Sustainability in the UNC Food System

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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

- 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.
- 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.

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.