**Drawing Boundaries Around Food Systems**

**Class activity for Chapter 1**

***Food, Farms and Community***

**Material Requirements: Large pieces of paper**

**Time Requirement: 30 minutes**

What are food systems? If you posed this to 10 different people who study some facet of the processes of producing, processing, distributing, consuming or disposing of food, you would likely get 10 different answers. The reality is that food systems are a convenient fiction, one that students, instructors and researchers create to facilitate their research and inquiry. A food system is simply a set of elements and interactions within the broader system people participate and live in. People studying different issues will define “food system” differently, and that’s fine. The purpose of this exercise is to offer students an opportunity to come to this conclusion on their own by inviting them to pose a question about food systems that interests them and then drawing, using whatever diagramming approach they deem useful, a graphic representation of how system elements work together to create their issue.

For this exercise, break students in your class into small groups of three to five and invite them to choose a question they’re interested in exploring. Examples of productive questions include “Why are farm laborers paid so little?” or “Why does the price of food keep going up?” Once each group has a question, guide them as needed while they graphically represent the stocks, flows and other variables that work together to create their issue and how those variables are connected. The result will hopefully resemble a systems diagram of one sort or another. I suggest limiting this phase of the activity to 30 minutes or so.

Once students have a first attempt at a systems diagram, invite them to draw boundaries within their diagram to delineate which variables or other elements fall within a food system and which do not. Invite them to consider why they chose to include some things and not others. Once students have had an opportunity to consider these questions, pose another question: “Why bother delineating food systems if everything’s so connected?” This final question is an excellent one to close out the activity with, as it coaxes students to look at the exercise of drawing boundaries in a more critical, even skeptical light.