Campus-Farm Interview Transcript (Fictitious)

CultivAction Solidarity Cooperative

Research Project: Bishop's Campus-Community Food Sovereignty Project
Interview Date: November 2026
Interview Duration: Approximately 25–30 minutes
Participant: CultivAction Solidarity Cooperative Representative

Note: This is a fictional transcript created for educational purposes. It is not an actual interview, and all responses are simulated.

Introduction

Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We're students at Bishop's University conducting research on campus farms and how they contribute to campus-community food sovereignty. We're particularly interested in how farms operate, how they connect with their universities and surrounding communities, and what we might learn from their experiences.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study?

Participant: No, I think we're good. I'm happy to participate. It's great to hear that Bishop's is exploring these questions. I think there's a lot of potential for universities to play a bigger role in local food systems.

Question 1: Could you briefly tell us about your campus farm?

Participant: Sure. CultivAction is a solidarity cooperative that started in 2022. We grow food at several locations in Montreal, including Concordia University's Loyola Campus and a larger farm in Senneville. We also collaborate with community organizations on urban agriculture projects, including the Duff-Court Urban Farm in Lachine.

Our main goal is to build more food-sovereign communities. For us, that means creating alternatives to the industrial food system where communities have greater control over how food is produced, distributed, and accessed.

We do that through ecological farming, education, community partnerships, and providing affordable food. We operate pay-what-you-can markets where people can access fresh vegetables regardless of their income.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little more about the scale of the operation and what you grow?

Participant: Yeah, so we're still a relatively small operation compared to commercial farms, but we've been expanding.

At Loyola, we have a smaller urban farm where we grow vegetables, herbs, and other crops. We also use greenhouse space for microgreens. Our Senneville site gives us more room for field production, and we've been developing infrastructure, including growing tunnels and a greenhouse.

We grow a pretty wide variety of vegetables. Tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, kale, carrots, radishes, beans, squash, things like that. We also grow herbs and experiment with different ecological growing techniques.

We're trying to grow enough food to make a meaningful contribution to the communities we serve, but we're not at the point where we can supply a large part of Concordia's food needs.

Interviewer: Who is involved in operating and making decisions about the farm?

Participant: That's an important part of what we do. We're a solidarity cooperative, which means we're organized differently from a conventional private business.

We have worker members, user members, and support members. Members can participate in democratic decision-making, and we have a board of directors that helps govern the organization.

The day-to-day farming is mostly done by paid workers, with help from volunteers, students, and community members.

It's a pretty collaborative structure. But, you know, democratic decision-making also comes with challenges. It takes time to consult people, organize meetings, and make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate.

And sometimes the people who have the most time to participate end up having more influence over decisions.

Interviewer: You mentioned education. How important is that compared to food production?

Participant: I'd say they're both central to our mission. We want to produce food, but we also want people to understand how food systems work and how they can participate in changing them.

We offer workshops, volunteering opportunities, and hands-on educational activities. We've worked with university classes and students who want to learn about urban agriculture, agroecology, and food sovereignty.

For example, students might visit the farm as part of a course, learn about soil health or composting, and participate in growing food.

We also experiment with different farming methods. That's part of the educational side of the project.

But there can be tension between education and production. Sometimes teaching a group of students takes a lot more time than simply doing the farm work ourselves.

So, we have to balance those priorities.

Question 2: How is the farm connected to your campus and surrounding community?

Participant: We have a number of connections, both within Concordia and with community organizations in Montreal.

One of the most visible connections is our pay-what-you-can farmers' markets at Concordia. We bring produce that we've grown to campus and make it available to students and other community members.

People contribute what they can afford. Some pay the suggested price, some pay less, and others might not be able to pay anything.

The goal is to reduce financial barriers to accessing fresh, locally grown food.

We also distribute food to community organizations. For example, we've worked with the Hive Free Lunch program, which provides meals to students at Loyola, and other food organizations like the People's Potato.

We've also collaborated with the Hive Café and community food initiatives outside the university.

Interviewer: How do those relationships work? Are they formal partnerships?

Participant: It depends on the organization.

Some relationships are more formal, involving agreements, funding, or regular arrangements for food distribution.

Others are much more informal. Someone knows someone at another organization, they start talking, and eventually they find a way to collaborate.

Actually, I think personal relationships have been really important to our success.

For example, if a community kitchen needs vegetables and we have a surplus, we can contact them directly and arrange a delivery.

But that also creates challenges because sometimes these relationships depend on particular people. If someone graduates, changes jobs, or leaves an organization, we might lose that connection.

Interviewer: What about your relationship with the university itself?

Participant: That's a complicated question.

Concordia has supported different campus food initiatives, and we've benefited from access to land, facilities, and funding opportunities connected to the university.

But CultivAction is an independent cooperative. We're not a department of Concordia, and we don't operate the university's food services.

That independence is important because it allows us to make decisions based on our mission rather than the priorities of the university administration.

At the same time, we depend on access to university resources, particularly land and infrastructure. That creates a certain vulnerability.

If the university changes its priorities or decides to use the land for something else, that could affect our ability to operate.

Interviewer: Have you tried to sell food directly to the university's food services?

Participant: That's something we've talked about, and we'd like to develop those connections further.

But it's difficult.

Large university food services typically work with established suppliers that can deliver consistent quantities, meet particular food safety and administrative requirements, and supply products throughout the year.

We're a small, seasonal farm. We grow a variety of crops, and production changes throughout the season.

We might have a lot of kale one week and tomatoes the next, but we can't necessarily guarantee the same quantities every week.

And then there are questions about pricing. We want to pay our workers fairly and use ecological farming practices. That costs money.

If a food service provider is primarily looking for the lowest possible price, it can be difficult for a small cooperative to compete.

Interviewer: What do you think would help overcome those barriers?

Participant: I think the university would need to make a commitment to local and socially responsible procurement.

For example, food services could agree to purchase certain seasonal crops from campus farms and adjust their menus according to what's available.

Rather than expecting small farms to operate like industrial suppliers, they could design procurement arrangements that support smaller producers.

It would also help if the university provided more stable access to land, infrastructure, and financial support.

But I think it has to go beyond simply buying vegetables from us. The larger question is who controls the campus food system and how decisions are made.

Interviewer: Are there other challenges you've experienced in building community partnerships?

Participant: Funding is probably one of the biggest ones.

We want food to be affordable, but we also need to pay our workers, purchase equipment, maintain infrastructure, and cover operating expenses.

The pay-what-you-can model helps make food accessible, but it doesn't necessarily generate enough revenue to cover all those costs.

We rely on a combination of food sales, grants, donations, educational activities, and partnerships.

That's challenging because grants are usually temporary. You might receive funding to establish a project, but then you have to figure out how to maintain it after the funding runs out.

Another challenge is the amount of work involved in coordinating everything.

We're not just farming. We're organizing volunteers, distributing food, applying for funding, managing relationships, and making collective decisions.

Sometimes the administrative work feels almost as demanding as the farming itself.

Interviewer: Despite these challenges, what do you think has worked particularly well?

Participant: I think the relationships we've built with other organizations are probably our biggest strength.

We don't need to do everything ourselves.

We can grow food, and another organization can prepare meals or distribute that food to people who need it.

We also have people who contribute different forms of knowledge. Some have farming experience, some understand cooperative governance, and others have experience with community organizing or education.

Bringing those people together creates opportunities that wouldn't exist if we were operating as an isolated farm.

Question 3: Bishop's University is exploring how its Educational Farm can strengthen connections with its campus and surrounding communities. Based on your experience, what could Bishop's learn from your farm?

Participant: I think the most important thing would be to start by talking with the people and organizations that you want to work with.

Don't assume that because the university has a farm, the community will automatically benefit from it.

You need to ask what people actually need, what they're already doing, and how the farm could support those activities.

For example, are there food organizations in Sherbrooke that could use fresh vegetables? Are there student groups interested in food security? Are there local farmers who would like to collaborate on education or research?

I would start by mapping those organizations and bringing them together to discuss what the farm could become.

Interviewer: Are there specific activities you would recommend?

Participant: A pay-what-you-can market could be a good starting point.

It's relatively straightforward to organize, and it creates a direct connection between the farm and the campus community.

You could also explore supplying food to student-run cafés, campus kitchens, or community meal programs.

But I wouldn't start with too many activities at once.

One mistake organizations sometimes make is trying to do everything. Farming, education, research, food distribution, community engagement, all at the same time.

Those are worthwhile goals, but each requires people, funding, and coordination.

I'd suggest choosing a few priorities and building on them over time.

Interviewer: What would you do differently if you were starting CultivAction again?

Participant: That's a good question. [Pause]

I think we would spend more time developing our organizational structure and long-term financial plan before expanding.

We were really motivated to get things started, and sometimes we took on opportunities without fully considering how much work they would create.

We would also try to establish clearer agreements with our partners from the beginning.

For example, if you're using university land, who is responsible for maintenance? What happens if infrastructure needs to be repaired? Who makes decisions about how the space is used?

Those things might seem minor when everyone is excited about a new project, but they become much more important over time.

Interviewer: How important do you think community participation is in deciding what the farm should do?

Participant: I think it's essential, especially if the goal is food sovereignty.

There's a difference between a university growing food for the community and a university working with the community to develop a food system.

In the first case, the university makes the decisions and the community receives the benefits.

In the second case, community members have a meaningful role in deciding what gets produced, how resources are used, and how food is distributed.

That's a much more difficult process, but it's also more transformative.

I think Bishop's has an opportunity to build those relationships early rather than trying to introduce community participation after all the major decisions have already been made.

Interviewer: What would help sustain those relationships over time?

Participant: Having people who are actually responsible for maintaining them.

Universities have a lot of turnover. Students graduate, faculty members change positions, and community organizations have their own staffing challenges.

If a partnership depends entirely on a particular professor or a few motivated students, it can disappear pretty quickly.

You need some continuity.

That could mean having a permanent farm coordinator, creating formal partnership agreements, or establishing a committee with representatives from the university and community.

But it also means making sure the partnerships are reciprocal.

If community organizations are constantly being asked to host students, participate in research, or attend meetings without receiving much in return, eventually they might stop participating.

Question 4: Is there anything important about your farm or its relationship with the campus or surrounding community that we have not asked about?

Participant: I guess one thing I'd emphasize is that food sovereignty isn't just about growing more local food.

That's important, obviously, but you could have a university farm producing a lot of vegetables without really changing anything about the food system.

For us, food sovereignty is also about ownership, decision-making, working conditions, access to food, and relationships between people.

We want to build something that operates differently from the conventional food system.

And that's not easy.

We're still operating in an economy where we need to generate revenue, compete for funding, and pay our bills.

So there's always a tension between our values and the practical realities of running a farm.

I think it's important to acknowledge that rather than pretending we've figured everything out.

Interviewer: Could you give an example of that tension?

Participant: Sure. Take the pay-what-you-can markets.

We want everyone to have access to fresh vegetables, regardless of their income.

But if everyone paid nothing, we wouldn't have enough revenue to sustain the operation.

So we're constantly trying to figure out how to make food accessible while maintaining decent working conditions for our farmers.

That's not a problem we can solve entirely on our own.

It requires broader support from the university, community organizations, governments, and the people who benefit from the food we produce.

I think that's something Bishop's should consider. If the farm is expected to contribute to education, research, ecological sustainability, and food security, then those contributions should be recognized and supported financially.

You can't necessarily expect the farm to pay for all those public benefits through vegetable sales.

Interviewer: That's really interesting. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Participant: Maybe just that universities have a lot of resources that could be used to support community food systems.

They have land, buildings, kitchens, researchers, students, and access to funding.

But those resources aren't always connected.

A campus farm can help bring them together, especially when it works with community organizations that already have experience addressing local food needs.

I think the opportunity is bigger than creating a successful farm. It's about using the farm to help build a different kind of food system.

And I think that should be the long-term goal.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for sharing your experience. Your insights will be extremely useful for our research into how Bishop's Educational Farm can strengthen campus-community food sovereignty.

Participant: You're very welcome. Good luck with the project. I'd be interested to hear what you find out.

End of Interview