

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a yellow cardigan over a pink top, is looking down at a large pile of red tomatoes at a market stall. She is holding a tomato in her right hand. In the background, other people and market stalls are visible but blurred.

The Canadian Association for Food Studies

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THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR FOOD STUDIES

The Canadian Association for Food Studies allows researchers from diverse disciplines to meet regularly to share their findings and collaborate on diverse issues relating to food systems. In this exclusive interview, we speak with CAFS President **Dr Amanda Wilson**, who describes how the Association facilitates interdisciplinary scholarship in the areas of food production, distribution and consumption, towards addressing social, environmental and economic challenges within our food systems.



To begin, please give us a brief introduction to CAFS. Why was the Association founded?

The Canadian Association for Food Studies is an academic association that promotes critical, interdisciplinary scholarship in the broad area of food systems: food policy, production, distribution and consumption.

It was founded in 2005 by a group of academics and community-based researchers, following a conference on food security. They had identified a need for an association that would bring together scholars from diverse disciplines and backgrounds to share research, learn from each other and collectively identify research priorities moving forward. While CAFS first emerged in response to questions of food security, it has since expanded to include a range of food systems concerns and challenges – everything from food policy, to critical dietetics, food cultures, food literacy and alternative food networks.

Can you give a few examples of the types of research that your members conduct?

The types of research that members conduct is really quite diverse.

One example is a project called [FLEdGe](#) (Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged), which is a multi-year research project exploring opportunities to build transformative and sustainable food systems. Working in partnerships with a range of community-based organisations, researchers have identified six 'Good Food Principles', and have produced a range of case studies illustrating these principles in practice.

Another is the [Family Farms and Work](#) project, which examines the experiences and policy context of non-wage household workers on Alberta farms, highlighting the tensions and complexities involved in health and safety within the context of family farms. The research involves interviews with farm operators and family members, as well as workers and government regulators, combined with a policy and document analysis.

[Feeding the City](#) is a community-based research project seeking to understand how a range of food actors are affected by, and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, researchers hope to highlight not only the challenges but the resilience of local food systems in the face of crisis.

While these projects demonstrate the breadth of research conducted by CAFS members, it also highlights some commonalities – collaborative research and a commitment to addressing pressing social, environmental and economic challenges within our food system.

Why is studying food and food systems from these perspectives now more important than ever before?

Well, I would argue that studying food and food systems has always been important, but certainly there is a growing recognition of the crucial role played by food and food systems in relation to our environment and climate change, public health, social inequities as well as culture and identity.

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As an association that brings all of these different facets and questions together, it helps us understand the connections between them – what is often referred to as a food systems perspective. Given the current challenges that our society is facing, food has emerged as a really important lens through which to not only better understand those issues and their implications, but take concrete actions to change them.

How does CAFS promote collaboration between researchers in similar and disparate research areas?

Food studies, by its very nature, is interdisciplinary, so we definitely see research in multiple fields. However, I think it is fair to say that the majority of our membership is situated within the social sciences and humanities, using predominantly qualitative research methods.

In the past couple of years, due to member interest, we've established a protocol for the creation of research Working Groups within CAFS. The idea behind these Working Groups is to facilitate collaboration and communication among scholars working on a common topic. At the moment there is one active Working Group, on School Food. The goal of this Working Group is to promote the best available evidence for the development of a national school food program. So, these research groups are one way for researchers from different backgrounds to come together and collaborate on a common topic.

During our annual conference, we also seek out opportunities to collaborate with other academic associations. For instance, in the past we've co-organised sessions with the Canadian Communications Association and the Canadian Sociological Association. These joint-sessions help to establish links and connections across disciplines and fields of study.

Who makes up the current membership of CAFS? Aside from the Working Groups and Annual Conference, what are the other benefits of being a member?

We have approximately 200 members, made up of faculty, students as well as community practitioners and community-based researchers. A core element of CAFS, since its very beginning, has been strong connections with practitioners and civil society organisations. CAFS isn't strictly an academic space, it's a space where faculty, student and practitioners connect and learn from one another.

I think one of the real values of CAFS is the space for constructive dialogue and learning. We have a very active Listserv which is used not only to share information, but to engage in conversation and discussion about contemporary issues. Just the other week there was a lively thread discussing the merits and framing of basic income strategies.

We also have a quarterly newsletter which promotes not only the activities of the association, but research and publications of our members. We've also launched a webinar series this year; the first one explored Indigenous perspectives on the place of 'Canada' in Canadian Food Studies, and the second is a conversation between two food scholars on the state of critical agri-food studies.

Finally, CAFS also houses the [Canadian Food Studies journal](#), a peer-reviewed, open-access interdisciplinary journal showcasing critical scholarship on the diverse dimensions of the foodscape in so-called Canada.

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meeting individual people, but the sense of being a part of a broader whole, a collective of people who, together, provide a constructive and supportive space for learning and reflection.

Describe the role that food studies can play in demonstrating the unequal social and environmental impacts of food systems, and how these studies can inform policies that promote social transformation.

As an academic association, our primary purpose is to provide a space of critical dialogue and learning for our members. However, I believe we are also a group of scholars committed to using our research to advance more just and equitable food systems; with that comes a responsibility to speak out against injustices and a commitment to follow-through with action.

Food studies research has helped to exposed the many challenges facing our food system; but it also highlights proposed solutions and alternative to those problems. For instance, the federal government went through a process to develop a national food policy for Canada a couple years ago. Many CAFS members were very active in the consultation process – providing evidence, analysis and policy proposals to steer this national food policy in the right direction.

I think there has always been a recognition within food studies that research is not merely an objective, neutral exercise. Research is not immune to the broader systems and structures of power found within society; asking particular questions, pursuing particular lines of inquiry can reproduce or challenge those relations of power in different ways.

Academia – academic institutions and organisations, including CAFS, are not immune to the injustices found within society as a whole. This year the CAFS board has made a series of commitments to taking concrete actions to challenge systemic anti-black and anti-Indigenous racism within our food system and society. This first came about in the Summer, in response to the waves of protests and resistance movements against racialised police violence (read our [statement here](#)).

More recently, our association issued a statement in support of Mi'kmaq fishers in Nova Scotia, who were exercising their treaty rights to fish for a moderate livelihood, and were met with violence and opposition from white fishers in the area (read our full [statement here](#)). As a board, we believe it is important for academic associations to contribute to contemporary

conversations that have direct bearing on our food systems – that we have a responsibility to make use of the research and analysis we've developed and co-constructed to improve our society.

Finally, how have the Association's activities been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? How might the pandemic impact the field of food studies in general?

Like many academic associations, we have moved our upcoming annual conference entirely online. We also made the decision last year to cancel our annual conference, rather than move it online. We just didn't feel like we had enough time and space to re-vision the conference we had been planning all year.

Not having an in-person conference is a real loss for CAFS members – given that many of us are quite geographically spread out, it's one of the only opportunities for members to see each other in-person, get to know new members etc. Replicating those informal connections and conversations is difficult in an on-line conference, but it's often what people value most about these events – that sense of community. We're planning a joint virtual conference this Spring, with our counterpart associations in the United States, which will create different kinds of opportunities for connection and collaboration.

The pandemic has really underscored and accentuated many pre-existing problems in our food system – rates of food insecurity, inadequate food governance mechanisms, corporate concentration, the precarity of food workers, and in particular the exploitation of migrant farm workers. These problems feel pretty daunting, but I've been impressed by how quickly CAFS members, and food scholars in general, have taken to not only documenting these issues, but actively working with community partners to address them. Food scholars have pivoted to tackle these pressing needs, building on existing research expertise and relationships to help us better understand the impact of this pandemic on our food system, and help to ensure our food system emerges from this pandemic more resilient and sustainable.

On the other hand, the pandemic has also put a real strain on many of our members, particularly those with caring responsibilities, or those with underlying health conditions. Planned data collection activities has been postponed, conference opportunities delayed or re-worked, not to mention the added workload of switching to online teaching. I think it's fair to say that it will be a difficult year for many of our members.

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