

Sustainability in the UNC Food System



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Leslie Alanis, Florence Brooks, Katelyn Cline, Katie McMahon, Isabelle Smith, Alexis Tammi
Advised by: Dr. Amy Cooke, Dr. Elizabeth Havice, Amy Braun, Andreina Malki

Support provided by: Office of Undergraduate Research & College of Arts and Sciences

Introduction

UNC committed to the Real Food Challenge (RFC), a third-party food sustainability standard, in 2016. The goal of the project was to examine the strengths and weaknesses of RFC, analyze alternative approaches to standards, and provide evidence-based recommendations to CDS on future pathways to maximize sustainability in the campus food system. We conducted interviews and a survey to reach our goal.

Alternatives to RFC: Challenges Associated with Internal Standards

“Overall, I think it is best not to develop an internal standard like we did.”

Stakeholders with experience of internal standard development enjoyed taking a front seat in the decision-making process, but recommend that UNC **not develop an internal standard**, feeling that “this work is best left to nonprofits and organizations dedicated to studying sustainable food.” External standards provide stability despite student and administrative turnover.

Standards and Stakeholder Perspectives

- Several stakeholder groups mentioned that **large institutions have the opportunity and responsibility** to create a food system that is **generative** of local economic growth and ecological sustainability
- Interviewees most commonly identified **time and cost as challenges** to working towards sustainability
- Stakeholders, and especially dining administrators, emphasize **affordability, which is often considered to be at odds with sustainability**
- **Students drive change**, yet constant turnover creates inconsistent student activism around sustainable food

Comparison Across Third Party Standards

	REAL FOOD CALCULATOR (RFC)	GOOD FOOD PURCHASING	ARAMARK'S GREEN THREAD	AASHE STARS	COOL FOOD PLEDGE	MENUS OF CHANGE
PRIMARY GOALS/ QUALIFICATIONS	Local & community based, fair, ecologically sound, humane ¹	Nutrition, valued workforce, local economies, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare ⁷	Local purchasing, reduction and diversion of waste, energy and water conservation, reduction of fuel consumption and emissions ²	Sustainably or ethically produced, plant-based, sustainable dining initiatives, food waste minimization and recovery ³	Cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25 ²⁷ percent by 2030 ²⁷	Transparency, sourcing from both local and global, fresh, seasonal items, plant-forward, minimally processed, whole foods, nutrition ²⁷
RESULTS OR REPORTING METHODS	Calculates the % of “Real Food” from procurement records ⁴	Members submit policies, news, and successes ⁸	Information gathered from each member, on desired metrics ⁹	Audit over entire institution (not just dining) ²²	CFP gathers each member’s results on emissions ²⁴	Gathers information on foodservice industry as a whole ²⁸
REPORTING PERIOD	Yearly, by each member ⁵	No formal member schedule, periodic reports by GFP ⁹	Yearly, in aggregate ¹⁵	Yearly, by each member ²³	Yearly, in aggregate ²⁹	Yearly, in aggregate ³⁰
RECOGNITION	Percentages publicly reported ⁶	Good news from members posted publicly ¹⁰	Some members publicly report, commitment ¹¹	5 levels of badges: reporter, bronze, silver, gold, platinum ²⁴	Spotlights on some members in report ²⁵	Annual summit and website spotlight ³¹
OTHER NOTES	Some members have made the commitment and not reported, some report inconsistently ⁵	Members have few standardized goals and have a great deal of flexibility ⁸	Varied goals across a broad range of sustainability aspects, each member often has their own goals ¹⁷	Dining is a subset of a broader, whole-institution audit on sustainability. Uses a calculator similar to RFC; some members don’t report ²³	Members’ individual reports are aggregated to promote collaboration ³¹	Provides overview of the entire foodservice industry; members below are from the University Research Collaborative (MCURC) ³⁷
SELECTED PARTICIPANTS	UNC-Chapel Hill U. of Pittsburgh, U. of CA system	LA Unified School District, City of Chicago, IL	Auburn U., Clemson U., James Madison U.	Michigan St. U., CA State System, UNC-Chapel Hill	Sloan-Kettering, Farmers Restaurant Group, Morgan-Stanley	Michigan St. U., U. of CA System, NC St. U.

Figure 3. We compared several third-party certifications. RFC emerged as the most robust, despite concerns from stakeholders that it does not always meet UNC’s specific needs. Stakeholders identified gaps in the RFC standard that they want to address.

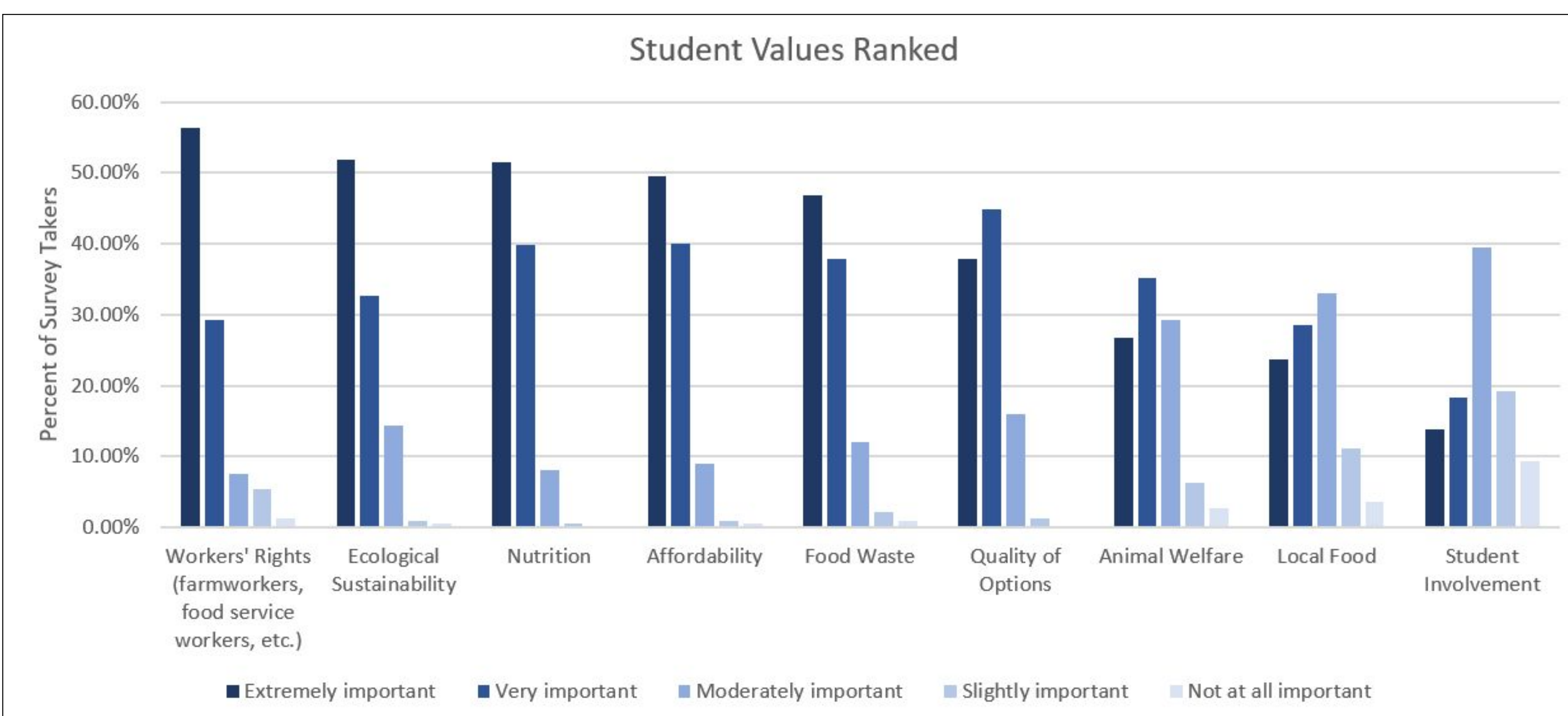


Figure 1. The survey (n= 238) showed **discrepancies between expert opinion and student values** as many interviewees valued local food but most respondents ranked it as “moderately important.”

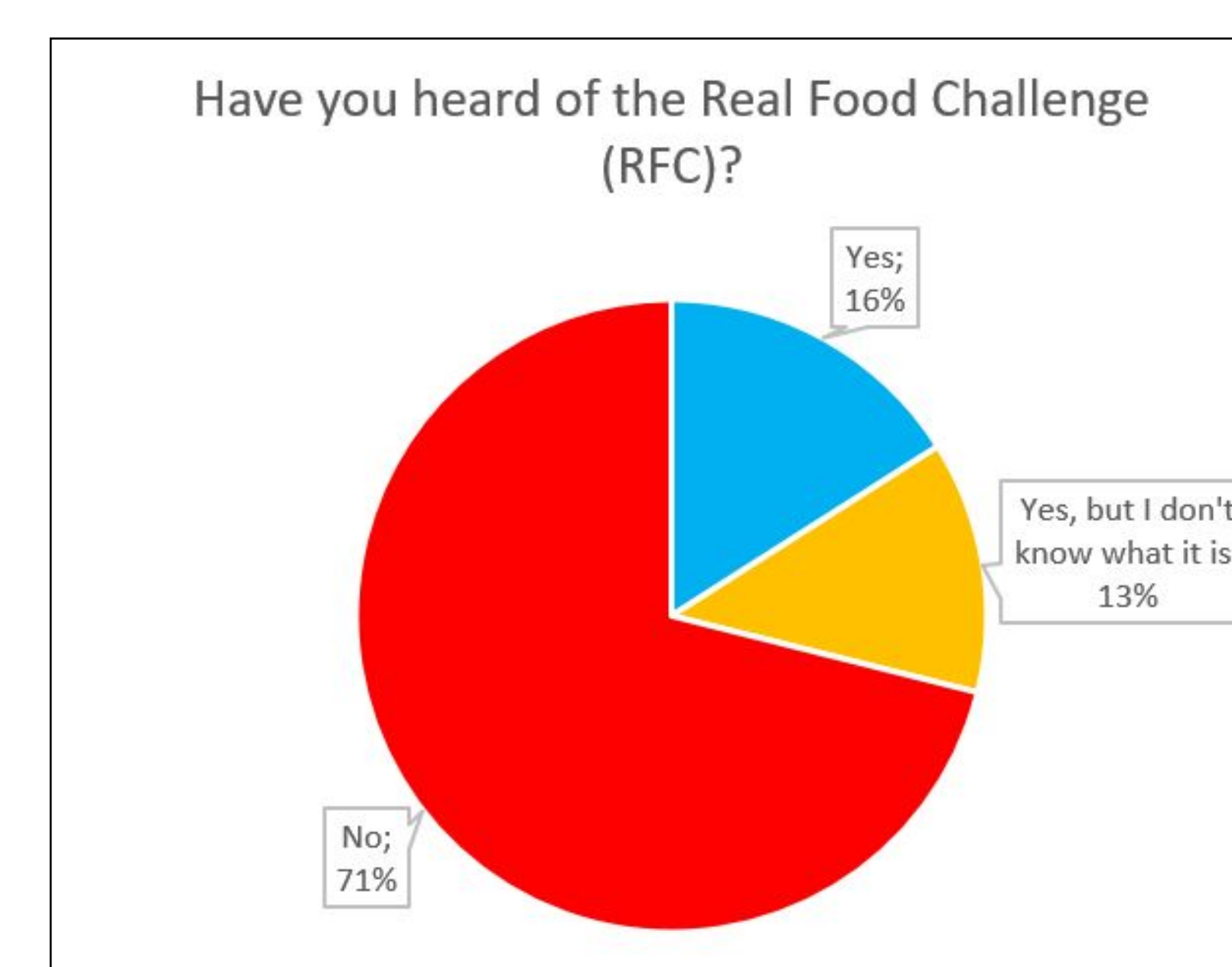


Figure 2: 71% of respondents had never heard of RFC.

Recommendations

1. **Hire someone** within Carolina Dining Services to manage sustainability and third-party certifications.
2. **Increase communication with students** (e.g., via social media and surveys) to share sustainability commitments and initiatives and get a pulse on students’ opinions on the subjects.
3. **Stay committed to RFC for now** to maintain accountability. In the meantime, CDS can either identify alternative standards or complement RFC with internal best practices to reflect stakeholder and student interests.