Land is the most basic resource which is crucial to the livelihoods and identities of communities. The twin 2008 crises of the global financial markets and food prices (driven by speculation and biofuels policy) strengthened the interest of financial investors in acquiring farmland. The private company TIAA (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America-College Retirement Equities Fund), which manages retirement investments for university and other non-profit employees, now claims to be the largest private manager of farmland and forests globally. They played a lead role in bringing together large financial actors to establish the Principles of Responsible Investment in Farmland, which largely ignore the stronger and more detailed human rights based land tenure guidelines of the UN Committee on World Food Security.

In the United States, TIAA is accumulating farmland in states such as Illinois and Mississippi, in a land market that reduces opportunities for family farmers and farmers of color. TIAA is trying to create an aura of responsibility around the growth of a system of large industrial farming companies, focused on flex fuel and feed crops, that is decimating rural economies. TIAA's land acquisitions for soybeans in northeastern Brazil are undertaken in the context of violent threats against land rights defenders. TIAA is rewarding land-grabbers, causing deforestation and enormous biodiversity loss in the Cerrado savanna, and threatening the right to food and water for Afro-Brazilian and other peasant communities. However, a campaign to expose the problem and pressure TIAA to change their practices has been slowly building. University faculty and staff have a key role to play in changing policies and practices of farmland tenure that threaten communities.

Doug Hertzler grew up in family farming in central Pennsylvania, and received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Iowa in 2002. His dissertation was entitled Agrarian Cultures of Solidarity: Campesino Unions and the Struggle for Land and Community Development in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. He worked for 11 years a faculty member of Eastern Mennonite University and was Associate Director of the Washington Community Scholars' Center in the District of Columbia. In 2012, he joined the international human rights based NGO ActionAid to work on the threats posed by the expansion of agribusiness and concentration of land holdings to indigenous peoples and peasant/family farming communities. He still has retirement funds invested in TIAA in hopes that clients can pressure them to change their practices.