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## Exploring Food Policy Networks: A Case Study of Omaha, Nebraska

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**OCTOBER 2016**



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The College has become a national leader among similar colleges, with nine programs ranked in the top 25 in the nation. Our faculty ranks are among the finest in their disciplines. Faculty, staff, and students are integral to the community and state because of our applied research, service learning, and community partnerships. We take our duty seriously to help address social needs and craft solutions to local, state, and national problems. For more information, visit our website: [cpacs.unomaha.edu](http://cpacs.unomaha.edu)

## CPACS Urban Research Awards

Part of the mission of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) is to conduct research, especially as it relates to concerns of our local and statewide constituencies. CPACS has always had an urban mission, and one way that mission is served is to perform applied research relevant to urban society in general, and the Omaha metropolitan area and other Nebraska urban communities in particular. Beginning in 2014, the CPACS Dean provided funding for projects with high relevance to current urban issues, with the potential to apply the findings to practice in Nebraska, Iowa and beyond.

# Exploring Food Policy Networks:

A Case Study of Omaha, Nebraska

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**October 2016**

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## OVERVIEW

- Overview of the issues and importance of this work
- Research Questions
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusion

## THE ISSUES

- Agricultural policy traditionally has been set at the federal level.
- Increasing attention on local and regional food systems has led to new demands for policymaking at the state and local levels.
- Few academics have researched these emerging food policy issues and governance challenges.

## PURPOSE

To present the results of interviews with key stakeholders in the Omaha food policy network in order to gain an understanding of the specific characteristics of food policy networks and apply the lessons learned to the more general body of knowledge on policy networks.

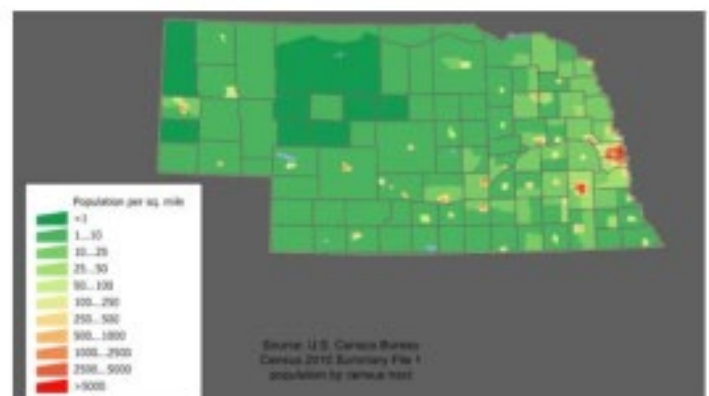
## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Who are the key stakeholders influencing policy around local food in Omaha and what are their visions for a sustainable and healthy food system?
- How do these various actors interact with one another?
- What are the broader implications of this research for the study of food policy networks and policy networks more generally?

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

- Agranoff and McGuire (2001):
  - Activation
  - Framing
  - Mobilizing
  - Synthesizing
- Contributing to knowledge of network formation and food systems development

## OMAHA, NEBRASKA



## METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative Approach
- Interviews
  - Interviewees
  - Analysis of Interviews
- Inventory

| Demographics |    |
|--------------|----|
| Male         | 23 |
| Female       | 17 |

| Sector  | # Interviewed |
|---|---------------|
| Nonprofit                                     | 16            |
| Government (career)                           | 11            |
| Government (elected)                          | 3             |
| Higher Ed/Research                            | 5             |
| Private                                       | 9             |
| Food Producer/Aggregator                      | 4             |
| * some individuals have multiple affiliations |               |

## NETWORK-FOCUSED FINDINGS

### STRENGTHS OF OMAHA FPN

#### Agricultural heritage

"The agricultural heritage in Nebraska. Not that many people are that far away from the farm that they can understand. They've got family that worked on them or grew up on them. They understand that it takes a lot of work and that should be important to us." (Participant 34)

"I think we need to tap into that. The seed sower is our emblem, we have a rich agricultural heritage and tradition. A majority of the people that you talk to come from a family of farmers. We need to remember that heritage and embrace it. We need to redefine it. That can be one of our strongest tools in moving forward." (Participant 28)

#### Natural resources

"Biggest strength is natural resource. In Omaha, the spread out nature means that there are these vacant lots and that's a plus to us, a plus to growing. And then also the soil being that old prairie soil." (Participant 25)

#### Growing awareness of local food

"I would say especially from the consumer perspective, I see a lot more growth and awareness and engagement on that regard." (Participant 36)

#### Strong restaurant and growing retail investment in local food

"We have an incredible amount of restaurants that are farm to table. Our grocery stores carrying local farms." (Participant 7)

"The fact that the retailers will give preferential treatment to local growers. They will highlight that. The Russ's and Super Saver's they even have pictures up of like the corn grower, Daniels, in their produce department. They want people to make that connection." (Participant 12)

#### Partnership/collaboration highly valued

"The strength, I think our network is really strong actually in Nebraska. And there's a real, I think, I'm observing, a real willingness to work together. There's sort of a demand for that collaboration. And if you don't do that I feel like there is a push back to you as an organization or group that doesn't." (Participant 20)

## Passionate people

"I think the strengths are you have people who are excited and passionate about doing the work. You do have individuals who are willing to get in and engage. You do have individuals who are willing to do the dirty, foundational, structural work that needs to be done in order to make this work." (Participant 19)

## WEAKNESSES OF OMAHA FPN

### Nebraska doesn't grow food

"Large-scale agriculture system and a large-scale agriculture that's not producing food. And I've talked about this with a lot of different people, our landscape here in Nebraska is very well suited for huge-scale agriculture because it's very wide-open and you can drive a tractor for a hundred miles." (Participant 13)

"Obviously being such an ag-focused region it should be very natural and I think it is for us to have food conversations. And the irony of the way that we're using our land to produce food that's not consumed by humans and shipped all over the world." (Participant 20)

### Farm to Institution limited, chicken & egg of scalability

"Institutionally we're way behind. Like significantly, way behind. When you look at school systems on the coast, specifically to the west coast, and even hospitals and things of that nature, they have amazing food programs in place." (Participant 18)

### Policies as barriers

- Food safety regulations
- Zoning issues
- Complexity of navigating red tape

### Lack of Coordination, Duplication & Need for Steering/Small # of People

"A lot of different groups are working on this and somewhat duplicating each other's efforts." (Participant 12)

"But I'd say it's too loose to call it a system. I think what you have is a lot of players doing different things and playing important roles, but it's not like a system in the sense that, oh, it's seamless and we're making this work together and this is, you know, how we're all working together, and this is what our niche is versus someone else's. A lot of independent people." (Participant 16)

"But again, you'll have fifty people that are covering the same ground and the differences between them are very little. So then they're chasing the same money." (Participant 24)

"The flip side of that though is that there is a very small group with very limited resources and we haven't expanded that group very successfully." (Participant 33)

## WHO WILL LEAD?

"Well I think when you think about the Metro Omaha Food Policy Council, my first thought is that the birth, so to speak, of that food policy council, and I think it happened many times." (Participant 30)

"It's unfortunate that that has ebbed and flowed to a point where it is now that it's sort of in this regrouping stage." (Participant 36)



| Organization Name                      | Focus  | Timeline     |
|--|--|--------------|
| Community Garden Network               | Community Gardens  | 2009-present |
| Metro Omaha Food Policy Council        | Omaha Metro; food policy                                   | 2011-present |
| Growing Food Connections               | Steering committee to determine strategic vision for Omaha | 2015-2017    |
| MAPA's Local Food Coordinating Council | Heartland 2050; 8 county focus                             | 2016-present |
| Community Garden Task Force            | Growing community gardens statewide                        | 2015-2016    |
| Statewide Food Policy Council          | Not funded (on hold)                                       | 2015-present |
| FPCs in neighboring communities        | Many FPCs in Iowa; FPC in Lincoln (2014-present)           | varies       |

## NEED FOR EDUCATION

### Target Audience

- General Public
- Children/Youth
  - Clear pathways throughout education system
- Policymakers

### Education Focus

- General/Awareness
- Skills-based

## FOOD POLICY COUNCIL - DESIRED TRAITS

Inclusivity



Good representation across the food system

Serves as a network hub

Represent the “doers” – chefs/farmers/businesses

“People can talk all they want about food access and food availability, but if they don’t have the people that are actually growing the produce, if they aren’t the nucleus of this discussion, then all this discussion around it is effortless.” (Participant 22)

“It’s really hard for individual local food producers to have the time to be able to, you know, they’re so obviously out of time and overstretched with their resources anyway. When they go to meetings nobody is paying them to be there. That’s just time away from their operations, time away from everything else. But that perspective needs to certainly be there in terms of how...because if it doesn’t work for the producers it usually doesn’t work for anyone else usually either.” (Participant 27)

Prevent duplication and target grants/resources  
Paid/dedicated staff & appropriate infrastructure  
Government/political involvement  
Actively addressing public policy (P vs. P)  
Task-goal oriented

## **FOOD POLICY COUNCIL - ROLES FOR ACTORS**

Visionary/strategic  
Research support  
Identify needs of persons doing the work  
Facilitator or convener  
Government follows rather than leads?

## **FOOD POLICY COUNCIL - TRAITS OF LEAD AGENCY**

Knows the community and has a good network  
Strong facilitation skills  
Neutral/no personal agenda

"You get some folks who are very vocal. It has to be this way. But understanding that urban agriculture is so big. It's so varied. The needs of the people are so different. You have to have someone who can move between all the different segments, understand them, and then make sure that the needs of all the organizations are being addressed." (Participant 19)





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