frontiers
in Sustainable Food Systems

PERSPECTIVE
published: 17 November 2021
doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2021.751264

Centering Justice in a Sustainable Food Systems Master's Program

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The new Master of Science in Sustainable Food Systems (MSFS) program at Prescott College was re-envisioned as part of the preferred teach out partnership with Green Mountain College that closed in 2019. In collaboration with faculty from both colleges, the new MSFS program was developed to intentionally center social justice and offer students a *Food Justice* concentration. Food justice is a growing movement that seeks to shift global, industrial food systems toward more equitable, just, and sustainable foodways. Using this definition, students in the *Food Justice* core course uncovered how forms of institutional oppression prevent certain communities from accessing healthy and culturally appropriate food. This course was designed and taught from an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and culturally sustaining pedagogical framework. The *Food Justice* course frames students' investigation of the current food system and how issues of privilege, access, and identity relate to food justice throughout the MSFS program. Through experiential learning, students were asked to develop and implement a project that aligns with social justice values. In this perspective paper, we describe our experiences as sustainable food systems educators in making structural changes to the master's program. We share the values and assumptions that led to the development of the *Food Justice* concentration and course; detail our pedagogical frameworks; and highlight students' projects as a manifestation of the student experience.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogy, sustainable food systems education, food justice, experiential learning, graduate programs, justice, pedagogy

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:
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Specialty section:
This article was submitted to Social Movements, Institutions and Governance, a section of the journal Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems

Received: *31 July 2021*
Accepted: *07 October 2021*
Published: *17 November 2021*

Citation:
Greeson KM and Currey RCD (2021) Centering Justice in a Sustainable Food Systems Master's Program. Front. Sustain. Food Syst. 5:751264. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2021.751264

INTRODUCTION

This profile of the Master of Science in Sustainable Food Systems (MSFS) program at Prescott College (PC) provides an example of how an existing food systems curriculum was re-envisioned to intentionally center social justice and research-engaged teaching (Neary et al., 2014; Harfitt and Chow, 2020). PC's MSFS program is an intentionally online, asynchronous program that was accredited and launched in the Fall of 2019 as part of a preferred teach-out agreement with Green Mountain College (GMC), Vermont, which, unfortunately, closed July 2019. In this paper, we share some of the values and assumptions that led to the development of the *Food Justice* concentration and course and detail our pedagogical frameworks. Highlighting student projects, we provide concrete examples of active learning that illustrate students' understanding of racism and other injustices in the food system. The goals of this paper were to (1) Provide context and strategies for graduate level SFS program development, and (2) Offer our pedagogical perspectives and praxis to provide tangible insight for SFS educators.

AUTHOR AND COLLABORATIVE POSITIONALITY

We are educators operating from diverse and intersecting identities. We acknowledge the power and privilege we hold as educated, middle-class, cisgender female scholars working in higher education, particularly in relation to teaching justice at a predominantly white institution (PWI). As white and biracial settler educators working and living on Yavapai-Prescott and Kānaka Maoli lands, we approach place-based learning from a relational and ethical standpoint.

With the 2019 closure of GMC, PC welcomed students and faculty. The MSFS Program Director (Currey) and five faculty members transitioned to PC where Greeson was already teaching a PC course entitled *Food Justice*. The interdisciplinary faculty specialize in agroecology; ethnoecology; nutrition; public health and policy; social ecology; soil ecology; and sustainability education. Both Greeson and Currey shared insider positionality as they embarked upon, with the other members of the transitional faculty (now PC faculty), revising and seeking accreditation for the PC MSFS program (Hinkelman, 2018). We both also shared outsider positionality as Greeson came to know the existing GMC MSFS curriculum, faculty and students, and Currey came to know the PC faculty, college-wide course offerings and ethos. With clear support from PC leadership, the urgent need to have a newly accredited program in place for transferring students and shared power to bring about change, our collaboration team redesigned and re-positioned the program in 6 months.

BACKGROUND: MSFS OVERVIEW

GMC's MSFS program, launched in 2011, was the nation's first online, asynchronous master's level sustainable food system program. The 39 credit-hour program consisted of 13, three-credit courses, including a capstone project requirement [**Supplementary Table 1**; for learning objectives and course descriptions see Green Mountain College (GMC). 2018, p. 14]. All courses were required and taken sequentially in the order noted in **Supplementary Table 1**. There were 139 graduates over 8 years.

The transition to PC created opportunities to modify the MSFS curriculum at the program level, but also to systematically revise course content. Modifications sought to improve students' awareness of the structural inequities in the food system, their positionality and the skill sets needed to bring about more sustainable and just communities (Valley et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2021). We highlight the development of the *Food Justice* concentration with the *Food Justice* course at its core, below. The main strategies and tactics for centering justice in the MSFS program included:

1. Embracing PC's low-barrier, holistic admission process (no-fee; no testing; see Glazer et al. 2014, p. 3) that recognizes prospective students for online, graduate programs are more likely to have recent, substantive volunteer (see Stapleton, 2021) and/or work experience rather than recent academic experience. Independent college students, as Reichlin Cruse et al. (2018) note, are more likely to work at least part-time, be women, be People of Color, and be parenting children under the age of 18.
2. Reducing the credit hour count by nearly 10% to improve affordability of, and thus access to, the program for students seeking to influence food systems in their communities;
3. Reducing the number of required courses so that students have more agency over their education by choosing electives;
4. Creating courses and concentrations, such as *Food Justice,* to help students build awareness about structural biases and their positionality in the food system (Prescott College, 2021);
5. Moving the *Food Justice* course into the first semester (**Supplementary Table 1**) as a triggering event for cognitive presence in the program so that students encounter the entirety of the MSFS curriculum with social and environmental justice competencies (Akyol and Garrison, 2011; Almasi and Zhu, 2020; Valley et al., 2020), and
6. Investing in professional development such that all courses are developed and revised centering justice and supporting students' application of what they are learning in their communities (e.g., XITO, 2015; Fernández, 2019).

As a result, PC's MSFS program, accredited and launched in August 2019, is an online, asynchronous program 36 credits in length consisting of 12, three-credit courses, including a student-led capstone project (**Supplementary Table 1**; for learning objectives and course descriptions see Prescott College 2021, p. 210). Eight courses are required with students having agency over four courses, which include their capstone and three electives. Electives can lead to nine-credit concentrations in: *Food Justice*; *Sustainable Diets and Biodiversity*; and/or *Food Entrepreneurship*. Students may also choose a Dual MBA in Sustainability Leadership and MSFS (45 credits) degree path. Currently, 59 students are enrolled with 20 graduates.

FOOD JUSTICE CORE COURSE AND CONCENTRATION

As educators committed to examining and teaching sustainable food systems, we approached not only course content but the program curriculum from the standpoint that food systems are intersectional and must include social and environmental justice. Intersectionality refers to the ways forms of oppressions intersect and overlap (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2001). This lens aligns with PC's focus on social justice and helped to support a *Food Justice* concentration which consists of the following courses: *Food Justice*; *Food Systems;* and *Mobilizing Change.*

Course Design

The *Food Justice* course is a core course taken in the first semester of the students' master's degree program. Students who complete this course should be able to:

1. Understand historical, conceptual, and theoretical frameworks of food justice, and interpret the ways the

underlying institutionalized oppression have created such injustices.
2. Analyze foundational and emerging literature on industrialized and global food systems, food (in)justice, food sovereignty, food access.
3. Identify and critique elements of food production including human and animal labor and environmental injustices.
4. Examine contemporary socio-political movements through sustainable food system case studies from an anti-oppressive lens.
5. Develop a community-based project focused on a local (to the student) food justice issue.

To scaffold student learning and engagement for these five learning outcomes, this 8-week course is divided into four, 2-week sessions: (1) Foundational Concepts, (2) (In)justices of Food Production, (3) Decolonizing Food Justice and Indigenous Diets, and (4) Sustainable Food Systems: Exploration and Critique. Course learning outcomes and corresponding activities are assessed through authentic and formative assessment (Wiggins, 1990; Fook and Sidhu, 2010). Course assignments attempt to bridge asynchronous, online learning with Hyflex inspired teaching (Kyei-Blankson and Godwyll, 2010).

Course activities strive to foster critical thinking and develop higher order understanding of power and oppression that underpin complex problems within contemporary food systems. Greeson facilitates a learning community by creating spaces for students to engage with course content through peer-to-peer dialogue. Course activities include: asynchronous online dialogue; semi-synchronous small group virtual meetings; blog posts; and an experiential learning project.

Experiential learning projects grounded in social justice and place-based praxis can be difficult to implement during an 8-week block and in an online program, especially when students encounter the course during their first semester. To accommodate project timelines, students meet with the instructor and develop project proposals during the first 2 weeks of the course. Students with reciprocal relationships are encouraged to collaborate with their community on a project, while students with minimal to no relationships are counseled to use the assignment to examine their positionality and as an opportunity to build relationships. Every other week students reflect on their projects in the blog post assignment and with their small groups.

The *Food Justice* course was not only designed to introduce students to food justice movements but the course intentionally centered pedagogical frameworks cognizant of intersectional approaches to food justice and food justice education. The next section describes our pedagogical approaches and offers tangible ways these frameworks can be implemented in a graduate level course.

Pedagogical Frameworks

Pedagogical frameworks focused on a culturally sustaining pedagogy were central to the course design, learning outcomes, and content development. An anti-racist, anti-colonial culturally sustaining approach leads students to unpack their positionalities in relation to (in)justices within food systems and ensures multiple voices and perspectives are heard and represented in the syllabus (Paris and Alim, 2017; Alim et al., 2020). Informed by Tuck and Yang (2012), we use the word anti-colonial to shift the onus as settlers attempting to dismantle colonial structures in education (Tuck et al., 2014). In doing so, these pedagogical approaches seek to address the Eurocentric epistemological dominance and colonial structures of the academy including the erasure of Queer and BIPOC voices in sustainable food system projects and scholarship (Ramírez, 2014; Leslie, 2017, 2019).

Food systems educators can critically examine whose voices are prioritized in academia and consequently in course syllabi (Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Some things for educators to consider in syllabi development: Whose voices are being included and excluded in the scholarly conversation? Are educators including scholars with marginalized identities and food justice activists? What perspectives are needed to deepen the conversation? This is particularly important in food justice education, where folks who are marginalized within the food system "beyond institutionalized racism and white privilege" including gender, ethnic, class, ability, and sexual differences (Sbicca 2012, p. 36) are leading activism work.

These pedagogical approaches invite students to share their thoughts and think critically about the material and topics by including multiple perspectives, learning styles, and ways of knowing. To reconfigure the politics of knowledge and center food justice activism, there was a concerted effort to largely include BIPOC authorship and decolonizing or Queer standpoints, and students were offered scholarly and non-scholarly sources including multiple resource formats (e.g., peer review journals, podcasts, art). In the course design, students were encouraged to view activists from marginalized identities as experts whose knowledge ought to be valued in the academy.

Posthumanism challenges human-centered narratives and colonial curricula (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013, 2019; Bayley, 2018). The food justice movement and literature largely focus on human access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods; and human cost associated with inhumane working conditions in the food production industry (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012; Bauer and Stewart, 2013). This is appropriate, considering only 13.5% of all food workers surveyed reported earning a livable wage (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012). Despite the US's reliance on immigrant workers, H-2A program exploits and abuses non-citizens working within US food systems (Bauer and Stewart, 2013). Yet, liberation movements are increasingly called to understand the ways in which movements are not isolated from one another and that white supremacy and colonization underpin all forms of oppression. Ko argued Black liberation is inexplicably tied to animal rights, in that "our understanding of the world, our understanding of social categories, our understanding of ourselves have been birthed from a toxic, oppressive, colonized cultural womb" (Ko 2019, p. 17) and justice movements are underscored by white supremacy. Offering these counter-hegemonic narratives to dominant sustainable food system discourse allowed students to examine potentially harmful siloed thinking.

A post-humanist framework provides students with the opportunity to critically think about the anthropocentricity of justice work and the whiteness of alternative food movements (Breese, 2011). Specifically, incorporating literature on the more-than-human cost to contemporary food production (Stanescu, 2013) introduces students to the role more-than-humans play in traditional foodways such as traditional hunting and gathering (Kimmerer, 2013; Coté, 2016; Kagawa-Viviani et al., 2018). One of the four course sections (see section Course Design, above) centers Indigenous food sovereignty and decolonizing diets (Montgomery and Vaughan, 2018; Mihesuah, 2020). Students explored the ways Indigenous communities restore cultural knowledge and rights to determine their food systems. To consider the more-than-human interconnectedness in contemporary food systems is inherently tied to the decolonial project (see Salmón, 2000; TallBear, 2017), Indigenous food sovereignty, and perceptions of place as it relates to food and experiential learning projects.

Place-Based Experiential Learning Projects

The place-based experiential learning assignment asked students to develop and implement a project within students' communities (Harfitt and Chow, 2020). These projects are opportunities to anchor theory and content to real-world applications while integrating student-centered, interest driven learning, with critical place-based engagement (Gruenewald, 2003). Experiential learning reinforces critical thinking and provides students with depth and connection that otherwise might be challenging in online courses.

In this section, we reflect on student projects implemented both prior to and during the COVID19 pandemic. Teaching during a global pandemic—albeit in an online graduate program—shifted how we defined community engagement (Ramsey et al., 2020). We also recognize that these projects took place in communities all over the globe and will look different in different contexts. As such, instructors can support students by being emergent and reflexive. For example, in 2020, students developed projects that were mindful of social distancing restrictions to explore online communities or develop curriculum for communities of inquiry (**Supplementary Table 2**).

While experiential learning can be a powerful learning strategy in any course, it can be especially relevant for food justice-focused courses. These projects allow students to connect justice and activism with course content; however, often these projects might focus on communities marginalized by social and environmental injustices. Student-developed and implemented projects not only encourage students to engage and learn about their communities but also offer students opportunities to work toward being culturally responsive. It is through the project process that students begin to develop their academic identity, social justice eye, and community relationships.

Educators must guide students using social justice and culturally responsive teaching, to encourage students to work *with* communities (Freire, 2000; Rose and Paisley, 2012; Gallant et al., 2017). In one-on-one discussion with the instructor, students were guided in project development, and reminded to be conscientious of white savior narratives and to listen with humility. Rather than approaching a community or organization with their project ideas but as a collaboration—educators might ask students to think about ways scholars/learners can center folks that are marginalized by asking how these projects could benefit them. What is particularly important for educators and students is to be thoughtful that we may be causing unintentional harm to already oppressed groups and to be mindful of extractive practices (e.g., learning outcomes; Stoecker, 2016). Students practiced critical reflexivity (Evans et al., 2013) in relation to course content through bi-weekly blog assignments. As a result, some students focused on building relationships with communities as a first step for future collaboration.

Supplementary Table 2 lists select project titles implemented by students prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As summarized in their titles, project topics were wide in scope and entirely place-based and learner-interest driven. Often these projects were developed within the students' professional arena, such as the workshop developed for the *Agricultural Training Exchange Supporting Alaska Native Communitie*s and the undergraduate food justice curriculum written for *Food Justice: Education, Sustainability & Youth Engagement in Valencia College*. Projects conducted before the pandemic generally had more face-to-face community involvement while projects during the pandemic required more creativity and flexibility. Students utilized a variety of media to disseminate their projects including but not limited to creative videos, social media infographics, formal presentations, podcasts, websites, and scholarly papers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

More SFS programs are being developed in higher education to address complex problems within our food systems, yet many of these programs do not directly espouse equity in their curricula (Valley et al., 2020). Explicitly centering justice and equity dismantles the inherent whiteness of the SFS movement (Alkon and Guthman, 2017) and "power asymmetries present in organizations and within communities" (Ramírez 2014, p. 748). From our perspective, this extends into educative practices in the academy as it relates to SFS. By employing an anti-racist, anti-colonial culturally sustaining framework, equity grounds both course content and design whereby power and privilege are thoughtfully considered and enacted. While we cannot in this paper present an in-depth analysis unpacking our pedagogical and theoretical approaches, we hope that offering an overview stirs SFS educators to approach their program structure and classes from a culturally sustaining lens because dismantling oppression starts in our classrooms (Gannon, 2020).

In the process of re-envisioning the MSFS program at PC, the program team intentionally integrated justice and community-oriented praxis into the curriculum at multiple levels. Through our experiences and recommendations, we hope that other food systems educators might find tangible ways to center justice, and in turn help shape critical and accountable SFS professionals who will work toward dismantling systemic oppression. Finally, we recognize justice work is ongoing and requires active listening, humility, and self-reflection.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/**Supplementary Material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Prescott College IRB. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

KG: co-conceptualization, writing concentration and course level—original draft preparation and revisions. RC: co-conceptualization, IRB exemption application, and writing program level—original draft preparation and revisions. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

FUNDING

The Endeavor Foundation provided grant funds to support the Prescott College-Green Mountain College preferred teach-out partnership.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the students and faculty in both the Prescott College and Green Mountain College versions of the Master of Science in Sustainable Food Systems. Finally, the authors would like to thank the reviewers for their insightful comments.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2021.751264/full#supplementary-material

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