Polly Ericksen FSLI project write up, April 2026

- **Project title:** Building a Food Systems Collaborative Research Culture
- **Original Project need**: A central challenge of my job as Director of the UVM Food Systems Institute is to foster a culture of collaborative research, which is difficult for traditional faculty. I have yet to see true cross-food systems research at scale in a university setting.
- **Project objectives**: To document, reflect and improve fostering a culture of collaborative research on complicated but pressing "real world" issues.
- **Project goal(s):** A documented narrative of how to foster collaborative research that others can use and share and reflect on.

Reality in April 2026

The problem: The original need is still there, although my context and landscape have changed; I now report to the Vice President for Research. The past 18 months have been hard for university research. The young research culture and lack of team experience remain at UVM broadly. I underestimated this when I arrived, as I did not understand academic incentives or mindset, so I did not know how to make them feel appreciated and valued.

My plan: To document concrete steps that my staff and I took to foster a more collaborative and transdisciplinary culture. I focused on a set of competitive grants that we gave to teams tasked with developing and collecting data for a set of metrics that measured the sustainability of food systems across five dimensions. I have reflected on the success (or not) of each of these steps and the reasons for it. I started a literature review across four different areas: food system transformations; transdisciplinary teams; complex systems; and place-based solutions.

Progress: My progress to date has been mixed. This is in part because my administrative burden increased as I worked to help the ARS research unit establish research facilities with UVM. Below I outline the concrete steps my team and I have taken over the past 4.5 years to foster collaboration among research teams studying the sustainability of food systems in the New England region.

1. At the onset of the "Sustainability of Food Systems" project (before I arrived), the institute commissioned several teams to develop thematic white papers on one or more dimensions or themes of food system sustainability. The seven white papers this process produced built some collaboration as well as nascent project ideas. It also led to what was referred to as a "framework" for sustainable food systems but was just a list of metrics and indicators for five different dimensions.

2. A second step was to award ten planning grants for a 6-month period to allow teams to work on a proposal submission for a three-year grant of $650K each.

3. Once five three-year grants were awarded (the first thing I did when I took up the position was to review and award these), we hired five postdocs in a cluster, to advance collaboration. We hired a project coordinator and a data manager/ scientist.

4. We scheduled regular facilitated workshops to encourage joint planning, with at least two each year for three years. The project coordinator met with each of the teams as often as she could and met monthly with the post-docs. The data scientist created an open access data sharing platform that met IRB requirements and FAIR data rules.

Results: I underestimated the lack of a shared food systems framework. The incompatibility of research data collection plans and units of analysis hampered collaborative analysis. The teams had different cultures within them; only one really did cross-disciplinary analysis. Getting them to work across teams was difficult, although we asked them to share data collection plans; the data scientists collected a whole raft of secondary data for each of the metrics; and we showed them examples of the type of cross-team analysis we were hoping to achieve.

5. We just granted another four proposals for an additional three years. We spent a full year working through a collaborative process to motivate more collaboration and even required it as part of the RFP process. We were only partially successful, as three of the seven proposals did not describe plans for collaboration, and the four that we granted all seem to be using different units of analysis! I have found a body of literature on transdisciplinary research, including useful links to leadership principles. I am also working on several new big proposals with cross-university and ARS teams.

What I gained from FSLI that helped me in the project

- Allow for discomfort in group discussions and trusting that skillful but open facilitation will get us to some consensus at least.
- Leading is not about me, and in this case my personal "example" of being a transdisciplinary scholar was not sufficient. This realization led me to pay more attention to process and incentives (motivations) of individual researchers as well as the teams. Teams have their own goals and motivations, and these require fostering.
- As a researcher, I learn through reading, and all great leaders devote attention to skills building through research and practice.
- The importance of creating an environment where people (and teams) function at their best – not only in the team that I directly supervise but in the much broader research community that I am trying to engage.
- Recently this led me to back to some key points from adaptive management: an adaptive organization has a healthy pipeline of talent. It is important to institutionalize reflection and continuous learning, and to welcome multiple interpretations. Great to apply leadership to research processes.