

**An In-Depth Look at Sustainable
Food Practices at the University of Texas at Austin**

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Defining a Sustainable Food System

Sustainable food systems incorporate a set of practices which focus on enhancing food production, improving economic efficiency, and promoting healthy eating habits. A sustainable food system values the public health of current and future communities as well as the state of our natural environment. These food practices are characterized by economic, social, and ecological sustainability.

Advocates and Programs for Sustainable Food Service Practices

In June 2010, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND), American Nurses Association (ANA), American Planning Association (APA), and American Public Health Association (APHA) formed and endorsed the "Healthy, Sustainable Food System" principles. The principles were agreed upon as points of interest in the advocacy for sustainable food systems and health.

According to *Principles of a Healthy, Sustainable Food System*, a healthy, sustainable food system is health-promoting, sustainable, resilient, diverse, fair, and transparent.¹ Each principle is loosely defined and it is up to each commercial food system to interpret and promote these conventions. Health Care Without Harm and Healthier Hospitals also strive to promote sustainable and antibiotic free foods within food service operations.

Within sustainable food practices, many rating systems and programs are used in commercial food service operations. This paper will take a particular interest in the following:

- The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS); a program led by The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (aashe)
- The Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP)
- The Nonprofit Sustainable Food Center in Austin, TX.

About the University of Texas at Austin (UT)

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) is located in the heart of Austin, Texas. This public university houses eighteen schools and colleges. The total number of students attending UT is around 50,950. The university values sustainability through many aspects of its day-to-day operations. From reducing resource usage to educating students and employees, UT Austin handles a variety of sustainability policies through the UT Office of Sustainability. The university has a separate division, The Division of Housing and Food Service (DHFS), which is responsible for all on-campus living and university apartment affairs. DHFS does not use State or University funds in order to sustain its populace when meeting the demands of two buffet locations and seven a la carte meal service locations.

About the Division of Housing and Food Service (DHFS)

The UT Division of Housing and Food Service department is in charge of sustainable food service practices as well as resource conservation, sustainable living environments, education, outreach and policy. It is part of the DHFS sustainability mission to “seek to implement policies and procedures that support the decrease of the organization's ecological footprint and make sustainability awareness and practices guiding principles.”² Guided by their mission, DHFS has created Eco2Go, a reusable takeout container program which has limited food waste. They have also used 100% of the herbs and vegetables grown on two campus gardens and the Concho Community Gardens. All DHFS kitchens and dining halls recycle and compost. The university and DHFS has been recognized for their sustainability efforts and procedures by several local and national organizations. Their most recent awards include Runner Up in Recycling and Waste Division in 2011 by Keep Austin Beautiful Awards. They have also an ‘A’ rating by The College Sustainability Report in 2010, and a Silver rating by Sustainability Tracking Assessment & Rating System (STARS) in 2011 and 2016.

DHFS Food Procurement Overview

The Division of Housing and Food Service is a well-organized entity in charge of both student housing and food service. Because this division caters to several services, the food service branch of the division separates retail operations from procurement. One of the two Associative Directors, currently Darla Stewart, is in charge of Projects and Procurement. She works directly with the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, Texas, U.S. Foods (purchasing over 15,000 different products), and local vendors. The food procurement process utilizes FoodPro, US Foods, and the Sustainable Food Center. Stewart and Manager and Campus Executive Chef Robert Mayberry go out to farms and speak directly to vendors about the products they want and expect.

DHFS’s Food Procurement Priorities

The food procurement policy at the University of Texas at Austin is guided by the DHFS purchasing priorities. The program purchases sustainable foods and beverages based on the following priority list ranked from high to low:

1. Texas
2. Local raised and locally processed (within a 200 mile radius from Austin)
3. Third Party Certified Sustainable
4. Organic/NonGMO/Fair Trade

Currently, DHFS has a budget of around seven million dollars to spend on food and beverages for their locations. Of the estimated seven million dollar budget in 2015, The University of Texas

at Austin DHFS spent 21.32% on sustainable products. According to the 2015 Sustainable Food Tracking Calendar, 14.2% of DHFS food expenditures went to Texas and local products. The data shows 4.1% of the expenditures went to Certified Sustainable products, 1.5% to Organic products, and 1.6% to Fair Trade coffee. Though the numbers may seem small, hidden in the percentages are big strides for UT. For example, all coffee at DHFS locations are Free Trade. The eggs in shells purchased are cage free unless the supplier cannot fill the vast order, then the order is mixed with cage free and organic. Fortunately, all tofu served is organic and all non-deli meat turkey served is antibiotic free at all DHFS locations. The University of Texas at Austin has set two major sustainability goals: increasing foods from local and sustainable sources up to 25% and reaching Zero Waste by 2020.³

Antibiotic Free Meat and Usage at UT

Antibiotic resistant bacteria strains have been created through the overuse of antibiotics. According to FDA Principal Deputy Commissioner Joshua Sharfstein, MD, “Antimicrobial use in animals has been shown to contribute to the emergence of resistant microorganism that can infect people.”⁴ Starting in 1999, the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (PAMTA) has been introduced to the federal legislation. PAMTA is designed to limit the antibiotic usage in animals for human medical purposes. It has not been passed into legislation, even though over 450 organizations including those with medical and public health focuses have support the act.⁵ PAMTA’s strict definition of “nontherapeutic use” is a likely reason as to why it has failed to pass.

DHFS is currently working on trying to serve more antibiotic free meats. Currently, all of the non-deli turkey is antibiotic free, and most of the bone in chicken that will be served starting Fall 2016 is from Perdue, a known antibiotic free chicken distributor. Fortunately, Stewart strongly believes that more vendors will offer antibiotic free meats in the near future due to increasing demands.

UT’s Sustainable Rating System Report

As of March 2016, The University of Texas at Austin received a “Silver” rating from the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System™ (STARS). STARS is a self-reporting program used by higher education institutions to track their sustainability efforts. UT Austin’s reports are open to the public and reveal 21.32% of DHFS expenses are used to purchase local, community based, and/or third party verified food and beverages.

STARS rates each university on a numerical scale in each category, for example, UT Austin’s Food and Beverage Purchasing was rated 0.85 out of 4.00. Each categorical score is then added up and attributes to the overall STARS rating. About 46.8% of all universities and colleges using STARS has received a silver rating. When comparing schools and suitability

practices, one must also analyze the school size, population, and geography. Although the STARS rating is an important achievement, the system provides limited feedback when it comes to driving campus improvement. It is also limited when trying to find the “best” model given that there are many variables depending on the institution.

The Barriers

The university faces several challenges when it comes to sustainable food practices, including but not limited to:

- Cost of sustainable foods
- Location of the university
- Demand and size of the UT’s populous
- Vendor participation
- FoodPro’s lack of sustainable food organization
- Educating the student

The cost of antibiotic free, organic, and non-GMO food affects the university’s procurement. The size of the university alone requires DHFS to supply a lot of food per meal at each location. The mass quantities of food that must be prepared is an inevitable obstacle. Unfortunately, cost will always be a barrier to a self-sustaining operation. “Local” foods can be hard to come by depending on the demand. For example, a majority of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) sustainable fish that was purchased in 2015 came from Alaska. Like fish, many food products cannot be attained locally because of mass quantities needed. The University of Texas at Austin would not be able to increase their micro-farming program into a full farming program because of their location in a busy city. According to Stewart, some vendors are happy to meet the demand of their consumers if there is an evident demand for change towards sustainability. According to Chef Mayberry, it is difficult to inform students about the effectiveness and benefits of sustainable practices. DHFS is actively improving their educational component with the help of various food service implantations. One way of achieving that is placing signs at dining locations. The signs indicate which food items were made from local products and the location where they were grown or processed.

The university also faces a unique obstacle within DHFS. According to the Suitability Coordinator, Neil Kaufman, the division of attention between the housing and food service has both its advantages and a disadvantages. In particular, communicating challenges to staff regarding funds, attention, and suitability buy-in can be difficult. It is Kaufman’s job to work directly with students and operations to fill in the communication gap by education learning platforms (i.e. micro-farming), training staff, and working on improving sustainability protocols.

The Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) in Austin, TX

Starting Fall 2016, The University of Texas at Austin, the Austin Independent School District (AISD), and the City of Austin adopted the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP). Austin is now a GFPP pilot city. GFPP was created by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council in 2012. It is said to be “the most comprehensive and metric-based food procurement policy in the country.”⁶ The City of Los Angeles, followed by, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) became one of the first institutions to adopt the GFPP. Through their “clear standards and strategic support,” these major institutions were able to procure local, sustainable, fair and humanely produced foods.⁷ GFPP affiliated institutions are also able to increase access to healthy and high quality foods for their communities by improving their food systems through GFPP purchasing practices.⁸ Those purchasing standards focus on five key aspects: local economies, environmental sustainability, values workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition.

After adopting the GFPP, LAUSD has increased its budget to spend more money locally. This has in turn increased demand for local businesses which had to create “over 150 new well-paying” jobs. The way LAUSD does business with its vendors has also changed. Distributors are improving their products and policies to keep up with the demand. Due to the GFPP’s success, the Center for Good Food Purchasing (CGFP) was created to support a nationwide interest in the Good Food Purchasing Program. Together with their national partners Food Chain Works Alliance, Farm Forward, School Food Focus (Austin Independent School District is currently parenting with), and the HEAL (Health, Environment, Agriculture/Access, Labor) Food Alliance, the CGFP is working to establish the program in other local intuitions and expanding their local lead partners.⁹

Conclusion

The UT Division of Housing and Food Services continues to focus efforts towards sustainable food practices in a commercial food service setting. Although they have several challenges to face such as the size of the UT community and vendor participation, DHFS is increasing its sustainability measures year after year. Now that UT and the City of Austin are starting the Good Food Purchasing Program, we can expect to see bigger strides in Austin’s sustainable food service systems.

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