

## Introduction

The UC Global Food Initiative (GFI) seeks “to harness the resources of the University of California... to put the world on a pathway to feed itself in ways that are nutritious and sustainable.” GFI empowers university students to find solutions and engage in education of their peers and communities through a variety of channels – one of which is hands-on education. Students, staff, and faculty across the nine UC campuses are collaborating on projects and research that target student needs in food access and literacy.

However, achieving food literacy and food sovereignty in the student population at UC Berkeley has been challenging. Without an understanding of how students participate (or not) in food systems education and what the barriers to entry into educational spaces are, existing experiential learning spaces on campus can only reach students who already have the knowledge or interest in the opportunities that these spaces provide. We must first understand the relationship between food and learning in student experiences – particularly the experiences of students with marginalized identities – in order to create inclusive, meaningful, and engaging experiential education spaces that students can feel ownership of.

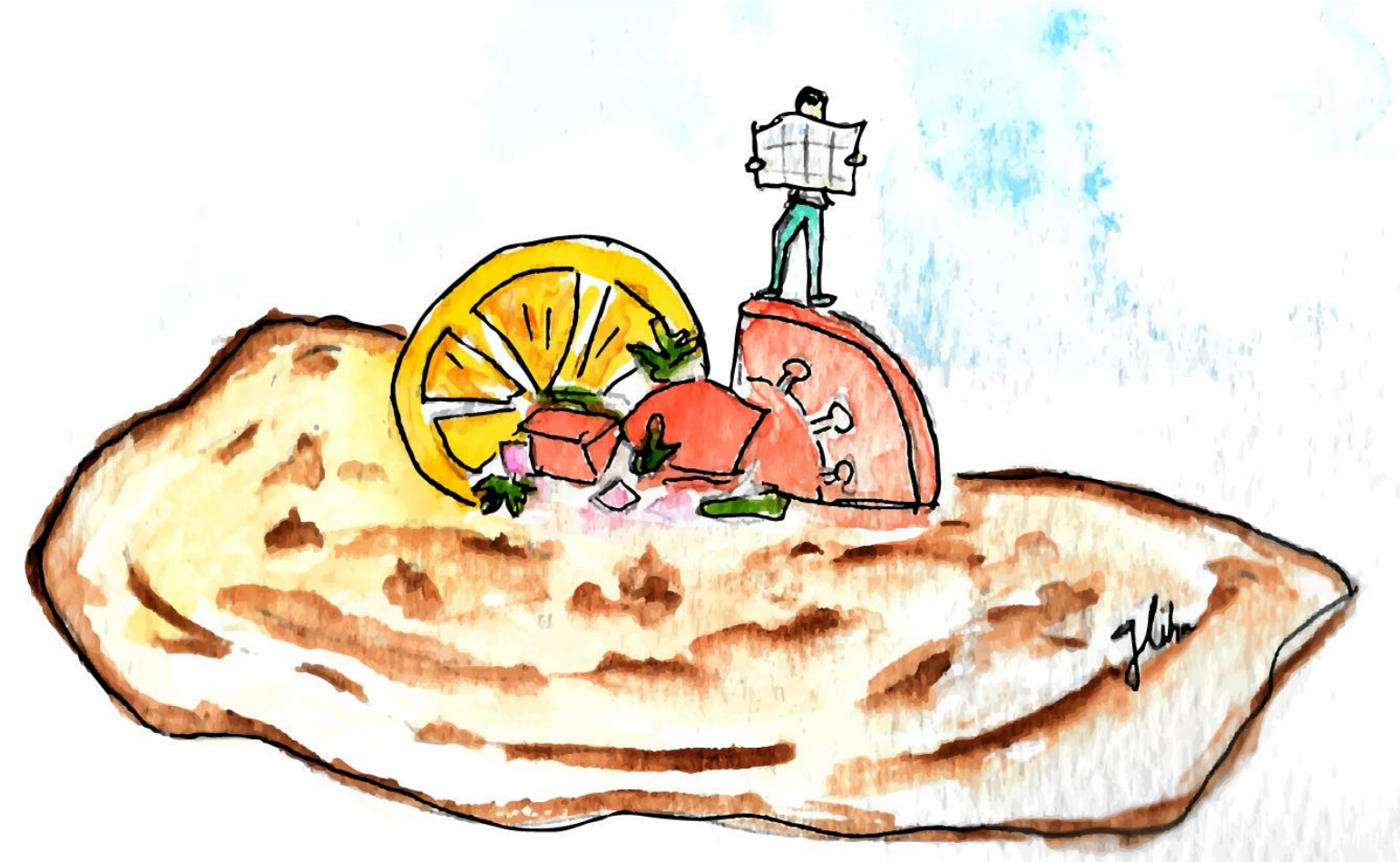
## Context

There are many existing and growing experiential learning spaces on and around the UC Berkeley campus. Case studies of some of these spaces have been done in the past, examining their challenges, opportunities, and best practices. Yet, much of the campus population is not involved in these educational spaces or engaged in food systems education.

The university's high levels of food (and basic needs) insecurity indicate that, aside from a need for better and more financial and social resources, there is also a need for greater food literacy – that is, access to knowledge and networks in food systems necessary for understanding food and active participation in food systems – that must be addressed on campus.

*What are obstacles preventing students from participating in food systems education? What are these students' narratives?*

“Learning through our food” is an oral history project created to gain a greater understanding of food literacy in its most basic form: that is, how individuals relate to food through their personal history. It highlights the narratives of students who are involved in campus organizations outside of the existing food experiential education spaces and their experiences associated with food.

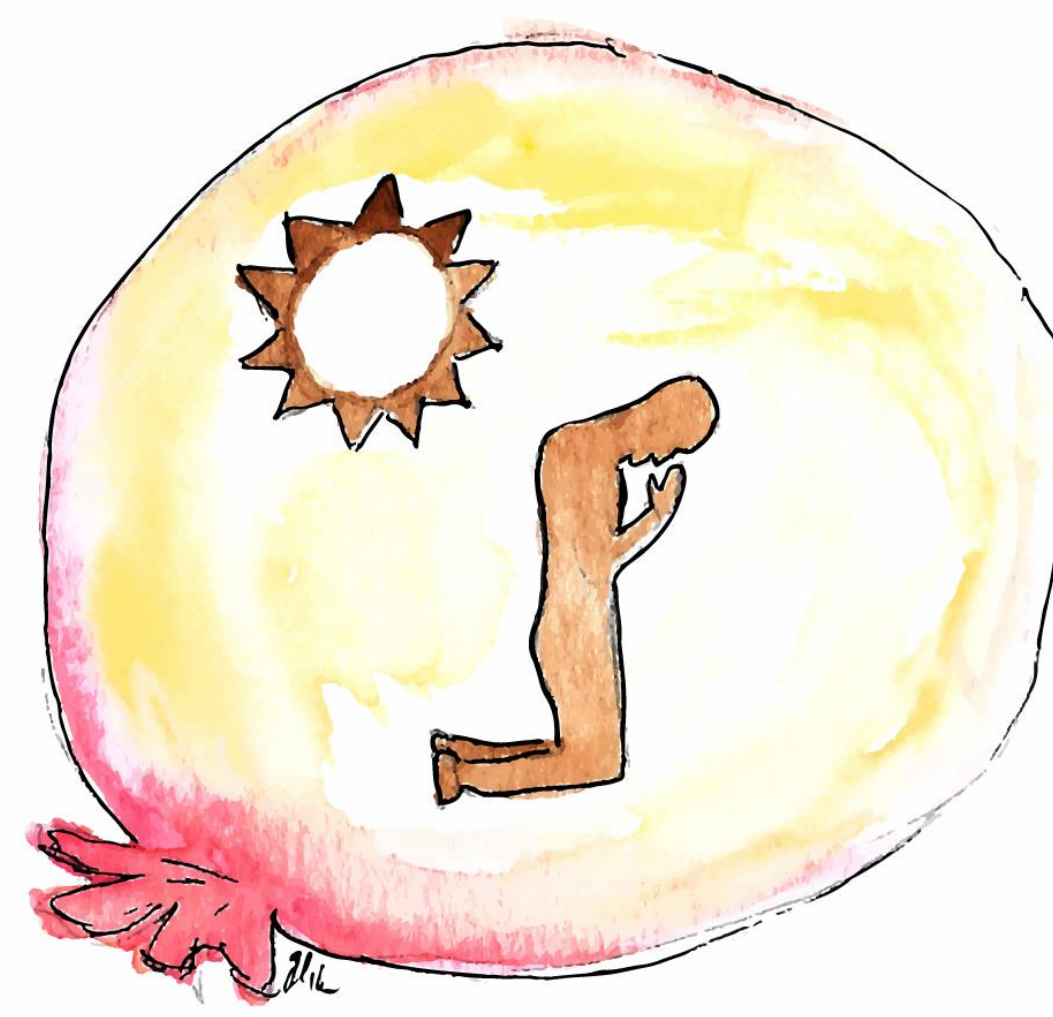


# learning through our food

an oral history project

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## Defining “literacy”

From an ethnographic perspective, dominant paradigms such as human capital theory view literacy as an independent and transparent skill gained gradually “as the individual moves through universal stages of cognitive and physical development” (Bartlett 2007). This framework assumes that literacy is “a homology between the individual and the society,” that literacy on the individual level results in economic progress in society. In contrast, sociocultural scholars conceptualize literacy as a part of the “relentlessly local and complex social and cultural interactions” that influence the effects of schooling – that is, the social meanings of the different types of literacy that are employed by people, and the roles that literacies hold in their lives (Bartlett 2007).

I draw much my definition of “food literacy” from Lesley Bartlett’s study of literacy in Brazil. In this ethnography project, I conceptualize food literacy as an individual’s ability to participate in food systems – the language, skills, and resources to which they have access so that they may make decisions and acquire information regarding the food they eat. I seek to understand the role of food in an individual’s life, the meaning various foods hold and the interactions involved in the individual’s conceptualization of food. Food literacy, then, is a function of other parts of the individual’s life – their schooling, their workplace, their life at home, and their social connections.

## Findings

Through the oral history interviews I conducted with eight students, I found that the campus food spaces – the gardens and other experiential learning organizations – were largely unknown to students.

In our conversations about their relationships to food, I found that the eight students I interviewed had very intimate connections to the food they ate. They recalled distinct memories of the people in their lives who made their favorite foods. The acquisition of “food literacy” often takes place in interactions between children and their caretakers. But it is also often not until a student attends college that they have the opportunities to engage with their relationship to food; as one student noted, it wasn’t until he left his parents’ home that he recognized his connection to his family’s cultural backgrounds. Food is intertwined with culture. On the journeys of engaging with our cultural backgrounds, we find many encounters with food – how it’s grown, how it’s made, and whose hands we receive it from.

As the many organizations in the UC Berkeley food system continue to strive towards equity and inclusion, it is important to recognize that many students feel most welcome and committed to a space when they feel a sense of belonging and deep connection to that space. Sometimes, that manifests in the interpersonal connections that students form between each other – such as in the common passion for community service or in shared beliefs. Other times, this sense of ownership is rooted in the empowerment that students feel when they are provided with opportunities to be leaders or spaces to solve community issues collaboratively. It is different for every student and for every space, but what is important is that each student within a space is given the opportunity to shape the space in a democratic way.

“Learning through our food” is a small oral history project, conducted over the course of a semester. Given that only eight narratives are presented here, it is not meant to encapsulate the entire student body’s experiences or draw general conclusions about food literacy. Rather, it is a space for a student to hold dialogue about food and student passions with other fellow students who are involved in a variety of different spaces on campus. In this act of exploring what food means to themselves, students create a space together in which they delve into their own food literacy. I hope that this project will inspire more similar spaces of oral history and narrative-sharing about food.

The oral histories curated in “Learning through our food” can be accessed through the UC Berkeley Foodscape Map website: [https://is.gd/gfi\\_learning\\_food](https://is.gd/gfi_learning_food)

## References

Bartlett, Lesley. "Human capital or human connections? The cultural meanings of education in Brazil." *Teachers College Record* 109.7 (2007): 1613-1636.