Partnerships in pandemics: tracing power relations in community engaged scholarship in food systems during COVID-19

Laura Jessee Livingston

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted food and educational systems, laying bare institutional inadequacies and structural inequalities. While there has been ample discussion on impacts to the food system and higher education institutions separately, there has been little written through the perspective of people who navigate both. Farmers, researchers, graduate students, chefs, and many stakeholders contribute to community engaged scholarship (CES) in food systems, facing novel obstacles and opportunities with the spread of the pandemic. In this article, I utilize institutional ethnography to center the experiences of the people who participated in or led CES projects during the spring and summer of 2020. The goal of this study is to understand how discourse and texts in the academic institution constrain the reality of CES partnerships and identify areas for change. My findings show that tenure and promotion guidelines and funding opportunities constrain CES partnerships, reducing opportunities for relationship building and discouraging innovative models of participation. Quantified evaluation metrics on grant rubrics and tenure and promotion guidelines privilege individual academic researchers growing large programs, writing lucrative grants for the university, and publishing profusely. However, community-led and decentralized projects were able to adapt to community priorities and sustain research projects during the pandemic. COVID-19 created obstacles to community engagement and allowed for creative approaches to community participation. By restructuring academic evaluation and funding processes to support problem-solving models of CES led by community partners, CES projects can support both academic and community priorities in times of disruption and relative stability.

Keywords Community-engaged scholarship · Food systems · COVID-19 pandemic

Abbreviations
CES  Community engaged scholarship
CBR  Community based research
CBL  Community based learning
IE  Institutional ethnography

As people across the globe can attest, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted global, regional, and local systems. The pandemic halted supply chains, leading to mass euthanasia of animals and destruction of crops while many people faced increased food insecurity. University leaders closed college campuses closed, halted research, and rapidly created protocols and safety measures. Individuals who negotiated both higher education and food systems work navigated these impacts while also caring for their individual, family, and community health. It is critical to question and reflect on the institutional forces that shaped how community engaged scholarship (CES) in food systems responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for policy and structural changes to build a more robust academic environment.

COVID-19 impacted academic and community partners in CES projects as the rippling effect of the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout our food and economic systems. As a community-engaged scholar myself, I know from experience that managing the complex relationships inherent in CES is delicate and difficult in times of certainty, let alone in times of systemic shock. Authors have theorized how power is operationalized within CES projects (see, e.g., Israel et al. 1998; Spears Johnson et al. 2016; Wallerstein et al. 2018). Whereas previous research has emphasized studying individual partnerships, my research looks to understand how the structuring of higher education impacts individual projects through the lens of community and academic partners doing
CES in food systems during the spread of COVID-19. With the new and distinct challenges and disruptions posed by COVID-19, I explore how CES partnerships in food systems are navigating power relations including structural societal inequities and power relations within academia.

In this paper, I share excerpts of interview from system scholars and practitioners whose projects span from seed sovereignty to food production to community-based food consumption. I review institutional and project texts regulating CES activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper contributes to the work of critical sociologists who argue that institutions of higher education are not built to reward or sustain CES. By uncovering economic, social, and environmental factors including drivers, interactions, and activities, my research theorizes how the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic interacts with and shapes CES projects within the food system and how institutional structures shape CES project adaptability.

After a review of the literature exploring the history of CES, CES in food systems, and CES during times of disruption, I highlight my methodology and analysis process in which I trace the institutional forces and power relations that shape the everyday experience of community-engaged scholars and community partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community engaged scholarship in food systems: intersection of higher education & food systems

Introduction to community engaged scholarship

Community Engaged Scholarship (CES) refers to mutually beneficial partnerships between community and university partners designed to collaboratively develop and apply knowledge to address public issues (da Cruz 2018). There are many types of participatory research falling under the CES umbrella including Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community Based Research (CBR), Community Based Learning (CBL), and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers 1994). Although these approaches share the goal of knowledge co-creation, they come from various disciplinary traditions. CES approaches have been shaped by diverse intellectual roots including Kurt Lewin, Paulo Freire, and feminist theorists, such as Sandra Harding and Linda Tuhawi Smith.

From the Global North, Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term “action research” (AR) to represent research methodologies in which researchers identify research questions with actionable outputs. Lewin rejected the positivistic belief that the researcher studies an objective world separate from the meanings understood by participants therefore challenging the perceived gap between theory and practice. CES has also been greatly influenced by emancipatory roots in the global South. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1972) developed the political components of AR, establishing Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR diverges from conventional research methodologies by conducting research with rather than on members of marginalized groups. PAR also adapts a commitment to critical consciousness and social justice, taking a community-directed approach with the goal of action and political change (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). Sandra Harding (1986), Colleen Reid (2004), Linda Tuhawi Smith (2012) and other feminist and intersectional theories further challenged biases inherent in traditional scholarship practices within the Western, white, colonial, and patriarchal structure of academia.

Intersectional feminist scholars argue that using decolonial feminist methodologies shifts the dominant patriarchal ways of understanding the world and creates opportunities for greater balance of power and emancipatory knowledge seeking, not just for women, but for all marginalized communities and individuals.

CES projects in food systems vary in design and scope, however they are united in the focus on collaborative development and application of community and scholarly knowledge to address societal issues. CES requires collaboration across differences with partners who recognize there are multiple knowledges and epistemologies (Aikenhead 1997) and work in new ways. Collaboration in the social construction of knowledge also requires joint problem solving, identification and negotiation of divergent and convergent perspectives and persistence in generating shared values, norms, and actions (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rogof 2003).

CES practitioners have catalogued the potential for reproduction of power differentials within the collaborative process (Narayanaswamy 2016; Wallerstein 1999). University-affiliated researchers represent centers of status and power within their formal institutions. Furthermore, researchers may carry power and privilege through visible and invisible identities, and power differentials can result in mistrust. Fundamental differences that exist between academic and community partners range from their agendas for research, access to resources and funding, and ownership of the research project (Stoecker 1999). Although there have been challenges, particularly in navigating the historical and contemporary relationships between people on and off campus, CES has grown across many fields including food systems research.

CES and food systems research

The positivist paradigm dominated early food system research which informed the dominant theory of knowledge and therefore, dominant research practices. The positivist paradigm asserts the existence of one absolute
physical-material reality from which there are no variations, utilizing scientific experimentation as the privileged means for building knowledge (Patton 1980). This epistemological stance privileged modern scientific knowledge over traditional ecological knowledge and lived experience (Chambers 1983), at times enforcing colonial top-down approaches and conceptualizations of knowledge. Utilizing this paradigm, scholars presumed agricultural knowledge flowed in one direction, from the academic to the farmer, which served to reproduce existing power relations (Foucault 1979). Positivist researchers aim to reduce bias and subjectivity in research, often placing themselves outside of the phenomena of study. Yet, this singular epistemic approach to identifying and addressing problems in the food systems limits the horizons of possibilities (Santos 2014) and perpetuates epistemic injustice (Boogaard 2021) in food systems research. Epistemic injustice, or injustice related to knowledge, leads to exclusion and silencing, as well as undervaluing and distrust of differing types of knowledges within the research process.

Seeing the limitations of positivist frameworks and epistemic hegemony, food systems researchers broadened their epistemologies, including constructivist, interpretivist, and critical approaches. Researchers who use non-positivist approaches view reality as socially constructed, with multiple relative views on truth and reality. Epistemologically, these scholars break down the false dichotomy between the researcher and the phenomena (Chambers 1983) and the false understanding of a single lived reality. Contrasting with the objectivity expected by positivists, constructivists, interpretivists, and critical scholars understand the inquiry process to be interactive, subjective, and potentially transformative when addressing root causes of inequities.

As epistemological choices were clarified, the acceptable methodologies of food systems research have also broadened. Originally, experiments were the primary method of inquiry, with the goal of eliminating confounding variables and measuring probability. However, the complexity and uncertainty of real-world problems in food systems requires the knowledge and perspectives of stakeholders outside of academia (Pretty 1995). In the late 1970s, farming systems research and extension emerged, arguing that farmers’ complex needs should drive food systems research and technologies (Gartner 1990). In the 1980s, food systems researchers increasingly involved stakeholders in research design and data collection (Bruges and Smith 2007), focusing on the farmer as an innovator and experimenter (Farrington 1988). As our food system is contextually complex, many societal issues require locally specific and collaborative research methods (Bruges and Smith 2007). When researchers utilize CES as a bottom-up approach, participants can integrate contextually based local knowledge and priorities into the research process (Fraser et al. 2005; Montoya and Kent 2011), pushing back against a kind of scholarship approach that produces colonialist and patriarchal ideologies.

There are many ways of doing CES within food and agricultural scholarship; outreach involving community is central to the traditional Land Grant university philosophy. In much extension work and academic outreach, knowledge is assumed to extend from the university onto farms and food systems, reproducing the dominant knowledge paradigm. To create alternative knowledge creation processes, community and academic partners must challenge existing power dynamics and increase community-based control over resources and decision making. Examples of this community-based control include a peoples’ food justice geography (Block and Reynolds 2021) which involved co-constructing knowledge that facilitates action and dialectical knowledge creation and food justice scholar-activism (Reynolds et al. 2018) which foregrounds the goals of engaging in social change or problem-solving through scholarly activities. Food justice scholarship spans the social sciences, with anthropologists (Mares and Pena 2010; Reese 2019), geographers (Kinpaisby-Hill 2011; McCutcheon 2015; Reynolds 2015), and sociologists (Kato 2013; Smith 2019; White 2018) revealing and addressing social and political inequities with communities.

Power in food systems scholarship

Although CES projects aim to address power inequities in research, CES projects are embedded within the broader sociopolitical context of power relations. The CES literature highlights the importance of illuminating and calling into question power inequities and knowledge production throughout the research process (see, e.g., Berkes 2009; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Minkler 2012; Narayanaswamy 2016) that reinforce the “neoliberal university” (Pickerill et al. 2010). Critical scholars have questioned by whom, about whom, and for whom knowledge is defined (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Gaventa and Cornwall 2006) and how collaborators share power (Chávez et al. 2012). Community-based activists have stated that academic spaces reify hegemonic notions of “valid knowledge” and dominant discourses (Hammelman et al. 2020). Although CES literature discusses how theoretically and practically CES projects democratize knowledge production (Gaventa and Cornwall 2006), authors also have noted the tendency for power (funding and decision-making) to remain with academic partners (Janes 2016; Stoecker 2009).

Power, and how people cultivate power, are central themes in CES (Gaventa and Cornwall 2006), given its roots in efforts to transform social systems through empowerment of oppressed people (Freire 1970). External and internal power relations are the underlying context for academic and community collaboration (Wallerstein and Duran...
Additional forms of structural power differences exist within CES relations, which include relationships between academics and community partners and the hierarchies that exist within university research teams (Lingard et al. 2007). For example, a Land Grant university researcher is likely to have more access to large funding and labor sources than a farmer or independent plant breeder. Community knowledge about agriculture and the food system have not historically been given the esteem of academic knowledge presented in journals. CES in food systems, even when working towards goals of social change, can reproduce power inequities and oppressive systems (Reynolds and Cohen 2016). Managing power relations is essential to promoting trust and respect in CES projects (Marshall and Rotimi 2001), yet academic and funding evaluation metrics do not always recognize this relational work.

Several authors have taken a Foucauldian approach, stating that power is acquired through internal and external social relations (Hilsen 2006) and that this power is malleable in CES partnerships. However, academic institutions participate and are embedded in translocal forces, which Smith (1987) refers to as ruling relations. These ruling relations lead to the shaping of activities across place and time. Translocal here refers to the idea that power relations connect and influence different places and people, for example policies at a university will impact a graduate student in geography, a tenured professor in agronomy, and a farmer researcher. All academic activities take place in these ruling relations. This matters in CES because university partners often enter research relationships with more traditional power, which if unaddressed can reify oppressive social relations of knowledge during times of stability and times of systemic shock.

Community and academic partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic

Systemic shocks are far reaching and extreme events that cause disruptions in local, regional, and global systems. Examples of systemic shocks include weather-related shocks (Rosenzweig et al. 2002) and epidemics (McCloskey et al. 2014). Food systems and food systems research are vulnerable to systemic shocks, as even localized disruptions to food systems can have widespread impacts (The Global Food Security Programme 2015). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we were living in a period of environmental and climate change with considerable instability and uncertainty. Future shocks could likely impact CES projects in the future by destabilizing various aspects of our regional and global systems. Taleb (2007) posited the term “Black Swans” to describe unpredictable events with extreme repercussions and emphasized the importance of considering outliers in future planning. Although COVID-19 was more predictable than the “Black Swan” events that Taleb discusses, he argues that these rare and extreme events have been increasing since the Industrial Age with enhanced globalization and connectivity of translocal networks. Considering how random extremes, such as global shocks, impact CES power relations is important, as CES partnerships will have to consider a greater range of shock events when planning future research projects.

During the spread of COVID-19, university campuses closed, restricting research travel and activities, which impacted grant funding and timelines. People working within food systems at Land Grant universities experienced shocks to both the food and education systems. Land Grant universities have a three-part mission of teaching, research, and extension, with agricultural ties reaching back to the first Morrill Act in 1862 (Committee for the Future of Colleges of Agriculture in the Land Grant System 1996). Studying the impacts of COVID-19 in a land grant university provides a unique opportunity to understand how CES partnerships operated within a university institution that has long-term ties to community-engagement in agriculture. During this time of disruption, community and academic research partners at Land Grant institutions negotiated and made decisions on how to pivot, pause and proceed with CES projects.

Outside of academia, farmers dealt with changing markets and safety protocols while chefs and restaurant owners faced lowered restaurant capacities, making it difficult to pay employees. Food workers from across the spectrum, including producers, processors, and servers were at the forefront of the pandemic, working as frontline workers while consistently being underpaid and undervalued. The COVID-19 pandemic caused economic, human, and material losses (Bande 2020; International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems 2020; Poppick 2020), with the full consequences still unseen. COVID-19 is unique in the global scale of its impact yet understanding how CES relationships respond to shocks during COVID-19 will shed light on how institutional structures shape CES partnerships during global systemic shocks and during times of relative stability. The findings from this study provide practitioners with multiple examples of how CES projects navigated COVID-19 and where people working within academic can make institutional changes to support CES.

Embedded case study institutional ethnography: a critical sociological approach

Following in the footsteps of Laura Nader (1972), I believe it is important to “study up” to better understand how institutions function and structure everyday life. Therefore, this study documents how the COVID-19 pandemic affected...
CES projects, especially projects that sit at the intersection of academia and food systems. I choose Institutional Ethnography (IE) as the primary method for this inquiry, as IE offers opportunities for finely grained and situated understandings of ruling relations and institutional processes.

Dorothy Smith, a Canadian sociologist, first introduced IE as a “feminist research strategy” in her 1987 book, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Smith (2005) positioned IE as an alternative to the objectified and abstract knowledge privileged in dominant sociological discourse. IE focuses on people’s everyday lives and how their work and work processes are organized and coordinated by institutional forces (Campbell and Gregor 2004; Smith 1987, 2005; Taber 2010). Smith differentiates IE from “mainstream sociology” by highlighting that IE does not privilege social theory over people. By centering problematics, IE researchers locate the starting point of inquiry as anchored in people’s actual experience (Smith 2005). These problematics are disruptors that do not make sense within the domain of the everyday world but are implicit in the social organization. Most researchers require an ontological and epistemological paradigm shift to view knowledge as an extension of ordinary ways in which we know and act in our everyday world.

This paper details how power is built into CES and research in higher education and how the impacts of COVID-19 reinforced and/or resisted these power structures through six distinct subcases, integrating IE into an embedded case study approach. By understanding people’s everyday experiences and work, I trace where CES partners experience changes in power before and during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. My research goal was to reveal how power is built into the way academic institutions are organized to accomplish particular goals. Additionally, I am to highlight how institutional goals at times contrast the material conditions that inform how people can work (Marx and Engels 1932) and the individuals who do the organizational work (Foucault 1979) within the academic institution. Universities, like other institutions, appear in specific local settings and are specialized in particular types of work, for example education, extension, and research.

To challenge this social organization of knowledge, IE asks researchers to understand translocal ruling relations through the standpoint of individuals experiencing those power relations. Standpoint is not just an identity but a mechanism to investigate aspects of power relations that are normally obscured because researchers are viewing them from a dominating class perspective. I am taking the standpoint of partners in food systems projects who navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodological choice aims not to objectify or quantify concepts and instead gives priority to context and different voices (Smith 2005). IE researchers empirically examine ruling relations implicated in the “problematic” or tensions and contradictions that establish the research focus.

My research explores the hierarchy and the translocal ruling relations of CES in food systems within one Land Grant university and exposes the articulation of the activities of everyday life within that academic institution. In this paper, I establish subcases as standpoints and connect the local institutional processes to the translocal ruling relations.

**Data generation**

I began recruiting informants and gathering data in January of 2021 and continued through June of 2021. Informants for this inquiry include university researchers and community partners who were members of CES partnerships engaging food systems activities with at least one member of the partnership attending or employed by a large, public Land Grant university during March of 2020. I selected informants from research partnerships where both academic and community partners consented to participate creating an initial networking sample (Werner and Schoepfle 1987). First, I recruited informants through email, using listservs and through word of mouth. My goal was not to create a representative sample; the purpose of IE is not to generalize but rather to investigate the social organization that shapes the informants’ experiences (Smith 1987). Second, I utilized dimensional selection (Arnold 1970) to provide differing views to map the relations intersecting in the everyday life of the informants. Using an emergent analytical framework (Glazer and Strauss 1967), I distinguished the dimensions on which informants vary (job title, length of partnership, discipline, project scale, and CES typology). During this process I was not aiming for categorical descriptions, but instead sought to understand how people operating in different circumstances are drawn into a common set of organizational practices (DeVault and McCoy 2012).

The data for this article consists of two types of material: interview transcripts and organizational or institutional texts. For the first stage of IE research, I focused on the production of entry level data (Campbell and Gregor 2004) through interviewing participants. Over the course of four months, I conducted thirty interviews over virtual conferencing software with sixteen informants. During the interview process I used open-ended questions to learn about each informant’s individual position within the institution, exploring organizational, societal, and economic aspects that shape everyday experience of individuals in CES projects. I tailored the sixty to ninety-minute interview to each individual’s position with the goal of explicating how people maintain CES projects and relationships and the daily activities that individuals undertake both before and after the spread of COVID-19. I also asked informants about written documents and policies that shape or organize the CES process. Informants provided
calls for grant applications, institutional review board materials, institutional forms required for research during the COVID-19 pandemic, Material Transfer Agreements (MTA), tenure and promotion guidelines, and other institutionally mandated forms and policies. In IE, texts organize the social world and can become vehicles for solidifying power differentials (McGibbon et al. 2010; Smith 1987). During the second phase of IE research, I utilized textual analysis, to add context to informants’ interviews. By tracing power relations between the texts and interviews, I mapped how institutional forces confined CES projects before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data analysis

The goal of IE analysis is to “make visible the ways the institutional order creates the conditions of individual experience” (McCoy 2006, p. 109). During the analysis process, I identified and described problematics arising in the everyday life of my informants and the moments where institutional organization became visible within peoples’ stories. I used concept and power mapping to bring a visual coherence to findings and to strategically analyze power structures (Rankin 2017). I also indexed data by organizing linked practices to support an analytic view into the institution (Smith 2005). Instead of categorizing or counting events, themes, and languages, I viewed the meaning of the data as embedded in the local setting. I used these two techniques to cross-reference subcases while continuing to highlight unique experiences from each subcase. The goal of this type of analysis is to link lived experiences with translocal ruling relations within and across the multiple subcases. In the findings below, I trace and explicate the ruling relations present in everyday life before and during the spread of COVID-19.

Findings

Community engaged projects relied on relationships during COVID-19

CES relationships and relational approaches, which one faculty member coined “good neighboring,” are key to sustaining and growing CES projects. Although this description does not address the inequities between the university and community partners, it speaks to the importance of relationship building as a foundation for CES. Community and academic partners highlighted the importance of relational approaches, sharing stories about collaborators engaging before the pandemic in spontaneous conversations after a meeting over a cider, academics actively listening at farmer-to-farmer gatherings, and researchers assisting a farmer in mending a fence before starting an interview. This mirrors findings from Croog et al. (2018) which highlighted the importance of trust-building and networks in relationships as well as the touchstones of food justice scholar activism outlined by Reynolds et al. (2018).

COVID-19 both reduced the ability for people to have time and space for informal relational approaches and at the same time emphasized the importance of having authentic relationships in CES. A community partner noted that “it’s hard to start developing relationships and overcoming barriers virtually.” One graduate student whose work stalled because of COVID-19 reported a lack of relationships as a main reason for not continuing the project: “I had no solid ground to stand on to try to pivot or build a new virtual or COVID-friendly project… I don’t think I have the right relationships or traction.” Even in recording data, relationships are important. One farmer mentioned that relationships are influential to the effort she puts into data collection and emphasized the importance of sharing knowledge and ideas through informal conversations.

Projects that originated within the university and intended to incorporate community partner participation and viewpoints struggled to sustain partnerships during COVID-19. One faculty member lamented the postponement of their in-person farmer listening sessions, which he sees “as a huge part of just trust-building and buy-in to the idea that university researchers aren’t just coming here to tell us what to do.” In contrast, people in projects that originated collaboratively between community and academic stakeholders or originated within the community had already spent time “good neighboring” to align priorities and collaboratively write grants.

Trust and relationship building are required when working with farmers (Nerbonne and Lentz 2003), grazers (Lyon et al. 2011) and other stakeholders in the food system. Yet texts and discourses of higher education do not reflect this reality. CES has a variety of texts that center everyday lives in locally situated CES partnerships. The texts are products of power relations that exist beyond the partnership in which they appear. Grant Request for Applications (RFA) are a prime example of texts that constrain CES projects. Projects funded by grants that had built community engagement into the RFA require academic partners to describe how community partners are involved in project design/management. In these grants, the funders deem relational work as valuable. Of the eight grant RFAs that informants provided, only two requested evidence of relational approaches or collaboration. Another, more invisible form of institutional power relations is tenure and promotion materials and job evaluations, which also do not value the work inherent in “good neighboring.”
How work is valued in academia impacts relationships in collaborative projects

The translocal discourse of performance measurements and auditing values inform local constructs of the “ideal scholar” as someone whose work has been widely published in high-ranking peer-reviewed journals, who receives large federal and state grants, and generates funding and international prestige for the university (Couture 2017). In the academic setting, increased performance measurement and competition are part of an everyday experience (Willmott 2011). At this research-intensive Land Grant university, guidelines for tenure and promotion in the biological and social sciences typically list three areas of evaluation: teaching, research, and service to the profession, public, or school. For most positions outside of Extension, service comes in a distant third for tenure and promotion. Outreach is measured quantitatively through the number of publications, software, education programs, and so on. This process essentially reduces collaborative research into an individual academic pursuit, when off-campus community, or “target” community are mentioned they are “being impacted” by research, not participating or leading.

Texts associated with tenure and promotion as well as degree requirements may seem invisible during CES projects, but these texts shape the way researchers talk and work in these settings. Specifically, a faculty member in the biological sciences noted that with CES, “it might be tacked onto my CV [curriculum vitae] but nobody cares. I’m not going to get evaluated for it. I’ll get evaluated for two things, how many publications and how many butts in [classroom] seats.” The same faculty member noted they did not invite any assistant professors to participate in their CES project, which is led by tenured faculty members, because of the tenure and promotion process. A different faculty member in the biological sciences lamented that “the more intangible changes of people feeling like they actually have a role to play in research are not measurable, so they don’t count.” And she also noted that her research program was more responsive to stakeholders’ priorities once she received tenure.

The success of collaborative research projects is often measured quantitatively, including growth, yet this poses problems with sustaining relationships as collaborations grow, “it can’t just be all transactional… I need more time to spend talking to them about what they are excited about… And that is just very hard because there are so many people, it’s hard for me to carve out time to do all of that. And it’s also hard to delegate that kind of relationship building.” This demonstrates how these locally situated community-engaged scholars negotiate different types of activities related to being a community engaged academic. They find tension because they take responsibility for their relational activities that are needed to build relationships through “good neighboring” and are evaluated for predominantly quantifiable metrics of publications and course enrollments which may not be what sustains CES projects in food systems.

Part of “good neighboring” is knowing when to not “make an ask” as an academic project lead. Respecting community partners’ time and boundaries was even more important during COVID-19, as many academics were able to work from the safety of their homes and were often less likely to face employment and financial insecurity than their community counterparts. For example, an academic researcher noted that their community partners were “afraid for the future of their businesses, their farms. So, I felt that I had no right to ask for people’s attention. It was kind of paralyzing… I tried to be very restrained in how many emails I’ve sent and how much I’ve communicated with people.” The academic researchers that echoed this sentiment were in academic-led projects, indicating that the structure of CES projects influenced how CES project leaders managed COVID-19 impacts.

One community partner lamented that he does not get compensated for sending emails: “My job isn’t an e-mail job. I cook and I grow, but people got those desktops, and they sit at home, and they get paid to write.” When working on projects led by academics, especially during COVID-19, he felt as if this he was expected to follow academic norms of communication and work. However, he was facing different economic and job insecurities during COVID-19 than his academic counterparts were less vulnerable to. Additionally, this community partner was (like many others) working on the front-line feeding people during the pandemic, while his academic partners were working from home and self-isolating. Inequitable approaches to partnership were always an issue, the extra stressors of the pandemic exacerbated this tension. In contrast, co-led projects collectively decided how to move forward and communicate around shared scholarship, instead of the academic partner “making an ask” of work or input from community partners that might be outside of their current priorities in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Who leads projects shapes how COVID-19 impacted projects

One faculty member described their project as a hub and spoke model where the academic team “is like the hub and then the communication goes through the research lab, takes feedback from people and collectively makes decisions from them.” This in practice reduces the logistical burden of community partners, but this also removed community partners from making decisions and influencing project direction during COVID-19. In this same project, the community partner stated that he heard from his academic partner that the
During the COVID-19 pandemic, decentralized research projects and problem-solving projects were able to pivot and continue research processes during times of disruption, although these types of projects are not always valued in the academic institution. A faculty member noted how they are decentralizing research processes by submitting grants through community partner organizations and individual farmers with the university as a subcontractor, as “whoever controls the money controls a lot of the decision and the university likes to be the entity that controls the money,” she added, “I think it works better if we’re not.” However, that same faculty member noted that proposals submitted by community partners are not funded as frequently as projects submitted through the university on both external and internal grants. A graduate student, researcher, or post-doctoral student might be able to foster shared leadership on CES projects, yet faculty members cited the importance of bringing funding to the university as the Principal Investigator (P.I.) of large grants. The tenure and promotion guidelines and academic job market give more value to projects where the academic is the lead P.I., and the university partner holds the funds.

Co-led or community projects involved community partners in decisions about how to continue research or project activities. A graduate student noted how the community-led project she was working on was responding to emergent priorities and that there was more power held in the hands of the community partner than in previous academic-led CES projects. In this project, the community was reacting to a problem in the food system and research was a component of their problem-solving process. In accepting an invitation to this problem-solving project, she as a researcher was able to respond to community priorities during COVID-19 and adapt her dissertation around the community-led work.

When COVID-19 struck, projects that were less based in knowledge generation, but instead had a strong problem-solving component in addition to research adapted to meet community priorities and constraints during the pandemic. In another example, the leader of a project that had an explicitly problem-solving approach stated that “It’s hard to say that doesn’t fit within what we’re doing because it’s such a broad approach. And so, when a number of people started grabbing onto these other COVID related ideas, there wasn’t a lot of opposition to that.” Although this was an academic-led project, their problem-solving approach allowed for greater flexibility. Yet, these problem-solving approaches may not lead to publications, which are central to tenure, promotion, and evaluation.

COVID-19 provided opportunities for different ways of community participation

COVID-19 provided unique opportunities for people to meet virtually without requiring university or community partners to travel long distances. Before the pandemic, academic partners with academic-led projects were wary about inviting community partners to campus: “[W]e were always very careful with
their time, with an ask to bring them in. We wouldn’t just do it for any old thing, but it had to be something pretty critical and important.” Instead, academics often organized meetings off campus, at research stations and on participating farms. One farmer noted that “it’s really hard for me to leave the farm. And so, from my perspective, I really appreciate that this is normalized to be able to do virtual interviews.” Remote meetings provide flexibility for academics and community partners alike, reducing travel time and increasing geographic range of attendees. With increased proficiency in virtual meeting technologies, academic partners noticed that a larger number of community partners participated in research meetings, whether to participate in discussion, outreach, and/or decision making. A community partner of a large interdisciplinary project noted that farmers she had worked with in the past participated to a greater extent, despite barriers to internet access. Yet, a faculty member noted that although the quantity of participation increased, he experienced a decrease in the quality and depth of conversation topics: “[It’s] one thing for a bunch of academics to get on a Zoom call, but getting a bunch of farmers on a Zoom call to talk about, what do you want the future to look like? Yeah, it’s dicey.” This underscores the importance of building trust and relationships as a foundational component of CES.

Much like their flexible approach to meeting modality, CES partners also had to be nimble in the data generation process. To gather data during the pandemic, researchers held interviews over Zoom and asked community partners to participate in archival work and videography, building capacity and skills in data gathering. For a student’s Master’s thesis with a videography component, one community partner took on the role of co-videographer during the pandemic, deciding what and how to film. Before COVID-19, there were no plans to involve community-partners in data or video collection. The community partner in this project noticed that her academic partner “had a lot less agency than she would otherwise… There were certain things that I, I guess for lack of a better term, was kind of like a gatekeeper or funnel or something. I am aware that I probably had more power than I would have in pre-pandemic times.” These examples show how projects became less centralized and more community-led during the pandemic to meet research and community priorities, subverting hegemonic views of who produces knowledge and holds power in research relationships. We should continue to think creatively about participation and empowerment during times of relative stability.

**Discussion**

The data presented here reveals how Land Grant university tenure and promotional guidelines, institutional values, and funding constrained CES partnerships during the pandemic. The academic institutional grip on scholarship and knowledge production shaped CES project leaders’ ability to adapt to the pandemic. The focus on tenure and evaluation and data production, while clearly important for academic partners, often hinders the ability for collaborative projects to respond to disruption and instability because of the narrow scope of these projects and the reliance on university resources and grants. This tension, although not always visible in project descriptions before COVID-19, was made visible during the pandemic through limited project adaptability. Institutional rules and procedures also delayed and limited CES possibilities as COVID-19 stalled projects. CES projects that originate from community-priorities and utilize community resources were able to avoid more institutional barriers during the pandemic.

What I am proposing in this paper is a restructuring and revaluing of food system CES to prioritize projects and inquiries that are already underway in communities, valuing the problem-solving knowledge produced outside of academia. This change requires an adjustment of whose questions and motivations drive CES in the first place. For example, problem-solving project responds to an identified issue in the food system. Of the people I interviewed, people working in the food system like restaurant owners and farmers identified problem-solving project priorities. Community partners invited academics to help solve the problem, utilizing their quantitative and qualitative research techniques and other technical skills like grant writing and evaluative thinking. With this structure, the academic partners fell into a more consulting role or a collaborator in the project versus holding a leadership role. This contrasts with the knowledge production projects, where academics I interviewed often started with theoretically or disciplinarily interesting questions, seeking out farmers to participate or relying on relationships with non-profit organizations. Academics (whether graduate students, faculty members, research staff) in these projects were always the P.I.s, often taking on the grant management, research, and overall project management roles. With academic partners holding significant roles, most of the funding and resources are also held within the Land Grant university. I noted that problem-solving projects took a more decentralized approach to funding and resource use, which was advantageous during disruptions. From this study of the impacts of COVID-19 on CES projects in food systems, projects that utilize a problem-solving model of practice can weather systemic shocks more effectively. However, the academic institution is not structured to reward problem-solving projects.

To create an academic environment that supports problem-solving CES, people in positions of power must make structural changes. Tenure and promotion and other evaluation timelines should be updated to value CES and social change as highly as “high impact” publishing. In May 2020,
a committee updated the social science tenure and promotion guidelines at the institution under study to include criteria for evaluating community engaged scholarship, providing qualitative criteria, including “grounding in community needs and interests” and “documented community impact, evaluated from academic and community perspectives.” This change will provide faculty on the tenure track within the social sciences the ability to create community-engaged research projects in food systems and legitimize their work in the tenure and promotion process. Other Faculty Divisions and other academic institutions should follow suit to ensure that community-engaged research in food systems is able to continue during times of disruption and relative stability.

Those who oversee funding and evaluation of CES should attend closely to how their policies and structures prioritize the forms of CES that meet quantitative evaluation metrics, such as number of academic publications or presentations. Additionally, funders should include evidence of community engagement and mechanisms for sharing power within grant rubrics, as projects with established community relationships found greater traction to adapt projects during COVID-19. Academic partners and funders should compensate community partners for their time to avoid reinforcing inequitable compensation structures. Compensation can be in the form of stipends, co-authorship, and access to university resources (libraries, grant opportunities, co-authoring articles, parking spaces) and should reflect community partner preferences and goals. Those working in CES projects, whether in academia or through various locations in the food system, should be critical of academic and funder organizations and how those impact CES, because CES serves a crucial role in both higher education and agricultural systems. Without a critical examination and re-examination of an academic institution’s structures and activities, researchers can overlook unintended and potentially negative effects.

Not only must structural changes be made within academic and funding institutions; we must also think critically about who leads CES and where projects originate. Researchers design data generation CES projects to produce knowledge about the food system because that is what is valued within our current academic system. In contrast, the CES projects led or co-led by farmers and restaurant owners are designed to solve problems within the food system, because that is what is valued by people working within the food system. This core distinction leads to different research questions, approaches, and practices, as well as how people utilize research findings. When COVID-19 spread, CES projects rooted in problem-solving met the changing priorities of the different participants. By prioritizing projects that are grounded in community problems and priorities in the food system, academia can maintain relevancy when disturbances happen.

Once people in positions of power alter institutional and financial reward structures, community and academic partners can feel supported to collaborate on food systems projects. Partners will be able to spend more time building the trust required to share (or more radically, take a back seat in) decision-making and funding. Moving beyond “good neighboring,” supportive academic partners can become allies or co-conspirators in addressing issues in food systems by deepening their commitment to community partner priorities. Importantly, academic partners can join projects and inquiries that are already ongoing in the community, instead of starting with a foundation of university-led questions and priorities.

COVID-19 provided a window into what models of practice best serve CES during times of disturbance. CES projects in food systems should have goals broader than knowledge building, with funding dispersed in ways that support innovation and flexibility among all partners. Furthermore, CES should begin with community partner priorities and collaboratively maintained, allowing for projects to be relevant in times of disruption and relative stability. COVID-19 allowed for projects to take community-led approaches and different ways of engagement, including virtual communication and community partner-led data collection. Academic institutions should continue to support these innovations. By making institutional changes, we can foster CES in food systems that can adapt to our uncertain futures.

It is important to note that this study took place at a Land Grant university, a Research 1 institution, with elevated expectations for faculty, students, and staff to generate academic publications and patents. This structure puts a specific knowledge production pressure on academic partners that may be felt differently in other types of academic settings, such as small liberal arts colleges and regional state universities. Tenure processes and requirements were heterogeneous across disciplines of the faculty interviewed for this study, and that heterogeneity increases as you look towards tenure and promotion processes across different types of institutions. Some colleges or universities may have community engagement built into their mission statement and vision, leading to potentially a greater capacity for CES. Although this study does not encompass all these different education models, researchers and practitioners can use the findings and discussion as a foundation to inquire into institutional policies and structures that enable or constrain CES.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explicated some of the institutional power relations and processes related to CES scholarship in food systems. The institutional power imbalances and structural barriers within CES identified in this study are
not novel, however the impact of these institutional forces on projects during COVID-19 provides a lens for us to question how academic structures support and hinder the participatory process in food systems. I argue here that institutional barriers and translocal power relations are key to understanding how food systems CES projects’ function and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the function of those projects. Through these informants’ experiences, we can see what CES models tend to work (problem-solving, decentralized) and what do not (knowledge-building, centralized) during times of disturbance.

After decades of increasing acceptance and institutional- alization of CES, food systems scholars are pushing for community informed, and community engaged projects. As the COVID-19 crisis exposed inadequacies in academic institutions’ ability to support these partnerships, it is critical to attend to the institutional forces structuring CES, not merely demanding more democratized CES. The root of this phenomenon is the question of what types of community engagement are valued institutionally. The appearance in a top ranked journal or awarding of a federal grant, it would seem, is more important than contribution to social change, contributing as a sub-awardee on a farmer-led grant, and generating knowledge that is useful inside and outside of academia. Yet, the journal publications or grants valued within the tenure and promotion process may not sustain projects through disruption as much as relationships and collaborative ownership.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated barriers to authentic participation, provided opportunities for democratizing research processes, and opened conversations about structural change. IE prompts us to ask, how could we reorganize academia differently to bring more community led, community controlled CES that solves problems in our food system? What shifts should we require (tenure and promotion process, funding structures, distribution of resources, documentation) to embed more substantive attention to community contexts in academic work? This opportunity to make structural changes to support and bolster research with farmers, food workers, laborers, and seed keepers should not be overlooked.

This study points to relations of ruling, such as funding and evaluation structures, and where we can change some of the processes within them to better serve research involving community partners to make social change in food systems. The data and ideas around institutional forces presented here might further a research agenda that poses deeper questions about the importance of relational practices and community-led initiatives, and the institutional structures that inhibit or foster both. Although academic institutions are not static across times and places, they often reproduce and construct practices and discourses that perform a monolithic appearance allowing for researcher to apply this critique across large academic research institutions. Through this inquiry into one academic institution, we are better able to understand institutional power relations and provide examples of where it may be possible to break down barriers to CES in food systems more broadly.

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Laura Jessee Livingston is an assistant professor in the Food Studies Department at Chatham University. Livingston received a bachelor’s degree in geology and biology from Oberlin College. She earned her Master’s degree in Agroecology and her PhD in Environment and Resources at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is interested in community engaged scholarship and addressing inequities in food systems through critical inquiry and collective action.