

Project explores plant power



Volunteers with Feeding Laramie Valley plant a garden for public distribution at First United Methodist Church. Courtesy photo

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Editor's note: This is the second in an occasional series by the Wyoming Tribune Eagle and Laramie Boomerang highlighting the work being done by professors at the University of Wyoming.

For University of Wyoming assistant professor Christine Porter, concepts such as dignity, community, democracy and sustainability are expressed in a garden that feeds the people who tend it.

As communities grapple with familiar problems — crime, unemployment, hunger, obesity, pollution — they're looking at ways to develop sustainable, local food systems. As a result, they're creating jobs, feeding their most vulnerable members and enriching their communities.

Not bad for a row of tomatoes.

Porter, who works in the College of Health Sciences Division of Kinesiology and Health, wants to make sure universities are a part of the community food system movement that's growing around the

country.

She's leading a \$5-million, five-year project to research and support five community groups, including two in Wyoming. Her research group includes a team of staff and students at UW and a team at Cornell University, where Porter earned a Ph.D. in community nutrition.

"Food Dignity: Action Research on Engaging Food Insecure Communities and Universities in Building Sustainable Community Food Systems," is funded by a food research grant program through the United States Department of Agriculture and is the largest USDA grant UW has received.

"There is certainly a food movement — locally, nationally, globally — that's tackling social issues through food system approaches. But there's been almost no research done with that, compared to the scale and scope of what they're doing," Porter said.

The movement has created hundreds of organizations working on a local scale.

"They're generating tons of knowledge, but it's not reaching universities or government, so it's not informing university research agendas, university action or government action. Part of the goal is to have all the knowledge-generating inform policy and research," she said.

A sustainable food system, Porter explained, is one that has few external inputs. That means minimizing everything from commercial fertilizer to government subsidies to trade barriers. Small- and medium-sized farms are the best option because they create jobs, grow diverse crops and are invested in their communities. However, such farms have a hard time succeeding economically.

"The way that we subsidize agriculture federally means that it's almost impossible for the most sustainable kind of farm to survive economically," she said.

Porter became involved in food system research while completing a dissertation on childhood obesity prevention. Many of the people she interviewed said they weren't worried about obesity; they worried about putting food on the table.

"I had a personal epiphany that hunger and obesity share a lot of the same causes, a lot of food system causes," she said. "The fear of not having enough food tomorrow makes people eat more today."

The five community food groups will create steering committees to disperse mini-grants to individual citizens with project ideas. The grant application process will be non-traditional — oral applications will be accepted, for example — so those unfamiliar with the grant application process won't be discouraged from applying.

"People who (have ideas) are people who are food insecure," Porter said. "They're not historically the leaders in their communities; they don't have funding or grants. They haven't been invited to come together to the table."

The research partners will track the successes and failures over the next five years. But in addition to learning how to build successful local food projects, the researchers will also learn how to support such projects.

"Another goal, aside from learning from and with the people who are doing this work on the ground, is also to try out and struggle through how universities ... can be a supporter and an ally in this community food system work in a way that's effective and appropriate," Porter said.

A potential new minor in sustainable food systems at UW is the final piece of the project.

The Laramie partner of the project is an organization called Feeding Laramie Valley, an arm of a nonprofit called Action Resources International.

"There are all these amazing food projects happening all over the county, a little bit in isolation. I see

Feeding Laramie Valley as an opportunity to coordinate and to start forming a coalition around all these groups, and it's already starting to happen really fast," Gayle Woodsum, who founded Feeding Laramie Valley, said.

One project that's expanding this year is called Sharing the Bounty, which accepts donations from gardeners and donates the food to nonprofits such as the Laramie Soup Kitchen and Head Start. This year, Sharing the Bounty will grow its own produce on a section of the new community garden at First United Methodist Church.

Woodsum said she'd love to see more private land around the city devoted to gardens that grow food for public distribution. Long-term, she'd also like to see community gardens, such as the one at LaBonte Park, in every park in the city, customized to the needs of the surrounding residents.

"My five-year goal, with this grant as the leverage, is to see Albany County end up with a coalition that is a sustainable funding source for community gardens all over the county," Woodsum said.

Revenue from produce sales as well as grants from local government entities, businesses and nonprofits could be part of the funding stream, she said.

She's hoping to provide training to those who receive mini-grants so they can apply for further grant money.

"It's about sustainability around everything: around food, around organizing, around having power in the community for your voice not only to be heard, but for action to be taken that you have prompted," Woodsum said.

Peggy McCrackin, a UW graduate student working on the project, said she's excited about seeing a more unified local effort.

"A lot of people are connecting up who were working in isolation. We have this spider web of associations," she said.

The second Wyoming partner is an organization called Blue Mountain Associates, a private nonprofit organization that works on the Wind River Reservation.

Virginia Sutter and her son, Jim, members of the Northern Arapaho tribe, returned to the reservation several years ago to start the organization. They see the Food Dignity project as a way to encourage reservation communities to start producing agricultural products on their land.

Their steering committee is in place, and one of their first projects will be to take over a farmer's market that was started last year by the UW Cooperative Extension Service. Many of the residential sites on the reservation are big enough to support gardens, and those with extra produce can sell it at the market.

"I think the farmer's market is going to be one of the big interests on the reservation this year," Virginia Sutter said.

They've also planted several dozen chokecherry bushes to replace those that died during the recent drought.

"Those are a fruit that the natives use here as a ceremonial-type traditional food, and it's been very difficult the last few years to get chokecherries," she said.

Jim Sutter said he's going to focus on documenting the work in the community as well as talking with elders who remember how their parents and grandparents obtained food when they were moved to the reservation.

"Part of my research is to contact these elders and ... see if we can manage to somehow make that a part of our culture again," he said.

Other community groups are Dig Deep Farms and Produce in Alameda County, Calif., Whole Community Project of Cornell Cooperative Extension in Tompkins County, N.Y., and East New York Farms! in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dig Deep Farms was started by the Alameda County Deputy Sheriff's Activities League to create jobs and prevent crime. Only a year old, it has about a hundred customers and employs 13 people. Porter said several employees are proud of having transformed a vacant lot into a garden.

"It's not just the food and the jobs, but the experience of having the power to change their community for the better, in a way that they want it to be for their children," she said.

Five years from now, Porter hopes to see each location with enough momentum and infrastructure to maintain and expand the work they're doing. She hopes the researchers will be able to articulate their learning in way that sets the agenda for future funding and research. Ultimately, she hopes to promote human dignity.

"We're using food system development as a path to building dignity and democracy," she said. "In my vision, you wouldn't even need government programs. Our communities would provide for our communities."

For more information, go to www.fooddignity.org.