

LET'S GET REAL: PROBLEMATIZING THE USE OF THE REAL FOOD CALCULATOR
IN LARGE-SCALE FOOD SYSTEMS AND EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

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Introduction

One of the most prevalent sustainability movements occurring on campuses across the United States involves challenging the large-scale, conventional agrifood system within which western societies have become increasingly entangled. Student activists are calling for more sustainably sourced foodstuffs in an effort to bring awareness to broader issues such as environmental sustainability, social justice, economic disparity, and human and animal welfare. In 2014, the California State University (CSU) established the first official system-wide policy geared toward increasing the amount of sustainable food entering each of its 23 campuses. This policy is explicitly grounded in the principles of the Real Food Challenge, which is one of the most well-known and largest national coalitions aimed at aiding student activists in their efforts to bring about changes to their campus food systems. The Real Food Challenge administers the Real Food Calculator, which is a means of tracking campus spending on sustainable food, the criteria of which has been developed by the Challenge over several years. An analysis of the food landscape of one of CSUs – California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) – reveals what is arguably true of many CSU campuses: the goals outlined in the policy are far from being achieved and there is no clear method for improvement moving forward. What is clear, however, is that the Real Food Challenge and Calculator might not represent the most effective means of pursuing an increase in sustainable food procurement on Cal Poly's campus. Drawing on insight from other universities, it becomes apparent that Cal Poly suffers from a lack of several key elements necessary for successful policy implementation. This analysis seeks to challenge the use of the Real Food Calculator as an appropriate tracking metric for large-scale food systems, such as the CSU system or Cal Poly more specifically, and offers alternatives and suggestions gleaned from comparative and qualitative research findings.

Methodology

Two universities were chosen as case studies for comparison based on their location, relationship to Cal Poly, and level of commitment to sustainable food procurement. The California State University, North Ridge was selected as the within-system comparison based on the recommendation of Megan Coats, the registered dietitian for Cal Poly Corporation. The University of California, Santa Barbara was selected as the out-of-system comparison due to its geographic proximity to Cal Poly. Qualitative research was conducted over the course of several months beginning in April 2016. To this end, research was conducted in the form of participant observation, semi-formal interviews, extensive literature review, and investigative research in the form of Real Food Researcher training. Several public meetings were attended on the Cal Poly campus, including the “State of Our Plate: a food forum” in May 2016 and a Campus Dining Committee meeting, also held in May 2016. Possible interview candidates were selected based on professional and academic background, and additional candidates were pursued based on recommendations from initial candidates. In total, twelve interviews were conducted either in-person, over the phone, or in an email. Interview participants included representatives from Cal Poly faculty and alumni spanning four departments in three colleges, including biology, nutrition, agricultural business, and political science. Also interviewed were industry representatives and administrative personnel from the California State University (CSU), the University of California (UC), CSU Northridge, UC Santa Barbara, and Cal Poly. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the Real Food Calculator, the principal investigator underwent Real Food Calculator Researcher certification training. Quantitative data collection was conducted using SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, San Mateo, California), an online survey service. Of 241 survey responses collected, nineteen were removed due to incompleteness,

leaving a sample size of 222. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed using JMP version 12 (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina) for Windows.

The CSU Sustainability Policy

On Tuesday May 20, 2014, the CSU Committees on Educational Policy and Campus Planning, Buildings and Grounds held a joint meeting to discuss the California State University Sustainability Policy Proposal, Action Plan. In the Action Plan, there are two items listed under the “Sustainable Food Services” heading, the first of which reads: “All campus food service organizations should track their sustainable food purchases. Such tracking and reporting will be grounded in the Real Food Challenge guidelines, or equivalent, with consideration to campus requested improvements. **Campuses shall strive to increase their sustainable food purchases to 20 percent of total food budget by 2020** [emphasis added by author]” (O’Donnell & San Juan, 2014, p. 4). It is now 2017 and whether there has been substantial effort on the part of any of the 23 CSU campuses to achieve the 20 percent by 2020 goal is largely unclear. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona has been lauded by the CSU system for their Restaurant at Kellogg Ranch operations, which not only “strives to practice environmental sustainability in the kitchen and dining room,” but also serves as a cross-disciplinary educational endeavor for agriculture and hospitality management students (The California State University, 2014, p. 22). Similarly, CSU Chico has received recognition for their efforts to expand the use of real food “in partnership with the University Farm and a growing number of local and environmentally conscious suppliers” (The California State University, 2014, p. 22). However, neither campus seems to provide any hard evidence that they are actively working toward the CSU system-wide goal. There is no immediately obvious means of tracking the amount of real food coming into either school and their policies on what constitutes sustainable food are not to be found in any

easily accessible reports or documents. This leaves many to wonder about the status of implementation of the 20 percent by 2020 goal, a goal that is supposedly meant to be met in just three years. Despite widespread support of “green” initiatives on CSU campuses, as evidenced by institution-level meetings such as the one held in May of 2014, as well as grassroots initiatives taking place on the ground at many universities, concrete action plans geared toward goals such as the one listed under “Sustainable Food Services” are largely nonexistent.

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo is no exception to this trend. It took until the 2015-2016 fiscal year report for the Cal Poly Corporation, which is in charge of all campus dining operations, to include the word “sustainability” more than once in the entirety of the annual Operating Budget and Capital Outlay Proposal. Two out of the three mentions of “sustainability” occur in following sentence, which is listed under the “2015-16 Goals and Objectives”: “Build increased awareness around Campus Dining’s sustainability efforts and practices and its partnerships with the university to reach CSU sustainability goals” (Cal Poly Corporation, 2015, p. 6). The Proposal goes on to outline efforts to establish some sort of tracking metric by stating that the Corporation seeks to, “in partnership with the Real Food Challenge team, complete the analysis of its product sourcing to establish a baseline percentage of sustainably sourced products” (Cal Poly Corporation, 2015, p. 6). And yet, it took until June 1, 2016 for any food data to be inputted into the Real Food Calculator, a laborious undertaking that was accomplished by two students working under the direction of Dr. Dawn Neill and a research grant from the Cal Poly STRIDE Program. The results of that initial run are telling; based on three months of data, Real Food comprises just three percent of the overall food budget for Cal Poly, with only one percent of food purchases falling into two or more sustainability categories.

Furthermore, only five percent of Cal Poly's food is local, one percent is ecologically sound, and one percent is fair, as per the Real Food Challenge definitions, which will be explored later.

Regardless of the Calculator results, there is an obvious need for improvement within the Cal Poly campus food environment. As an institute of higher education, Cal Poly serves to influence young scholars, future leaders, the San Luis Obispo community, and the local and national economies. Therefore, it is necessary for Cal Poly to practice sustainability and maintain a conscious sense of social responsibility that reflects student values and imparts these principles on members of the campus community.

The Real Food Challenge

An analysis of the 20 percent by 2020 goal would not be complete or coherent without an understanding of the Real Food Challenge. The Real Food Challenge (RFC) is, at its core, a call to action for university students across the country to act as change agents on their campuses in order to promote the purchasing of "real food". The RFC outlines its primary campaign as one aiming to "shift \$1 billion of existing university food budgets away from industrial farms and junk food and towards local/community-based, fair, ecologically sound and humane food sources...by 2020" ("About Real Food Challenge," n.d.). By harnessing the power of sustainability-oriented and socially progressive youth, the RFC hopes to create an institutional food system that "fundamentally respects human dignity and health, animal welfare, social justice and environmental sustainability" ("Frequently Asked Questions," n.d.). In order to guide this effort, the RFC utilizes six principles: real food, a connection to the larger food movement, youth advocates, meaningful partnerships, multi-culturalism, and participation ("About Real Food Challenge," n.d.).

The RFC uses a tracking metric called the Real Food Calculator in order to provide institutions with a standard, streamlined way to input and analyze food sourcing data. Campus activists that wish to use the Real Food Calculator undergo a training program that covers a brief history of the Calculator, as well as how to operate it. Once completed, the student is considered a Real Food Researcher and can begin compiling and organizing food sourcing data for their campus. In the interest of brevity, the details of the Calculator will be omitted; however, in brief, to be considered “real,” a product must meet certain criteria in one of four categories: local and community based, fair, ecologically sound, or humane. There are three categories of real food standards based on certifications in each of the four categories. “Green” products best represent the standard, “yellow” products do not represent the fullest expression of the standard, and “red” products are disqualified and do not count as “real” food (Real Food Calculator Admin, 2017). Furthermore, there are two broad categories of Real Food: Real Food A meets standards in multiple categories while Real Food B meets the standards in only one category (Real Food Calculator Admin, 2017). Certain disqualifiers preclude products from being counted as “real.” Though certainly not an exhaustive list, products will be disqualified if they contain GMOs beyond trace amounts, if they come from a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO), or if any company in the product’s supply chain has been found guilty of violating labor or human rights laws. The Real Food Challenge provides guides and assessment tips to aid researchers in classifying the food products of their campus.

Significance of Real Food

In addition to a basic understanding of the Real Food Challenge and the Calculator, it’s important to address the significance of Real Food, which need not be viewed exclusively from the guiding principles of the Real Food Challenge. Indeed, “real food” and the buzz surrounding

it extend far beyond the realm of higher education and academia. Restaurants, including some unexpected ones like Chipotle, McDonald's, and KFC, have been responding to an increased demand for sustainable practices from their customers over the past few years (Burrows, 2015; Watrous, 2014). The real food paradigm encompasses more than just the issue of environmental sustainability, however, and intersects with platforms such as human health, environmental justice, intellectual property, technological development, wealth distribution, and globalization, just to name a few. While the layman may often focus accusatory or praise-giving efforts on one facet of food production, it is nearly impossible to extricate these issues and still engage in a meaningful exploration of the topic.

There is no doubt that food is, and has always been, intimately connected to the human existence in a way that few other commodities have. In many ways, human interaction with food was a driver of technological advancement, which led to exploration, increased intercultural communication, and subsequent cultural evolution. Indeed, it was the Agricultural Revolution that allowed vast numbers of people to dedicate time and energy to something other than food procurement for the first time in human history. Since then, food's relevance to everyday life has expanded from a mere necessity for survival to a centerpiece of our cultural identities. Food contributes greatly to "our sense of self, our beliefs, our connection to or disconnection from others, and our impact on the natural world" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 15). However, relatively recent trends toward greater mechanization, automation, and, in particular, globalization of food systems have systematically isolated the various components of the supply chain from one another. The relatively rapid transition from traditional means of food procurement to what is now a corporate agrifood system has, in many localities, resulted in a large disconnect between people and the food they consume. In what Belasco (2008) calls

“technological utopianism,” the means of production of food have been largely abstracted from the masses (p. 5). Like a modern Agricultural Revolution, this utopia allows people at all points in the food economy, from farm owners and laborers, to chefs, butchers, and grocers, to pursue other, perhaps more lucrative opportunities (Belasco, 2008, p. 3). Consequently, this transition has resulted in “further distancing from the traditional rituals, sensibilities, and practices of food production” (Belasco, 2008, p. 4). While the mechanization of food acquisition has been shrouded in a rhetoric of upward economic mobility, revolutionary technological innovation, and increased food availability, it cannot be denied that it has also had a profound effect on our relationship to food, as well as our relationship to the environment.

Yet despite the deeply cultural nature of food, it remains a commodity, a good to be bought and sold, and global food systems are rife with disparities the world over. As a commodity, the role of food in the economy cannot be ignored. Weaver-Hightower (2011) reports that “The U.S. food system involves about 20% of the total workforce and about \$1 trillion annually” (p. 18). That’s an amazing, yet somewhat disproportionate amount of man power going toward producing a fundamental component of an individual’s everyday life. However, the disparities don’t end there. According to the USDA Economic Research Service (2016), gross expenditure on food by families and individuals as a share of disposable personal income increased by over one and a quarter billion dollars between 1920 and 2014; however, the percentage of the total personal income spent on food decreased from 23.4 percent to 9.7 percent. The Food Marketing Institute (FMI) (2016) found that between 2005 and 2016, there has been an 18 percent decrease in the number of people reporting “Supermarket” as their primary source of grocery-type items, while those reporting “Supercenter” as their primary source has risen by three percent in the same period (p. 7). These figures highlight several key components of the US

food system. First, food is cheap. Americans aren't spending less on food, far from it, but they must commit proportionally less money to this commodity than they did just a century ago. Second, food has become increasingly convenient. It is no coincidence that "fast food" has become a cornerstone of the US food system. Its embodiment of affordability and convenience has made it more prolific than even traditional supermarkets (Boone-Heinonen et al., 2011).

However, as mentioned earlier, there have been other shifts that warrant addressing in the context of "real food." Though perhaps more ideological than market driven, there appears to be a marked increase in food consciousness that is nonetheless reflected in market trends. In the same study that found a decrease in the number of people reporting "Supermarket" as their primary source of grocery-type items, the FMI (2016) also found that the number of people reporting "Organic/specialty" stores as their primary source for these same items has risen from one percent to three percent since 2005 (p. 7). Though not a giant increase, the trend is notable for its nod to a potential shift in consumer consciousness. Kearney (2010) reports that between 2006 and 2008 organic farming, which saw 82 percent growth in this time period, was "one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture" (p. 2800). The United States is the fourth largest holder of certified organic land behind Australia, China, and Argentina with 1.6 million hectares (Kearney, 2010, p. 2800). The local and organic food trends can be attributed to people's beliefs that these foods are healthier for humans, better for the environment, more fresh, and more supportive of local economies, communities, and laborers, even if many of these beliefs are as yet unfounded in the scientific literature (Cleveland, 2017; Kearny, 2010). Not surprisingly, university campuses seem to be at the forefront of this emerging paradigm, where scientific uncertainty appears to have no effect on students' "dissatisfaction with the conventional product" (Barlett, 2011, p. 105). Breen (2010) contextualizes the sustainable food movement within the

overarching theme of campus sustainability and argues that it is “one of the most noticeable trends” observed by “those who work or live on campus” (p. 687). Barlett (2011) suggests that campus-level sustainable food initiatives “build on the pioneering work of advocacy groups, farmers, and chefs who have critiqued the corporate agrifood system that emerged since World War II and who have laid the foundation for an alternative system” (p. 102). Breen (2010) points out that corporate food distributors such as Bon Appetit, Sodexo, and Aramark are responding to increased interest and demand in local foods, in particular, as a way to maintain their university markets (p. 687). This response is not insignificant given that these three companies account for ninety percent of the revenue of contracted food services for universities across the nation (Mero, 2012, p. 217). Thus it appears that higher education institutions do in fact have immense power in terms of “economic impact on the conventional food chain” (Barlett, 2011, p. 111).

More important to this analysis than national market trends, however, is Cal Poly’s attitude toward sustainable food practices. Of 214 students and faculty surveyed, 210 of which were students, over 53 percent said that it was “Very Important” for an educational institution, such as Cal Poly, to procure real food, as defined by the RFC. Only about three percent of respondents said that it was “Not at all important.” Similarly, when asked how important it was for Cal Poly to source food sustainably, regardless of the definitions of real food, less than two percent of student and faculty respondents said “Not at all important.” Also of interest, over 66 percent of student and faculty respondents said that they would be willing to spend more for food that is sustainably sourced. However, Barlett (2011) reported that, based on a survey of 146 institutions, the cost differences associated with switching to sustainable food are not usually passed on to customers (p. 107). Furthermore, only a little over 11 percent of respondents said that their personal eating habits did not align with any of the four real food categories outlined by

the RFC. Thus, nearly 90 percent of respondents are already eating in a way that is most likely considered sustainable by RFC standards. Data collected at the “State of Our Plate” food forum further demonstrates an interest in prioritizing sustainability when it comes to Cal Poly’s food. Of 26 submitted comments, nine contain references to sustainability, local or organic foods, or the Real Food Challenge specifically. These results demonstrate that sustainable food sourcing is important to the Cal Poly community and that efforts made toward increasing the amount of sustainably procured food on campus would most likely be well-received.

Implementation of the RFC Elsewhere

As discussed earlier, the CSU system-wide sustainability policy officially adopted the RFC goal of achieving 20 percent spending on real food by 2020 in 2014. However, concrete evidence that this goal is being actively pursued by all 23 CSU schools remains largely nonexistent. Thus, the claim on the RFC website that the “Real Food for CSUs campaign of spring 2014 won 20% real food (over \$20 million, annually) from all 23 CSU campuses,” is either egregiously unfounded or meant to reflect the official sustainability policy (“Participating Schools,” n.d.). Nonetheless, it is clear that universities in the CSU system are aiming to improve their food procurement policies, even if actual results have not yet been produced. CSU Northridge (CSUN) is one of the campuses that has actually committed to both the RFC and the Calculator. According to Karina Ward, Special Projects Coordinator for The University Corporation at CSUN, there are five real food student researchers working on inputting food procurement metrics into the Calculator (personal communication, June 15, 2016). However, the impetus for implementing the use of the RFC and the Calculator did not stem from student activism. While Ward emphasized the importance of student involvement in the Challenge, she explicitly stated that “The Real Food movement was started by The University Corporation

(TUC) in partnership with Associated Students (AS). The University Corporation learned about the Real Food Challenge and was eager to get the ball rolling at CSUN” (personal communication, June 15, 2016). She also mentioned that a “big factor to the success” of implementation of the RFC was “the support of TUC’s Executive Director and the dining staff” (K. Ward, personal communication, June 15, 2016).

While the RFC website claims that all ten of the University of California (UC) campuses have “integrated the Real Food Challenge into system-wide sustainability policy,” it is important to note that the UC does not, in fact, use the Real Food Calculator to track campus food procurement. Indeed, Danielle Kemp, the registered dietitian for UC Santa Barbara’s Housing, Dining, and Auxiliary Services said that, though the UC used the Real Food Calculator initially, they moved away from it due to its complexity, lack of permanence, and misalignment with established sustainability goals (personal communication, May 23, 2016). Currently, UC Santa Barbara Housing, Dining, and Auxiliary Services uses their own criteria and tracking metrics that they developed in coordination with other system entities. Without going into too much detail, the UCSB criteria are arguably more lenient than those of the Real Food Calculator. For them, “local” is defined as being grown or produced within 150 miles for produce and within 250 miles for everything else (D. Kemp, personal communication, May 23, 2016; Kemp et al., 2013). Furthermore, UCSB’s Housing, Dining, and Auxiliary Services operates independently of the other campus dining entity, called UCen Dining Services, which partners with contracted vendors and chains (D. Kemp, personal communication, May 23, 2016). The two entities track and report their food and beverage procurements separately. Interestingly, UCen Dining Services does not include leased tenants in their procurement data, which is in line with the UC’s current sustainability policy (S. Hawkins, personal communication, May 23, 2016; “Sustainable

Practices,” 2015 p. 10). Nonetheless, USCB increased sustainable food purchases by an impressive 15 percent between 2009 and 2013, from 23 percent to 38 percent (Kemp et al., 2013, p. 4).

Still, the glaring question yet to be answered is, “Is the Real Food Calculator the best way to go?” The answer to this question is clearly not a simple “yes” or “no”. The Real Food Calculator would not exist were it not an effective way for schools to track food procurement spending; their website boasts that an impressive 200 universities have signed up to use the Calculator (RFC, n.d.). CSUN has clearly met with success in their use of the Calculator, while the UC system has found it necessary to develop their own set of standards. In this way, it’s unfair to draw comparisons between the budding sustainability efforts of CSU system, or Cal Poly more specifically, and those of the UC system. To do so would be to compare apples to oranges, literally and figuratively. While efforts to use the Calculator have clearly been met with success at other universities, at least one of which is within the CSU system, it is not the most effective way to track food procurement for Cal Poly, at least not within the values framework of the campus.

Exploring Other Options: AASHE STARS

While the Calculator may not be a suitable option for Cal Poly, other tracking metrics exist that might prove more useful and reliable. Cal Poly has recently shifted to using the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Reporting System (STARS), which is administered by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). STARS is a self-reporting sustainability rating system that allows campuses to earn credits in five broad categories: Academics, Engagement, Operations, Planning and Administration, and Innovation and Leadership. A crucial aspect of AASHE that is integral to the usefulness of STARS is their

use of a clear definition of "sustainability." The AASHE definition of sustainability, which is based on the Brundtland Commission Report's definition of sustainable development, encompasses "human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods, and a better world for all generations" ("Understanding Sustainability," 2017). AASHE also seeks to align their definition of sustainability with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, a set of seventeen broad statements meant to encourage maximization of each part of the triple bottom line of sustainable development: people, planet, and profit ("Understanding Sustainability," 2017). STARS is their attempt to take lofty goals and make them into "measurable objectives at the campus level" ("Understanding Sustainability," 2017).

Not unlike the Real Food Calculator, a key tenet of STARS is transparency in reporting. Additionally, STARS also looks at food procurement from a monetary standpoint and gives credit to foods that are certified organic, fair trade, and humane, or both local and community-based. An expansive list of acceptable certifications can be found quite easily in the STARS 2.1 Technical Manual. Thus, in its conceptualization, the STARS credits are not vastly different from those of the Real Food Calculator. In fact, STARS allows an institution to report its Real Food A and Real Food B numbers in order to earn STARS credits. And while it is not worthwhile to nitpick the minute differences between the two approaches, it is worth noting that STARS does not appear to automatically disqualify any foodstuffs in the way the Calculator does. In this way, STARS may be less conservative than the Calculator. However, an examination of Cal Poly's STARS report card seems to provide evidence to the contrary.

In February 2017, Cal Poly received its first ever report card from STARS. While Cal Poly received a score of 62.57 credits, earning the campus a Silver Rating, the area of food procurement left much to be desired ("Scorecard," 2017). Cal Poly earned 0.09 out of six

possible credits for Food and Beverage Purchasing. The entirety of that credit came from 1.74 percent of food expenditures being spent on products that meet the aforementioned sustainability criteria outlined by STARS. Interestingly, Part 2 of the credit, which has to do with animal products, was not pursued in this report submittal. Of note, the report card allows for narrative-style interjections written by the institution. One such interjection on Cal Poly's report card reads, "A total of 20.2% of purchasing was categorized as 'conventional products with other sustainability attributes.' When combined with the 'third party verified or both local and community based' metric, this equates to nearly 22% of purchasing for the 2015-2016 academic year" ("Scorecard," 2017). It should strike the reader as odd that this narrative includes numbers in the twenties when it has already been stated that the real sustainable food expenditure was a meager 1.74 percent. While the higher percentages are not outright lies, they do not accurately reflect the true state of food procurement on Cal Poly's campus. It is true that 20.2 percent of the expenditures were designated as "conventional products with other sustainability attributes," but this designation is essentially meaningless to the report card and does not count toward credits in any way. In reality, this designation is meant to aid institutions in seeing possible areas of improvement. While it's certainly possible that the narrative was meant to highlight these possibilities, one must be skeptical of the reporter's intentions when a true expenditure value at or exceeding 20 percent would mean checking the proverbial box for meeting the CSU-wide sustainability goal. Furthermore, consumer perceptions are important for the success of any business and Cal Poly Corporation, as a for-profit establishment, is privy to this fact. The Corporation is also in the unique position of having to answer to both their customer base and the governing body of the system in which they necessarily exist. Therefore, it's no surprise that regarding sustainability, Cal Poly Corporation has taken to greenwashing in an effort to improve

their image. However, surprising or not, greenwashing is unacceptable, especially with regard to something as important as food, which has a demonstrated impact on human and environmental health and well-being. Also of note, much of the expenditure data has been redacted from the published Excel spreadsheet, leading one to wonder what the raw numbers revealed that Cal Poly Corporation did not want the public to see. Additionally, in January 2017, Cal Poly Corporation underwent a management shift that resulted in refusal to share purchasing data with the certified Real Food Researcher. This refusal was unexpected given the Corporation's prior agreement to support the Real Food Researcher as they sought to make meaningful comparisons to the baseline Calculator results. One can only hope that people look at the STARS report card with a discerning eye and are able to separate reality from sensationalism.

STARS allows institutions to place food vendors, on-site franchises, convenience stores, and concessions in a separate part of the report ("Scorecard," 2017). When placed in "Sustainable Procurement" under the "Purchasing" category, the institution need only have "published sustainability criteria to be applied when evaluating food services" in order to earn credits for these external food service entities ("Scorecard," 2017). Cal Poly has no such criteria in place at the moment and as such, no credits were earned for this particular sub-section, though the overall Sustainable Procurement score was 1.75/3.0 ("Scorecard," 2017). However, this presents yet another opportunity for improvement. Cal Poly Sustainability Coordinator Kylee Singh hopes that Cal Poly will be able to collaborate with other CSUs in the near future in order to use collective leveraging power to negotiate sustainability criteria into new food sourcing contracts (personal communication, May 30, 2017). Unfortunately, recent changes within Cal Poly Corporation do not seem intent on improving the quality of food on campus. A management change that began rather quietly sometime in the early part of 2017 appears to be more focused

on streamlining campus dining management than acting on sustainability goals (K. Singh, personal communication, May 30, 2017). Chartwells, the new management company, is a subsidiary of Compass Group USA, Incorporated, one of the biggest food management corporations in the world (“Company Overview,” 2017). Of note, Compass Group also owns and operates Bon Appetit, one of the three companies mentioned earlier that account for ninety percent of the revenue of contracted food services for universities nationwide. With such an expansive reach and a clearly successful business model, Chartwells’s lack of interest in the sustainability goals of one small campus is not unexpected. However, this does not mean that all hope is lost. As Cal Poly Corporation moves forward with changes to dining operations, it has a unique opportunity to harness the power of a large-scale food system – the CSU – and make strides toward implementing stringent sustainability criteria. It is pertinent that they do so before big business has the chance to make lasting decisions that run counter to Cal Poly’s values.

Another topic that warrants discussion is the fact that outputs from the two metrics – the Calculator and STARS – are not all that different. Ironically, the Calculator, which was criticized by Cal Poly Corporation for being too conservative, yielded a higher number than the STARS report: three percent and 1.75 percent, respectively. However, it’s important to keep in mind that both outputs represent a first for Cal Poly and to compare baseline findings from the two would be ill-advised. Nonetheless, the similar results succeed in demonstrating the need for Cal Poly to make improvements in the area of sustainable food procurement, as well as the need to continue to track food purchasing so that worthwhile comparisons can eventually be made. While there is no appreciable difference between the findings of the Real Food Calculator and the STARS report card, it makes more sense to incorporate food procurement data into an overarching sustainability tracking metric, especially when there is a lack of official criteria under which the

institution must operate. Furthermore, STARS is highly regarded by other institutions and reviewers of sustainable higher education assessments; AASHE boasts five endorsements in published literature on their website (“Endorsements,” 2017). With strong support for and wide acceptance of STARS, it seems as though using this tracking metric would be beneficial to Cal Poly moving forward.

Suggestions for Further Development

Having an established tracking metric, however, is only the beginning of what will surely be a long process toward increased sustainable food procurement. Starting small and setting short-term attainable goals will aid Cal Poly and Cal Poly Corporation in reaching the seemingly unattainable 20 percent by 2020 goal. Three years is a fairly short amount of time to make a nearly 18 percent increase in expenditures going toward sustainable food as per the STARS definition and setting out to do just that is undoubtedly a daunting task. Dr. Shelley Hurt, a political science professor at Cal Poly, says that structural, systematic issues such as this one require breaking down the overall goal into manageable action steps and that actually achieving the end goal may take upwards of ten to twelve years (personal communication, May 27, 2016). She further argues that politicizing every step in the process is a way to ensure success along the way (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Micah Elconin, former sales manager for Harvest Santa Barbara, said that from an industry point of view, it’s necessary for businesses to celebrate small victories with their clients (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Elconin worked closely with UCSB and Cal Poly during his time with Harvest Santa Barbara, which is a local and sustainable wholesale produce distributor based in Santa Barbara County, and he emphasized that big change within any food system is nearly impossible in a short space of time, but that being okay with starting small is hugely beneficial for any institution looking to make

change (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Some crucial actions steps Cal Poly and the Corporation should be undertaking early on in this process are establishing a governing entity, whether that is a single person or a collaborative group of people, educating students, and taking advantage of available resources and knowledge.

Cal Poly suffers from a lack of oversight when it comes to sustainable food purchasing. There is no one person whose job it is to oversee food procurement expenditure data. Consequently, this task falls on personnel who have a multitude of other job duties they must see to. In the case of the STARS report, the job fell to Megan Coats, the registered dietitian for Cal Poly Corporation. While Coats is committed to doing what she can to shift to local and sustainable products, her primary concern need necessarily be student health and well-being (M. Coats, personal communication, May 18, 2016). UCSB faced a similar issue in the past, with their dietitian becoming responsible for data sorting and entry (D. Kemp, personal communication, May 23, 2016). Presently, however, UCSB employs a student whose only job duty is to track produce expenditures, which accounts for a majority of the campus's sustainable food percentage (K. Singh, personal communication, May 30, 2017; D. Kemp, personal communication, May 23, 2016). If Cal Poly were to pursue a similar model, the results of the next STARS report might show an improvement considering it's entirely possible that a lack of time and personnel has contributed to inaccuracies in the data (K. Singh, personal communication, May 30, 2017). Dr. Tim Delbridge, an agricultural business professor at Cal Poly, agrees that if food procurement is not explicitly part of someone's job description, it will simply get lost in the shuffle (personal communication, May 26, 2016). On another level, appointing a CSU-wide person-in-charge for either sustainability at large, or food procurement more specifically would prove hugely beneficial to the movement. Erin Brewster, Sustainability

Manager for the Energy and Sustainability division of Capital Planning, Design, and Construction for the CSU, confirmed that at the system level, there is no governing body or entity specifically tasked with navigating the development and maintenance of sustainable food procurement, such as is the case with the UC system (personal communication, June 22, 2016). At the time of communication, Brewster was just beginning to attempt to piece together some sort of coherent, system-wide knowledge base about implementation of the 20 percent goal (E. Brewster, personal communication, June 22, 2016). Having a point person or group at both the campus and system levels might also aid non-students in reclaiming ownership of sustainability efforts, a lack of which can act as a potential barrier to effecting change with regard to food procurement.

The RFC has made abundantly clear their belief that student activism and grassroots initiatives are the keys to achieving progress toward sustainable food sourcing on university campuses. To them, campus food-service directors are too busy to make changes regarding food procurement, so it is up to sustainably- and ethically-minded students to push for change (Lappé, 2009, p. 28). However, this belief ignores the fundamental transiency that is university life. Breen (2010) argues that green-campus efforts are often hindered in this way: “Because most students cycle through the campus within a few years, projects and levels of commitment also tend to surge and wane” (p. 687). While it may be true that student demands and campaigns need to serve as the impetus for implementation of campus sustainability initiatives, believing students can effectively drive the process grossly oversimplifies the issue. Barlett (2011) argues that despite the fact that “Students have taken the lead on many campuses...faculty and administrative involvement is essential for continuity and contractual compliance” (p. 102). Cal Poly has indeed suffered from differing levels of commitment and a lack of administrative

involvement in the past. There was an initial effort to run the Calculator back in 2012 when a team of five Cal Poly students became Real Food Researchers. However, the effort was eventually abandoned. It was picked up again, as mentioned earlier, in early 2016, this time by a team of two students who finally met success. However, the “surge and wane” of student interest is not the only thing contributing to a lack of change on Cal Poly’s campus. A glaring lack of staff and faculty ownership and investment in this particular sustainability endeavor further deters any efforts to improve the system. Singh suggests that the Calculator can take on an adversarial nature in that it is perceived by some as merely a tool used by students to make the Cal Poly Corporation look bad (personal communication, May 30, 2017).

Student engagement with the food practices of their respective campuses is fundamental to the success of goal-oriented policy change. However, from a political standpoint, students can only do so much. And when it comes to this particular issue, students have already done a lot. Brewster and St Clair both emphasized that shifting student attitudes and demands served as the impetus for sweeping goal implementation and subsequent policy change at both the CSU and the UC (personal communications, June 22, and May 25, 2016). For these demands to catch the attention of persons operating at the level of the CSU and UC systems is telling of just how important this issue is for many student bodies. Thus, the argument that students haven’t done their part as change agents is lazy at best and outright dismissive at worst. Furthermore, sustainability efforts are most successful when approached from both top-down and bottom-up models. Over half of people interviewed stated that education and/or marketing was necessary for the success of Cal Poly’s sustainable food procurement campaign (M. Coats, S. Hurt, A. Grant-Holcomb, M. St Clair, M. Elconin, T. Salzman, S. Hawkins, personal communications, various dates). As with most political issues, there is widespread ignorance about food systems

and food procurement. Informing the masses about the relevance and realities of sustainable food practices is the job of food services management and those in strategic positions of power.

Whether this education comes from marketing campaigns, workshops, or otherwise is a matter of little importance, so long as some avenue of two-way communication is established. What's more, Cal Poly is an educational institution, so the importance of this facet of the task at hand should not be lost on those involved.

Perhaps the easiest and most useful thing for Cal Poly to do moving forward is to look to other universities that have already started down the path of more sustainable food procurement. In a situation such as this, where multiple large-scale food systems have already undergone changes, it is expedient to develop a plan based on what has already been proven to work. Matthew St Clair, the Director of Sustainability for the University of California Office of the President, said that collaboration between the CSU campuses will be essential to the success of the system since no one campus will have to reinvent the wheel (personal communication, May 25, 2016). Additionally, many of the people interviewed drew comparisons to either a specific UC campus or the UC system as a whole, so it only seems logical to start by using them as a model. However, drawing on existing resources goes beyond mimicking the practices of other universities. Indeed, Cal Poly should make use of students who want to help out with the effort. Karina Ward of CSUN emphasized the usefulness of student advocates at that campus and with Cal Poly students being as passionate as they are about sustainable food sourcing, there is almost certainly an abundance of people willing to help out (K. Ward, personal communication, May 23, 2016). Students can aid in education, data management, research, and a multitude of other things.

One of the most significant lessons to be learned from others is that transparency is fundamental to the sustainable food movement. Both the RFC and AASHE emphasize the need for institutions to be open and honest about their sustainability practices, yet Cal Poly Corporation remains reserved. The aforementioned suggestions will be nothing without first establishing transparency and open communication.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that large-scale food systems such as the CSU, or Cal Poly more specifically, have a responsibility to contribute to the sustainable food movement, not only because of their large impact on the food market economy, but also for the sake of producing socially and environmentally conscious scholars. The recently established CSU system-wide sustainability policy regarding food procurement is a positive step toward this contribution and using the RFC to guide the policy's conceptualization was arguably a logical preliminary decision. However, comparative research and thorough investigation into large-scale food systems reveals that the RFC and corresponding Calculator are problematic for universities such as Cal Poly. Regardless of claims to the contrary, the RFC has been deemed too conservative by some universities while its success at other universities was due in large part to top-down, systematic implementation, which represents a fundamental departure from the ideals of the RFC. Thus, it would be beneficial for Cal Poly to itself depart from the ideals of the RFC and to do so in small, manageable steps. The shift to using STARS is a step in the right direction since STARS incorporates food procurement into an overarching metric of campus sustainability. Furthermore, rather than relying on student involvement in sustainable food procurement, STARS gives ownership over the movement back to people in positions of power who are more capable of exacting change. However, Cal Poly needs to further strengthen this ownership and

recognize the importance of having personnel committed to the task at hand. Education will also be imperative to Cal Poly's success in meeting the CSU 20 percent by 2020 goal. This research demonstrated that students and faculty alike care about sustainable food, but a lack of understanding about food systems in general, as well as a lack of transparency, still contributes to an unfortunate disconnect between Cal Poly's food services and the campus community. Luckily, Cal Poly need not remain in the dark about policy implementation and best practices given that universities both within and external to the CSU system have already met with success when it comes to sustainable food procurement. Cal Poly can rise to the challenge of the 20 percent by 2020 goal, but it will take effort on the part of the entire campus community. Reengaging people with the food they consume is a worthwhile endeavor that will hopefully continue to proliferate within Cal Poly, the CSU, and beyond.

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