



EFSNE Outreach: Innovative methods to engage multiple audiences in a complex food system project

A summary of “Engaging Multiple Audiences: Challenges and Strategies in Complex Food Systems Projects” by Kathryn Z. Ruhf^a, Kristen Devlin^b, Kate Clancy^c, Linda Berlin^d, and Anne Palmer^e. Published in *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, December 21, 2017.

Complex projects must manage many challenges, including how to engage and communicate with multiple audiences. The Outreach Team of the Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast through Regional Food Systems Project (EFSNE) employed several innovative methods to proactively share findings with multiple audiences and to engage with leaders in the participating communities. EFSNE was an inter-disciplinary food systems project funded by the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (2011-2017).

The EFSNE Project was designed to assess whether in the long term, greater reliance on regionally produced foods could improve food access for low income-communities in the Northeast while also benefitting farmers, supply chain firms and others in the food system. As an integrated project—defined by USDA as including research, education and extension—EFSNE focused on the 12-state Northeast region. This project used a common understanding of extension as educational activities that deliver science-based knowledge (research and education) directly to people (USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2017). Outreach is similarly defined as “efforts to bring services or information to people where they live or spend time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017 “Outreach,” para.1).

EFSNE was not a participatory research project in which community stakeholders were part of the design team. However, we engaged selected community leaders and storeowners in nine case study locations. They helped plan and implement many parts of the project. Throughout the project, the project team sought to be transparent, acknowledging the creative tension between coming into a community to “study it” and working with a community in meaningful ways to support its own objectives.

The project’s Outreach Team devised a strategic outreach plan in which we identified eight stakeholder categories (academics and extension; community leaders and groups; grocery store owners; agro-food entities; students; other similar AFRI projects; funders; and the press) along with “desired behaviors” such as attend project events, participate in research activities, provide feedback, and join a learning community. We developed communications pathways to the nine project locations (agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security/locations-partner-sites) and recruited local leaders to liaise between their community and the project.

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Activities

EFSNE's outreach and extension consisted of the following activities:

Events, online presence and publications

EFSNE's Outreach Team designed multiple opportunities for stakeholder exposure to the project. Between 2011 and 2016, team members gave over 80 presentations related to the project. EFSNE gave a workshop about the project at NESAWG's annual "It Takes a Region" conference. In 2013, the project brought community leaders, supermarket owners and project researchers together for a two-day meeting that enhanced community leaders' understanding of the research and encouraged communities' involvement with the project's investigations and their own food system activities.

In 2015, the Outreach Team organized a national conference to share the project with academics, policymakers, government staff, students and community leaders, and to gather feedback to inform the project's concluding phase. The project website and newsletter enabled all stakeholders to learn about the project—from an accessible explanation of the project structure, objectives, research activities, and information on locations and study sites to explanatory non-scientific storytelling.

At least 20 articles about aspects of the EFSNE project have been published or are pending review in scientific and other professional journals. In addition, over a dozen briefs such as this one make project findings accessible to a wide public audience through multiple channels (agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security/research-publications/outreach). Each brief "decodes" technical language and translates data into common language and/or digestible graphic representations.

Community Readiness Model

To understand communities' capacities to engage in research activities and/or to conduct food access-related "activities", we conducted a "community readiness" study. The Community Readiness Model (CRM) is based on the theory that communities progress through stages of change in relation to an issue, as do individuals. It assesses and builds on how ready

a community is to address a social issue (Tri-Ethnic Center, Colorado State University, 2017). Researchers interviewed four community leaders in each of six locations to assess organizational resources, capacity and attitudes of their respective communities. Overall, the results indicated that communities had active leaders with modest community support. The three urban communities were a bit more advanced on the scale than the three rural settings. A report was provided to each community.

Community events

Each location was asked and supported to create a community event that would highlight project findings, encourage communities to use the findings in their work, and enhance understanding of local and regional food system issues. Six locations took different approaches to execute engaging, interactive and place-based initiatives combining project results and local resources to animate the research findings.

eXtension Community of Practice

Central to EFSNE's outreach was its commitment to engage colleagues who shared an interest in regional food systems. Together with non-EFSNE colleagues, the team employed the eXtension Community of Practice (eCoP) platform provided by the Cooperative Extension System as a vehicle for virtual sharing of information and professional network-building to enhance the work of Extension and other professionals working on local and regional food systems. With colleagues from the University of Wisconsin/Madison and Ohio State University (OSU), EFSNE recruited a national Leadership Team for the Community, Local and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) eCoP. Two national meetings were followed by online content development, curation and publishing.

As of 2017, there are over 400 members of the CLRFS eCoP, the second largest in the eCoP stable. A national Leadership Team provides overall direction, with a steering team providing more direct management. OSU Extension provided initial supporting administration; administration has been transferred to the University of Arkansas. Eight work groups provide the substance of the community's work.

Food Systems Modeling Learning Community

The learning community concept was core to EFSNE's commitment to developing a compendium of ways to inform, teach, learn and network. "Learning communities" (LC) bring together people who share common interests, to meet regularly or periodically to pursue and exchange knowledge, and to collaborate. The LC framework can be especially effective with interdisciplinary groups.

Food systems modeling emerged as a priority topic. System modeling—both agricultural economic and bio-physical—is of increasing interest as an analytical tool for food systems researchers and practitioners. Several project researchers were engaged in modeling protocols. We reached out to other academics outside EFSNE to join and develop a food systems modeling LC (FSMLC) to strengthen their work by providing a skilled and supportive academic community for building skills, trust and a shared language. About fifteen professionals met virtually for three years, including eight webinar-based presentations on members' food systems modeling work. One outcome was to prepare these professionals to work with practitioners from Extension and the nonprofit sector—"consumers" of food system modeling research and tools—to build their literacy to work with modelers.

Observations and Conclusions

Overall, the project's multi-pronged outreach efforts were successful, but not without challenges. Despite our desire for a "two-way street" in which stakeholder engagement was as important as dissemination, the community development-research tension existed. For example, community members were interested in local food while researchers were seeking input on the value of regional food. The CRM tool turned out to be very useful to both researchers and community leaders.

Translating the project internally and externally was an ongoing challenge; it took a while for the project team members to understand how the pieces fit and how to communicate about them. A project glossary, publishing protocols and intensive team cross-review of materials ensured message consistency internally and in all outreach products.

The CLRFS eCoP and FSMLC were meaningful "legacy spin-offs" that continue to engage multiple stakeholders in regional food systems thinking. This inter-related compilation of outreach tactics can serve as an example for other complex and transdisciplinary projects. ❖

About the EFSNE project

The work described here is part of a larger research project called "Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast through Regional Food Systems" (EFSNE). From 2011 to 2017, the EFSNE project engaged more than 40 partners at multiple universities, non-profits and government agencies around the question of whether greater reliance on regionally produced food could improve food access in low-income communities, while also benefiting farmers, food supply chain firms and others in the food system. Learn more at <http://agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security>.

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