

## Inter-institutional Network for Food and Agricultural Sustainability (INFAS)

### Member Profile: *Christine M. Porter, University of Wyoming*

#### **Background**

Christine Porter has been at the University of Wyoming since 2010. She is an associate professor and Wyoming Excellence Chair of community and public health and the director of a USDA grant-funded project known as *Food Dignity* and an NIH-funded project called *Growing Resilience*. During graduate studies at Cornell University, Christine was working on a project to prevent childhood obesity as a way to make her Ph.D. research in nutrition useful in a real-world application. Through this work it soon became apparent to her that childhood obesity was a symptom of much larger issues regarding social justice, food justice, and equity, and she realized that she had to focus on a broader picture of community nutrition in order to connect and prevent hunger, obesity, and food insecurity. As a result, she shifted her focus away from childhood obesity to broader food justice and food system issues.



#### **Connections to INFAS**

The work that Christine is doing at the University of Wyoming relates directly to key questions that INFAS is addressing: *What should the role of colleges, universities, and institutions of higher education be in addressing areas of structural racism and injustices in society and within the food system, and how should they do this?*

The goals of *Food Dignity* are to work with, learn from, and provide support for, five community food justice organizations. Christine says that *Food Dignity* has been referred to as a “model” of how academia and community can effectively work together to create a more just food system for all, including via their Community-Campus Partnerships for Health award in 2014. While Christine is proud of the recognition of the group’s efforts, she does feel that *Food Dignity* has more to do and much more to learn. The *Food Dignity* project is important because it is grappling with how academic institutions can support and learn from, and with, community partners to help increase food sovereignty, food justice, and equity, all of which are major goals that INFAS has identified within its mission statement.



Food Dignity team touring D-town Farms in Detroit, 2012

#### **Value of INFAS**

Christine became more active in INFAS when the Network identified racial equity and social justice in the food system as its top priority. Participating in her first INFAS activity made an impact on Christine; she was impressed with how far along INFAS is in their conversation and commitment to racial equity, as well as the depth of the conversations.

Christine has appreciated connecting with members of INFAS and discovering the diverse work they are doing within their institutions and local communities across the US. These connections enable her to assess various approaches, successes and challenges, and to learn from this networked community. Christine thinks that the work that INFAS is doing is valuable and necessary to shape academic contributions to food system change and that INFAS is ahead of most other academic organizations and associations in its commitment to anti-racism in the food system. Christine also believes that a significant asset of the Network is that it brings together academics that possess different areas of food system expertise which can create opportunities for a more holistic and truly systemic understanding of

food systems as well as to informing public and political discussions. Christine believes that a vital role of INFAS members is to transform academics – both individuals and organizations – to become more ethical and effective partners in addressing inequities within the food system.

## **Food Dignity**

Christine first learned about Food Policy Councils during graduate school and decided that starting council in Ithaca, NY would foster food justice locally. When she proposed this council to community leaders she was told that she shouldn't be telling the community what it needed, but that they would support her in asking the questions to learn what the community did want to do with respect to food justice<sup>1</sup>. This was one of the first lessons, according to Christine, that community organizers have generously taught her about the roles academics should play, and how to implement action, in support and service of community-based organizations and citizen leaders.



While completing graduate school Christine accepted a faculty position at the University of Wyoming. She also discovered a USDA call for funding proposals on the topic of generating sustainable and food secure community food systems. She gathered partners and submitted a proposal in which she requested funding for what would become the *Food Dignity* project<sup>2</sup>.

*Food Dignity*<sup>3</sup> is an education, extension and research project funded from 2011-2016. With five community food organizations and four academic institutional partners, the collaborators aim to identify, develop and evaluate scalable and equitable strategies for organizing sustainable community food systems to ensure food security. *Food Dignity* has strived to become a community-academic

allyship for increasing the sustainability and equity of the food system, especially in the five communities represented in the partnership. As reflected by its name, the project strives to improve dignity in the food system by supporting and documenting ways people develop food sovereignty and self-determination in their communities.

The five community organizations in the Food Dignity collaboration include: Blue Mountain Associates in Wind River Indian Reservation, Dig Deep Farms in Alameda County California, East New York Farms! in Brooklyn, Feeding Laramie Valley in Laramie, and Whole Community Project in Ithaca. Academic partner organizations include University of Wyoming, Cornell University, and Ithaca College.

### **Food Dignity Team Shared Values**

*Written and adopted in May 2014*

We value the fundamental dignity, worth, sovereignty, self-determination and the inherent power of all people. We are committed to principles and ways of working within our own work and in the changes we wish to inform and inspire in the world, by:

- combating all forms of racism, oppression and implicit bias;
- respecting and valuing the individual and shared journeys of the people, the project and the histories of our communities, including historical trauma;
- valuing authentic first-person voice and first-person knowledge;
- valuing the different ways that people live, work and relate to each other;
- valuing the act of listening and specifically listening long enough to achieve shared meaning;
- valuing seeing and being seen, listening and being heard, becoming real to each other, recognizing that an important kind of knowing is experiential and lived;
- valuing accountability to one another and to the work for both the intention and impact of our words and actions;
- and persevering through the challenges that come with our inclusion and engagement of differences.

<sup>1</sup> Christine would like to credit Liz Karabinakis, Jessica English, Alicia Swords and, most of all, Audrey Cooper.

<sup>2</sup> UW Assistant Professor Awarded \$5 Million Grant for Sustainable Community Food Project. University of Wyoming. [www.uwyo.edu/uw/news/2011/04/uw-assistant-professor-awarded-5-million-grant-for-sustainable-community-food-project.html](http://www.uwyo.edu/uw/news/2011/04/uw-assistant-professor-awarded-5-million-grant-for-sustainable-community-food-project.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://fooddignity.org/>