

2015 Report on the Real Food Challenge at IU Bloomington
Indiana University Office of Sustainability Food Working Group

According to our mission statement: “the Food Working Group (FWG) strives to support an environmentally and financially sustainable food system focusing on quality, taste, and nutrition, as well as the social, ecological, and public health costs of food production and consumption.” To that end we have initiated the *Real Food Calculator* at IU and hope to see IU sign the *Real Food Campus Commitment*.

Background

Over the past three years, the IU Office of Sustainability Food Working Group has hosted a series of summits, seven to date, addressing the following questions: What constitutes a sustainable food system? How can we increase the purchase and availability of sustainable food at IU? How can we raise student awareness and encourage sustainable eating habits?

At the conclusion of the first summit we adopted the *Real Food Challenge* (RFC) definition of sustainable food as it was emerging as a national standard (developed in cooperation with the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education). That resolution prompted us to establish links with RFC and take steps toward increasing “*Real Food*” at IU and achieving the RFC goal of 20% *real* by 2020.

Real Food Challenge in the US

The *Real Food Challenge* is a grassroots organization that supports student efforts to create a healthy, fair, and sustainable food system. The RFC campaign consists of two major initiatives: the *Real Food Campus Commitment* and the *Real Food Calculator*. Students use the Calculator to assess the amount of *Real Food* on campus, where *Real Food* meets the criteria in at least one of the following four categories: local and community-based, fair, ecologically sound, and humane. The RFC Commitment includes a procurement goal of at least 20% *Real Food* by 2020, as well as additional operational and educational initiatives such as the development of a food systems working group. Thirty-six colleges and universities across the U.S. have signed the RFC Commitment to date, including the 23-campus California State University system; in June 2015, Northwestern University became the first Big Ten school to sign the Commitment.

Real Food Calculator at IU

Since 2013, students at IU Bloomington have been working with the *Real Food Calculator* to analyze the food purchased for the Bloomington campus. This project became an official IU course during the spring semester of 2014, and has continued every spring semester out of the Department of Geography. During Spring semester 2016, eighteen students analyzed over 45,000 items procured during the 2013-14 fiscal year by the three campus dining operations: Residential Programs and Services (RPS), Athletics Dining, and Sodexo in the IMU. Over \$17.0 million in food expenditures was captured in the analysis, which is estimated to be 91% of the \$18.6 million in combined annual food expenditures. Students found **3.83%** of food products, or \$714K, qualify as *Real Food*. This figure consists of 2.94% local and community-based, 0.06% fair, 0.82% ecologically sound, and 0% humane food products. Though conservative, these figures highlight opportunities for significant growth.

Real Food and Health

According to IU Health Center statistics, the average IU freshman begins college with a body mass index (BMI) within the normal range, but graduates with a BMI that is overweight. IU's Bicentennial Strategic Plan emphasizes the importance of building an environment that supports the "physical and mental health and wellness of students." Although there are increased financial costs associated with building a food system that offers students more *Real Food* and less empty calories, these costs are offset by healthcare cost savings. Applying peer reviewed external studies on the cost of overweight and obesity to the IU student and employee populations, we estimate the total annual cost of overweight and obesity at IU to be \$23,252,098 (see appendix). This is equivalent to the tuition fees of 2,495 students annually.

The *Real Food Challenge* promotes healthy eating as a foundational component of good health. A diet that consists of *Real Food*, as opposed to highly processed foods and empty calories, ensures adequate nutrition for a healthy weight and preventing chronic disease. The health of college students, and Americans in general, is severely compromised, in large part due to poor nutrition. Excessive calorie intake is the norm, yet nutritional deficiencies are common due to overconsumption of empty calories. The *Real Food Challenge* disqualifies many of these highly processed foods, including those containing high fructose corn syrup, trans fat, and many artificial sweeteners, preservatives, and dyes.

Additionally, the *Real Food Challenge* addresses other health issues, including the healthcare burden of antibiotic resistance. The CDC estimates additional healthcare costs of \$20 billion annually due to antibiotic resistance. Curbing these costs requires reducing the antibiotic load provided to agricultural animals, and the RFC promotes choosing meat and poultry that is raised without antibiotics. Whether viewed from the perspective of reducing antibiotic resistance, reducing intake of highly processed foods, or increasing intake of nutrient-dense whole foods, the RFC commitment is a clear choice for improving the diet and health of IU students.

Real Food and the Environment

In his opening statement to the Committee on Agriculture, General José Graziano da Silva, the UN's Director of the Food and Agriculture Organization, stated, "The challenges that we face in the food and agriculture sector have changed... We need a paradigm shift towards healthier and more sustainable food systems." Aligning with this message, one of the core values of IU's Bicentennial Strategic Plan is advancing "sustainability, stewardship and accountability for the natural, human, and economic resources ... entrusted to IU". Through the enactment of the *Real Food Commitment*, awareness and discussion of sustainability will be increased at IUB. Ecologically sound food is one of the four core components of the RFC, and the procurement of such food engages students, food service personnel, and producers in the sustainable food system. Further, the discussion of ecologically sound food options will promote more sustainable practices within dining services, by decreasing food waste, increasing awareness of practices such as composting, and reducing carbon usage by sourcing local foods.

Real Food and Student Demand

Students remain the driving force of this grassroots initiative; the campus food system is shaped by student demand and participation, as well as by the products supplied by vendors. Thus, we have structured the bi-annual food summits to address student demand each fall and suppliers every spring semester. At the last student food summit, we heard from students engaged in the food system that “campus is not considered a place to find sustainable food.” During the summits, we have learned that students feel sustainable food choices will be encouraged if *Real Foods* are available and labeled in the dining halls.

To engage the student population that is not as actively involved in our campus food system, we are raising awareness of sustainable food by hosting the annual Big Red Eats Green festival, scheduled this year for September 10th at the IU Art Museum. The eighth Food Summit this spring will serve as yet another forum for discussion of the *Real Food Challenge* and the general issue of student demand. Additionally, we will be designing and administering a survey to conduct a broader assessment of student demand such that we can inform RPS, Sodexo, and Athletics as to what shifts in their procurement patterns might be most beneficial to meeting RFC goals.

We feel that this work is vital in attracting future students to IU. The Princeton Review’s 2009 College Hope & Worries Survey asked 15,722 students that given the ability “to compare colleges based on their commitment to environmental issues (from academic offerings to practices concerning energy use, recycling, etc.), how much would this contribute to your decision to apply to or attend a school?” Twenty-four percent of those surveyed indicated that this measure would “Strongly” or “Very Much” impact their decision. The *Real Food Challenge* is seen as a nation-wide indicator of campus commitment to sustainability, human rights, animal welfare, and community development. Signing the *Real Food Campus Commitment* would affirm IU’s interest in promoting these causes.

How do we increase Real Food at IU?

After two years of dialogue with various stakeholders, including dining directors, food distributors and local producers, we have discovered our biggest challenges and best opportunities for increasing *Real Food* on the Bloomington campus. We are also making connections with other IU campuses to promote university-wide collaboration. Challenges include the higher costs associated with *Real Foods*, the varying availability of local foods, and the lack of transparency in the regional and national food systems. Fortunately, opportunities exist to increase *Real Food* without substantially increasing the food budget, while also *realizing* indirect savings on healthcare costs and attracting future students to IU. Additionally, there are opportunities to aggregate local foods, to support and enable local producers to provide sufficient quantities, and our vendors and distributors are already working to improve their transparency.

There are several strategies for the cost-effective procurement and sale of *Real Food*:

- Encourage current vendors to create viable locally grown programs and to invest in technology that will allow RPS, Sodexo, and Athletics to know the exact source of all food
 - Use local produce whenever possible
 - Enhance the marketing of local products
 - Incorporate local sourcing requirements into vendor contracts

- Develop stations within dining halls on campus that feature local and sustainable food, where students can learn more about the *Real Food Challenge* and Dining Services can pilot *Real Food* products
 - Create sustainable focus in the new Hoosier Room of the south end zone expansion
 - For more costly products, consider portion size reduction
- Explore specialty contracts with a few large local growers who can supply significant volume year round
 - Encourage local growers to work with Piazza if at all possible to simplify contracts
 - In rare cases, Purchasing would be able to contract with a large local vendor to supply IUB with product rather than all 8 front doors
 - Expand use of “raw” products that qualify as *Real Food*
- Increase production of freshly made products at food stores (breads, cookies, and other desserts are made daily) and at dining sites such as the new Italian concept at Wright Food Court and new concepts at Read’s El Bistro
 - Freeze fresh local produce for year-round availability

IU and RFC Commitment

As a state leader in education, research, and innovation, Indiana University is uniquely positioned to set the standard against which other institutions measure themselves. The 2020 Bicentennial Strategic Plan has reaffirmed our commitment to topics such as education, health care, and sustainability. We can further this mission through a commitment to increasing the purchase of foods that are local and community-based, fair, ecologically sound, and humane. By connecting IU to Indiana’s economy, labor force, and environment, and by empowering our students to take action, now and in the future, we can continue our legacy. A pledge of 20% *Real Food* by 2020 will affirm these commitments and aid us as we set out to achieve the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan.

Appendix

Estimated Cost of Overweight/Obesity in IU Students

| | # IU Students | % Change high school to 24 (IN BRFSS) | Est. # students increase | Excess cost per person per year | Estimated annual excess cost for student population |
|---|---------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Obese | 114382 | 5% | 5719 | \$1,723 | \$9,854,009 |
| Overweight | 114382 | 10.4% | 11896 | \$266 | \$3,164,264 |
| Total excess cost of Overweight/Obese from high school to age 24 | | | | | \$13,018,273 |

Estimated Cost of Overweight/Obesity in IU Employees

| | # IU Employees | % of population | # employees | Excess cost per person per year | Estimated annual excess cost for employee population |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Obese | 17500 | 29% | 5075 | \$1,723 | \$8,744,225 |
| Overweight | 17500 | 32% | 5600 | \$266 | \$1,489,600 |
| Total excess cost of Overweight/Obese in IU employees | | | | | \$10,233,825 |

References

1. [Direct medical cost of overweight and obesity in the United States: a quantitative systematic review](#)
2. [Association of healthcare costs with per unit body mass index increase.](#)
3. [2013 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#)
4. [Fairbanks School of Public Health, 2013 IU Workplace Health and Wellness Survey](#)
5. [Antibiotic Resistance Healthcare Costs](#)
6. [Director of the Food and Agriculture Organization](#)
7. [How do campus sustainability initiatives affect college admissions?](#)