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THE POWER OF FOOD ON CAMPUS: A UNIQUE (AND TASTY) CO-CREATION

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Introduction

Timmons: This partnership began in early 2012, when Professor Bosso invited me to present in the “Open Classroom,” a public forum sponsored by the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs that attracts participants from across campus as well as from the Greater Boston community. The theme of the “Open Classroom” changes each semester, and in Spring 2012 Professor Bosso focused it on the food system through an urban lens. He emailed and asked me to talk about “feeding Northeastern” as part of a panel focused on being on the front lines of food service. It was the first time anyone had asked me to talk about how Dining Services fed literally tens of thousands of students, faculty, and staff each day.

Since then we have collaborated numerous times, in the process blurring the lines between theory and practice through experiential education, the long-time hallmark of the Northeastern curriculum. Each collaboration has engaged students in the classroom, the dining halls, on research projects, and, most recently, as Fellows in the [Menus of Change University Research Collaborative \(MCURC\)](#). Professor Bosso and I were invited to be part of the MCURC when it started in 2015, and both hold leadership positions in the Collaborative. The MCURC, co-led by Stanford University and The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), seeks to apply the [Menus of Change Principles](#) to institutional dining (as a whole, the largest provider of food in the nation) and thereby accelerate production and consumption of healthy, sustainable, and delicious food. The MCURC Education Working Group created a student Fellows program in early 2019 to more intentionally engage students in ***The vision for the (MCURC) to cultivate the long-term well-being of all people and the planet—one student, one meal at a time.***

Allison is our current MCURC student fellow and works with both Chris and me on a range of projects. She has served as a teaching assistant in our “pop-up” class, *Xperiential Food Literacy*, inspired by the Menus of Change Principles. She also has coordinated the work with several undergraduate student interns funded by the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, which supports projects to create a more sustainable New England food system. In this case, students are working as part of a three-university project to support a more sustainable regional seafood industry, which includes promoting greater use of kelp and underutilized fish in dining.

Our respective areas of work have been transformed through our partnership. It would not have had the same impact without full participation of other Northeastern Dining staff (especially co-educators: Campus Executive Chef, Tom Barton, and Dietitian, Christine Clark), including many in support roles whose names are not on the class syllabus, and by our MCURC Fellows. And it does not work without the enthusiasm and interest of our students. All relationships and outcomes have been enriched through our connections and shared intentions to grow and contribute together.

What we have learned from our collaborations

Timmons: As a new and enthusiastic educator, I saw each connection with the students as offering an opportunity to share and learn. Hearing directly from our student/Fellow in real time and being agile enough to continually adjust to improve the class was invaluable. We cultivated true co-creations where each stakeholder (student, faculty, and staff) has a voice that impacted the outcome and created a powerful experience. Throughout the project we met regularly to tweak the content, and we each had the role of educator and learner. It was a powerful growth experience for all.

Every time I have the opportunity to collaborate with Chris, I always learn from his expertise on food systems and pedagogy that he so generously shares with everyone around him. Co-creating with our MCURC Fellows, Maya (spring 2019) and Allison (fall 2019 – present) have offered and are offering student perspectives and insights that influence how we modify the dining program, conduct research, and teach together in our Xperiential Food Literacy pop-up class.

Bosso: Our collaborations have enabled me to get outside my traditional teaching zone and to work with colleagues whose primary responsibility is to feed our students. Our eight-week, 1-credit “pop-up” course, for example, takes place in our Xhibition Kitchen, located in our Stetson West Dining Hall. It is a “teaching kitchen,” not a standard classroom, and the course involves a blend of lectures by me and Maureen on one or more of the Menus of Change principles, related cooking demonstrations by Campus Executive Chef Tom Barton, tastings of dishes he prepared, and discussions on nutrition led by Dietitian Christine Clark. Pulling this off requires collaboration among professionals with very different backgrounds, schedules, and official roles, requiring me to adjust how I think about teaching.

In the process, I have learned an immense amount about the “business side” of my university’s dining system—its sheer scale, the diversity of foods prepared and served, and the daily challenges of feeding thousands of students, faculty, and staff, each of whom brings their own food desires and needs to the exchange. In many ways, I’ve come to appreciate the campus as a perfect metaphor for the broader food system. I’ve also come to see Maureen and other professionals in Dining Services, from Executive Chef Barton and Nutritionist Clark to the other chefs and front-line servers, as teachers in their own right. Their encounters with students usually are far more frequent and intimate than mine—food has a way of doing that—and their perceptions about our students have informed my thinking. For example, prior to our collaboration I was unaware of the scope and range of dietary challenges our students bring to campus, ranging from allergies to food phobias, and the effort it takes for Dining Services to

accommodate them. I also observed that Dining Services does not just serve food; it seeks to guide students on healthy eating choices that will stay with them through life. There is a lot of teaching going on in those dining halls.

Deyo: Though I worked primarily behind the scenes helping create lesson plans and PowerPoint decks, I was able to both offer insights into the mindsets of college students around my age group for my fellow co-creators and provide a practical perspective of dining operations and systems to students that are not always obvious throughout the process. Having the unique perspective of a fairly recent college graduate who studies food policy and spent a year working on the sustainability side of dining services at my undergraduate university, I found that the course provided an opportunity to combine and share my knowledge from my previous experiences from both the classroom and the dining halls. Chef Tom's cooking demonstrations and Christine's lessons in practical nutrition, as well as the wisdom and expertise of Chris and Maureen, truly set this course apart from any others offered in a traditional academic setting. I mean, how many college classes give you a cooking lesson, lunch, and a better understanding of where the food came from and why it's nutritious?

When I first started at Northeastern in the fall of 2019, it felt like I had a lot to catch up on in terms of the student culture and how things are done. Being able to participate in the pop-up proved to be an excellent learning opportunity to see firsthand how active a role the student body takes in the decision-making in relation to dining services operations and what challenges they encounter when making food choices. An experimental, collaborative course like this is something that could only be dreamed of at many schools. It was inspiring to see four instructors come together to try to attack the issue of food literacy from different angles without anyone asking them to do so, then be able to adapt and make changes as we went without any egos. A commitment and excitement over the potential outcomes of the class remain, which is why we've decided to do it all again in the spring.

Insights obtained

Timmons: It is wonderful to be a part of such a diverse (in positions, generations, gender, and experience) teaching team. It is rare that this group (a tenured professor, Director of Dining, Campus Executive Chef, Dietitian and Graduate student/MCURC Fellow) would teach a class together and learn from each other every step of the way. The co-creation was powerful. No egos, or agendas, just a mutual commitment and passion for collaborating to make a difference in the world through the power of food as an educator on campus and beyond. For each of the 24 Menus of Change Principles, we would discuss which one of us would take the lead for the session based on which combination of perspectives would be most impactful for the students. As an example, if the principle focused heavily on nutrition (e.g. reduce added sugar) our nutritionist and chef would be the leads for that topic as they had the most information to offer. When we taught about the "rewarding better agricultural practices" Professor Bosso would share his insights through a policy lens and I would offer details about how we operationalize the principle through our procurement practices. Our MCURC Fellow Allison was highly engaged and offered a student perspective and also highlighted where we could be clearer or expand the presentation after we finished each session. Together our course was a generous dance with five

different areas of expertise focused on creating a memorable experience for the students to put into action.

I have also been engaging a similar co-creation mindset with students, faculty, and staff for many years in my primary role as Director of Dining Services at Northeastern, with positive outcomes. For over fifteen years I've chaired the Food Advisory Board (FAB) open to all students. We would gather monthly and the students set the agenda. I shared updates from Dining and answered any questions they had. At each meeting we always spoke about our intention to co-create the Dining program together. The combination of the student feedback and our dining expertise has been an ideal pairing to continually improve the program driven by a strong student voice and advocacy. These meetings created long standing relationships, a high level of trust and a program that students are engaged in and care about. It was exciting to have the opportunity to amplify the co-creation model with our pop-up teaching team that included students, faculty, staff and our contracted food service team.

Bosso: The collaborations with Maureen and other members of the Dining Services team gives me deeper practical (as opposed to only theoretical) appreciation of the power of food in our everyday experiences. It is one thing to read a book, a far different thing to work with people who face everyday challenges in ensuring that the campus community—students in particular—enjoy healthy, nutritious, safe, and tasty food while navigating the many possible “landmines” in contemporary food production and consumption. Of note, our students increasingly demand food that is produced more sustainably (however that term is defined), more ethically, and more locally. They want the conditions of production to match their values. But they still also want convenience and variety—few will give up strawberries in February—and they worry about costs. In some ways, our campus dining ecosystem is an apt metaphor for the food system more generally. In these ways, our collaborations have informed my course on *Food Systems and Public Policy*, in which I now routinely use campus dining to highlight key tensions in food production and consumption.

I've also learned far more than I expected about the complicated lives of our students and the centrality of Dining Services in helping students thrive. As I noted earlier, I was unaware of the scope and range of dietary challenges our students confront, and how those challenges affect their capacity to thrive intellectually. These insights have helped get me out of my academic cocoon, where I haven't always noticed or appreciated what happens to students beyond the classroom. I've also come to appreciate how much learning occurs outside the classroom, and have come to see the entire campus as a laboratory for teaching, research, and learning.

Deyo: As this pilot course was my first ever experience as a teaching assistant, I wasn't sure what to expect. I was a bit intimidated and unsure of how to best provide feedback and insights on the materials and how we could better serve our students. For example, I was often able to work behind the scenes to craft slides and lesson content in a way that students could apply the material in their own lives, offering tips on how to affordably and sustainably eat plant-forward on a college student budget. I gave advice on things like bulk purchasing legumes, which dairy alternatives are best, and how to weigh the pros and cons of some items that are marketed as “green” or “sustainable.” The core instructors were eager to hear my critiques and encouraged me to share my ideas and point of view with the class. This eagerness and encouragement, along

with reading discussion posts from students, made me much more comfortable to step into a teaching role. It was inspiring to work with a group who dedicated so much time out of their busy schedules to collaborate on this project, which we've recognized as a way to inform and motivate students to assume a more participative role in our food system.

Coming from a smaller and significantly less diverse undergraduate university, my interactions with the students helped me to understand how to better apply the Menus of Change principles in a way that accounts for the vast variety in food cultures that students bring to campus. I think our curriculum has maintained a sense of positivity rather than being accusatory, explaining why it's important for everyone to make small changes to their dietary habits and how we as an institution are giving them the tools to do so.

Challenges—and lessons from them

Timmons: Our pop-up class was a build-as-you-go, iterative model. Everyone had to be flexible, creative, and willing to pivot quickly. This included the teaching team and students in this first-time class. We met frequently, communicated often, and were generous and forgiving with each other as we taught and learned together. Even with all this, we made mistakes, had overlaps in our content with four instructors, and still need to work on our PowerPoint decks. We attempted to share all 24 Menus of Change Principles during our eight sessions with three Principles each session. We created themes for each class and clustered like Principles. Was 24 in eight sessions too much for students to understand and integrate? Should we have prioritized the Principles to create a more intentional focus for impact? These are all questions to consider for our next pop-up in Spring 2021. We'll keep asking questions, be curious, and be open to opportunities for improvement including all voices.

Bosso: In many ways, the major challenges are structural: I live on the “academic” side of the house, while Maureen and the rest of the Northeastern Dining Services team live on the “business” side. While we may share the academic schedule, everything else is different: our daily work lives, what counts as “work,” how success is assessed. For example, most of our work together would not “count” much toward my annual merit review, which tends to favor scholarly publications above all other outputs. I suspect the same holds true for Maureen, whose primary duty is to ensure the efficient and cost-effective operations of Dining Services. We collaborate *despite* these realities. We're both fortunate to be senior enough—and therefore given a lot of independence—that we can pursue these collaborations without significant concern about our professional standings. However, that isn't to say we haven't had to work to overcome the structural barriers that exist between our respective sides of campus. To cite one example: our “pop up” course is entirely voluntary, and relies on our willingness and capacity to go beyond our regular jobs.

Deyo: I think our main challenge was figuring out the right balance of teaching material for each class. We attempted to incorporate policy issues to frame the topic, then presented three MOC principles. Due to the way we had organized them, instructors occasionally found themselves echoing what the previous instructor had just said or had spoken about during a previous class. Moving forward, we're attempting to group the principles with similar ones that are directly

related in order to minimize repetition and have a clearer message each session. We also are working to find ways to encourage student participation more during each week. I think this will be achieved by having a more focused discussion and by utilizing prompts asking about how students can utilize the information and what factors have played a role in their current habits.

Advice we can offer to others considering engaging in such work

Timmons: I suggest approaching any project with the intention of teaching and learning together as a co-creation. Everyone involved has something valuable to offer and the diversity of thoughts, demographics, and generations creates the secret sauce where everyone is highly engaged and the results are powerful for all involved.

Bosso: *Just do it*, even acknowledging the structural challenges. While it helps that I am a full professor with tenure, these collaborations can inform teaching and research for any faculty member. What matters is getting the institutional support to collaborate across “the divide.” For new faculty, start out by building these collaborations into your teaching. Start by inviting people from the “other side” into your classroom. Ask them to talk about what they do on campus and connect their roles and contributions to your course themes. You would be amazed at how much teaching is happening beyond the confines of the academic space.

Deyo: I would say that, though it might be easier at first for organizational purposes to identify everyone’s main strengths, it can be even more helpful to encourage possible insights from fellow co-creators. We all came from different backgrounds, both professionally and personally, which meant that each person’s expertise wasn’t necessarily limited to the topic we initially thought they would cover.