoveries and perspectives. The Food Dignity website includes digital stories, learning guides, collaborative pathway models, and more exploration of the themes in this special issue and beyond. We invite you to join us at <http://www.fooddignity.org> and in this special issue, hoping that what we have learned will help everyone working for a just food system to inform and expand our work toward equity and dignity. 

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