



# Food Systems Program Director

## Job Description

Food Systems Program Directors tackle issues about the food industry in their region. They address topics ranging from food security and nutritional qualities, to the resilience of the food system and community health surrounding food production. Their main focus is coming up with ways to support their region's food system through education and outreach. Problem-solving and leadership are both big factors of this job position.

## Salary

Entry — \$44,624

Middle — \$64,286

Top — \$84,190+

## Core Tasks

- Manage teams and committees
- Travel to meet up with people across their state's food system
- Problem-solve for food system improvements
- Teach academic classes on food systems
- Write grants and secure funding

## Workplace / Environment

- **Work hours**  
**Approx. 40-60 hours/week.**  
(At key milestones overtime work may be required to meet deadlines)
- **Environment**  
Work typically takes place in a **physical office** — this occurs on a **day-to-day** basis
- **Travel**  
Travels around, sometimes **out of state** at least **1 time per week**  
**3-4 national conferences** annually

## Education / Prerequisites

### Education Level

Degree in Food Systems, Food Studies, Program Management, or related fields

### Licensing

Varies by state but teaching certifications are beneficial

### Pre-Job Preparation

Real-world experience, management/leadership training, food courses, and background knowledge in food systems

## Experience

### Soft Skills

- Collaboration
- Management
- Patience
- Problem-solving

### Technical Skills

- Microsoft Suite
- Communications Software
- Grant writing

## Career Path: Laura Lewis



### About Me

Food Systems Program Director at Washington State University

PhD in Biogeography from UC Davis

### High School Life

"I grew up in Burien and then eventually made my way up North to Bellingham. While I was in high school, I got a job working on an **organic production farm** up in Bellingham, initially just watering plants. I eventually worked my way up to **managing a greenhouse** and **managing inventory**."



### College Choices



"I went to **Seattle Central Community College** for a while. Later, I ended up transferring to **WSU** to study **crop and soil science**. While I was there, I think the most impactful thing for my career was getting a job with the **Agricultural Research Service** at the **USDA**. I was one of their **biological science technicians**. I became so fascinated by the history of agriculture and how people domesticated plants all over the world."

### Into the Real World

"I ended up joining the **Peace Corps** as an **African Food Systems Initiative Volunteer**. It was my first major experience. I had worked on a production farm and had studied agriculture, but I hadn't actually lived in an agricultural community, so it was great for me. I spent two years living in a small village in **West Africa**. I was able to experience the rhythms of an agricultural community and all of the **different aspects** of their food system. My work there was to support cereal production, as well as women's garden projects."

# About My Job

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"Food plays such a significant role, not only culturally, but also from a nutritional perspective."

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## Pros

- "The best part about my job is that I'm **never bored**."
- "There's a tremendous amount of **academic freedom** in what you get to do and how you get to steer a program or create opportunity."
- "The nature of doing **statewide work** has been really exciting for me. I'm not siloed into just one small part of a community or one aspect of the food system— I get to experience so many different facets of the food system."
- "It's really exciting with all the **different types of people** I get to work with from across so many different communities."

## Fieldwork

- "It's really exciting with all of the **different types of people** I get to work with from across so many different communities in Washington. I'll work with the governor's office or the Director of Agriculture for our state, all the way down to someone managing a food bank. It's a very, very diverse set of stakeholders that I get to interact with on a daily basis."
- "We host **academic seminars** at the University of Washington, so there is an academic component to my job as well."

## Cons

- "There's a **steep learning** curve for me with some of the work that I'm doing. It's really exciting, but can also be daunting."
- "There's always **additional requirements**, whether it's scholarships, writing papers, or getting grants. All of those kinds of things are added onto what's already a pretty heavy lift."

## Office Work

- "A lot of my time is spent in **grant writing and fund development**. I spend a day or two a week just in meetings that are either for existing grants or upcoming grant opportunities that I'm working on with partners."
- "My in-person work environment is focused on my **office team**. There's myself and then I have a statewide program coordinator, a statewide project manager, and an office manager. The four of us work together pretty cohesively on a day-to-day basis in our physical offices."

## Skills

- "I've taken classes on **leadership** and **workplace dynamics**. These are important to understand—how you work with different personality types, how you work with people who have different strengths and weaknesses in the same office, how to really empower people, and also how to step back."
- "The program is really a **systems approach** so I'm constantly needing to flex different parts of my intellectual muscles."

## Education/Experience

- "One of the things that has really helped me more than anything else is having some **in-person experience** in food systems as someone working on a farm. My Peace Corps experience on an African food systems project really helped me out. It's hard when you accumulate a lot of educational credentials, but you don't necessarily have the experience of volunteering in a food bank, being a food bank client, or working on a farm. It's important to have experience with applied work that's happening **within the food system**. That has been really instrumental in helping me have a more **relatable perspective** to the people that I'm working with."

## The Future of **Food Systems Work**

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"I really feel like our program is growing every single day."

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"There's a strong need for us to continue to **recruit people** into food systems work. We see those numbers fall every single year—whether it's the number of farmers we have or the number of people that can get jobs that will support them within food systems work. From a justice perspective, there is still so much that we need to do to make it a more just food system as well. It's a **huge area of growth**."