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*Engaged Scholars Program*

- 1. PROJECT TITLE:** Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System
- 2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** The Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System is a qualitative research project of Food Solutions New England (FSNE). Spearheaded by the Sustainability Academy of the University this initiative is designed to “make more visible the invisible” through observation, interview, engagement and analysis.

The project will capture the perspectives of those actively immersed in food system employment, as well as the researchers, activists and philanthropists working along-side these front line workers. It will also include insight from those who are under-served and under- resourced and are thus being denied full participation in the food system. By using a mix of written, oral and visual representations, the strengths, challenges, threats and innovative solutions that are part of the current New England food system will be made more evident. Through the establishment of open-source transparent data sharing mechanisms, analysis, and dissemination, the challenges inherent in the present food system, and creative strategies to develop long term sustainable food solutions will become more evidence based.

Through collaboration among University researchers, funders and community members, representatives from key food system sectors will be interviewed, including, but not limited those working on farms, in food production and processing, those engaged in health and nutrition care, food system research as well as those striving to promote social economic justice.

This project is fully aligned with our campus strategic plan as proposed by Mark Huddleston, UNH University president in February 2010 when he envisioned that

“ In 2020, as today, our efforts will be animated by the spirit of **discovery**. Our faculty, students and staff will be committed to being **engaged** in our **communities**. And we will continue to be **resourceful** and **effective** in all we undertake.

The Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System project is designed to discover, to be engaged with community partners and to leverage existing state and regional resources and to be effective agents in shaping the current and future regional food system

Additionally, the spring 2010 UNH Strategic plan identifies the Sustainability Academy as Programmatic Initiative that will build on UNH’s current reputation as a leader in the “greening” of American higher education:

“ A UNH Sustainability Academy would extend the University’s innovative and collaborative work in this field for both on- and off-campus audiences through programming that focuses on the challenges and opportunities of sustainability that lie at the intersection of the sciences, humanities, and engineering.”

Internally faculty and graduate students from the UNH Department of Molecular, Cellular, and Biomedical Sciences (MCBS) Nutrition and Dietetics Program will collaborate with faculty and staff from University Office of Sustainability, and those from the Sociology Department. Externally, partners include, but are not limited to funders of the project, (Common Vision, Share our Strength, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, NH Charitable Foundation), those actively engaged in planning or participating the FSNE food summit, and those immersed in promoting the food system security and sustainability in NH and beyond. At least two of the external funders or community agencies will provide input regarding questions to ask in the field and to identify shared goals and common objectives, and desired measurable outcomes for the project

Funding for a North East Regional Food Summit has been secured by FSNE for the spring of 2011. The Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System will launch as a pre-summit targeted initiative in the summer and fall of 2010. Results from this initial phase will help to inform the summit content. The Voices project as will also be integrated through-out the food summit preparations, execution, and evaluation. The extensive dialogue and documentation will serve to identify FSNE as a resource dedicated to building NE regional food capacity through its commitment to discovery, discourse, engagement, transparency and application.

### **3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION/STATEMENT OF THE ISSUES/PROBLEM**

Presently, there is extensive fragmentation, in the United States among the many entities that collectively comprise an unsystematic, unsustainable “food system” . The very workers who produce the food are often not able to purchase the fruits of their labor. In NH and the Northeast, there have been significant farm land losses in the past twenty year; our dairy industry continues to be threatened; and food processing capacity is limited. At least seven of ten of the leading causes of diet in the United States are diet related. New England is not alone in its need to address regional food security and in the need to take a “systems approach to food ”.

As noted in the 2008 International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, in its Manifesto on Climate Change and the Future of Food Security there are urgent reasons to build regional food systems that are secure, sustainable and accessible

[http://www.arsia.toscana.it/petizione/documents/clima/\(1\)](http://www.arsia.toscana.it/petizione/documents/clima/(1))

[CLIMA\\_ING.pdf](#) .Three (of several) are identified below and are expanded in page five of the reference

- Industrial Globalised Agriculture Contributes to and is Vulnerable to Climate Change.
- Ecological and Organic Farming Contributes to Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change.

- Transition to Local, Sustainable Food Systems Benefit the Environment

The FSNE goals are in concert with another initiative of the UNH Office of Sustainability, Carbon Solutions New England (CSNE); common goals and commitments to sustainable practices will leverage resources of both initiatives. Just as the perils of reliance on industrialized agriculture are acknowledged, the benefits of promoting sustainable, regional food system infrastructure and access is becoming increasingly apparent. From farm, to fork, to health and nutrition outcomes, to social and economic justices, individuals and grass roots efforts have emerged. The Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System, is designed to lead to a greater understanding of the current reality of food system challenges and opportunities in New England. By putting faces and voices to the current food system we will be better poised to identify the challenges inherent in this multi-faceted food system, be they related to the growing, production, processing or access to food, or to indicators of health, nutrition and social justice status that impact the quality of life for all, but particularly underserved and under-resourced populations.

#### **4. PROJECT DETAILS**

**Goal:** The goal of this project is to gather and visualize first hand perspectives of the food system from those involved in direct services, those who are marginalized by the system, and those who work to promote food security sustainability and access and food justice.

##### **Objectives:**

- At least 20 individuals or agencies representing farm, fork, health and nutrition and social justice interests will be interviewed by December 2010.
- One visual display or slide show will be completed by January 2011 that captures key themes expressed in the initial Voices in the Field: Perspectives on the Food System.
- At least 20 more “voices” will be captured during the food summit of March 2011.
- At least 10 graduate students will gain experience in engaged scholarship research and qualitative interviewing.
- At least one publication will be submitted to a peer reviewed journal regarding the project design (proof of concept) and/or outcomes.
- (Incorporate collaborators’ objectives/measurable outcomes and dissemination strategies to this list).

##### **Target Population/Audience**

The target populations for gathering information are those intimately involved in food system work, those who are underrepresented or struggle with food access and those who are professionally and personally engaged in food security and sustainability. The target audience for sharing information is the same population, with a particular emphasis for the initial sharing to be those attending the food summit of 2011. Since there will be visual representation, the ability to broaden the audience via FSNE’s web presence and staff will extend the audience to community, students and policy makers.

## **Methods**

Food system sectors will be identified using the farm, to food processing, to food, nutrition, health and social justice sectors, as well as those identified by the FSNE food summit. The FSNE staff and faculty, internal and external partners will be consulted to formalize questions for the “voices’ project. Faculty and staff from MCBS and UOS, and a graduate level PhD candidate from Sociology will be conducting interviews, as well as training and assisting graduate level dietetic interns who will assist in the data collection and analysis

**Evidence of External Collaboration and Partnership:** Internal and external partners have been previously identified.

**Expected Impact:** Collaboration on this project helps FSNE make more visible the voices of those that are not always available; the benefit to internal and external collaborators is that they also benefit from the information extracted and all stand to benefit from a greater understanding of the food system challenges, dynamics, and innovation. Based on identified objectives, the impact of this project can be measured by determining if objectives were met. Plans are for public dissemination at the food summit and via FSNE website and professional publication

**Scholarly Connection:** Results from this project will be shared at the spring regional food summit. My professional work in dietetics and nutrition will be more formally expanded to include food security and sustainability. The use of visualization presents an opportunity to reach a wider audience

## **5. EVALUATION PLAN**

Feedback of the initial visualization tool will be sought at the food summit. Formative and summative evaluations of the initiative will be sought during the project, as well as at the end. We will determine if objectives identified in the planning process have been met. We will determine if the partnership was mutually beneficial via the meeting of identified goals as well as formal and informal survey of collaborators and attainment of identified goals

## Reference

(1) Manifesto on Climate Change and the Future of Food Security (2008), International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture

- **Industrial Globalised Agriculture Contributes to and is Vulnerable to Climate Change.**

Industrial agriculture, based on chemicals, fossil fuels, and globalized food systems enabled by energy intensive and long distant transport, has a negative impact on climate. Industrial agriculture presently contributes at least one quarter of current greenhouse gas emissions. This dominant system, as promoted by the current economic paradigm, has accelerated climate instability and increased food insecurity. It also increases vulnerability because it is based on uniformity and monocultures, on centralized distribution systems, and dependence on intensive energy and water inputs

- **Ecological and Organic Farming Contributes to Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change.**

Agriculture is the only human activity based on photosynthesis and has a potential to be fully renewable. Ecological and organic farming mitigates climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration in plants and soil. Multifunctional, biodiverse farming systems and localized diversified food systems are essential for ensuring food security in an era of climate change. A rapid global transition to such systems is an imperative both for mitigating climate change and for ensuring food security.

- **Transition to Local, Sustainable Food Systems Benefit the Environment and Public Health.**

Economic globalization has led to a nutritional transition away from local, diverse, seasonal diets to industrially processed synthetic foods, which are leading to new food-related diseases and ill health. Economic globalization policies increase the burden on the environment through resource and energy intensive consumption patterns. Localization, diversification, and seasonality are important for improving human well being, health, and nutrition.(1)