

## **Food systems literacy**

This research project, led by Dalhousie University professors Kathleen Kevany and Hiwot Hailelassie and postdoctoral researcher, Liam Young, responded to the interrelated problems affecting our food systems—climate change, malnutrition, obesity, deskilling, and the ubiquity of highly processed foods—through an investigation of the concept and practice of food systems literacy. An emerging idea in academic and public health discourse, food systems literacy includes not only knowledge of nutrition and healthful food choices, but also a broader understanding of food's social, economic, and ecological significance. Our study's aim was to build upon existing forms of food systems education in Atlantic Canada, develop new tools and resources for teachers, and ignite young imaginations around careers in the plant protein sector—where technology, innovation, and skilled labour are coming together to meet the challenges of climate change and public health.

From June 2022 to March 2023, we conducted a review of scientific evidence to shine light on the best ways to increase food systems literacy; and we produced a series of lesson plans related to plant proteins and food systems, using input from educational professionals and community practitioners interested in improving the food skills and knowledge of primary and junior high students. This included our applying for and receiving ethics approval from two universities, provincial governments, and local school districts to conduct six focus groups where we collected data and analyzed this input to consider for use in teachers' guides. We have drafted a paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, and we have another one in the works based on the focus group data.

As one of our focus group participants emphatically stated, “The food system is broken.”

He attributed this brokenness to our food culture, one that values food as a convenience and commodity but not as a source of wellness, health, community, or ecological sustainability. Our research shows that fostering new food cultures requires several strategies, including improving food systems literacy in youth, particularly around plant proteins. The lesson plans we are developing aim to educate students on the interconnectedness of food systems and how food systems affect individuals, communities, and the environment. By learning about the multiple components of food systems, students may be able to understand the impact of their food choices, and how they can make more sustainable choices.

In the coming months, our lesson plans will be distributed to our partner schools and our two academic papers will be published. If feasible, we may host additional focus groups with teachers in PEI, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, to gather more ideas on how to bring these interactive teaching ideas into classrooms and into the hands of students.