

Executive Summary of Phase 1 Findings - Strategic Planning

Turning Uncertainty into Direction

There's a common saying that when one door closes, another opens. In many ways, for the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS), moments of uncertainty have long served as catalysts for collective purpose. Since 2005, CAFS has played a central role in building and sustaining an interdisciplinary food studies community in Canada, anchored by its annual conference and the open-access journal *Canadian Food Studies*.

CAFS's 20th year anniversary in 2025 arrived at a pivotal moment. Externally, food systems challenges (rising food prices, worsening food insecurity, labour precarity, and ecological strain) have become increasingly visible and urgent in a post-pandemic context. Internally, CAFS, like many volunteer-run scholarly associations, has been navigating familiar pressures: volunteer burnout, leadership turnover, continuity gaps, and questions about how non-hierarchical governance can best support sustainability, accountability, and impact.

It was within this dual context of external urgency and internal pressure that the CAFS Board established a Strategic Planning Committee in 2024. The Committee was tasked with undertaking a first-phase "current state" assessment to ground future strategic decisions in evidence rather than assumptions.

This executive summary synthesizes what we did, what we heard, and what it suggests for CAFS's future. It highlights key findings and the strategic choices they surface, while directing readers to the full report—20 Years of the Canadian Association for Food Studies: A Snapshot and Directions for the Future—for deeper analysis, detailed results, and supporting data.

Phase 1 Approach and Guiding Questions

Phase 1 focused on building a baseline understanding of CAFS' history, accomplishments, membership, and operating context. The aim was to surface strengths and challenges that shape what CAFS can realistically deliver. Our guiding questions were:

1. Who is the CAFS community, and how does it engage with the association?
2. How is CAFS experienced and perceived by its members and potential members?
3. How do CAFS's structures, activities, and resources shape its current and potential impact?

Methods

From January to June 2025, the Committee employed a mixed-methods design that combined breadth, depth, and collective sense-making:

- Member survey (n = 67) to capture broad perspectives
- Follow-up interviews (n = 5) to explore themes in greater depth
- World Café sessions at the 2025 annual conference (n = 45), enabling collaborative dialogue, and priority-setting

Data were analyzed using a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic approach. Predefined themes drawn from the survey guided initial coding, while allowing new themes to emerge from interviews and World Café discussions. To strengthen credibility, at least two Committee members independently reviewed themes. World Café notes and a dotmocracy exercise were

synthesized to identify and rank collective priorities, complemented by a post-hoc frequency analysis.

This approach ensured that findings reflect not only individual perspectives but also shared priorities emerging through dialogue.

Key Insights

1. CAFS's strongest value proposition is as a connector and convener

Across the conference/forum, journal, webinars, listserv, and newsletter, members consistently described CAFS as an "intellectual home". CAFS enables interdisciplinary networking, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, particularly valuable for scholars who feel siloed within home disciplines. The annual conference remains a central anchor, but members expressed interest in more frequent and informal opportunities for networking, mentorship, space for works-in-progress and feedback, alongside regional gatherings and alternative conference models (e.g. biennial national conference). These suggestions reflect both enthusiasm for engagement and awareness of capacity limits.

2. CAFS needs clearer alignment on its role along the knowledge-to-action continuum

Members expressed a strong desire for CAFS to contribute more visibly to food systems changes, particularly through policy influence and knowledge mobilization. However, perspectives diverge on how CAFS should do this.

Some members advocated for a more explicit advocacy role, while others emphasized CAFS's strength as a convener that enables policy-relevant research, partnerships, and dialogue without engaging in direct advocacy. This tension points not to disagreement about values, but to the need for clearer organizational alignment and boundaries.

3. Equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) can be operationalized more consistently across CAFS structure, process, and programming

CAFS is viewed as welcoming and values-driven. At the same time, members identified gaps between stated commitments and practice. Priorities included broader sectoral inclusion (e.g., farming, industry, grassroots/community organizations, social enterprises, government, Indigenous communities), stronger French-language engagement, and improved regional and time-zone accessibility. Members emphasized a desire for EDIA to be applied consistently across governance, process, and programming.

4. Capacity constraints limit sustainability

Reliance on volunteer labour emerged as a defining constraint shaping CAFS's capacity. Members demonstrated comprehension for faced constraints and framed capacity challenges as structural rather than failures of commitment. Key risks identified included burnout and uneven workloads, leadership and continuity gaps, limited revenue, governance ambiguity, and uneven accessibility. These constraints shape what CAFS can realistically expand, sustain, or pause.

5. With targeted resourcing, CAFS could significantly expand its impact

Despite constraints, members identified numerous ideas for feasible enhancements (documented in detail in the appendix of the full report). With appropriate resources, CAFS could expand programming, grow its membership, and its strengthen eligibility for future funding. Importantly, members emphasized that growth must be intentional and aligned with capacity.

Strategic Directions and Priorities

Overall, Phase 1 findings shows that CAFS is deeply valued as an intellectual home and a connector/convenor for interdisciplinary food studies in Canada, but its future impact depends on making deliberate choices.

Members want CAFS to be more accessible and inclusive, more effective at translating knowledge into real-world influence, and more sustainable and transparent in how work is distributed and governed.

At the same time, there is widespread recognition that focus, trade-offs, and resourcing must guide what CAFS chooses to do next. Based on our findings, we recommend a set of strategic directions and priorities across:

- Convening and community-building models
- Knowledge-to-action pathways
- Capacity, governance, and resourcing
- EDIA in practice
- Organizational focus and accountability

These decisions require Board leadership and collective clarity.

Looking Ahead

This strategic planning process reflects inputs from 67 survey respondents, 45 World Café participants, and 5 in-depth interviews, providing a grounded snapshot of CAFS at a moment of transition. The feedback reflects a community that is engaged, thoughtful, and deeply committed to strengthening both connection and impact in food systems work.

The findings also situate CAFS within a broader moment of growing momentum for food systems change in Canada, marked by growing policy attention, public initiatives, and expanding post-secondary programming in food studies. CAFS is well-positioned to contribute to this landscape through its open-access journal, its annual conference, and convening role.

Phase 1 does more than establish a foundation, it launches a bold starting point for the decade ahead. The strategic directions and priorities outlined in the full report offer a clear and actionable path forward while also opening space for new partnerships, fresh thinking, and collective engagement across disciplines. The years ahead present not simply challenges, but significant opportunities to shape, strengthen and re-imagine the future of the Canadian Association of Food Studies together.

Readers are encouraged to consult the full report for the detailed findings, methodology and complete strategic directions and priorities.