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Implementing a Feminist Pragmatist Approach in Undergraduate Education to Support Local Food Recovery

Abstract

Access to healthy and local foods is an issue that crosses numerous political, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. Traditional philosophical approaches and market strategies have failed to provide stakeholders with the tools they need to address the entangled, systemic issues surrounding access to such food. This article describes how combining a wicked problems framework with a feminist pragmatist methodology is valuable for empowering students to collaboratively address these issues in and with local communities. This framework encourages stakeholders to recognize the need for collaborative, context-sensitive, and iterative action processes aimed to mitigate current injustices. In particular, this article documents the philosophy behind and initial outcomes of undergraduate students’ participatory action efforts designed to support the work of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This article ultimately highlights the philosophy behind such work, the structures and processes involved, as well as the challenges and benefits of an engaged, boundary-spanning educational model.

The great difficulty we experience in reducing to action our imperfect code of social ethics arises from the fact that we have not yet learned to act together.

–Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics

Introduction

At 57, CA is a ten-year resident of the impoverished Heartside neighborhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Prior to coming to Grand Rapids, CA was homeless for five years. She is diabetic, and community agencies have been essential in helping her meet her basic needs, obtain housing, and receive medical care. Still, this support alone did not extend far enough, making access to healthy food far from easy. In her words, “I didn’t have the money [for fresh fruit and vegetables]; bread, eggs, milk, and cheese were more important. My income has not grown as fast as the cost of everything else.” This sentiment rings true for most Heartside residents. Food insecurity, obesity, and diabetes are just the tip of the iceberg. Connected to and exacerbating these issues are a host of others, including a stopgap healthcare system, unsafe neighborhoods, poor city infrastructure, and lack of transportation (to name only a few). In addition, the structure of—and momentum behind—many current local, regional, and global systems makes addressing these interconnected challenges incredibly difficult. This is where we begin.

Undeniably, the interconnected challenges CA has confronted are far too common in Heartside. With a population of 3,000 (60% male and 40% female, 38% minority, and 40% over 45 years of age) and an unemployment rate of 22.5% in 2012, more than 45% of the population lives below the poverty line. The neighborhood is designated a food desert by the U.S. Department...
of Agriculture; it lacks access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.² Within the Heartside neighborhood there are no grocery stores where fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased. In 2012 fewer than 55% of households had a car to travel to a grocery store.³ As CA notes, “most of the families in the community are on a fixed income and don’t have money for luxuries. Food stamps are for necessities, and many families think that fruits and vegetables are a luxury.” Indeed, many Heartside residents rely on free community meal programs and food pantries.

These meals, however, do not meet basic nutrition standards; in fact, the meals served at these pantries and shelters are consistent with meals that contribute to the hunger/obesity paradox.⁴ They are high in fat and sugar, contain few fruits and vegetables, and thus tend to promote weight gain and contribute to nutrition deficit.⁵ Food-insecure adults are twice as likely to be obese as are food-secure individuals.⁶ Since access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a marker of a healthy diet that can reduce chronic diseases, lack of access is particularly troubling. Indeed, the combined health effects of the hunger/obesity paradox include increased rates of diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure, high blood pressure and some cancers.⁷ Lack of access, then, literally reduces the quality and quantity of one’s life. Access to healthy foods is an issue that crosses complex political, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. It is also an intractable, high-stakes life-and-death issue. As Michael Pollan notes, “there are no alternatives to food.”⁸

How should community members, nonprofit organizations, educators, and students working towards food justice respond to these challenges? That is, beyond theorizing and pontificating about the situation within a university classroom, what else might educators and their students do to engage? What can a standard, undergraduate general education course possibly offer a neighborhood facing these challenges? Traditional philosophic approaches and market strategies have failed to provide stakeholders with the tools they need to address the entangled, systemic issues surrounding access to local and healthy food. In contrast, a wicked problems (WP) framework can be combined with a feminist pragmatist methodology to address complex food issues in local communities. Scholars utilizing the WP framework can help stakeholders more fully recognize that food justice is an incredibly complex and high-stakes social issue and—by laying this groundwork—generate buy-in for engaging in collaborative, context-sensitive, and iterative action processes aimed at ameliorating current food injustices. The framework encourages public and engaged philosophy, particularly scholarship associated with feminist pragmatism. In fact, practitioners familiar with feminist pragmatism can further undergird and extend this framework. As an engaged philosophy that emphasizes the need for cooperative action, it encourages a move away from an individualist ethos and to a social ethics. Recognizing a need for perplexity, reciprocity, and sympathetic understanding, this article begins by arguing that a feminist pragmatist pedagogical method is a means of working towards more effective and collaborative food justice.

After explicating this engaged framework, we illustrate its value by documenting the philosophy behind and initial outcomes of two upper-division undergraduate university courses employing this pedagogical approach. Given current resistance to, assumptions about, and fear of engaging undergraduate students in participatory action on such wicked issues within the community, we find the lessons learned to be particularly salient. This article details undergraduate students’ efforts to support the work of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As a new and alternative local food access model for food insecure residents, HGI gleans produce from two seasonal farmers’ markets in the area, distributing it to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and residents in the neighborhood.

3. Community Research Institute, “Heartside.”
With few-to-no institutional mechanisms for encouraging or sustaining this cross-class community partnership, this work was sparked through informal relationships and a shared commitment to food justice. For example, HGI, as a burgeoning nonprofit, hoped such a collaboration would yield creative and fruitful ideas for sustaining and enhancing their outreach. Food Matters, as a project- and community-based course, saw HGI as a powerful avenue for helping students viscerally understand and address real challenges surrounding food justice. Students in Food Matters harnessed both ideas learned through the course and their own disciplinary expertise to collaboratively design six potentially viable prototypes for HGI. These prototypes ranged from the creation of a context-dependent recipe book to plans for volunteer recruitment, daycare distribution, establishing funding streams, a resident-led cooking workshop, and a food waste analysis. Prior to the end of the semester students elicited feedback on their work from HGI and published their findings (providing leverage to a subsequent course offering). Through the lens of the subsequent course—entitled Wicked Problems of Sustainability—these initial student reports were a powerful pivot around which to sustain and enhance effective community change.

Participatory and Transdisciplinary Pedagogy

A Wicked Problems Framework

Wicked problems are most often characterized as incredibly complex, interdependent public problems involving high levels of uncertainty, variability, and risk as well as intense disagreement between fragmented stakeholders. For example, problems like poverty, diet and health, globalization, and environmental challenges can be, and often are, characterized as “wicked.” Since such problems resist wholesale resolution, undergo change over time, are deeply interconnected with other systemic challenges, and involve competing facts and values, they tend to turn from large-scale, systemic messes into crises. Behind such problems we often see conflicting objectives, narrow problem-framing and agenda-setting, outdated institutions and systems, ineffective policies, and unexamined assumptions.  

Thus, WP scholars generally suggest that public deliberation, participatory action research, and collaborative model-framing are needed to address large-scale social problems. Such efforts are necessary because effective interventions tend to require that stakeholders first move from a narrow state of certainty (and often a win-lose zero-sum game competitive agenda) towards a state of perplexity. This process fosters deep listening and encourages stakeholders to see the perspectives of others; it thus tends to expand eth-

ical frameworks, making future collaborative action-efforts more likely and more comprehensive. In general, such processes temporarily mire stakeholders in the complexities of problems, which then tends to boost their willingness to work with others in order to address challenges.

A WP framework ultimately encourages experiential learning: a more holistic—albeit messy and always incomplete—understanding of complex systemic problems. It also provides a wide variety of tools and processes for reframing the issue being examined (including but not limited to design thinking, collaborative modeling, and soft systems thinking, as well as democratic deliberation and facilitation). Since these problems require we engage a wide-range of stakeholders involved in the situation, initial and iterative framing is essential for inspiring and maintaining the motivation to collaborate across boundaries. Calling on higher education to reconsider its role, Ramaley says, “the management of this kind of problem requires collaboration, a sharing of exposure to risk and an opportunity for benefit, and a willingness to learn as the problem changes.” In fact, researchers suggest this framework is valuable for ameliorating a wide range of systemic challenges, including but not limited to poverty, health, diet, and environment. As many have noted, this framework also calls on philosophers (and scholars more generally) to reconsider their role.

Field Philosophy

Indeed, collaborative efforts to reflect on and wrestle with wicked problems call for more than applied scholarship. That is, to the extent that applied scholarship works from theoretical, top-down descriptions of problems and only then seeks to apply these “theoretical principles” to problems, it gets it wrong. Wicked problems require a more piecemeal, reciprocal, and messy engagement process that is committed to fallible, context-dependent co-learning. They encourage processes like systemic action research, a process whereby we come to continuously adapt to uncertain, dynamic and interconnected social messes. Systemic action research requires we consider disparate knowledge, wrestle with issues of power, and engage others across our differences. Under this model, scholars no longer seek a “framework in advance, prior to engagement with the particulars of a problem or question.” Instead, scholars intentionally weave “intellectual analysis with experiential knowing,” working with different “forms of evidence,” including individual narratives, community input, quantitative data, and more. Ultimately, then, the approach pursued here is best described by Robert Frodeman’s field philosophy: “a problem-oriented form of philosophical practice that treats knowledge production and knowledge use as dynamically integrated.” By working at the “project level on problems that have been defined by various social actors,” field philosophers intentionally begin with “problems as defined by non-philosophers” and seek to “ameliorate situations.” Such an approach will “open up new ways of seeing, new approaches to sense-making, and new opportunities to work together to apply what we learn by ‘reading’ our environment.” Engaged scholarship requires we develop “case-specific, explicitly pluralistic approaches to the question of what counts as quality work.” Jane Addams—and the field of feminist pragmatism more broadly—embodies the strategies of field philosophers articulated here.

Feminist Pragmatist Approach

At its core, a feminist pragmatist approach emphasizes the necessity of narrative and perplexity, fellowship and cooperative action, sympathetic understanding and the expansion of one’s ethical framework. This stance of openness is necessary for coming to more deeply see the positionality of others. For feminist pragmatists, knowledge is contingent and co-constructed; it is

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17. Frodeman, Sustainable Knowledge, 105.
25. Frodeman, Sustainable Knowledge, 50.
a tool for meliorating problems. Influenced by Jane Addams’s lifework, such an approach is also prefaced on a “working with” model, encouraging all involved to give as well as receive, to learn as well as teach, to reflect as well as act; it ultimately seeks to overturn traditional notions of charity and service, a simple doing “for” others. 27 In fact, Addams’ lifework—involving both place-based interventions at Hull House 28 in Chicago and global outreach through her work on food justice and peace—is a powerful illustration of collaborative and iterative interventions aimed toward ameliorating wicked problems. 29

As an approach intentionally designed to encourage collaborative, reflective, and experimental interventions, feminist pragmatism lays the groundwork for what follows. For instance, this approach encourages the formation of relationships across boundaries of all kinds (epistemic, ethical, and cultural). And these relationships goad us into rethinking “the nature of the work we do and the impact of our contributions.” Such an approach encourages instructors to think more carefully about “how we generate knowledge, create an inspiring educational environment, and assist our students in acquiring knowledge and skills they will need to work effectively with others to address complex problems.” 30 It similarly means we must be more critically aware of how power operates, as well as more willing to collaboratively define the problem, ask the questions, and frame the options. In the end, such an approach moves stakeholders to co-act: compelling them to consider who is bearing the risks, reaping the benefits, and interpreting the results. As a catalyst for place- and self-transformation, a feminist pragmatist approach opens space from which to rethink how and why we engage, encourages courageous and humble co-action, and thus fosters the habits and virtues of change-agents.

Place-Based Participatory Action at the Undergraduate Level

I. The Heartside Gleaning Initiative

With this context in mind, Heartside Gleaning Initiative is striving to increase both access to and knowledge about fresh fruits and vegetables for Heartside and its surrounding communities. With an overarching goal of improving health and quality of life, HGI increases not only access to these foods but also awareness about the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables and knowledge about how to prepare them. This initiative thus supplies fresh, healthy produce collected from farmer’s donations at farmers’ markets to area community meal programs, food pantries, and low-income residents. These activities are conducted June through October, with a plan to expand to a year-round operation. In 2014, their first season of operation, more than 17,000 pounds of fresh produce were gleaned and redistributed. 31

In addition to educating about healthier food choices, HGI encourages positive interactions between neighborhood residents and vendors at the markets. These burgeoning relationships have built cohesion across otherwise fairly isolated groups. In its first year HGI has—by “bringing together groups that otherwise would have little reason or opportunity to interact: urban with rural, immigrant with native, old with young, black with white,” and student with the community residents—effectively spanned a number of social divides. 32 Research has shown that building such relationships tends to positively impact the social determinants of health. 33 By partnering with a wide variety of stakeholders, the gleaning program is intentionally bridging boundaries, providing valuable resources, encouraging healthy food choices, reducing waste, enhancing education, and encouraging civic engagement; that is, HGI is seeking to “ameliorate interconnected problems such as pov,


28. Hull House, the first social settlement in the United States, was an incredibly effective bridge institution, consistently bringing stakeholders together across their differences in order to advocate for change (see Matthias March Gross, Collaborative Experiments: Jane Addams, Hull House and Experimental Social Work, Social Science Information 48, no. 1 (2009): 91-95). Bridge institutions, also known as boundary organizations, tend to operate as flexible but stable forces for collaboration across sectors; they aim to cogenerate new knowledge and reshape policy (see Sandra Batic, “Wicked Problems in Applied Economics,” American Journal of Agricultural Economics 90, no. 5 (2008): 176-91). Indeed, Addams herself describes Hull House as an institution intentionally placed to be “accountable to all sides” (“Objective Value,” 32).

29. Under Frodeman’s definition, Jane Addams is a preeminent field philosopher. She bridged the gap between knowledge production and application, operating across differences in order to implement reform. As a public philosopher, deliberative facilitator, and social activist, she did more in her time than almost anyone else to alleviate need, empower others, and reform unjust and ineffective policies (Lake, “Jane Addams”; Fischer, “Interpretation’s”; Elshatoin, “Return to Heli-House”).


property, access, health, diet, and environment in the neighborhood with neighborhood residents."

CA's story is a case in point: since CA has been able to increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables in her diet through her involvement in the Heartside Gleaning Initiative, her doctor has noted a substantial improvement in her AIC, an indicator of diabetes control. Not surprisingly, her change in diet also has resulted in substantial weight loss, lower blood pressure, and better cholesterol readings. The changes in CA, however, cannot be measured by a simple doctor’s visit. Interactions with local farmers, Heartside residents, and business leaders, as well as university professors and students (among others) have also had a powerful impact on CA’s outlook on life. She now believes her life has a greater purpose; she has reunited with her family after twenty years, has dreams of obtaining her high school diploma, and is considering attending college. With these significant changes in mind, CA argues passionately for the value of this program, saying "each week we see the results of the program and the difference we’re making in other’s lives." With this positive experience behind her, CA was more than willing to step into a collaborative partnership with Food Matters students in the fall of 2014.

II. Food Matters

Food Matters is an upper-level general education course that requires students to analyze the role of food in health from a variety of perspectives, as well as address food-related problems through collaborative and integrative problem solving. More specifically, the skills and content objectives of the course are to:

1) identify needs and opportunities for improvement of a food related issue in the community;

2) propose creative and integrative solutions to address health problems related to diet;

3) refine and implement ideas that address the three pillars of sustainability (economic viability, social equity, and environmental concerns);

4) reflect on collaboration and integration as a framework valuable for problem solving.

With both these objectives and a feminist pragmatist framework in mind, students were partnered with HGI from the very beginning of the semester (rather than develop ideas in the classroom setting and then apply them in the community). This partnership—beginning with an introduction from both CA and the HGI director—encouraged a “working with” model, grounded in the context of the local situation being addressed. The director provided students with a context for the initiative, while CA highlighted both the social and environmental conditions surrounding the neighborhood and the initial impact the initiative has had in the community.

Students then participated in a gleaning experience alongside other HGI volunteers. This activity required students to engage with the other volunteers and local farmers, collect and weigh produce, and deliver it to homeless shelters in the downtown area; it encouraged students to learn by doing and seeing in the community, ultimately grounding their understanding of HGI operations and its impact on local residents. This firsthand experience illustrated the value of the initiative as well as opportunities where students could improve its viability. As a class, students then combined their collective insights by brainstorming a list of areas in need of improvement, ultimately identifying the following issues as ones they hoped to collaboratively address: (1) information about food use and waste after distribution, (2) food illiteracy, (3) lack of funding, (4) a need for committed and sustainable volun-

Students then periodically met with the HGI board of directors, volunteers, and neighborhood residents in order to improve upon the quality and viability of their action plans. These efforts encourage the boundary-spanning work promoted by a feminist pragmatist approach, requiring consistent feedback, reflection, and revision. In place of submitting assignments once, students and HGI engaged in an iterative feedback loop process that further strengthened final projects. Every month, students organized a themed potluck during which the HGI director, board members, volunteers, and residents of the Heartside neighborhood shared their thoughts about students’ action plans. These gatherings stimulated alignment between student projects and the needs of HGI, encouraged students to see the real-world impact of their efforts, and put the HGI community at the center of the endeavor. The students would collect feedback, further integrating multiple perspectives from the community into their existing plans. This iterative revisioning process pushed students to move beyond initial perceptions and narrow interventions by fostering a space from which they could incorporate diverse experiences across boundaries. We suggest such experiences are the vehicle for effective collaboration where working with the community rather than on the community can be put into practice.

At the end of the semester students presented their final prototypes to HGI’s director, board members, and volunteers; engaged in a dialogue with the invited community members; and collected a last set of recommendations that were then incorporated into their published findings. With this extensive feedback in mind, students ultimately (1) measured HGI’s outcomes through a student-created, administered, and assessed survey; (2) contributed to the design of HGI products and services through the development of community education programs and materials; (3) proposed an extended distribution route to include a daycare and other potential schools in the neighborhood; (4) built partnerships with other community members and local businesses intentionally aimed to increase the credibility and viability of HGI; and (5) published their ideas on how to cultivate self-sustaining programs and increase the scale of the work being done.


36. To assist the Heartside Cleaning Initiative in finding out what happens to food once it is distributed, specifically how much food is wasted, one student group created a survey and then collected, summarized, and disseminated the findings (see Katelyn Kuhl et al., “Heartside Cleaning Initiative Food Waste Survey,” LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability, paper 10, 2014, http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/10). This project helped the class refine their own projects.

37. For example, one product included a student-created manual outlining easy, nutritious, and low-cost recipes, using minimal ingredients and equipment, focused around seasonal produce coming from the farmers’ markets, and designed to help people learn about preparing produce in a healthy way (see Amanda Foster et al., “A Recipe for Healthy Communities,” LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability, paper 14, 2014, http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/14).


39. This team of students completed research on fundraising opportunities, creating an informational pamphlet along with a contact list of local potential business partners. The final group of students made initial contacts with a number of organizations, ultimately producing a pamphlet about the volunteering needs of HGI (see Kyle Ramsey et al., “3R-Reach, Recruit, Reform: Working with the Grand Rapids Community to Meet the Volunteer Needs of the Heartside Cleaning Initiative,” LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability, paper 15, 2014, https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/15).
Bridging the limitations of individual courses, students in the following semester’s course, Wicked Problems of Sustainability, then analyzed these initial action efforts, brainstormed creative ways to move HGI forward, and implemented action plans of their own, either as an extension to the already existing projects or as brand-new offshoots for the Initiative. In the absence of formal mechanisms for this course- and semester-spanning partnership, the animating force behind this collaboration was catalyzed by individual faculty-to-faculty relationships and a willingness to work together, along with a commitment to sustained engagement practices.\textsuperscript{40} and publicly engaged scholarship.\textsuperscript{41}

\section*{III. Wicked Problems of Sustainability}

In the winter of 2015 two interdisciplinary teams of students from Wicked Problems of Sustainability considered how they might use their own values, skill sets, and disciplinary expertise in order to move these initial efforts forward. The intent of this general education course is to “provide upper-division undergraduate students with a hands-on, collaborative experience at working on a local wicked problem of sustainability with community partners.”\textsuperscript{42} The objectives of the course ask students to:

1) identify and apply the literature on “wicked problems” to sustainability issues;

2) research and analyze current and/or historical case studies via two or more different disciplinary lenses with a goal towards integration;

3) in collaboration, present findings and facilitate deliberation on possible action plans;

4) analyze deliberative conclusions and propose solution or action effort, disseminating the results of the project.

These course objectives align with WP recommendations suggesting ameliorative and collaborative community actions must begin with the values at hand.\textsuperscript{43} The first three weeks of the semester focused on fostering community while building competency in the issues being studied. Students continued to delve into the complexities of the issue throughout the semester while developing and refining action-plans with HGI. Mirroring the course structure of Food Matters, students spent the final weeks of the semester disseminating their ideas, eliciting feedback, and analyzing their efforts so they could synthesize what they learned and share their findings with a broad range of community stakeholders.

Within the inherent time limitations of a standard semester, this timeline helped the instructor to scaffold course requirements in order to support students in building competencies and confidence in their community efforts. For instance, students begin by acquiring a framework from which to build action plans by conducting traditional literature reviews, hearing various experts talk about issues the initiative faces, interviewing community members, observing the community and the project-in-action, and then mind-mapping their insights. These collaborative frameworks are then used to brainstorm possible action plans, and these plans can then be prototyped and tested. Lessons learned through prototyping innovations can then filter back into the framework, reshaping and enhancing students’ understanding of the situation.\textsuperscript{44}

In the instructor’s experience, these practices can move students from a predetermined state of mind, into a state of “perplexity,”\textsuperscript{45} in addition, such iterative framing and scaffolding is likely to broaden students’ ethical framework, encourage community narrative as a vital source of information, and foster collaborative action. Seeking to integrate these disparate sources of in-


\textsuperscript{42} Lake and Fauvel, “Tackling.” 33.

\textsuperscript{43} See Brown and Lambert, \textit{Collective Learning}.


formation also makes the need for different knowledge cultures—including expert, community, organizational, and “holistic knowledge”—apparent.46

In alignment with the course objectives, interdisciplinary teams of students in the course used empathy mapping,47 community conversations, and secondary research in order to carefully consider the needs of HGI. By considering not only the wicked nature of systemic food challenges and the needs of HGI but also their own skill sets, disciplinary expertise, and values, students ultimately chose to focus on the challenges HGI faced around funding, promotion, and food distribution. By the end of the semester the two student teams collectively created (1) a crowdfunding “how-to” guide openly accessible to any interested nonprofit organization, (2) a storyboard for the creation of a HGI promotional video,48 (3) plans for the Heartside Glean Ride (a design like that of a mobile produce van), and (4) a brochure for Healthy Heartside Share boxes49 (i.e., weekly boxes of mixed produce delivered to residents). In addition, students sought out a wide variety of possible partners who might be able to further HGI’s mission (i.e., film and video students and professors, nursing students and professors, Heartside residents, etc.). (See figure 1 for an illustration of student project work.)

IV. The Community Partner’s Perspective

Heartside Gleaning Initiative viewed the opportunity to work with university classes as a prototypical win-win-win situation for a number of reasons. (1) Heartside Gleaning had much work that needed to be accomplished and, like most nonprofit organizations, their leadership and volunteer resources were overburdened. Seizing the opportunity to have students evaluate challenges, conduct secondary research, interview stakeholders, and develop potentially innovative action plans, HGI valued the chance to work closely with students interested in food justice, develop relationships and encourage volunteers for the harvest season. (2) The instructors would be partnering with a volunteer organization whose members were not only willing but also accustomed to working with students, as several key players were also university professors. (3) These partnerships enabled HGI to facilitate student learning about sustainable food systems, food access, and education (aligning with HGI’s mission).

With these objectives in mind HGI talked with the instructors to ensure that their approach to working in the community was compatible with the empowerment model HGI implements—that of working “with” not “on.” In fact, initial and sustained discussions were held to ensure compatibility between HGI needs and course objectives and to align expectations. An email excerpt outlines some of the desired framework for the partnership: “I would like it if we could imagine a context in which the students have many options/choices and can be innovative in their approach, but also provide guidelines, partnership, feedback, ideas and support, akin to what a client would request. I feel working ‘with’ the residents would be an extremely valuable experience and opportunity for the residents and for the students alike.”50 With a shared vision in place and a commitment to flexible collaboration, the partnership unfolded fairly organically.

When each semester ended HGI took a step back from the process, read the published student reports, and developed a document summarizing the outcomes and recommendations from each team. These documents have been referred to on numerous occasions as HGI continues to move ahead with fulfilling the organization’s mission. In general, course final products were useful as jumping off points for future HGI endeavors. The student recipe book, for example, needed to be individualized to better suit the needs of HGI’s produce recipients but has since been re-published by the country health department. However, in another instance, the data collected on pro-

47. Empathy mapping is a popular Design Thinking tool that asks students to consider not only what others are saying but also what they are thinking and feeling, assuming and valuing. It seeks to uncover the hidden and often unconscious motivations behind what others do and say, see, Holly Morris and Greg Warman, “Using Design Thinking in Higher Education,” EDUCAUSE Review, January 12, 2015, https://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/1/using-design-thinking-in-higher-education.
48. The Grand Gleaners hoped to further the mission of HGI by focusing predominantly on two critical concerns of nonprofit organizations: promoting and funding. This team thus created a crowdfunding “how-to” guide, developed a storyboard for the creation of a short promotional video, and conducted outreach to local film professionals (Kara D. Cook et al., “The Grand Gleaners Project Analysis,” LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability, paper 17, 2015, http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/17). The crowdfunding “how-to” guide, openly accessible to anyone, was incredibly valued by a wide range of community stakeholders.
49. The Food Fighters team, “armed with both the methods for ameliorating wicked problems and with key partnerships in the local community,” focused on designing tools to increase food distribution. These tools resulted in the Heartside Clean Ride, “a mobile food cart that allows HGI to store and transport gleaned produce to local residents who otherwise lack reliable transportation” (Selina Dorking, “Heartside’s Clean Ride: Bringing Fresh Food and Ideas to the Heart of Grand Rapids,” LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability, paper 18, 2015, p. 3, http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/18).
50. A. M. Fauvel, personal communication, 8/12/14.
duce use and waste by recipients was used directly in the HGI annual report and grant applications as well as in media releases.

An article published in the GVSU student newspaper, the *Lanthorn*, highlighted the outcomes of this partnership, interviewing CA, who said this work has been incredibly rewarding. CA noted that the formal classroom environment makes forming the connections necessary for genuine and reciprocal collaboration difficult. However, breaking bread together—as community member, partner, instructor, and student—helped to dissolve these divides. “When we ate together it was more of just a conversation and we went back and forth, back and forth.” In the end, “students came up with a lot of good ideas to help us see what our potential can be.” This interview captures the importance of hospitality, deep listening, and relationship building for fostering transformational learning and reciprocal impact.

While the benefits to the organization are clear, the collaboration with students also presented the HGI board with several challenges.

**Challenge #1: Implementing a “Working With” Model**

Ensuring community member voices were included in the process each step of the way (i.e., implementing a “working with” model) presented logistical challenges. For instance, HGI collaborates with and seeks to empower Heartside residents who have few resources. This presented many hurdles for the partnership, including difficulties with transportation to campus, communication, and meals. Communication with Heartside residents was problematic since most do not have easy access to email and have very limited minutes available on their phone plans. Moreover, since these residents are reliant on soup kitchens for meals and both courses were offered during mealtimes, it was considered necessary to provide meals. This problem was partially alleviated by holding thematic potlucks during each class meeting attended by residents. Lower-income volunteers attending these class sessions particularly valued eating home-prepared foods in a pleasant community setting with undergraduate students who were eager to listen to what they had to say.

**Challenge #2: Lack of Control and Follow-Through**

It is essential for an organization to speak with a consistent message that supports its mission and shows it in the best light. Students who are not an integral part of an organization may not fully understand the message or how to present it. During the course of these projects HGI did not always know who was being contacted, for what reason, and what was being said. Allowing students to represent HGI during contacts with potential donors, community partners, neighborhood residents, and businesses was risky. And, since HGI was not always aware of whom students contacted and what was discussed, they did not have the ability to follow-through, potentially placing HGI in a negative light in the eyes of those contacted about donating, fundraising, receiving produce, etc. In addition, some student projects could not be implemented without additional funding (for example, producing a promotional video for crowdfunding).

**Challenge #3: Quality of Student Work**

Not all of the work produced by students was usable; at times this resulted from the quality of submitted work, but at other times this was because the projects did not align with the organization’s current needs. For example, pamphlets and brochures must be of the highest quality; they must also be in a format easily adapted over time (as the organization’s needs change). A number of documents produced by students were created in programs that could not be edited and they thus could not be used.
While some of these challenges are specific to HGI, others are inherent to the messy process of collaborative and experiential learning and should be expected by any partnering organization seeking to empower students and community residents to be genuine collaborators. However, it is crucial to set outcome expectations early in the process and have continual communication so there are no surprises, unmet expectations, or disgruntled community members or partner organizations.

II. The Students’ Perspective

Students published works and commentary largely verified the value of the collaboration with HGI. This community collaboration required strong communication and collaboration skills, yielded real-world impacts, and opened opportunities to examine the value of course content in relation to surrounding communities so they could see the situation from multiple frameworks. As one student articulated, he most “enjoyed the … opportunity to create something real.” In general, students reported feeling intimidated by—and yet in the end empowered with—the notion that their work was going to continue beyond the classroom walls and live on in the community long after the semester ended. Further feedback substantiated the value and importance of intentional scaffolding for courses engaging students in messy, real-world learning. Students also found these courses far more challenging than most others.

**Challenge #1: Inherently Intimidating Nature of Real-World, Messy Partnerships**

A couple student teams found it challenging to imagine inspiring, impactful, and practical action projects within the broad range of possibilities presented. These same teams spent a lot of the semester floundering, paralyzed by the size of the task at hand. By the time they narrowed their action plans, they felt disappointed by the overall impact of their projects in comparison with their initial hopes. The high-stakes, real-world nature of the challenges students are confronting in such courses can be intimidating and overwhelming. In a number of ways, students were risking public failure. Student projects were presented to nonprofit leaders, deans, and the surrounding community and their findings published in an openly accessible platform.

**Challenge #2: Collaborative Time Constraints**

Across the board students articulated time constraints and difficulties in coordinating schedules. On the other hand, students were divided in their assessment of the number of hours of work required for completing tasks, many maintaining the workload was heavy. However, few students reported spending more than the recommended number of hours on course material and projects each week. Thus, there is a decided discrepancy between the workload expectation on the part of the students and the recommendations set by most universities.

**Challenge #3: Integration**

Some students additionally found it challenging to integrate course content with community engaged experiences, failing to wade into course content and connect it to their local action efforts. This feedback highlights the challenges of fostering deep student-to-content engagement when there is a strong student-to-community requirement in the course. Some findings that providing structured support and alignment can move students past these challenges. For instance, almost all students in Wicked Problems of Sustainability confirmed that the community work in the course was directly tied to the course objectives, the assignments allowed them to draw upon their community work, and the work was valuable. Emphasizing this, one
student in the class wrote, “this course is definitely one of my favorites so far. I love how much thought was put into this class and hope to see projects come to fruition.” Illustrating the merit of real-world engagement another student said “this is probably the most valuable course I have taken. It gave me insight [in]to issues I have never thought about as well as real world experience. This course also helped me realize what I want to do after college.”

III. The Instructors’ Perspective

We, the instructors, got to (1) put our pedagogical and philosophical commitments into practice in the “real world” (a rare enough phenomenon in the academic world), (2) facilitate in-time community transformations (seeing many of the results of our collaborative efforts within the same academic year), and (3) guide students own transformational learning (empowering them to see they have a role to play in our systemic public challenges). The collaboration with HGI made the issues each course sought to address very real, contextualizing the course topics and their value. Grounding these issues in the “real world” is critical for motivating engagement. We believe the partnership was also effective because it provided a frame from which students could be of service by utilizing their own experiences, skills, and disciplinary expertise. As feminist pragmatist scholars have noted, such an approach to engagement can help students foster the skill sets and values that are essential for social justice work: those of a genuine collaborator, capable organizer, fair facilitator, critical interpreter, as well as a public and engaged scholar.51 This approach, on the other hand, also presents even the most earnest and prepared instructor with a series of challenges.

Challenge #1: Content Versus Process: A “Both/And” or An “Either/Or” Proposition?

One of the main challenges comes from the fine movement between the course content and the applied problem-solving focus in the community. As noted, some students were overwhelmed by the readings and assignments. Experience has lent itself to the conclusion that integration between course content and student action efforts requires instructors to intentionally build reflective action cycles into the course. Experiential learning cycles can move students from brainstorming to implementation and testing, then to analysis and consideration of how these experiences relate to and can be informed by the content of the course. Synthesis, as one of the most challenging tasks we can assign to students, requires a lot of effort. Learning cycles that encourage revision and integration of lessons learned are more likely to yield synthesized insights and thus transformational, life-long learning.52 With this challenge in mind, we are pursuing the “disciplined pursuit of less … only better.”53

Challenge #2: Widely Varying Levels of Knowledge and Motivation

Students in both general education courses had widely varying levels of motivation around—and knowledge of—food and sustainability issues. Given the intensive nature of collaboration in both courses, these gulfs were significant. For instance, some students came in with no in-depth knowledge of food; some had never thought about its ethical, cultural, and political dimensions; many had never cooked; and even more didn’t have a clue about the systems and narratives behind its production. At the other end of the spectrum was a highly motivated and self-educated student—a committed vegan for a multitude of environmental, philosophical and ethical reasons with a wealth of volunteering experience at the on-campus Sustainable Agriculture Project. Partnerships between such students are full of tensions … and potential. These divisions lead to a widely divergent target audience. How do we, as instructors, keep the activist engaged while bringing the food ‘zombies’ into not only the dialogue but also the community action? Lessons

learned indicate that fostering connections between students, building relationships, and sharing our stories together foster the bonds necessary for transformational learning across these differences.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, Jane Addams has insights for us. For Addams, fellowship opens the door to transformational learning, to the reshaping of one’s perspective, and the expansion of one’s ethical framework.\textsuperscript{55} In addition, narratives have been shown to move and transform, whereas rational argumentation often does not.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Challenge \#3: Serving Many Masters and None}

Finally, significant challenges result from a diffusion of power and thus a lack of control over the directions of the course and student work. As collaborative student projects emerge from students’ own values, disciplinary expertise, and interests, the instructor can guarantee neither the trajectory of the project nor its merit. These efforts largely shift the instructor from authoritative expert towards facilitator and guide (a role Addams played throughout her life). Both courses required students to consider the impact their work is likely to have on not only their final grade but also the community. Midway through the semester, these more complex dimensions of the course led one student team to ask who they were trying to serve? The professor? The HGI director? Or the Heartside residents? We suggest these questions and the tension between them are incredibly valuable to the instructors’ and the students’ future personal, professional, and civic lives. As instructors, we were encouraged to develop skills never broached in graduate school—skills like counseling, facilitating, and mediating.\textsuperscript{57} In the end, the most successful projects resulted from teams that fully developed community relationships and took ownership over their projects, yet also employed open listening and integration in order to bridge these divides.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Community Partner} & \textbf{Student} & \textbf{Instructor} \\
\hline
Implementing a “working with” model & Inherently intimidating nature of real-world, messy partnerships & Content versus process: a “both/and” or an “either/or” proposition? \\
\hline
Lack of control and follow-through & Collaborative time constraints & Widely varying levels of student knowledge and motivation \\
\hline
Quality of student work & Integration & Serving many masters and none \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Challenges}
\end{figure}

\textit{Reciprocal Transformation: A Boundary-Spanning Model}

The end result of these endeavors ranged from awareness of the existence of HGI to strong partnerships in the community. For example, some students followed up on internship opportunities with various nonprofit organizations in the area, others found new career opportunities, and some continued their work with HGI. This should not be all that surprising, since such partnerships intentionally bridge boundaries by engaging university students, community members, nonprofit organizations, local farmers, and market vendors through their initiatives. Indeed, the partnerships described here intentionally sought to understand and ameliorate interconnected problems such as poverty, access, health, diet, and environment in the neighborhood with community partners and neighborhood residents. In general, these efforts have helped to prevent and reduce waste of valuable resources, inspire healthy food choices, enhance education, enrich relationships and networks, and encourage civic engagement.

Overall, the partnerships benefited HGI by exposing the initiative to additional potential partners, extending opportunities to fulfill their mission, and providing innovative new ideas and solutions for challenges faced by the orga-
nization. Most importantly for HGI, community members expressed feelings of empowerment by having their voices be an integral and consistent part of the conversation (a goal highlighted in HGI's mission). Similarly, students felt empowered through the opportunity to put their burgeoning knowledge and skills into action in the real world. Through their efforts, they gained skills at collaborating, presenting, networking, and publishing. The instructors got to put their philosophy into action, support community efforts, and empower students. In the end, students, instructors, and HGI found the partnership to be an enriching, challenging experience. In general, we suggest participatory, experiential and community-based pedagogy must carefully consider how to meet communities and students where they are, foster co-transformative interactions, and sustain long-term relationships.

The wicked problems framework makes it clear that we must do far more within higher education to create collaborative opportunities, not simply across our campus but also within our community. The problems we face today demand we develop relationships across difference, that we seek common ground, pursue creative solutions, and envision a new way forward. Frodeman's recommendations that we pursue field philosophy provides interested educators with a frame for such work. Under this model, and according to Frodeman, we must redefine success. Addressing “the needs of others as they define them” and changing our communities must now be integral factors in judging the success of our work. With this new definition in mind, a feminist pragmatist approach provides the tools. As Addams so clearly illustrates in Democracy and Social Ethics and as Ramaley more recently argued in “The Changing Role of Higher Education: Learning to Deal with Wicked Problems,” we need to do more to generate opportunities for more inclusive, equitable, and collaborative work on issues of social justice in our surrounding communities.

In the end, CA sums it up best, saying “I would do it again!” The students opened her eyes to aspects of the program she had not previously considered. “They had ideas about working with other people in the community. They came up with recipes that helped me know how to use the fresh fruits and vegetables.” By highlighting the reciprocal dimensions of this partnership, CA concludes by exemplifying our overarching message: the necessity of the WP framework and the value of a feminist pragmatist approach. “It’s nice,” she says, “to contribute to [the students’] education … at the same time they’re contributing to my education.”

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Gleaning Initiative Working Board

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