

EEE Research Seminar

Date: March 5, 2024, at 10:30AM

Location: POTR 234 (Fu Room)

Weslynn Ashton, Ph.D.

Professor

Stuart School of Business
and Institute of Design
Illinois Institute of Technology



A Circular Economy for Food: Design, engineering, and management perspectives

Abstract

Across the United States, food insecurity is coupled with massive amounts of food waste. Both are symptoms of a larger problem – a food system built around a goal of profitability, mindsets of scarcity, and values that entrench the exploitation of both people and planet. This system has developed an infrastructure designed to move large amounts of fresh and preserved food items across large distances at low costs in one direction. Many recognize that the current linear organization of the food system is both wasteful and unsustainable, and efforts to reduce and recycle wasted food are aligned with the concept of the circular economy (CE). The CE proposes that societies reduce the resources extracted from the earth to produce what humans need, and keep resources in circulation through multiple reuse and recycling loops, greatly reducing waste and regenerating value from those resources. But this techno-economic discourse often ignores historic and contemporary inequities. Since 2020, there has been a concerted rise in initiatives to support justice and equity alongside sustainability and circularity in food supply chains. At the Institute of Design Food Systems Action Lab at Illinois Tech, we take a systems approach grounded in building and strengthening relationships with community-based food system stakeholders, understanding their diverse needs, story-telling with data in compelling ways, and co-designing systemic interventions to help realize aspirations for a thriving food economy. As we work to craft more circular food systems, it is necessary to grapple with the tensions among diverse stakeholders' visions, priorities and values, in order to create inclusive pathways for food production, consumption and regeneration.

Bio

Weslynn Ashton is a Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology with a joint appointment at the Stuart School of Business and the Institute of Design (ID). She co-directs ID's Food Systems Action Lab, which combines sustainability science and human-centered design with a systems focus to develop tools and frameworks that can catalyze the transformative work being done by practitioners and advocates to build more sustainable, equitable and just food systems. She investigates the adoption of socially and environmentally responsible strategies in business, and the role of innovation and entrepreneurship in addressing neighborhood-scale as well as societal grand challenges, including waste management and climate change. Professor Ashton advises policy-making and program implementation at local, national and international levels, including the US Agency for International Development and the UN's Resilience Frontiers Initiative. She has a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and master's and doctoral degrees in environmental science from Yale University. In 2024, Professor Ashton was named to the Thinkers50 Radar List of emerging thought leaders whose ideas are expected to shape management in the future.