

# Food Dignity

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## Introduction to Food Dignity

Our people suffer. Five communities, all different, have suffering in common. We lack what others take for granted: access to healthy affordable food; economic vitality; employment; good health. Our people struggle to feed their families and raise their children in the midst of poverty, violence and the oppression of massive stress that most other people could not endure. Yet our people endure—our greatest asset.

FoodDignity

Linked by a project called Food Dignity, funded by the USDA, we are tracing how we create sustainable community food systems that build food security and lead to self-sufficiency. We are working with academic allies who believe we can work together in a respectful, equitable collaboration to radically change and to learn from and with our communities.

## 5 + 1 case studies

Food Dignity (FD) involves 34 key people in 5 community organizations, 3 universities and 1 “action-think tank,” listed below. Our core research is case stories of each community organization plus one study of the collaboration itself. We have \$5 million for our 5 years, which started in April 2011. Each community has \$300,000 in community organizing and research support in that time. Partners in Food Dignity are:



- **East New York Farms!** (ENYF!)  
United Community Centers, Brooklyn, NY
- **Whole Community Project** (WCP)  
Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County, NY
- **Feeding Laramie Valley** (FLV)  
Laramie, Albany County, WY
- **Blue Mountain Associates** (BMA)  
Wind River Reservation, WY
- **Dig Deep Farms & Produce** (DDF&P)  
Cherryland/Ashland, Alameda County, CA
- **University of Wyoming** (UW), Laramie
- **Cornell University** (CU), Ithaca, NY
- **Ithaca College** (IC), Ithaca, NY
- **Center for Popular Research, Education & Policy** (C-PREP)  
Oakland, CA



## Trying to move...

	From service action...	...to dignity action
<i>Goal:</i>	To fix problems, or people	To build democratic power, agency, equity and dignity
<i>People as:</i>	Consumers, targets, audiences, clients	Citizens, actors, local experts
<i>Motive:</i>	Altruism	Self-interest
<i>Method:</i>	Technocracy: programs, interventions	Democracy and public work: leadership, program and policy development; community organizing
<i>Site:</i>	Departments	Public spaces

Adapted from civic learning models, Boyte 2004

	From a dominant research narrative...	...to a collaborative one.
<i>Expertise:</i>	Knowledge. Professionals, academics, institutions. Via study.	Wisdom. Also citizens, communities, associations. Via experience.
<i>Ethics:</i>	Last: to apply knowledge gained about truth	First: to decide what we want to know or understand, and how
<i>Research:</i>	- Written - Generalizable - Scientific method	- Also oral, visual - Contextual, maybe transferrable - Also stories

## Built-in inequity

This work is life and death in our communities. Life expectancy on the Wind River Reservation is 49 years. People in Alameda County’s richest communities live 10 years longer than people living in the Ashland and Cherryland communities. Dig Deep team members have been shot. Poverty, racism, capital flight and other forms of disinvestment hurt all of our communities. We cannot walk away. We commit to our communities, our people.

Our communities have enormous knowledge, skills and wisdom. Yet often academics act like they have all the knowledge and skills. Then they impose their knowledge for “solving” our problems—an exercise of power and privilege that hurts, insults and extracts. Academics use their language—words, ways and locations of speaking—as weapons to impose barriers between themselves and us, as if we could not possibly understand.

Rarely, we do meet individual academics who aim to work as allies, with respect and humility, to work for us. We also recognize that working on the right side of the tables above can pose career risks. However, even in our best experiences, our research collaborations are structurally inequitable. We also spend enormous time and energy trying to educate these well-intended allies and to protect our communities from yet more domination and extraction.

Individual allies are important, but far from enough. Structural shifts—especially those outlined in the first Community Partner Forum—are required. Otherwise even the best of our collaboration experiences will continue with structural issues such as those below.

Examples in Food Dignity: “Am I supposed to do this work out of the trunk of my car?” – an FD community partner

- For UW and CU, Porter budgeted for USDA’s max indirect costs of 22%; and only 10% for community partners. USDA disallowed even that.
- Academic partner salary fringe is 40-56%; community partner fringe is built into (lower) salary lines.
- Project poses community partners as the leaders and experts, but UW is the grantee and Porter the director.
- All the academic partners are white.

## What we do

- Push academics to work from heart and soul, not just head:
  - “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right.” - in *Research is Ceremony* Wilson 2008: 83
  - “Dignity is something that does not reside in one’s head. Dignity walks in the heart.” - Zapatista leadership declaration, 1995
- Spend time together.
- Coauthor, copresent, codesign.
- Share \$ resources, even if not equitable.
- Support bridge people. Not to colonize. Not on people’s backs. To meet: Dignity is a bridge. It needs two sides that, being different, distinct and distant become one in the bridge without ceasing to be different and distinct, but ceasing already to be distant. - Zapatista March of Dignity, Puebla, Feb 2nd, 2001
- Leverage project support to participate in CCPH Community Partner Forum work.

