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Lauren Breene

Regionalizing institutional food at URI

Introduction

Regional food sourcing would better student experience in the URI dining halls, stimulate the local agrarian economy, and encourage good stewardship of our region's rural lands. The term 'regional' refers to the New England states. This is a more accurate term than 'local' because of the lack of a single recognized definition of local. Institutional food traditionally relies on the industrial food system, a system that does not align itself with several of URI's mission statements, including commitments to promoting fairness and respect, to showing ethical leadership, (about URI 2006) and to enriching the lives of students through our land grant traditions (Hatch 1967). This paper mainly considers the effects regionalizing would have on URI and its surrounding food economy. Institutions such as universities, hospitals, and schools have more power over the food system than they may realize. Making the commitment to purchasing regionally produced food for one's family in the home is no more than a starting point. Significant change due to the source of New Englanders diets will not be seen until it reaches the institutional scale. Nearly half of a family's food dollars in the US are spent on meals eaten outside of the home, largely at their places of school or work (Andrée, Ayres, Bosia, Mássicotte). Major institutions offer sites for a large scale shift toward regional purchasing.

Background

The most recent five year URI Strategic Plan for Campus Sustainability stated that 25% of food products purchased for the dining hall were locally sourced, considering local to be anything within a 250 mile radius of campus (URI's Strategic Plan for Campus Sustainability 2010-2015 2012). However there is no way to either verify or refute this data as the URI dining

services has never tracked the amount of food purchased locally. In order to achieve a more sustainable food procurement program, the strategists recommended an increase in local purchasing and the development of an education program for the purpose of bringing regional food to URI. At the end of the five year cycle URI finds itself in a worse position than where it started. This paper will recommend methods by which to form attainable goals and ensure a lasting movement.

In the grand scope of issues in institutional food, one may wonder why regionalizing is so important. Regionalizing institutional food encompasses a myriad of benefits, including allowing students a greater awareness of where their food comes from and stimulating the New England food economy. These benefits will leave the URI student body with a greater sense of sustainable living as a whole.

Many are cautious of regionalizing institutional food. Some claim that it is an elitist notion. Others question the production and infrastructure feasibility. Each bite we take simultaneously casts a vote for what, when, where, how, and by who our food will be produced. This influences global trends and effects lives at every point in the food chain (Berry, Wirzba 2002). When an institution votes their ballot carries a much greater weight than an individual's. What follows is a justification for regionalizing to ensure that the majority of the eaters at URI are comfortable with the vote that is cast.

First regionalizing the food source must be examined in the context of URI. At URI the old adage 'think global act local' can be directly related to our 'think big, we do' slogan. Issues in food security and global hunger are addressed in many classes to fulfill this. These are serious issues that the URI community and mankind as a whole must deal with. However using them as scapegoats to avoid changing the food system we operate within will help no one. Here lies an

opportunity to revitalize our state and regional agrarian economy by changing the production landscape. Creating a sustainable market and reducing our purchases from the unsustainable industrial food system will reduce the global impact of this system rather than adding to its harmful repercussions (Berry, Wirzba 2002). Rather than being a result of a scarcity of resources global hunger is an issue of unjust control over arable land and distribution inequality (Lappé, Collins, Fowler 1977). Worldwide production is nearly double the calories and protein necessary for every man, woman, and child to be well nourished (The American Heart Association's Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations 2016). Thus, students and faculty at URI should continue to fight for worldwide food justice through education and direct involvement as well as doing so by 'acting locally' to change our segment of the global food system.

The second argument frequently used against regionalizing institutional food is that of production feasibility. The New England Food Vision details a proposition for regionalizing the greater New England diet (A New England Food Vision | Food Solutions New England). The ultimate goal is to produce 50% of the food consumed in New England within the region by the year 2060. There are several aspects of this proposal that those interested in regionalizing at URI can learn from. First, the vision opens with a detailed discussion of where food products are currently sourced. This baseline allows for achievable goals to be set. Second the vision recognizes the production capabilities of New England. Even in the year 2060 the vision does not ask for any acreage in New England to be designated to the production of coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, or nuts. The goal is to focus energy and resources on food products such as meats, grains, fruits, and vegetables. These are all commodities that thrive in New England climates and hold great potential for acreage increases.

Nation wide the Farm to Institution program has grown from a small grassroots movement to a cause that has uprooted to White House lawn. (First Lady Michelle Obama to Plant White House Kitchen Garden and Embark on American Garden Tour 2016). The Real Food Challenge is a tool to assist universities in their transition to regional purchasing through tracking technology for the sourcing of products and guidance in selecting what qualifies as ‘real’ food at a particular university. This will lend credibility to URI in the movement while also following the example set by the New England Food Vision (Real Food Challenge) to have baseline data from which realistic goals can be set. Spearheading the adoption of the Real Food Commitment at URI is Slow food Club president Kayleigh Hill. Hill's work in program research as well as promoting the cause to the student body, faculty, and staff will pave the way for future students to ensure the adoption and implementation of the program in 2016.

UMass Amherst Case Study

Umass Amherst is another of the New England land grant universities and is far ahead of URI in regionalizing their dining hall purchases. Kayleigh Hill and the URI Slow Food Club visited the university to learn from the leaders of the movement how they had reached success and what goals they had for the future. First it must be noted that the program at UMass is grant funded by the Kendall Foundation. Because of this they are able to pay students for their hours working to track food items, promote the foods, and educate their eaters. The newest dining hall at UMass Amherst is dedicated to changing institutional food. After four years on the program the dining hall has reached 17% real food purchases. Their goal by the year 2020 is 20% (Participating Schools). Another important note is their unique promotional techniques. The student employees not only create materials such as posters and photographs for the dining hall to showcase the farmers who grew the food but they also work in the university’s permaculture

gardens. Each dining facility has a permaculture garden associated with it. While very little produced in these gardens actually feeds students, they- like the photographs inside- are visual reminders of the process food items take before making it to their plates. Any student can volunteer in the garden and many are required to have some involvement through their classes. By implementing such practices as hiring students and promotional creativity the URI movement would escalate in involvement, efficiency, and rapidity.

Discussion

The most recent five-year US Department of Agriculture census found a 4% decrease nationwide in the total number of farms. However increases of 2% in Rhode Island and 5% in New England as a whole were seen in the total number of farms. Rhode Island Chief of Agriculture Ken Ayres believes it could be a signal of a shift in confidence (Faulkner 2014). New farmers are entering the scene because they believe there is an emerging market and they are confident they will be able to sell their product. An important portion of this market is institutional. Farm Fresh RI works as a liaison between farms and schools to promote produce in season and to educate the students- both mind and palate (May: Celebrate Dairy!).

The challenges many small farmers face in finding infrastructure (such as livestock and vegetable processing facilities) that is of the appropriate size, offers the proper certification for their market, and is within a reasonable distance are often prohibitive factors in farm expansion and by extension in wholesale production. However there are several facilities operated by commodity groups as well as towns and states that may fit the bill. These organizations include the Rhode Island Raised Livestock Association (Quinn), the Franklin County Community Development Center (About the Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center), and the above

mentioned Farm Fresh Rhode Island (Farm Fresh Rhode Island - RI farms, local food, farmers markets).

For many small producers marketing on the institutional scale is an intimidating proposal. This is primarily due to a lack of clarity in the purchasing process. The purchasing process at URI can seem complex and confusing (URI Purchasing). The head of dining hall purchases at URI Betty Gil agreed to an interview and answered all questions clearly and concisely. First, prospective vendors register with URI. This is not a mandatory step however not doing so will put the vendors at a slight disadvantage in viewing proposals. Second, the URI purchasing office will write a proposal for a specific food item. Registered vendors will receive this by email, but it can be accessed by all on the Rhode Island Division of Purchases public bid website. The Division of Purchases promotes competitive environments, encourages equal opportunity participation, and offers an outline for institutions like URI to follow in their own purchasing process (State of Rhode Island: Division of Purchases). Legally the proposal must be posted for no less than 7 days. Lastly the URI purchasing office selects the 'lowest responsive and responsible bid' (Lowest Responsive Responsible Bidder Flowchart). This is the lowest bid that also qualifies for all the necessary criteria for URI. If an unregistered bidder is selected, they must register with URI before the transaction can be completed. Once broken down, the entire process becomes relatively simple.

Occasionally URI takes on a larger agreement, for example one with Coca Cola or Roch's Fruit and Produce. In the example of Roch's the selection process was made through a 'Request for Proposal' (RFP). When creating an RFP the university can use more varied criteria in their decision process, and can be more selective in who has access to the proposal. In selecting the bid in the case of an RFP the decision is made not only by lowest responsive bidder. A supplier

of this scale must also offer impeccable service and exhibit a willingness to undertake a true partnership with the university. Roch's was also chosen for their commitment to sourcing locally wherever appropriate. Similar to this relationship at URI is the one that UMass Amherst has undertaken with a local farmer who aggregates, processes, and markets wholesale regionally produced fruit and vegetables.

Community is built wherever food is shared. Even in the highly institutionalized and seemingly impersonal dining hall environment community builds and drives our daily choices in food and culture. This community builds relationships between students, faculty, and staff. The Real Food Challenge is a student run program that can only survive through the efforts of a committed collection of youths. In his book 'Fair Food' activist Oran Hesterman recalls a discussion he had with an investor on the importance of student involvement in university movements (Hesterman 2011). Engaging the student body is the key to gaining traction in any movement. There are several avenues by which students will seek involvement in the URI movement.

Director of Dining Services Steven Mello is cautiously interested in sourcing regionally, but only if provoked by student interest. The priorities of the department are to provide affordable meals that students will find enticing, and to do so on an institutional scale. At this point in time the team is already watching their carbon footprint as it is affected by food miles and considering how to reduce waste. Frankly, they have a lot on their plates. Director Mello stressed the importance of students vocalizing what they wanted to see in the dining hall. Better methods of communication, including direct contact with the director, would be a great place to start. Student interns or employees dedicated to the regional food program would be a necessary part of bringing dining services on board.

To maintain contact with the student body dining services uses comment cards in the halls and watches their social media accounts for student reviews. At this point in time the department is not feeling pressure from the student body to source food regionally. Director Mello feels their best line of communication is the spontaneous dialect between students and the dining hall staff. He cited an example of a formal study conducted by the URI nutrition department where staffers recommended whole grain breads at the sandwich station. There was a significant increase in whole grain selections in light of these recommendations. This leads one to wonder if staffers making recommendations regarding choosing regionally produced meals would see a change in student choice. At the UMass Amherst dining hall cue cards are placed at each station, alerting students to which options are local or organic. Perhaps the movement does not need to be entirely student driven and some collaboration could be key.

A new bachelors of science program at URI in sustainable agriculture and food systems could draw in just the type of students that the regional food to URI movement needs. This interdisciplinary major will encompass both learning to grow crops and learning the social justice issues associated with food production. With professors from a variety of departments including Plant Sciences, Animal and Veterinary Sciences, Anthropology, Sociology, and Natural Resource Sciences these students will be very well rounded. Associated with this degree program will be a capstone project- an excellent opportunity to bring students into the movement (The Big Story: Grow with Us 2016).

Student workers and volunteers can also become involved in agriculture at URI through working at the Agronomy Research Farm. The purpose of the farm is for professors, students, and extension agents to conduct field research but it operates in much the same way as a commercial farm would. The charge of the farm is to test varieties, methods, and machinery not

only for publishing in the scientific realm but also for the purpose of disseminating their findings to local farmers. Much like the permaculture gardens at UMass Amherst, the Agronomy Research Farm will be a part of the movement as an experiential learning location for students interested in digging deeper. It will not however be a main provider of dining hall produce.

Conclusion

The success of a movement to bring regionally produced food to the students of URI will be dependent of the level of their voices. A collaborative effort between the Slow Food Club, the Student Action for Sustainability Club, the Nutrition Club, the Agriculture Club, and the Animal Veterinary Sciences Club has recently brought the issue to light through advertising in the Hope Dining Commons, a student and faculty petition, an online student interest survey, a visit to UMass Amherst, and the production of this paper. This research has made it evident that URI has all the necessary components to start a successful movement- regional capabilities for food production, interested student body and faculty, and an open dining hall. The opportunity to be a leader in regional food sourcing is one the URI cannot pass up.

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