Designing an Interdisciplinary Graduate Course: A Student Centered Approach to Curriculum Development

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Rationale
- Increasing interest in interdisciplinary collaboration from faculty, students & administration
- Both universities had undergraduate curricula about food systems, with emerging interest from graduate students and few opportunities at the graduate level
- Interest in more formalized training for future food systems practitioners

Goals
- Learn about perceived knowledge of the course’s subject matter
- Understand grad student learning preferences & expectations
- Identify themes of interest for grad students & what students think will be most valuable for educational & career goals
- Use findings to create a dynamic interdisciplinary graduate course in food systems at two land-grant universities.

About the Appalachian Foodshed Project
The Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) is using a foodshed concept to address issues of community food security in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia. AFP aims to facilitate a network of organizations and individuals working to address issues of community development, economic viability, health, nutrition, food access, social justice, and agriculture. By working collaboratively, AFP hopes to build on the human and natural resources in the region to cultivate resilient food systems and vibrant, healthy communities.

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Focus Group Participants
- Masters and doctoral students
  - 11 at Virginia Tech
  - 16 at North Carolina State University
- 17 female, 10 male
- 7 departments represented in the colleges of Agriculture and Life Science and Urban Affairs & Planning

Methods
- Taught graduate course on food systems at VT in 2013 using action research model
- Conducted literature review of food systems-related graduate courses

Phase I: Aggregating Background Information
- Taught graduate course on food systems at VT in 2013 using action research model
- Conducted literature review of food systems-related graduate courses

Phase II: Focus Group Design/Implementation
- IRB approval granted spring 2014
- Script created jointly by faculty & students
- Email recruitment targeted graduate students at VT & NCSU
- Focus groups held in April 2014

Analysis
- Recordings from focus groups were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti
- Analysis followed descriptive qualitative design
- Transcriptions were interpreted via coding
- Codes were words or short phrases that essentialized the concepts conveyed in excerpts of dialogue
- One researcher reviewed and recoded all transcripts to ensure intercoder agreement
- Themes were derived from groups of codes that shared similar characteristics

Emergent Themes

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| Opportunity to Gain Diverse Perspectives | “Any chance where we get all the people from the different disciplines to talk to each other and share perspectives is very, very valuable.”
“There’s so many angles, and to me community food systems and community food security is interdisciplinary, so you would need to give the student a background in the wideness of the topic—which is a course in and of itself.” |
| Involvement of a Community Partner | “I know that the community garden association has classes from the local universities, that they send volunteers. . . it’s a benefit to the community garden association but at the same time, [the students are] learning a little bit about what it takes to run this organization.”
“I just wonder about the sustainability of [community partner] projects like that, or how we could make it integrated with what people are already doing.”
“If you were, just as an example, to start a community garden, also build relationships in the community where you were starting it, and build interest so that when you do leave you have people to take your place.”
“I think grad classes need to have assessments appropriate for grad level classes and the community experience is great for undergrads, but not how grad students want to be spending their time.” |
| Real World Applications | “[The course] would give me a much more realistic perspective on what this work looks like because I’m so sure that I want to do this but I haven’t done it. I really would like that experience before I get out into the job field. I think it would also make me much more employable.”
“I really like the idea of the service component; actually taking what you learn from the class and putting it into practice . . . something that you can actually go out into the community and physically do and make a positive impact on the community.” |

(Quotations represent students from both NCSU & VT, N=27)

Course Development
- Developed shared syllabi at VT & NCSU
- Inaugural course offered at Virginia Tech Spring 2015, 12 graduate students enrolled
- Find the syllabus here:

VT’s Course Description
This graduate-level course is a critical and interdisciplinary exploration of current issues related to food security and the emerging discourse of food systems. This course will focus on the concepts of food security, community food security, food sovereignty, resiliency, and agricultural sustainability from local, regional, and international perspectives. Topics include but are not limited to: conceptual and programmatic approaches to addressing food security, food security policy, food system assessment, and the role of university-community partnerships to enhance food security and resiliency in communities. The Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) will provide course participants with a theoretical and practical backdrop for class discussion and coursework, including engaging with AFP scholar/practitioners and visiting the region. This course also involves e-collaborating with a partnering graduate course in food security being offered at North Carolina State University this spring. Participatory learning and asset-based community development are also relevant course themes.