

Sustainable Food Systems

ESLP Action Research Team

2012-2013



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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Project Overview.....	6
Significance and Background.....	8
Initial Conditions.....	10
Research Methodology.....	11
Key Findings.....	13
Recommendations.....	17
Conclusion.....	19

Abstract

The Sustainable Food Systems 2013 Action Research Team sought to help UCLA meet its goal of 20% sustainable food by 2020 through collaboration with UCLA Housing and Hospitality Services (HHS). In particular, we focused on the new sustainability and health-themed Sproul Dining Hall (set to open Fall 2013). With our stakeholder Aliana Lungo-Shapiro, the Sustainability Coordinator for HHS, our project had two main objectives: research and outreach. We researched different potential distributors and farms that could potentially supply the dining hall and investigated their sustainability in an effort to add to UCLA's sustainable food percentage. In terms of outreach, we conducted a student survey on multiple platforms in order to assess residents' preferences, support, and knowledge of sustainable food. We provided this information to the Sproul Dining Hall staff to aid in the implementation of their sustainability objectives. We hope that the success of this team and new dining hall will set the precedent for future teams and establish a status quo for sustainable food policy on campus.

Executive Summary

The main goal of the Sustainable Food Systems Action Research Team was to assist the on-campus dining staff as they organized details of the new Sproul Dining Hall, set to open in Fall 2013. Through research, we were able to recommend and determine feasibility for specified farms, ranches, and food distributors for Sproul Dining Hall. We focused primarily on produce, meat, and poultry food producers. Once our research was completed, student knowledge of sustainable foods was gauged based on survey results from 185 students at E3's Ecochella concert event, where we asked students questions regarding sustainable food knowledge and preference.

The ultimate objective of our team and dining staff was to help UCLA in reaching its goal of 20% sustainable food purchases by 2020. The model set for Sproul Dining Hall would aid UCLA in reaching this goal. In order to be categorized as "sustainable" by UC Policy, purchases must meet at least one criterion defined in the UCOP Sustainable Food Criteria (eg., local as defined by 500 miles, certified organic, etc.), and these categories differed between produce and meat. We recommended distributors and farms to Dining Services based upon: UCOP Sustainable Food Criteria, product demand and supply, and distribution mechanisms. Detailed information on each distributor was presented to the dining staff in an organized report for produce, and an Excel Data spreadsheet for meat/poultry.

The first portion of our research was done on produce distributors provided to us by the dining hall staff. A total of five distributors were researched, one assigned to each member of the team. Along with general background information on each company, the sustainability practices and certifications of each distributor was collected through online research and phone

conversations. These included practices such as locally grown, USDA organic, Fair Trade certified, and more. Based on our report and presentation, dining staff has made the decision to look closer into working with Greener Fields Together.

Following our produce research, the team was then responsible for compiling similar data for meat and poultry farms. We were provided a list of over 70 ranches, and from this narrowed the list of potential ranches suitable for dining's needs down to eight to present as viable options. Much of the UCOP criteria for meat overlapped with those applied to produce, but also included categories such as grass-finished, certified humane raised and handled, and cage-free. This information was organized into a table and presented to the dining staff. From this list of eight ranches, the staff narrowed the options to five potential ranches that could serve as meat providers for Sproul Dining Hall.

The final component of our research focused on student outreach. We were primarily interested in what types of sustainable food students prefer and would potentially want to see and eat at UCLA. Through conducting surveys at Ecochella, we believe the results can be used to help guide dining staff to implement educational materials for the opening of Sproul Dining Hall as well as help future ART teams. 185 students responded to the survey, providing telling information about their perspectives on food and sustainability.

Project Overview

Since the first team was established in 2010, Sustainable Food Systems has become a long-standing team in the Education for Sustainable Living Program. As many past teams have focused on education and outreach for sustainable food at UCLA, we saw a need to concentrate on actual dining hall-specific research, specifically in contacting with food providers. We saw working on Sproul Dining Hall as a unique opportunity to collaborate with dining services in the conception of the first healthy and sustainability-themed dining hall on campus. With the opening of the new sustainable food dining hall as well as the 20% sustainable goal by 2020, dining staff is more open to discussing sustainable food, allowing our team to connect with them on this issue. As dining services already possessed interest in sustainable food for Sproul Dining Hall, we were able to more narrowly focus our efforts on desired areas of research.

In shaping our project objectives, we discussed several parameters with our stakeholder that influenced our research and student outreach throughout the last two quarters. Even as students expressed interest in sustainable food, we had to recognize the massive scale of UCLA dining services in the procurement process. As mentioned in past reports, the dining halls serve about 22,000 meals and thousands of people every day (SFS 2010). Thus, meals made in these halls can have a huge influence on the health of the overall student population. The scale of UCLA Dining Services was also an important factor in researching small-scale sustainable farms as many farms fit the UCOP Sustainable Criteria, but could not properly meet dining services' demand. Another factor we had to consider during our research process was the purchasing power of UCLA Dining Services. UCLA Dining Services spends millions annually, enabling it to have an enormous impact on its partners. For example, purchasing directors had concerns that

sourcing from a small-scale producer, outside of the normal bidding process for acquiring food, would mean purchasing a large majority of the producer's supply. Furthermore, dining services did not want the producer to unfairly become reliant on UCLA as their sole partner, potentially endangering their business model. Lastly, seasonality was considered as a parameter of influence for the opening dining hall. Dining Services does not typically consider seasonality in their choice of produce unless there is economic incentive. Purchases are typically made from broadline distributors who source their produce from all across the globe. As Sproul Dining Hall is focused on sustainability, the importance of locality and seasonality became a significant consideration in the procurement process. However, this added some complications to the sourcing process, and raised questions as to how the staff could incorporate these factors into the menu planning process.

With these three major factors in mind, it was determined that food purchasing for this dining hall would not involve direct purchasing from farmers, but rather from larger distributors who offer sustainable food either exclusively or as a sub-division of their normal supply. Understanding these parameters allowed us to determine which produce distributor would be most suitable for Sproul Dining Hall's needs.

From the beginning, UCLA Dining Services also expressed interest in having us get involved with students in the dormitories. As an objective, they wanted to determine a typical UCLA student's knowledge of sustainable food, including food preference. This would have the dual benefits of pointing to what kind of educational material should be generated for the dining hall and what category of food the dining hall staff should focus more heavily on in reaching the 20% sustainable food goal.

Significance and Background

Our project's contributions would have a significant impact on the UCLA community, as they would affect roughly 10,000 undergraduates living on "the Hill" in undergraduate housing. The addition of the Sproul Dining Hall to on-campus undergraduate housing would greatly enhance the welfare of UCLA undergraduates living on campus. UCLA students represent exactly what the UCLA community is all about: learning and growing through knowledge. Through our action research team's efforts to aid on-campus housing, students can better learn about the foods that are offered by dining services, as well as have access to a multitude of healthier, more sustainable options. With this education on healthful food, students will be better equipped to eat and live healthier in the future.

Our project also could increase the Sproul Dining Hall team's knowledge and access to farms and ranches that offer healthy, sustainable foods in large enough quantities to regularly supply Sproul Dining Hall. Not only would incoming freshmen benefit from our contributions, but also returning on-campus residents and staff would benefit as the new menu composed of sustainable ingredients at Sproul Dining Hall would foster newfound appreciation for sustainable, locally sourced ingredients.

Sproul Dining Hall represents a step towards greater sustainability within the UCLA community, something strived for through different campus efforts such as the Healthy Campus Initiative and The Green Initiative Fund. Our contributions would also be important because they connect UCLA with the greater UC community, in that we would be using and adapting the UCOP criteria for sustainable foods offered on UC campuses. The wide-ranging UCOP criteria addresses crop-growing procedures, animal rights, and sustainable fishing

behaviors, as well as various certification systems, such as USDA Organic, already in place in California. Our contributions would build off the UCOP criteria as a basis for more sustainable measures, such as reducing the definition of “local” from a 500-mile radius. Therefore, our action research team’s efforts would better connect UCLA with the entire UC community, as well as forge new education opportunities and involvement within the UCLA community in terms of adopting these policies.

UC policy has set the goal that all UC campuses have 20% of purchased foods be sustainably grown or raised by 2020. This policy is of utmost importance to our project in that it ultimately represents the main goal for our project’s efforts and trajectory. Our action research team would directly address and work towards this policy through our contributions to the Sproul Dining Hall team. Sustainable Food Systems Action Research Team would markedly make a difference, both in terms of building community within and beyond UCLA and by approaching 2020 UC sustainable food criteria.

Initial Conditions

Before our initial meeting with our stakeholder, we read last year's Sustainable Food System's final report to gain an understanding of their objectives, conclusions, and recommendations for future Action Research Teams. The report mainly analyzed percent of sustainable food used at each UC Campus and also consulted UCLA Dining Services as their primary stakeholder. Expanding upon sustainable food percentages, we chose to focus our research on the opening of the Sproul Dining Hall, set for the fall of 2013. In the initial stages of our research, we met with our primary stakeholder, Aliana, as well as other members of Dining Services to better understand how Dining Services operates and the procurement and distribution food process. With their instruction, we focused on sustainable produce distributors and ranches for potential partnerships for Sproul Dining Hall. This was completely new and unknown territory for the dining staff, and requires rebuilding a dining and purchasing system from the bottom up. Dining services began this process by providing us a product list of estimated uses per month of expected products. For our research, we also consulted the UCOP Sustainable Criteria to determine if farms and/or ranches followed any of the specified criteria. With these two tools, we were able to properly begin our research assessing potential food providers for Sproul Dining Hall.

Research Methodology

In gathering information regarding produce farmers, we were provided with a list of five distributors currently under consideration by the dining hall staff. This list was divided amongst team members and leaders so that each person could focus on a single distributor. Many of the details were compiled based on information from websites, but all required a phone call from the team member to gather more specific facts, especially in regards to the volume of product each could provide. Each member was then responsible for organizing this information in paragraph form into a predetermined template, and all five reports were then presented to the staff. We were given a baseline of how much of each product the new dining hall was estimated to require, and used these numbers to analyze the feasibility of each option.

Starting on meat and poultry ranch research required a different approach. Our stakeholder, Aliana, provided us with a list of roughly 70 ranches and farms that had been compiled by the dining halls' nutritionist. The list was divided amongst members, and each member was then responsible for narrowing down the number of ranches on their assigned pages. Similar techniques were used to gather information on sustainability practices, including web searches and phone calls. For the final report, each member contributed what they believed to be the top three viable options of their researched ranches. This information was given to the dining hall as a spreadsheet. Similarly to the produce research, we were given estimated numbers and volumes for meat and poultry in the dining hall.

Student knowledge and interest in sustainable foods was gauged through a survey conducted at Sunset Recreational Center during the Ecochella event. Questions were compiled

using the SurveyMonkey website, and results were recorded both on paper and on members' iPhones. A total of just under 200 results were collected, and results were analyzed.

Key Findings

Throughout the last two quarters, we have gained a basic understanding of how dining services operates, including scouting farms, purchasing product, distributing goods, and finally preparing food. Guiding the whole process, we have learned how dining services has internalized the 20% sustainable food by 2020. Also, in our farm and distributor research, we have enhanced our knowledge in how food is grown with or without regard to specific certifications. Lastly, in conducting student outreach, we learned how to organize our surveys for students, particularly for students who live in the dormitories, to provide dining services with insight into student awareness and preference of sustainable food.

Research Results

Before we actually conducted any research, we met several times with Aliana as well as dining services to clarify our objectives for the Action Research Team. In our meetings with dining services, they described their goals for the opening of the Sproul Dining Hall, specifically in regard to healthy and sustainable food. As they have been planning and coordinating with a nutritionist to ensure the new dining hall would provide healthy food, they wanted our team to research different sustainable farms. In these meetings, we learned that dining services wanted to change the paradigm for dormitory eateries. Instead of students defaulting in eating at the dining hall closest to where they live, dining services want the dining halls and eateries to have individual themes and become more of a restaurant row. In discussing this process, they often referred to the success of Rieber Dining Hall that offers traditional Asian cuisine to students. Students will choose to eat here, when they want to eat this type of food. They want the same mindset to be applied to the Sproul Dining Hall. For example, when students are craving

healthy, seasonal, local food, they can fulfill their desires and eat at Sproul Dining Hall.

Furthermore, dining services also stated in order to reach the 20% sustainable food by 2020, they did not want to simply just order local, sustainable beef and reach the goal, but rather diversify the selection of sustainable food to reach the 20% goal.

With the farm and distributor research, we learned how to determine feasibility and choose best recommendations for dining services. From calling distributors, reviewing their websites, and consulting the UCOP Sustainable Food Criteria, we figured out what policies they follow that can be applied to the 20% by 2020 goal. In our research, we also realized that many sustainable farms—although local and sustainable—could not provide the product and volume demand that dining services need to operate a successful business. Also, we now understand the utmost importance in distributing and processing abilities for produce and beef distributors. Dining Services runs on a tight schedule, with menus planned weeks if not months in advance. Thus, they need a guarantee that their product will be delivered in a timely manner. With many sustainable farms, they are more susceptible to volatility, especially in terms of seasonality. In our research, we had to consider if the distributor was able to provide consistent product, regardless of instabilities in the growing season. With the meat and poultry farms, we spoke mostly with family farm operations. In talking with the ranchers, we learned the differences in grass-fed, pasture-raised cattle versus cattle raised with grain and in confined spaces. We also learned how the ranchers that operate sustainable farms might not have the third party certifications, such as American Grass-fed Association, but still raise their cattle without hormones, genetically modified organisms, pesticides, herbicides, or grain. In our recommendations to dining services, we took these factors into consideration.

Student Outreach

In addition to our farm and distributor research, we also conducted a student survey at a student run, biked-power music festival called Ecochella (Appendix 1). With the creation of the survey, we brainstormed the optimal quantity and quality questions that dining services could use for Sproul Dining Hall, specifically for educational material and tabling. In our meeting with dining services, they expressed they are most interested in opinions from students living in the dormitories. Thus, our first question asked if student lived on the hill or not, where 64.9% student lived on the hill and 35.1% of student respondents did not. The survey was distributed at Ecochella, and we had 185 participants. For question number 2, we asked students to describe how many miles a food producer would have to be away from where they typically shop for groceries to be considered local. The average was 49.38 miles, with on-campus residents averaging at 53.68 miles and off-campus residents averaging at 41.63 miles. This finding was very interesting for us to understand students mindset on local food, particularly in regards to UCOP definition of local as 500 miles. Question 3 asked student to rank their top 2 sustainable food preferences (Figure 1). For Question 4, we asked students to rank what types of sustainable food they would like to see more of at UCLA (Figure 2). Dining services can then use this information for Sproul Dining Hall in regards to their purchasing product, menu planning, and education material.

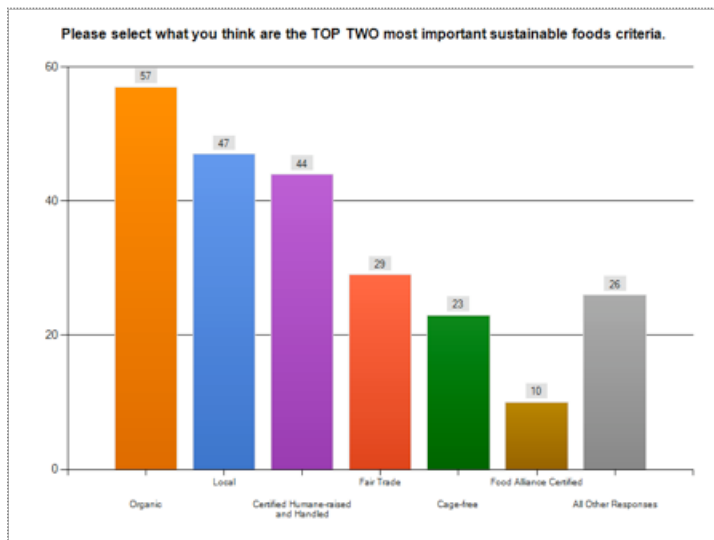


Figure 1. Survey Results for on-campus student's sustainable food preferences based upon the UCOP Sustainable Food Criteria. From the 185 respondents (represented on the Y-axis), organic, local, Certified Humane-raised and Handled were the most preferred

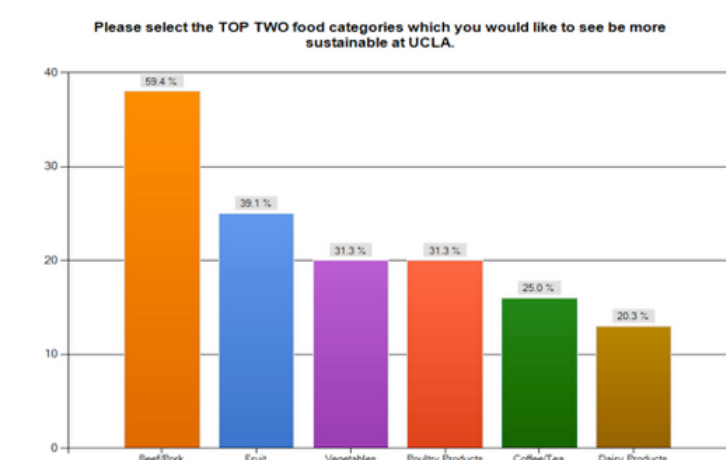


Figure 2. Survey results for on-campus students preference for sustainable food at UCLA.

Recommendations

Our research portions have involved the largely “top-down” approach of having a list of food producers and casting a large net of emails/phone calls into the list in the search for viable producers for the dining halls. In mid-May, our team paid a visit to Alan Schulman, the co-owner of Akasha Restaurant in Culver City. We discussed various aspects of the situation of sustainable food at UCLA, and he gave us great suggestions as to how we might proceed with our efforts. Most significantly, Alan recommended that, rather than the staff sitting behind desks at work or in meetings talking about the farmers and ranchers they might purchase from, the staff should instead go out to the farmers’ markets around Los Angeles and meet sustainable food producers. This grassroots, “bottom-up” approach, even if it may not directly establish a sourcing relationship for SDH, would open up the dining staff to a fresh perspective on the sustainable food industry through in-person conversations with producers. Directly hearing the perspectives and thoughts from these individuals can help shape how the staff should plan their purchasing/sourcing structure. This kind of “grassroots research” would be a great activity for future Sustainable Food Systems Action Research Team (eg., a staff educational field trip of sorts to nearby markets like the Santa Monica Farmers Market).

In terms of outreach, next year’s SFS ART should take the results of our survey and use that to help generate educational materials (posters, table-tents, events, etc.) that could bolster the awareness of the importance of sustainable foods on campus.

Furthermore, we would recommend that the SFS 2014 Team look into partnering with E3’s farmers’ market as a means for occasional sourcing around campus. One major concern and blocking point for acquiring sustainable food has been means of delivery, because many

small-scale farmers do not use the typical broadline distributor to deliver their products. Because these farmers will already be at UCLA a few times every quarter, it could be feasible for dining staff to purchase some quantities of produce from these individuals, and transportation charges will be nullified. This may be a very reasonable way to begin establishing the closer relationships with farmers that is sought after by dining staff.

Lastly, it is recommended that at least one member in this Action Research Team is indeed still a resident on the Hill. Although not extremely detrimental to our efforts, because of our lack of a resident member, we were unable to have direct experience tasting food from the Hedrick Test Kitchen. Also, for survey response collecting targeting on-campus residents as our majority sample size, a member who's a Hill resident could easily have access to and gather responses from his dormitory.

Conclusions

Our team's main goal was to assist the UCLA Dining Hall Staff source sustainable fruits, vegetables, and meat for the highly anticipated Sproul Dining Hall. We did this through extensive research of both third party distributors and local farms and ranches to identify the best candidates according to UCLA's sustainable criteria. We presented our findings to the dining hall staff so that they may make an informed decision when choosing which distributor to utilize. It was challenging keeping in close contact with farmers/ranchers and acquiring information in a timely manner, as many of these farmers/ranchers were preoccupied with other business. But although our research was challenging and exhaustive, it was also extremely rewarding. We gained extensive knowledge regarding the differences between sustainable criteria and third party certifications, price premiums of sustainable food over conventional, food distribution, and other important aspects of the farming, ranching, and food industry. We hope that the knowledge and information we acquired can be of much use to the UCLA Dining Hall Staff.

Whereas Winter and early Spring quarter were focused heavily on research, the last few weeks of the school year were focused on tabling at campus events, spreading awareness about sustainable food and the Sproul Dining Hall, and gauging student knowledge and preference regarding sustainable food. Our team tabled at the E3 Earth Day Fair, where we made solar-powered smoothies and recruited volunteers to partake in a focus group for Sproul Dining Hall (a project which will be passed on to next year's team). The Sustainable Food Systems Team also tabled at Ecochella, UCLA's first bike-powered concert, where we created a survey that assessed student knowledge, desires, and preferences regarding sustainable food.

These results can be used to help the UCLA Dining Hall Staff better understand student perspectives on sustainable food and hopefully allow Sproul Dining Hall to more easily cater to student preferences. These events presented their own set of challenges to the team, such as acquiring food permits, buying materials, creating surveys, and even the manual labor of making smoothies for hundreds of students. We anticipate that the data gathered from these events will be very useful to the UCLA Dining Hall Staff.

Our team has overcome many obstacles over these past two quarters and is proud of our accomplishments. We have formed a solid relationship between the Sustainable Food Systems Action Research Team and the UCLA Dining Hall Staff, as well as our stakeholder Aliana Lungo-Shapiro. This working relationship will benefit next year's SFS team greatly. Our research of fruit, vegetable, meat and poultry farms has provided UCLA Dining Hall Staff with the resources and information to make informed decisions regarding sustainable distributors for Sproul Dining Hall. The survey that this year's SFS team conducted at Ecochella gave UCLA Dining Services insight into how students view sustainable food, including opinions and preferences. This will help UCLA Dining Services tailor Sproul Dining Hall to meet student preference. Lastly, our team accomplished our goal of spreading general awareness about sustainability and sustainable food through our outreach events at Earth Day Fair and Ecochella.

Our team hopes that our project will have a lasting impact on Sproul Dining Hall. We have worked hard to make eating at Sproul an enjoyable and sustainable experience for students in the future. Our team hopes that the relationships and connections that were made with food distributors and farms/ranches will be maintained by UCLA Dining Services, and we also hope that our project can act as a foundation for future projects of which we did not have

time to complete. These include signage and educational materials within Sproul Dining Hall itself, table tents with information on sustainability, an Instagram account for Sproul Dining Hall in which students can post pictures and comments, and a focus group. Most importantly, the 2013 Sustainable Foods Action Research Team hopes that our efforts will bring UCLA closer to reaching its goal of 20% sustainability by 2020.