

## **A Student-Centred Focus on Food: York's Faculty of Environmental Studies**

**By Gerda Wekerle**

The Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University took in its first graduate students in 1970. Since then, we have often found that students are decades ahead of the academic community in identifying public policy issues that are emergent and benefit from an interdisciplinary bridging of fields and disciplines, particularly in the fast-growing area of food studies.

We recently hired our first tenure stream, full-time appointment to teach courses on food. An agronomist by training, this faculty member was a food systems policy consultant and Executive Director of Toronto's Food Policy Council. This experience links our students directly into the rapidly evolving and multi-sector Canadian food systems planning community. We now offer three courses on food in FES, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, one of which is Food, Land and Culture.

The Faculty of Environmental Studies attracted students to food studies 35 years ago. In 1973, three master's students completed major research papers on Conservation and Foodstuff Production, Basic Soil Ecology and Chemical Fertilizers, and Population Growth and the Problem of Food Supply. From 1973 to 2005, 118 masters students, supervised by more than 20 different faculty members, completed major research papers on a broad range of topics that are integrated into most of the key areas of teaching and research of the Faculty of Environmental Studies. These include student field work on food and agriculture in the Global South focused on topics such as cooperatives and agricultural development in Tanzania; farming systems and eco-development in dryland

Africa; urban agriculture in Jakarta and in Kampala; smallholder coffee production in Indonesia and Costa Rica; feeding and humanitarian aid in Africa; and food security and refugees. Students focusing on food and agriculture in the Global North have focused topics that include food policy and community gardens in Toronto; design for rooftop gardens; nutrition and community kitchens; health benefits of school breakfast programs; medicinal plants and community health; migrant farmers; food banks and waste management; educating new farmers in Ontario; feminism and farming and ethics in agriculture.

A PhD program started about ten years ago. Three completed dissertations focused on agricultural biotechnology and the environment, environmental risk assessment of GMO canola, and seed saving. Nine PhD students are currently focused on food issues, including an emphasis on women and food and on farmers' movements in Europe and Latin America.

### **Leadership and Activism**

The Faculty of Environmental Studies has tended to attract activist students who have a commitment to community service. As final projects for undergraduate theses and master's research papers, our students have established a number of school gardens, children's gardens and community gardens in Toronto and its suburbs. The first fair trade coffee shop in Toronto, Alternative Grounds, started as a final paper by one of our Masters in Environmental Studies students. After FES was gifted a rain forest in Costa Rica as a research centre, Las Nubes, students worked with local farmers to promote shade grown coffee. Students and farmers developed and marketed a new product which is sold through Timothy's, a Toronto coffee chain and widely publicized at the York

University coffee shop. One of our graduate students developed a curriculum for new farmer training that she tested on interns at organic farms in the region. This continues to be used. Another graduate student developed a prototype roof top garden for FoodShare's warehouse in downtown Toronto that evolved into their very successful rooftop food growing area. A group of our students organized an alternative organic food service on York campus to challenge the prevailing corporate food provider. They ran this for almost ten years and created student employment. Our students also persevered to gain administration commitment for a community garden on campus- the Maloca Garden, which is still going strong.

### **Planning and Food**

Interest in planning and food is relatively recent, emerging since about 2000.

We have a large planning program- about 60 masters students every year. They began to see special issues on food in planning journals, in books and at conferences. In 2003, we graduated the first three students whose interests focused on food. One focused on urban growth and agricultural land reserves; the second studied visual media in food system planning; a third studied a rural organization in Mexico that linked farmers and urban consumers. In 2004, three more planning graduate students focused on rural wine tourism and conservation of rural character; faith communities and food justice; and urban agriculture in Havana and Toronto. In 2006-2007, about six planning students focused on food and agriculture, about one third of the 22 masters students concentrate on food issues.

Within the planning program, students have incorporated food and agriculture interests into studio projects. For example, the redevelopment proposal for a military housing site

near the university included a plan for a community garden and farmers market. A studio that developed a plan for a city works site, incorporated land for a market garden and farmer's market.

The Faculty of Environmental Studies master's program is structured around student centred learning, where each student develops a unique academic plan that outlines learning objectives and the strategies to achieve them. There is extensive one-on-one advising and mentoring. Students are able to incorporate food issues into papers, projects and internships, as well as being able to take courses in other academic units and universities. Students have also benefitted from international research projects, such as a long term project we had in Indonesia where both Canadian and Indonesian students focused on urban agriculture. As part of the Canadian Urban Institute's international internships, one student is going to Jamaica in summer 2008 to work with a potato cooperative. Two of our MES students have been recipients of IDRC's prestigious Agropolis award for graduate study.

Our graduates have formed the backbone of the food security and urban agriculture movement in Toronto and other parts of Canada, providing leadership in food agencies and opening up new areas.

### **How do you build a field when none exists?**

Prior to the emergence of food studies as a field, the Faculty of Environmental Studies attracted students who had identified food and agriculture as a pressing issue. They had nowhere to study this. Through a **student-centred learning program**, where students work closely with a faculty advisor to design their own academic program , we have

found that students are innovative in identifying emerging issues in food studies. Their research and community projects often contribute innovative approaches and new knowledge.

**Food and agriculture studies have been spread throughout our large program and mainstreamed** rather than enclaved into a designated program or department. Faculty members whose primary expertise is not food studies but areas such as tropical ecology, critical development studies, conservation, health, social movements, and planning, have been supportive of student work on food and agriculture. This pushes the boundaries of food studies, while, at the same time, developing broad support for food studies.

**Partnership and collaboration have been important** with other universities, especially Ryerson and the University of Toronto, and with community agencies. For the past three years, the three universities have jointly organized and funded a yearly speaker's series, Food for Talk, to provide a resource for all our students and a forum for academics and community agencies to meet. Students in FES have benefitted immeasurably from ongoing and long-term relationships with community agencies such as FoodShare and the STOP Community Food Centre. These have provided opportunities for volunteer work, paid internships, and sites for action research.

**Planning Students act as a bridge.** They bring food issues into planning by introducing these topics in courses that they take and projects that they do. By working at the intersections of planning and other areas of environmental studies, they often raise new issues about planning and urban agriculture. As planning students, they apply planning theories and approaches to food: e.g. how do regional food systems relate to new

regionalism debates? How do you plan for more equitable and sustainable food systems? How do you target poverty reduction in rural development? How does communicative planning apply to community food security? Does GIS help in identifying sites for food production in the city? In raising these questions, they highlight the ways in which food studies can benefit from a broader planning perspective, as well how planning may be enriched by an emphasis on food and agriculture. As in other programs, our students struggle with the question of where food fits into the wider planning profession. If they focus on food and planning, where will they find employment? In Canadian cities, only Vancouver has specifically hired a planner to work on food issues, although in other urban areas, e.g. the Region of Waterloo, planning and public health staff have worked together on strategic plans. In the short term, students have to become well-educated planners who can bring food planning into the planning conversation as food continues to be seen as a critical issue in urbanized areas.