

Working with:

A collaborative and participatory food recovery program and the pedagogies that support it

Access to, and demand for, healthy and local foods is an issue that crosses numerous political, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. As such, current siloed and abstract teaching pedagogies along with still popular top-down, competitive, and isolating market strategies fail to provide students and local residents with the tools needed for addressing the entangled, systemic issues surrounding access to local and healthy food. In contrast, this presentation documents an innovative food recovery partnership between the Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI), Heartside Residents and two Grand Valley State University (GVSU) courses from the instructors, community-partners', and students' perspectives.

The partnership illustrates the necessity of experiential, collaborative, and community-engaged strategies and pedagogies for better preparing students and local residents to engage with and tackle the wicked problems surrounding food (including, but not limited to, production, distribution, access, diet, cost, consumption, and health). More specifically, the presentation (1) details the work of the HGI as a new and alternative local food access model for food insecure residents of an impoverished neighborhood, (2) outlines the design and pedagogical methods behind two interdisciplinary, community-engaged undergraduate courses at GVSU partnering with the Initiative, (3) highlights the outcomes of the HGI/university collaboration, and, thus, (4) ultimately presents a series of practical recommendations for others seeking to employ similar boundary-spanning models for distribution of, and access to, local food.

Particularly interesting about the nature of this collaboration is how it not only requires students to grapple with the real world complexities of the issues surrounding food, the local community, capitalistic food markets, and the non-profit HGI, but also how it requires students to co-create and implement a variety of action plans. For instance, in one semester students (1) measured HGI's outcomes through a student-created, administered, and assessed survey, (2) contributed to the design of HGI products and services through the development of community education programs and materials, in addition to (3) building partnerships intentionally aimed to increase the credibility and viability of the Initiative, and (4) generated published ideas on how to cultivate self-sustaining programs and increase the scale of the work being done. Bridging the limitations of individual courses, students in the following semester then analyzed these initial action efforts, brainstormed creative ways to move the HGI forward, and implemented their own plans. These collaborative efforts utilized principles and methods from design thinking, wicked problems, and the circular economy.

The nature of this work presents even the most earnest actors with a set of robust challenges, requiring messy inquiry, participatory research, collaboration across a wide-range of diverse viewpoints, and reciprocal community engagement efforts. Challenges inherent to this work will be highlighted along with recommendations for meliorating these challenges and thus better preparing students and local residents to collaboratively tackle the dynamic complexities involved in promoting and sustaining alternative food systems within their own communities.

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