

Analyzing Ohio State University's Food Purchasing System: Opportunities for Change through the Real Food Challenge

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In this study, I illustrate structural pathways of food into the Ohio State University (OSU) dining system and identify critical decision-making nodes to compare the goals and values of OSU decision makers with those of the Real Food Challenge (RFC). I then analyze OSU's food purchasing structure to explore barriers to and opportunities for alternative food sourcing through a potential commitment by OSU to RFC, the likelihood of which I consider through the diffusion of innovations framework. RFC is a national movement which seeks to drive change in the food system through colleges and universities by: institutionalizing student voice, increasing the transparency of food purchasing, and increasing the amount of Real Food (food that is sustainable, local, humane, or just) purchased. I construct a network flow diagram of the majority of food provided on campus to examine decision making in OSU's food purchasing system through commodity chain analysis by interviewing key decision makers. My analysis reveals that food enters the OSU dining system through a small number of pathways controlled by a few critical decision makers, whose goals and values, while distinct, are not aligned in opposition to those of RFC. The main barriers to OSU adopting RFC are systemic inertia and the lack of a cause "champion" or sufficient pressure, while the primary opportunities are in the flexibility offered by OSU maintaining a self-operated dining system and the sympathy to the cause offered by certain critical decision makers. Strategy suggestions are offered for students to use these opportunities to overcome barriers in order to achieve a commitment by OSU to RFC, while questions regarding the efficacy of RFC as a strategy to achieve alternative food system goals are raised.