

TO: Helene Dillard, Dean, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences
FROM: Molly D. Anderson, Chair of the Executive Committee, Inter-Institutional Network for Food, Agriculture & Sustainability (INFAS)
DATE: August 6, 2014
RE: Annual evaluation of INFAS performance by Tom Tomich and Joanna Friesner, Fiscal Year 2014

This is the third annual evaluation of the work of Tom Tomich and Joanna Friesner in coordinating and facilitating INFAS, funded by a W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) endowment to UC Davis. Our work this year aligned INFAS more deeply with the WKKF mission by enhancing our collaborative capacity to “support children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society.”

The purpose of INFAS is to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems, including social justice, through collaborative networks linking academic institutions with other sectors of the food system. This is an enormous charge with diverse pathways toward its realization. The group decided to establish an intentional network, rather than organizing ourselves in a more conventional way, because we recognized that our productivity as a national network, and particularly in work that goes beyond our typical academic activities, requires much deeper relationships and shared commitments.

Much of the last year has gone into network design: building a shared understanding of the context and current reality in which we are operating, the kind of future we want to see, and barriers to creating it. This work has been accomplished through a face-to-face meeting in Davis, monthly calls facilitated by a professional network “coach,” and during meetings organized for other purposes and attended by multiple INFAS members. The design process resulted in a statement of commitment to racial equity as a starting point for social justice in the food system:

INFAS is a network of educators and researchers who are dedicated to food system sustainability and committed to supporting, learning from and partnering with activists in our communities. We recognize that our food system is profoundly inequitable and institutions of higher education hold power and privilege that can be used for good or harm. Equity in opportunity, food access and health outcomes is a non-negotiable foundational principle of a sustainable food system and a core value and commitment for us.

To help build equity in the food system, we are focusing on the barrier of structural racism as an initial entry point. We recognize multiple forms of oppression; so we also will focus on gender and class oppression, and the intersections among race, class, and gender that shape barriers and opportunities to equity.

We make a commitment to collaborate with communities of practice and place through our research, education and convening capabilities to better understand, communicate and find solutions to how food system disparities affect the experiences of those most affected by systemic inequities. Working with and respecting community members as leaders, co-creators of knowledge, co-formulators of questions and co-facilitators in building solutions is necessary to create a more just food system for all people.

The group is energized by this commitment, and we are finding excitement in the wider community of sustainable agriculture and food systems work as we talk about it. No other national-level sustainable agriculture group is working specifically on this fundamental issue, although we are finding many potential partners. We tested the racial equity commitment during the WKKF conference in Detroit at the beginning of the summer, and organized a successful and well-attended workshop there to begin growing the network beyond our current collaborations to act on this commitment.

Tom and Joanna's contributions have been critical over the past year. Joanna has adapted very well to changing expectations of INFAS and is a capable, productive and articulate group member. She understands the institutional world of UC-Davis and knows how to get things done. We asked her to make a few improvements to our virtual meetings, to avoid future technical difficulties. She is consistently proactive and responsive to needs of the INFAS Network Design Team and Executive Committee.

Tom has been completely supportive of the Network Design process and has added a lot of good thought and personal leadership by example, as well as hosting a meeting of the Network Design Team in the spring. He successfully struck the balance between the convening role of the administrative home for INFAS while allowing others to assume leadership. This shared ownership is vital to the continued success of INFAS.

Over the coming year we will finalize the initial network design process and confirm the commitment to racial equity among past and current INFAS participants. We will reach out to other organizations and alliances to make sure that we are working closely with strategic partners. This will involve a better understanding of who is doing what to create racial equity and social justice in the US food system and offering INFAS support and collaboration. It also will involve INFAS members attending other organizations' meetings so that we can meet partners "where they are." In addition, we will be creating an agenda of activities for both collective and individual work to advance racial equity and social justice.

We look forward to continuing to work with Tom and Joanna through the coming year!