

Building Equity in the NC Food System Through Community Practice

Background:

When it comes to the North Carolina (NC) food system, the evidence is clear: strategic partnerships are essential to its future.

The NC food system is a cross-cutting ecosystem composed of multi-organizational interests, community needs, and individual experiences. However, the onset of COVID-19 has introduced and [continues to present](#) lasting challenges for local, state, national, and global food supply chains. In response, many [government actors](#), organizations, and communities have begun strategically focusing on strengthening local food systems. Over the last five years, organizations across the state have worked diligently to advance local food systems through community outreach.

In 2021, Food Resilience NC released a [North Carolina Food System Resilience Strategy](#), which used surveys to ascertain the needs of rural and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals and communities. In 2023, N.C. Following the conclusion of a similar state-wide survey, NC State Cooperative Extension (NC State Extension) announced its [Strategic Plan for 2030](#). Despite the individuality of these efforts, both initiatives found that to create an inclusive environment for all North Carolinians, it is necessary to improve communication practices within and between organizations and historically underrepresented communities.

However, [effective communication](#) with historically underrepresented populations will require [complicated legacies of discrimination](#) to be addressed within NC State Extension and beyond. Effective communication will require a concerted effort to acknowledge past injustices and create policies and practices that promote improved coordination and expand the reach of NC State Extension. For over a decade, the [Committee on Racial Equity \(C.O.R.E\) in the Food System](#) has been working towards creating equity in the NC food system. They have conducted research and analysis to develop community practices that promote value-aligned communication among organizations within and outside the food system. These community practices foster better communication and cultivate [relational trust](#) among food system partners and historically underrepresented populations. Relational trust is essential for the NC food system. It helps maintain relationships and can be employed to improve [value chain coordination](#) across the region.

Under Goal 1.2 of the Strategic Plan for 2023, NC State Extension should use the [Committee on Racial Equity \(C.O.R.E\) in the Food System's Community Practice Model](#) to adapt programs and services that reflect the diversity of the NC population to impact both traditional and new audiences. Specifically, this model should be employed to help address the key initiatives that seek to expand partnerships with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and N.C. A&T State University; provide greater accessibility to historically underrepresented groups and residents of all demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds; and adapt Extension materials, communications, and resources to best serve the multicultural populations and varied demographics of North Carolina.

Challenges and Opportunity:

It is important to note that now, and even before COVID-19, the social costs present within the food system have yet to be distributed equally amongst communities. Consequently, one challenge to creating a vibrant local food supply chain is addressing the more embedded issues—[food system equity](#). Recent studies have linked deficits in food system equity to [adverse social conditions, increased healthcare costs, and decreased economic productivity](#). In North Carolina, the implications of food system inequity have been especially detrimental to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (B.I.P.O.C) communities. If NC hopes to build a food system that evolves into the future, there is a need to increase the number of partnerships with historically underrepresented groups, especially B.I.P.O.C communities. There is also a need to invest in strategies that increase diversity in agricultural and food system programs to levels that reflect the NC populace.

In North Carolina, investment into local food system supply chains can be traced back to the establishment of the [Center for Environmental Farming Systems \(CEFS\) and NC Choices research](#) at the Goldsboro Research Farm in the 1990s. Today, national trends further support the argument that local food systems are essential to developing a robust food economy. Since 1997, local food marketing and direct-to-consumer sales have [increased in the U.S.](#) In 2020, local food marketing generated over [\\$9.0 billion](#) in revenue. There is an international effort to [build a more resilient](#) and sustainable food supply chain infrastructure for the future. With the [number of farms and land in farms in NC](#) on the decline, effective communication between food system partners is paramount to the future of NC agriculture. According to the North Carolina Local Food Council (NCLFC), investments in [local food systems](#) can help protect NC farmland and the environment and solve community problems. However, maximizing the benefits of the local food systems is as much about understanding the [communication of expectations and desires](#) as it is about resource investments. One great example of the importance of communication is the [definition of “local food”](#), which historically has [varied among organizations and individuals](#). In this policy memorandum, we use “community” to honor each “local food” definition and maintain their shared objective—*promoting measurable economic development and enhanced individual experiences within the NC food system*. However, developing key partnerships that will advance NC food systems at the local level starts with adjusting communication strategies at the institutional level.

In their [2023 Impact Report](#), the NC State Extension Local Food Program Team mentions some of their achievements. One of the highlights was the success of the Farm to School Work Group in setting up a community garden at a local non-profit. Additionally, the report states that the Local Food Program conducted an NC State Extension staff training to help utilize community gardens in food security work. While these initiatives are in alignment with the goals of the Strategic Plan for 2023, achieving long-term equity will require the implementation of effective communication practices that promote [institutional awareness](#).

To accomplish this, NC State Extension must adopt appropriate community practices at the *intra-institutional* and *inter-institutional* levels. The *intra-institutional level* refers to interactions between personnel within the Extension network, while the *inter-institutional level* refers to interactions between the Extension network and external entities. By prioritizing institutional awareness and community practices, NC State Extension can become more [reflexive in decision-making](#) and provide better services to North Carolinians.

The Plan of Action recommends mechanisms to increase awareness within the NC State Extension network and build an equitable NC Food System.

Plan of Action:

The Extension network should implement a policy that provides its personnel with the appropriate tools for establishing relational trust with underrepresented populations. Adopting community practices will help foster a more collaborative environment hospitable for traditional and new audiences, including historically underrepresented groups. North Carolina State Extension should employ community practices to adapt internal communication practices within the Extension network. Additionally, NC State Extension should use community practice to incorporate food system equity concerns into their network-building and partnership practices at the intra-institutional and inter-institutional levels. Ultimately, this will lead to a more diverse and vibrant food system in North Carolina and provide an avenue to reach new audiences and create prosperity for all North Carolinians.

Recommendation 1:

Establish a Food Equity Program to Build Partnerships with Underrepresented Populations

NC State Extension should establish a food equity program that builds relationships with BIPOC communities and provides clear pathways for improving accessibility for historically underrepresented groups. This program will support the Strategic Plan for 2030 by increasing the reach of NC State Extension to millions of North Carolinians who have never heard of Extension nor participated in its programs.

NC State Extension should allocate \$200,000 annually for three years to appoint a Director of Food System Equity and provide funding for hiring a Food System Equity Business Associate. An additional \$80,000 should be made available following a report from the Director on the resources and staff needed to carry out the program's function and coordination activities. NC State Extension should create a program under the Agriculture & Food Division and ensure that the team fulfills [National Science Foundation \(NSF\) diversity standards](#) and mirrors underrepresented populations in NC.

The Food System Equity Program should use C.O.R.E. Community Practice to build a bridge between Extension and historically underrepresented groups. The Food System Equity Program should coordinate with grassroots organizations, community coalitions, and neighborhoods to outline engagement strategies. The Food System Equity Program should develop customized workshops and materials that allow extension personnel to engage intentionally with BIPOC communities and other historically underrepresented groups. These workshops should follow the [CEFS CORE In-Betweens](#) model. The Food System Equity should provide the program monthly. Participants should comprise a mixture of cross-cutting actors (e.g., BIPOC community members, organizational leaders, Extension personnel, project managers, farmers, business associates, etc.). These workshops promote community agency and empower conversations about shared goals and cultural understanding gaps. The In-Betweens model should provide a reliable space to create and strengthen relationships between Extension and historically underrepresented audiences.

Ultimately, the process will increase Extension brand awareness and balanced participation through culturally appropriate programming.

Recommendation 2:

Establish A Community Practice and Produce Communication Strategies for Partnership-Building

Community practice should be adopted by Extension staff, faculty, and partners state-wide. The Food System Equity program should produce communication strategies for building partnerships with historically underrepresented populations and coordinate the implementation of community practice.

Community practice will assist in adapting extension materials, communications, and resources to effectively serve the multicultural populations and varied demographics of North Carolina. Senior leadership should support community practice by clearly defining organizational values (outlined in the Strategic Plan for 2030) and providing equity training to Extension service providers. Senior leadership should work with non-traditional audiences (i.e., B.I.P.O.C community leaders) to develop Respect Agreements. These agreements should outline clear protocols and codes of conduct that encourage open and honest communication and promote social growth and accountability within the Extension network. These agreements should help build trust and mutual respect among partners and develop communication strategies. The Food System Equity program should deliver these strategies to Extension personnel through workshops, media, and team-based discourse.

Community practice should be team-based (*working groups, departments, project teams, etc.*) and exercised across Extension settings (*office spaces, virtual rooms, research stations, field days, etc.*).

Extension events should devise room setups for circular seating and face-to-face communication. Additionally, relative to the number of Spanish speakers in NC, a fraction of Extension events should be conducted in Spanish and have an English translator.

The Food System Equity program should conduct an in-depth review to assess actions that would be most effective at addressing legacies of discrimination with NC State Extension. The review could reveal, or otherwise necessitate, that signage, advertisements, hiring practices or even diversity statements be adopted to facilitate better relational trust with BIPOC communities and other historically underrepresented groups. In this way, NC State Extension will be enabled to develop communication strategies that will reduce conflict, strengthen collaborative efforts between partners, and further increase the return on government investment.

Conclusion:

If partnerships are the lifeblood of a land-grant university, then communication is near to its heart. For years, various entities, big and small, have recommended ways to improve the NC food system. However, these initiatives have been largely independent and developed in siloes that have left a large number of residents without support. The Strategic Plan for 2030 delivers an opportunity to amalgamate independent initiatives within the NC food system into partnerships that will enable state-wide change. Nonetheless, if the Strategic Plan for 2030 is to accomplish its goal of reaching new audiences, then community practices must be responsive to, and commensurate with, the substantive needs of historically underrepresented populations. Community practice is not about creating extra work for Extension personnel but about shifting how the work is done. While land-grant institutions have traditionally struggled to support BIPOC constituencies and people without land, NC State Extension is uniquely positioned to promote food system equity. Community practices have the potential to help stabilize and sustain a diverse Extension network and build the capacity of the NC Food System for years to come.



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Frequently Asked Questions:

How are land-grant Institutions connected to food system inequity?

There is a [long-documented history](#) of racial discrimination within the U.S. Land Grant System. The [Morrill Act of 1862](#) provided funding for practical education to the “average U.S. citizen,” but it also systematically excluded individuals and institutions based on [race, gender, and religion](#). However, the [Second Morrill Act of 1890](#) aimed to address racial discrimination by ensuring that state funds were distributed equitably to both Morrill Act of 1862 institutions (White land grants) and 1890 institutions (Black land grants). This act focused mainly on former Confederate states and aimed to promote justice and more significant equity in allocating funds. However, the regulatory text of the Second Morrill Act of 1890 was unclear, which allowed states like North Carolina to provide unequal shares of appropriations to white land-grant institutions while withholding funds from Black land-grant institutions. Unfortunately, even after the establishment of the [Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994](#), which created twenty-nine Tribal land grant colleges and universities, the unequal allocation of funds continued. This exclusion has impacted diversity in agricultural and food system programs, perpetuating food system inequity in North Carolina.

Have inequities in the land-grant system been fully addressed?

Compared to 1862 institutions, minority-serving institutions (MSI) like 1890 and 1994 institutions have been [financially undermined and deprived of resources](#). For instance, the [Hatch Act of 1887 and Smith-Lever Act of 1917](#) granted 1862 institutions routine funds for research and extension matched 100% by non-federal funds. Meanwhile, 1890 institutions were excluded from these funds for almost six decades. It was only with the passage of the [Evans-Allen Act of 1977](#) and [Section 1444 of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act \(NARETPA\)](#) that routine funds were legislated for 1862 institutions. However, these federal appropriations still fail to address the long-standing legacy of discrimination. Therefore, 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant institutions must partner and work together to address the systemic implications of defunct public policy.

Why should NC State Extension adopt community practice?

The NC State Cooperative Extension network is an expanding ecosystem of food system actors, and the Strategic Plan for 2030 provides the necessary infrastructure to support NC minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and build relational trust with historically underrepresented populations. Community practice will enable NC State extension to serve North Carolinians better, promote food system equity, and address the legacy of discrimination that challenges the resiliency of North Carolina’s local food systems.

About the Author:

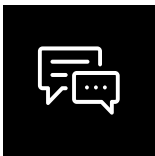


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His research strives to promote climate mediation in the agricultural sector by amalgamating sustainable management practices and science-based policy.

During his time at NCSU, Chris held the title of tripartite fellow, serving as a [Policy Entrepreneurship Fellow \(PEF\)](#) with the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), an [AgBioFEWS Fellow](#) with the National Science Foundation (NSF), and a [Doctoral Fellow with the Center for Environmental Farming Systems \(CEFS\)](#) & the [Committee on Racial Equity in the Food System](#).

Chris is interested in using an ecosystem approach to design and implement policy that holistically addresses systemic discrimination (e.g., loan discrimination, redlining, food system equity, etc.) and increases economic productivity. He is also the Senior Lead Consultant for [Gillespie Consulting, LLC](#). You can connect with Chris on Twitter ([@SpoilTheSoil](#)).



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Contact CORE

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About CORE

CORE is a long-term commitment to work internally and collaboratively with community and grassroots groups to address root causes of food system inequities and build collective solutions through the lens of racial equity as an entry point.

Vision

An equitable society would be one in which there are improved outcomes for all. Race would no longer be a determining factor for health, wage, employment, life expectancy, and other disparities.

Mission

To create institutional food system change by addressing the historical and current impacts of structural racism on our food and agricultural systems.

Learn more

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