

"Food as Resistance" MLK Symposium Event

University of Michigan Dining

Essay:

Overall Impact

The University of Michigan annually commemorates Martin Luther King Jr. Day with a symposium dedicated to honoring his legacy. During this event, classes are suspended, enabling students to attend a memorial keynote lecture and participate in numerous other complementary events held on the day and throughout the subsequent week. When requests from team members for more active participation in the symposium arose, Michigan Dining initiated the "Food as Resistance" event in partnership with the University of Michigan Sustainable Food Systems Initiative and their free community course "Food Literacy for All."

Food has been entwined with resistance movements, from lunch counter sit-ins and the Black Panther Breakfast Program of the US Civil Rights Movement to current organizing around sustainability and equitable food access for all. "Food as Resistance" kicked off the 2024 Food Literacy for All course, which was organized around the theme "Planted in History: A Food Future Informed By the Past." This inaugural event on January 16, 2024, featured Shiloh K. Maples, an educator, community organizer, and consultant who works within Michigan's Indigenous community to create a food sovereignty initiative aimed at increasing access to cultural foods and creating opportunities for the community to fully practice their foodways in the urban landscape of Detroit. This sponsored lecture was paired with dishes created by Michigan Dining front-line team members for the event. The dishes had personal connections to the identities and culture of the MDining team members preparing them, and spoke to the themes of resistance, community care, and sustainability.

The event proved invaluable for students and community members who attended the lecture and participated in the course, along with students involved in its planning and execution. Distinctively, the program also offered a professional development opportunity for the team members. They proposed recipes, received coaching from an executive chef, and showcased their culinary creations to the public, complete with narratives displayed at their stations (team features attached). Open to the public at no charge, this initiative mirrored the accessibility of "Food Literacy for All," which students can take for credit and community members can attend for free. Additionally, the event continued Michigan Dining's commitment to sustainability by using compostable materials and adhering to Michigan Dining's standards for minimizing waste. All the meals featured at the MLK Symposium event were also served across dining halls, with the event being live-streamed during dinner. Ultimately, "Food as Resistance" celebrated the exceptional work and extraordinary individuals behind Michigan Dining.

#### Creativity & Innovation

Michigan Dining has traditionally catered the MLK Symposium breakfast—a core part of the symposium's agenda—and various other events. However, in early 2023, staff expressed frustration that they didn't have a greater creative role and representation of themselves, not the company, in the symposium, and that they weren't able to be a part of the conversation. Not merely the caterer, but rather a catalyst for conversation. Knowing this, we began looking for a partner who would help program an event with an invited speaker. With our deep commitment to sustainability, we looked for a campus partner who had similar values and would help share this event. The team behind "Food Literacy for All," including graduate student coordinators, was instrumental in connecting this event to both undergraduate students and the broader community. While Michigan Dining led in all areas of the event planning and created the marketing materials, "Food Literacy for All" provided a connection to students and community members who are committed to food justice and access. Michigan Dining also invited the participating team members to share the event in their communities, and a particularly poignant aspect of this community engagement was witnessing the families of the featured team members attending to honor their contributions.

#### Low Start-Up Resource Costs/High Return

The event drew 300 attendees for the reception and lecture, with approximately 250 people participating via livestream. The lecture has since amassed over 500 views on YouTube. The success of the first year has resulted in a continued commitment from Michigan Dining and Food Literacy for All to continue this collaborative effort on the MLK "Food as Resistance" symposium event. While precise quantification of return on investment is challenging, the event cost approximately \$23.50 per person, including beverages, reflecting a modest financial outlay relative to the high-quality programming, engagement levels, and enhanced staff morale. Staff members felt genuinely appreciated, reinforcing Michigan Dining's dedication to staff recognition and well-being. This appreciation translated to positive perceptions among students who observed Michigan Dining chefs showcasing their talents, with many expressing enthusiasm for repeated servings of these dishes. Consequently, the MLK Symposium dishes have been integrated into Michigan Dining's Catering and Residential Dining menus for future use.

#### Applicability of Initiative

This initiative has three main parts: staff recognition, menu planning, and event/speaker sponsorship. Those interested in replicating this event would first want to see what team members are looking to be recognized, tell their stories, and propose a menu item for the event. Once a recipe is suggested, work with team members to adjust for pricing and portion. This is a professional development opportunity for team members who may not get to work with menuing systems or pricing event service. As you build the reception, you must also find what the central moment of the event is - we chose to sponsor a speaker. You could also have team members present their dishes and then get the opportunity to grow their public speaking skills.

#### Effectiveness of Measurement

Launched in 2017, Food Literacy for All is a community-academic partnership course based at the University of Michigan. Structured as an evening lecture series, Food Literacy for All features different guest speakers each week to address challenges and opportunities of diverse food systems. The course focuses not only on practices for increasing sustainability, but equity and sustainability frameworks for creating and maintaining sustainable food networks.

As a partner in the Food Literacy for All course, we contributed to the metrics of success for their course and can extrapolate from their past data:

- 234 students enrolled in the 2024 course
- The course attracts an interdisciplinary mix of undergraduate and graduate students; over five semesters, 68% of enrolled students have been undergraduate students, and 32% have been graduate students. The majority of enrolled students are from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), the School of Public Health (SPH), and the School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS), although students from over 14 schools have taken the class
- Since 2017, nearly 4,000 community members have participated in the course. Community attendees were most commonly non-profit professionals (ranging from 8% to 19%), educator (14% to 15%), food systems/community advocate (13%), consultant (12%), health care provider (4 to 6%), grower/farmer/producer (2% to 9%), and public health professional (4% to 5%). Other attendees identified as food-service professionals, researchers, government officials, funders, planners, grocers, or media professionals.
- Each Food Literacy for All session is recorded and published on YouTube, the SFSI website, and SFSI social media within one week. As of April 2023, Food Literacy for All videos have been viewed over 57,000 times. YouTube data over the last six years shows that viewers tune in from around the world, including the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, Germany, Belize, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, South Africa, Australia, and Bangladesh. The live-streamed sessions in 2017 and 2018 also engaged an international audience, as people tuned in from Germany, Great Britain, Ghana, India, Japan, Morocco, and Peru. Viewing of videos from past years grows each year, indicating that people continue to engage with the videos and that they remain relevant.
- Food Literacy for All increased overall interest in Sustainable Food Systems for both students and community members. Similar to other years, 92% of the Food Literacy for All students who enrolled in the course in 2022 indicated that the course increased their interest in learning more about sustainable food systems. Notably, 70% of survey respondents agreed that Food Literacy for All has had a significant impact on shaping their work, studies, or future aspirations.
- Similar to other years, 92% of the Food Literacy for All students who enrolled in the course in 2022 indicated that the course increased their interest in learning more about sustainable food systems. Over 90% of attendees agree that this course reaffirmed their career choice in sustainable food systems (36%), increased their awareness of important food justice issues (27%), or made them want to take action in their community (19%).

We also have data from our dining halls:

- 8,445 dinner meals served in Dining Halls on January 16th, 2024
- Eleven unique recipes created
- Eleven team members featured
- Approximately 250 live streams during the event

#### Education, Outreach, and Marketing/Communications

Promotion began on the MLK Symposium website, with event registration links shared across social media, the class website, and through academic and Student Life partners. Table tents advertising the event and themed dinners were displayed throughout the previous week, inviting students, staff, faculty, and community members through university channels. A poster (attached) advertising the event was shared through these channels and through the MLK Symposium website.

A graduate student helped to organize the course, two Michigan Dining Diversity & Inclusion students helped to organize the event, and hundreds of students attended both in person and via livestream.

The creation of our annual MLK Symposium "Food as Resistance" event in 2024 served as an invaluable experience not only for those attending the lecture and course but also for the students and staff involved in its planning and execution. The initiative's free and public accessibility echoes the inclusivity of "Food Literacy for All," reinforcing a commitment to sustainability and justice. By featuring the meals across dining halls during a live-streamed dinner, "Food as Resistance" prominently showcased Michigan Dining's dedication to sustainable practices and celebrated the exceptional efforts of the individuals behind the initiative.

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Attachment name  
"Food as Resistance" ML...

<https://www.youtube.co...>

