Oregon State University Food AssessmentS

2010-2013

**Amanda Green and Robert Asinjo**

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Amanda Green is a Doctoral Candidate in Applied Anthropology at Oregon State University. She is trained as a sociocultural anthropologist and does research on indigenous participation in food movements, with focus areas on circumpolar livelihoods in Sami and Swedish society.

Robert Asinjo completed his Masters in Applied Anthropology from Oregon State University in 2014. His research interests include food systems and natural resource management. His thesis topic focused on how smallholder farmers in rural Kenya are coping and adapting to climate change, a threat to their food security and natural resource management practices.

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# Introduction

In 2009, the Oregon Food Bank began its program of Community Food Assessments, partnered with the Americorps RARE program. These year-long assessments were organized by RARE volunteers across several Oregon counties. Each volunteer worked with local communities in Oregon in order to start a participatory process to “tell the story” of the region’s food system based on interviews, focus groups, and community meetings (Oregon Food Bank n.d.: 1). The end goal is a report and a process that empowers members of the community to take action to work in their regional food system.

When discussion of the Benton County Community Food Assessment began, an analysis of Oregon State University (OSU) in the assessment was considered essential by several organizers. The university is a huge economic and political institution in the county, for example representing approximately 23% of employment in Benton County in 2012 (City of Corvallis 2012). OSU is Oregon’s land grant university making agriculture and food production an important field of research and teaching. In 2010, graduate students in OSU’s Department of Applied Anthropology were enlisted as researcher assistants to work alongside Benton County’s RARE volunteer, and their work has continued since. In the following pages, we will tell you about the process and results of our three year engagement (2010-2013) in assessments, research and advocacy within OSU’s food system.

# Methods

In 2010, we began work on the university portion of the Benton County Food Assessment. Our analysis was in large part guided by Peggy Barlett’s 2011 article that describes the current state of campus sustainable food engagement. We sought to categorize projects within the four core areas Barlett described in order to identify areas for future work: 1) academic and co-curricular programs, 2) direct-marketing opportunities, including CSA’s and farmers markets; 3) campus gardens and farms; and 4) dining service innovations (Barlett 2011: 102).

From 2010-2012, we interviewed eight key OSU faculty and staff, including those in charge of dining services, student nutrition, student food security, student farms, and campus food sustainability. We surveyed 141 students in introductory anthropology courses using an online instrument regarding their perceptions of local, organic and/or sustainable foods and their availability on campus. We identified all ongoing campus food initiatives, such as academic programs, student farms and gardens, student organizations, and food pantries.

One question remained unanswered in our first assessment: how much local, organic and/or sustainable food was already being purchased by OSU’s dining and catering services? OSU’s head of dining services expressed interest in this data as it would give a benchmark to measure any changes dining services made in the future. They agreed to a joint research project, and our second project was initiated in the winter 2012.

We utilized a model laid out by Real Food Challenge (RFC). RFC is a national organization that encourages university and college campuses to make a commitment towards providing local and sustainably produced foods in their dining facilities, with a goal of 20% of budgets directed towards “real” food by 2020 (Real Food Challenge n.d.). In the RFC framework, a food is considered “real” if it meets one of the following criteria: locally produced, humanely produced, ecologically sound, or sourced through fair trading practices. It must also not contain ingredients that pose a health risk such as high fructose corn syrup.

The first step in RFC assessment involved conducting a baseline survey to gauge the structure of the dining services, including facilities management, purchasing and tracking, distributors, and level of interest in sustainability. The second step involved conducting a baseline analysis of food currently served at campus dining facilities. When we began, we only used data from the largest dining hall during the months of October 2011 and May 2012 to serve as a representative sample of the academic year. The survey continues today and is now in the hands of three student interns paid by the university. The most recent data expanded to include two dining halls and 3 data points from the years 2011-2014. The assessment has focused on five primary targets: Sysco, Childers, Franz, Pacific Coast Fruit Company and Spring Valley Dairy. From OSU’s purchase invoices, food items are first classified by type (dairy, meat, beverage, etc.) and then classified according to the RFC criteria for real foods using information available at Sysco’s eNutrition and product and vendor websites (Moreland, Stapleton, Wiegand 2014). This paper includes preliminary findings since the assessment is still ongoing.

# Results: 2011 Oregon State University Food Assessment

We needed to adjust Barlett’s framework for OSU, but we found that OSU had a robust environment for engaging with food on campus. In our categorizations, we combined direct-marketing opportunities with campus farms and gardens, as these often went hand-in hand, for example, when students sold produce from farms. We added another category, campus food security, because a campus food pantry had recently been established and we believed that food security was an essential part of sustainable food systems. The following data comes from our interviews with heads of organizations and each program’s website.

## Academic and Co-Curricular Programs

OSU is Oregon’s land grant university, and as such offers more traditional degrees from the College of Agricultural as well as newer degrees in other fields. Food Sciences is the fastest growing degree program in the college and offers research opportunities that work within a regional food system, using Oregon food crops (hops, grapes, and dairy products) to produce food (beer, wine, and cheese). Many faculty members from Horticulture have been the drivers of research and teaching in organic and sustainable agriculture on campus and acting as mentors to student organic farms and gardens.

Outside of the College of Agriculture, Nutrition and Exercise Sciences and Public Health also contribute to teaching and research on food at OSU as well as a new minor and certificate program, Food in Culture and Social Justice (FCSJ). FCSJ was initiated by faculty in the anthropology department. FCSJ aims to train students in interdisciplinary studies of food with coursework taken in social sciences, health sciences, and agricultural sciences. Working across disciplines to create the FCSJ program has provided an interesting venue for each discipline to voice their perceptions of food systems, sustainability, and local food production. FCSJ also provides direction for many food sustainability projects, including this assessment.

The Student Sustainability Initiative (SSI) is a student-run and student-fee funded organization that represents student interests in sustainability. Food is one of its project areas, and funding to the tune of $700 per term is allocated for a paid Food Systems Coordinator intern to implement projects related to food sustainability. In 2010-2011, the first coordinator ran cooking classes, screened documentaries, and organized tasting tables featuring local and seasonal foods in the campus resident dining halls. The student group, OSU Food Group, was initiated under this program, and it has continued to offer cooking classes using ingredients from student farms and the student food pantry.

SSI’s Food coordinators focused on creating a tracking system with University Housing and Dining (UHDS) to monitor local and sustainable food purchases, as the current UHDS inventory system is not set up to identify the sources for their food purchases. Another coordinator organized a Food Assessment Committee of food-interested faculty and the UHDS director. The goal of the committee was to assess the food related issues on OSU’s campus and make recommendations to the university president and administrative staff. UHDS changed directors, so the trajectories of many SSI projects are unclear. However, cooperation for this RFC assessment has gained strength as SSI funds pay for 3 student interns to work directly with UHDS.

OSU’s Extension Services has recently adjusted its programming with the development of their Small Farms Program. The Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems received an expanded mandate to continue work with small farms in production and marketing as well as to build a platform for collaboration between OSU and Oregon food producers. This is another area where we believe Barlett’s typology can be expanded to consider the role of extension researchers and educators in regional food systems.

## Campus Farms and Gardens and Direct-Marketing Opportunities

OSU students can participate in a number of food related projects. In addition to the multiple research farms run by the College of Agriculture where students gain hands-on experience, there are also two student-run farms located near campus, the Oak Creek Center for Urban Horticulture (OCCUH) and the Organic Growers Club (OGC). Located on 6 acres, the OCCUH offers permaculture classes, organic gardening classes, honeybee research, and a student intern program. Produce is sold on campus and sometimes to dining services and the OSU Food Group cooking classes, or it is donated to the Plant a Row for the Hungry (PAR) program. Initiated in 2000, the OGC produces 70 different fruits and vegetables on a 2 acre farm using student, faculty and staff labor. Produce is sold on campus each week, and five student interns are hired to work part-time during the summer.

Students in the College of Agriculture can receive training in food production and direct marketing at the Clark Meat Center and the OSU Dairy. Meat center students process animals from the College of Agriculture into various meat products and sell them to the public, while Dairy center students produce the Beaver Classic cheese and also sell it to the public. The Dairy Center also operates as a hub for beginning cheese makers, giving them the space and guidance needed to start a new business.

## Campus Food Security

Students can also participate in OSU’s food system through organizations that address issues of food insecurity. The OSU Emergency Food Pantry opened its doors in March 2009 following the work of Sarah Cunningham and Dana Johnson in cooperation with OSU’s Human Services Resource Center, Ten Rivers Food Web, and the Linn Benton Food Share (Cunningham and Johnson 2011). The pantry has only seen increased demand and increasing university support as its need for student wellbeing is apparent.

## Dining Innovations

We will provide a discussion of dining innovations on OSU’s campus via the results of our second study of sustainability in campus dining.

# Results: 2011-2013 Campus Dining Sustainability Assessment

## Student Surveys

In 2011, we surveyed 141 undergraduate students regarding their food security and access to and interest in organic, local, and/or fair trade foods on campus. The number of students surveyed is too small to allow us to make broad claims, but students in introductory courses tend to be first year students living on campus, eating at the dining halls and other restaurants on campus. Thus these results do point us towards interesting patterns. For example, we asked students what two factors were most important when making a decision about what to eat. More than half of students report that when making food choices they consider price (n=103), convenience (n=83), and health (n=93). Few students select that they consider organic (n=6) or local (n=3) as one of the top two things they consider when making food choices. With regard to food security and choices, nearly half of the surveyed students report that paying tuition and rent limit their food budgets. Moreover, responses on the topic of food security reveal between 30-40% of students had skipped meals to save money or had worried they would not have enough money to buy groceries in the past six months. Of the 141 students, 3 were participating in a community garden.

When asked if they ate organic, locally grown, or fair trade fruits and vegetables, many report that they do not know. They do not know if the items had those qualities or if they were available on campus. Several expressed in the comments section that they didn’t understand what makes a food organic, fair trade or sustainable. Many students were also unaware of dining services’ recent projects to bring fresher foods, foods without transfats, and local or seasonal foods into the dining halls.

When asked if they were interested in a prepared-foods stand made from locally sourced ingredients (a question we included per request of dining services administrators), we found 89 students stated they would purchase prepared meals from a local foods stands if they were affordable, 65 if it were part of the meal plan, while 7 reported they were interested no matter what. If price were not an issue, 62 students stated they would be interested in more local foods on campus and 51 would interested in more organic foods.

## Dining Services at OSU

UHDS operates three residential dining centers: Marketplace West, McNary Dining Center, and Arnold Center, as well as OSU Catering. In 2011 the food budget for UHDS services amounted to approximately $6 million per year, which translates to an average of 11,000 meals served every weekday while school is in session. UHDS operates as an auxiliary unit of OSU, meaning it is solely funded by student fees and does not have access to any state funds allotted to the university. They operate as if they are a standalone lodging business (Interview, UHDS staff).

OSU Catering has experienced double-digit growth in recent years. They organize approximately thirty events each day and gross approximately one and a half million dollars of sales annually. This translates to approximately three hundred fifty thousand dollars of annual food purchases. UHDS has more flexible purchasing with OSU Catering since it is not dependent on student fees. The catering menus feature many local products and provide them when they are ordered (Interview, UHDS staff).

UHDS has a primary vendor agreement with SYSCO. Their contracts are negotiated periodically and by guaranteeing a certain amount of business for the vendor, in return, UHDS receives favorable pricing or significant discounts from the company. Eighty-five percent of the budget is designated for purchases with SYSCO. UHDS purchases produce through Pacific Coast Fruit Distribution that offers a weekly “local buy sheet.” During a typical school year, 15 percent of the UHDS budget is available for sourcing food with local farms (Interview, UHDS staff). However, it was unclear if all fifteen percent went to local farm purchases.

Our 2011 analysis revealed that the total dollar amount of food sourced from SYSCO by Marketplace West totaled over $82,000, roughly 46% of the grand total of $177,000. SYSCO supplied Marketplace West with over 270 unique food items. The food items sourced from SYSCO to Marketplace West were distributed under a total of 113 different brand names. However the top two brands, SYSCO Classic and Hormel, account for almost $17K out of $82K, roughly 20% of total purchases. The top 10 brands account for roughly $46K or 56% of total purchases. Thus we can see a pattern where the bulk of food is distributed under a few brands, a pattern of consolidation found throughout food systems, visible in Table 2.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 2: OSU Food Purchases by Brand** | | |
| **Amount of Purchase** | **Number of Brands** | **Total Purchase** |
| $5K - $10K | 2 | $16,959.32 |
| $4K - $5K | 2 | $8,997.13 |
| $3K - $4K | 4 | $14,615.15 |
| $2K - $3K | 5 | $11,816.65 |
| $1K - $2K | 8 | $10,985.21 |
| $500 - $1K | 10 | $7,108.67 |
| $100 - $500 | 46 | $10,557.20 |
| Below$100 | 36 | $1,765.27 |
| Note Data are from OSU’s October 2011 SYSCO purchases for Marketplace West dining hall. | | |

SYSCO is a large distributor that sources its own supplies either directly from food processors or indirectly through smaller distributors, reflecting the pattern of vertical integration of the food system where one company owns production the whole way through. The consolidation of many producers under one product name minimizes transparency and presents challenges in ascertaining where these products are sourced from and the practices employed in their production. Analysis of food items according to sustainability criteria set out by RFC is still ongoing but has faced challenges since the outset. This is in large part because it is difficult to identify where a product is produced and the manner in which it was produced or sourced.

By 2014, the initial results from the OSU food assessment showed that less than 10% of SYSCO’s foods qualified as real foods, where they met one of the four Real Food criteria. SYSCO’s real foods met criteria primarily via certifications such as organic, Fair Trade or Food Alliance. Just over 50% of Pacific Coast Fruit purchases qualified as real, meeting one of the four criteria. Less than 25% of Franz products qualified as real. Both Pacific Coast and Franz products only qualified as real foods under the criteria locally produced (<250 miles from OSU). Analysis of Childers and Spring Valley Dairy are ongoing during the 2014-2014 academic year (Moreland, Stapleton, Wiegand 2014).

## Dining Innovations

UHDS has designed some innovative programs that focus on sustainability and health, such as changing all dining facility tableware to compostable alternatives and eliminating virtually all food items that contain transfats, which UHDS nutritionists consider unhealthy. With the help of UHDS nutritionists, UHDS chefs have launched a program they refer to as the “Harvest of the Month.” They feature special menu items prepared using locally sourced and seasonal foods that UHDS sources directly. SYSCO is also bolstering their local food options, but their options remain limited. UHDS staff prefer this approach because the chefs are able to order produce they know is local, fresh, and washed according to necessary standards (interview, UHDS staff). Adhering to food safety standards and certifications, is crucial area of concern for UHDS administrators, especially when they consider dealing with smaller local vendors.

The chefs recently conducted a taste test between grass-fed and corn-fed beef. Student decisively voted for grass-fed beef (Interview, UHDS staff). The chefs realized they should also have asked students if they would be willing to pay the extra cost to ensure that all beef served at UHDS is grass-fed. Interest is there, as UHDS Head Chef exclaimed to us, “We know we can do better. You want to know what I want to see. I want to see OSU farming its own products to use at UHDS!” (Interview, UHDS staff).

## Challenges

In addition to meeting the needs and price ranges of students, UHDS staff comment that the large scale of the university dining operations makes it difficult to change.Many individuals we interviewed cite the benefits in dealing with large food vendors such as SYSCO who can aggregate many food items from many smaller vendors into one delivery. UHDS prefers to have fewer deliveries, as it reduces the amount of vehicle traffic on campus and near residence halls.

The deskilling of food service staff in dining facilities is another constraint. Most of the food service staff are student workers, with a one to seven ratio of full time staff to student staff. UHDS chefs point out that, in general, the food service staff lack the skills required to prepare most meals that begin with raw ingredients. It increases their reliance on preprocessed and precooked food items, creating a positive feedback loop: as they rely on more prepared items they require fewer skilled employees. If UHDS were to increase their purchases of food produced locally and sustainably, they would need to restructure their kitchen staff.

UHDS also prioritizes other student interests, primarily gluten-free and vegetarian options. During our research, plans were underway to create a kitchen that would be entirely free from gluten products. These programs are prioritized based on what UHDS perceives students want in the dining halls. In interviews, UHDS staff comment that they often feel they actually generate the demand for organic or sustainably produced products by making them available to students, who otherwise had not thought about them. Our surveys of students confirm that organic and local are not top priorities for students, but if such food were made available, many students would be interested if prices were not much higher than current ones. Finally, student matriculation and short-lived student projects often hamper projects that require long-term interest and investment, such as projects to change the food system.

# Shortcomings of the Food Assessment Model

Our food sustainability assessment paid very little attention to the actual nutritional quality and composition of individual meals served in the residence dining halls. Instead emphasis has been on local procurement and ecologically sound production practices. The primary concern for the UHDS dieticians is ensuring that students are eating a nutritionally balanced meal. They would rather students eat fruits and vegetables from non-local sources than none at all. This difference made us wonder if our model needed to consider nutrition as part of model of sustainability, and we encourage future sustainability assessments to include it.

We also received critiques regarding the sustainability standards of our assessment, which is based on the Real Food Challenge criteria. UHDS staff point out the common issues found in third party certifications such as USDA Organic or Food Alliance: they have the potential to exclude local food producers who may not have the financial resources to obtain formal certifications despite the fact that they already have in place sustainable practices that meet or even surpass formal standards. However, our sustainability assessment criteria actually considers both locally produced and organically certified food items on par. Meeting either of those factors qualifies the food item as sustainable, though this too can be problematic.

Finally, we found that cooperation with the university worked better when we referred to it as an OSU student-led initiative, rather than an initiative of the Real Food Challenge. We used the framework of the RFC to conduct our second study because it is a valuable tool, but we found that university representatives expressed reluctance at working with an external organization such as Real Food Challenge, and are instead more open to working within established relationships whether with vendors or student organizations. The RFC project gathered strength in 2013 and 2014 as a collaboration between OSU specific organizations: SSI provided funding for student interns, FCSJ gave guidance via program coordinator Dr. Sarah Cunningham, and UHDS staff provided guidance and invoice data.

# Conclusion

There are clear indicators that Oregon State University is embracing alternative forms of food research, production, and consumption that focus on sustainable, organic and/or regional production. This is evidenced by developments in OSU’s academic programs (such as increasing coursework on organic or alternative farming methods and integrating social sciences in food systems studies) and availability of extracurricular and internship training (students farms and gardens and hands-on experience in direct sales) Yet broader student interest and campus dining lag behind.

Building working partnerships and coalitions to address food on campus proved more challenging than we initially anticipated, given that we identified a large interest in sustainable and regionally grown food in academic and extracurricular programs. Much more “weaver work” (Stephenson et al. 2007) must occur in order to unite diverse sets of actors to build institutional transformations. UHDS staff, faculty, coordinators at the Student Sustainability Initiative, and student leaders of the OSU Food Group, need to work together to identify solutions and increase student interest in a sustainable campus dining system.

We also believe a formal commitment, with money and resources, from OSU administration is one way, and perhaps the best way, forward in building a sustainable dining system. It should require the development of a transparent tracking system that reveals where, how and by whom foods were produced, standards to determine if a product is sustainable and/or local, a commitment to hire more full-time kitchen staff, and a reimagined ordering and delivery system.

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