

Local food advocacy includes academics!

Bryan Dale



I was a bit stunned. I was sitting with a friend in a café on Danforth Avenue in Toronto, and he had just told me that he was a member of the National Farmers Union (NFU). I had heard about the good work that the NFU was doing while I was carrying out my Master's research on La Vía Campesina, the international movement of peasants and farmers that the



NFU helped to establish in 1993. However I had no idea that non-farmers could be members. In a way, it made sense that this friend was an NFU member given his interests in local food, environmental advocacy and other social justice issues. Similarly, I didn't take any convincing. I signed up as an associate member of the NFU right away.

That was in 2013. Since then I have become increasingly involved with the NFU and its efforts to advocate for a more localized, socially just, and environmentally sound food system. This involvement was facilitated by the approach I took to completing my PhD research as a scholar-activist. Scholar-activism is an excellent methodology as it helps academics to both learn from those directly involved with grassroots struggles, and to get involved. Specifically, it is clear to me now that academics of various backgrounds and disciplines can make a huge contribution to local food advocacy efforts. I have met numerous students and professors who are supporting the NFU in this way, and yet there is still much room for other academics to lend a hand.

One of the simplest ways for academics to contribute is by making their research more accessible to farmers and their allies. Whether you are a soil scientist, political economist, or health policy expert, there are various ways for you to ensure that your work is supporting grassroots efforts to transform the food system. For example:

This is a Local Food Advocate Network publication and project of the National Farmers Union-Ontario. It is made possible by financial assistance from the Government of Ontario, and is supported by the Greenbelt Fund and the National Farmers Foundation.



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- You can disseminate your research findings and analyses on relevant issues by writing for popular news outlets, blogs and progressive magazines. (You can even write specifically for the NFU's quarterly newsletter!)
 - You can also speak at a conference where farmers and food advocates gather. The NFU's regional and national conventions, and the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO) annual conference, are just a couple of examples of opportunities where you can serve the public and also receive feedback on your work.

Secondly, academics can get involved in specific campaigns and research efforts that are of interest to them:

- The NFU has a wide range of committees and working groups that are contributing to diverse forms of advocacy and policy work. They are taking up issues ranging from seeds and land access to climate change and the struggles of marginalized groups (such as Indigenous peoples and migrant workers). The skills and knowledge that students and professors have can be practically applied to all of this important work.
- Physical scientists can also help advance the research interests of farmers, who are already taking up important issues such as soil health and carbon sequestration, and the health benefits of eating ecologically grown food.

Of course, it also cannot be overstated what a significant contribution academics can make by simply signing up as NFU associate members and getting involved locally. I can say with confidence that it is a very rewarding experience!