

Creating A Just and Sustainable Food System at TESC:

A Dining Services Worker Cooperative

An Argument for Better Practice

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Introduction:

The Evergreen State College (TESC) located in Olympia, WA, is an institution that deeply values environmental sustainability. This value is engraved into the psyche of the community, and has been since the institution opened its doors. Les Purce, the current president, put it in similar terms: “Sustainability isn’t just a bandwagon we’re hopping onto. It’s woven into the very fabric of our identity, and history, as an institution.” (TESC website, sustainability page) Coupled with this value of environmental sustainability, is the value of social responsibility. In many ways, Evergreen attempts to be “civically intelligent”, or collectively intelligent in the act of dealing with issues that affect the common good. The concept of civic intelligence holds that all stakeholder perspectives and needs are valid and useful. (Schuler, 2008)

In order to fulfill such values, the Evergreen educational model is interdisciplinary, flexible, community-based, and student-directed. Evergreen is well-known for nourishing well-rounded, active citizens, who can grasp and deal with real-world problems using a cross-disciplinary lens in order to achieve systemic change.

Evergreen’s own food system has needed this type of systemic change for some time. TESC has been under contract with Aramark, the nation's dominant food service provider, since 2004. (Evergreen Board of Trustees meeting minutes, June 2004)

One might imagine that an institution with Evergreen's values, would call on the services of a corporate food service provider only because of a lack of local food sources. This is not the case. In fact, TESC boasts its very own organic farm, and is located in a highly productive agricultural region; the Pacific Northwest. The availability of high quality, local produce suggests that the decision to contract with Aramark was an economic one. In his self-evaluation for the 2005 academic year, President Purce commented that contracting with Aramark had “produced a vast improvement in the financial health of the program.” (Purce, 2005)

The benefits of the Aramark contract do not seem to have trickled down to the student body, however, and student opinion of Aramark products and services is shaky at best. In Spring of 2004, the group Students

Organizing for Food Autonomy (SOFA) gained 600 signatures to end corporate food service on the campus. In the winter of 2006, Evergreen students completed forty-four academic credits devoted to food service issues. Also in 2006, SOFA put its energy into a student-run collective cafe called The Flaming Eggplant which completed it's first business plan that summer, as a direct response to corporate food service. (TESC website, Flaming Eggplant page)

Although The Flaming Eggplant is well-loved by students, it has been difficult for it to become profitable in this monopolized environment. The Aramark contract *requires* all freshman students to purchase full meal plans, thus limiting the likelihood of students to spend money in the student-run cafe.

The lack of response to the voices of students by Evergreen decision-making bodies, has served to decrease the institution's civic intelligence by marginalizing the needs of a huge stakeholder population, which is antithetical to the institution's values.

As the Aramark contract comes to an end in August of 2013, I write this paper to argue for the removal of corporate interests from the campus food system. I advocate that Evergreen's core values will be best upheld by supporting and investing into a democratically-controlled worker cooperative. I will also argue that giving voice to all stakeholders and granting worker autonomy, civic intelligence and engagement will be amplified within the Evergreen community.

These changes have the potential to improve the college's student retention rate, raise enrollment, and help the college fulfill it's commitment to be a “lab for sustainability”. (TESC website, sustainability page) Perhaps most importantly, though, these changes can close the gap between locally grown and processed foods, and student's plates, and provide a much needed boost to the local economy.

I should add that as student at Evergreen, and a employee of Aramark., and am a direct stakeholder in this food system. Although I have personal involvement in my argument, it is one that is built on facts and logical reasoning.

Aramark and Impacts of Corporate Food:

In this section I will give a brief overview of some of the effects that agribusiness (corporate food) has on the farming industry and it's lack of consideration for public well-being. I will then turn to a more micro view of the local reality at Evergreen.

Big Picture:

Many people are becoming aware that the modern industrial food system is littered with inequalities, inefficiencies, and waste. The days when choosing what to eat was simple, are now long gone. The act of eating itself has become political, in the sense that we must choose where to cast the vote that is our food dollar. More and more, these dollars are being funneled to an increasingly few corporations

In the article “The Influence of the Big Three – ADM, Cargill, and ConAgra” by William D. Heffernan, a

professor of Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia, noted that:

For over a century, farmers have felt that suppliers of certain inputs needed by farmers, such as bankers and farm equipment manufacturers, received a disproportionate share of the profits from food production. They also believed that the buyers of their products, the processing firms and the transportation firms which moved the farm products from the farm to consumer --- a group referred to as 'middlemen' earned an unfair share of the consumers dollar relative to what farmers receive for their contribution (Heffernan, 1999)

In 1999 farmers could hope for about 4 ½ percent return on their investments, while food firms could expect at least 20 percent return (Heffernan, 1999). Questions about the ethics and efficiency of agribusiness have been raised since the 1960's onward. In 1975, essays in the collection "Food for People, Not for Profit" made eerie predictions about the direction of the emerging industrial farming paradigm. (Lerza and Jacobson, 1975)

It is clear that the manipulation of those who work the land by those who have wealth, and therefore political influence, is nothing new. However, the oligopoly -- or shared monopoly -- that we see today is of a new brand, because of its global reach. The concentration of so much power into so few hands is a result of the way that the industrial food system is set up to function. From Heffernan's article I have identified three key functions that lead toward this type of privatized, non-competitive, food economy.

The first function is "exit power" referring to the upper-hand gained by a person, group, or organization, that has the least to lose from exiting a relationship or arrangement. For example, a large food processing firm has exit power over a family farmer because it can threaten to take it's business elsewhere, forcing farmers to agree to terms that are less than desirable. This robs farmers of decision-making autonomy and affects land use principles.

The second function is "vertical integration" which refers to the choice by a food firm to join together two or more stages in the food system. For example, a food firm that processes corn, decides to become a corn farmer. Large scale food firms become "farmers" by renting those farms whose crops they purchase. They do this by making farmers sign contracts in order to bring their crops to a market.

The third function, which highly exacerbates the first two, is the formation of what Heffernan calls "food systems clusters" or economic arrangements between firms, that enable them to share resources and power. These groups usually include a firm with biotechnology and patent rights. By enabling further vertical integration, food systems clusters allow for further monopolization of specific food markets. Thus, in turn, increasing exit power, and decreasing options for farmers, essentially squeezing them from all directions. (Heffernan, 1999)

The institutional food service industry has a Big Three as well: Aramark Corp., Compass Group Americas Division, and Sodexo, Inc. (Food Management website) These three companies dominate this niche of the market. Aramark is especially successful because of it's cooperative business partnership with Sysco; a national subsidiary of Aramark. (MIT news journal: The Tech, 1995) This partnership was established in 1984, and secures Aramark a discount on products that it buys in bulk from Sysco. (Yale Daily News, 2001)

According to Tod Murphy, owner of the Farmer's Diner in Vermont and a local food activist:

The suppliers are the long arms of the global agribusiness industry – behemoths like Sysco Corporation, the largest food distributor in North America and the second largest food processor as well (\$26 billion in annual sales, and approximately \$200 billion food service distribution industry). (As quoted by Berea College Local Food Initiative, 2005)

In an even more macro view, corporate food service providers, and food distributors, pose a massive threat to the environment and to public health. The corporate food system has been shown to externalize all negative affects of it's harmful environmental and social practices. This allows executives and board directors to reap huge short-term profits through the use of poor practices, while the average citizen pays the price.

To give an example of the consumptive nature of the industrial food system, according to Duram and Oberholtzer ("A Geographic Approach to Place and Natural Resource Use in Local Food Systems", 2010): "Irrigated agriculture accounts for 80% of consumptive water used in the USA, with over 90% in some Western states and 15% of all energy expended for crop production. While only 16% of cropland is irrigated, this acreage tallies almost half the value of all crops sold." (Duram and Oberholtzer, 2010) This is just one of many examples of the high inputs required for industrial mono-cropping to continue.

When put in this perspective, the development of local food systems begins to seem like a common sense course of action.

Focus on Evergreen:

"I personally dislike the fact that, rather than working out some sort of agreement with a number of different local organic farms from Olympia and the surrounding Olympia cities, Evergreen decided to go with a major corporation that supports the American prison system. We as Evergreen students are inadvertently perpetuating and supporting the injustice that goes hand-in-hand with our current prison system through extension of paying for Aramark food and supporting the Aramark company. We are paying to have and keep Aramark on campus and in business. Furthermore, Aramark gets to say, "look, We're not a bad corporation! We've got Evergreen on our side."

- Evergreen student (originally quoted in the CPJ, June 2011)

The above quote captures very well the hypocrisies in the Aramark/Evergreen contract. As I wrote in the introduction, Evergreen is an institution that highly values environmental and social sustainability. By partnering with, and supporting Aramark, the institution allows it's values to be co-opted for the sake of Big Business.

Students have been outspoken over the years about the need for student advocacy around issues of food, although their demands have rarely been satisfied. In addition to the action taken by SOFA, and the creation of The Flaming Eggplant, which I referred to in the introduction, students in recent years have been vocal as well. The above quote is one example of student opinion, and this is not an uncommon view when brought up in conversation among Evergreen students.

The Aramark contract is not designed to benefit the student body. It is designed to increase profits for the company and the institution, while giving the impression of alignment with institutional values. One example was given by Sabra Chandiwalla of the Cooper Point Journal (CPJ), Evergreen's student-run newspaper. She wrote:

One clause put in the contract between Evergreen and Aramark allows Aramark to amend a specific part of the contract every March. Although these amendments must be approved by the Evergreen administration, there is no room for student input, let alone a clause that says students must be informed of the change taking place. This clause has allowed Aramark to raise mandatory meal plan prices – which they did in 2007, 2008, and 2009 – and change the way the meal plan system works. From 2004 to the end of August, 2007, block meals and declining balance would roll over from quarter to quarter. After August 30, 2007, block meals and declining balance no longer roll over and whatever is left will be lost at the end of the quarter. This works well for Evergreen and Aramark due to clause 1.3.2 of the Evergreen/Aramark contract that says any unspent declining balance will be split evenly between the two parties. (Chandiwalla, 2011)

While the Aramark contract is dissatisfying and pocket-draining for a generation of debt-laden students, the food service workers aren't faring much better. For example, in 2009, Aramark employees successfully negotiated with their union for the rights of their baristas to receive tips. However, this victory was blocked by the Aramark policy against soliciting for tips. Employees were denied the right to announce the union policy change or mention it unless asked directly. To do otherwise would be considered grounds for termination. According to the CPJ, the Food Service Director, Craig Ward, declined to respond to questions about this topic. (Storlie, 2009)

Many Aramark employees at Evergreen agree that the products being served to students and the rest of the Evergreen community are not of the highest quality. (personal communication) Most of the food comes from Sysco, which should not be surprising, considering the profit-sharing agreement that exists between the two companies. However, although Sysco is the largest provider of products to the Evergreen account, you would be hard-pressed to find their name on the dining services website. Sustainably-sourced items are spotlighted in order to appease the community, although I have found no public information about the percentage of local and organic product procurement current to 2012. The “Greener Dining: A Guide to Sustainable Dining Practices at TESC” available on their website is dated to the 2009/2010 academic year.

The dissatisfaction with food services on the part of the student body is apparent, as is the unsustainable nature of the industrial farming model which corporations such as Aramark and Sysco perpetuate and rely upon. Keeping these truths in mind, it is obvious that change is desired, and will soon be necessary.

Precedents for Local Food Initiatives:

There are a number of schools around the United States who are taking the initiative when it comes to local and organic food procurement. A brief list would include: Yale University (a leader in this endeavor), Berea

College, Warren Wilson College, Bates College, and Oberlin College.

Yale has been considered the leader of the pack on local food. Formally starting in 2003, Yale launched a student-led initiative called the “Yale Sustainable Food Project”. This project was a joint effort between students and faculty, Yale administration, and Alice Waters, owner of the well-known restaurant Chez Panisse. Water's daughter was attending Yale during this time, and she took an interest in the Yale food system. The project includes a Yale Farm, educational opportunities to study food and agriculture, and a sustainable dining services program. Central to these efforts, was the pilot test kitchen launched to serve all local, seasonal, sustainable food in Berkeley College's (one of Yale's twelve residential colleges) dining hall. (Yale Sustainable Food Project website)

In 2005, Yale redirected 20 percent of its total residential dining food budget into the local agricultural economy, amounting to one million dollars. Yale has explored sustainable catering services, expanded sustainable sourcing to include all residential dining halls, and in 2007 assisted Yale Dining services in the transition to self-operation (they were previously contracted with Aramark). As of 2012, eighty percent of Yale students say increasing sustainable food purchasing is important to them. (Yale Sustainable Food Project fact sheet) Yale is a precedent for other colleges, showing how institutional support can enable vast changes in food sourcing, and eliminate the economic necessity of corporate food service providers.

Berea College is another example of a school that has changed its approach to food. In 1881, the first president, Edward Henry Fairchild, said: “I have seen student's efforts to run a farm, but they have never amounted to much. I do not think it can be made successful. I would not undertake to run a garden with students. I can make a good garden but I have never seen a student who could do it.” (Clark, 2007) This strong opinion luckily was not inherited by more recent generations at Berea. In 2007, in the Newsletter of the Berea College Sustainability and Environmental Studies Program, Sean Clark, an associate professor there wrote:

Berea College is making real progress in re-localizing its food supply. Cooperation between the Agriculture and Natural Resources Department, the College Farm, Food Service, and committed students, staff and faculty is paying off. This academic year meat and produce from the College farm is being served in the dining hall for the first time in many years – food grown by students and eaten by students. (Clark, 2007)

Yale and Berea College are excellent examples because they have overcome two significant challenges inherent in bringing local food to local institutions; scale, and institutional values. If these two schools can achieve this type of change, then Evergreen, where the value of sustainability is institutionalized, can do the same.

If we accept that change to the Evergreen food system is inevitable based on the unsustainability of the corporate model, then we have an opportunity to envision how it could be changed in order to ameliorate prominent social inequalities upheld in the corporate system. In the next section I will argue for the implementation of a democratically-run, dining services worker cooperative.

The Worker Cooperative Model:

In “Sustainable Economic Democracy: Worker Cooperatives for the 21st Century” by the MIT Community Innovators Lab, a collaborative thesis project, students wrote:

...a wide ownership structure can force a realignment of interests that helps reconcile conflicts between the owners of productive assets and their laborers. Shared ownership of the local economy helps root wealth in communities, keeping resources from 'leaking out' of the area. (Luviene, Stitely, and Hoyt, 2010).

Worker cooperatives present a strong case for themselves as a viable option for the future. If operated wisely, worker co-ops have incentives for productivity and innovation embedded into their model. By requiring an initial investment for worker-members, and agreeing to cosign or finance loans for member investments, co-ops encourage the hard work of people for the economic and social health of their communities.

All true cooperative enterprises adhere to the seven cooperative principles: 1) Voluntary and open membership; 2) Democratic member control (one person, one vote); 3) Member contribution to capital; 4) Autonomy and independence; 5) Education of members and public in cooperative principles; 6) Cooperation between cooperatives, and; 7) Concern for community. (International Cooperative Alliance Statement of Cooperative Identity, 1996) Because the decision-making power is spread between all worker-members, the needs of those members can be balanced with the acquisition of profit, a markedly different approach than that of a corporation like Aramark.

Large cooperative networks such as the Mondragon in the Basque region of Spain (Morrison, 1991), and the cooperative farming networks in Cuba (Rosset, *et al.* 2011), show a precedent for cooperative success. It appears from these examples that the *network* is the key for larger-scale cooperative success.

While Evergreen does not have a network of cooperative businesses to support a dining services cooperative, Evergreen itself is a network, to be precise, an experimental education network, and thus has tools built into it that would support the process of implementing this cooperative. I believe that the educational opportunities that this cooperative would supply, should be an incentive to undertake such a project.

Educational Opportunities:

The steps to implementing a worker cooperative are research intensive, highly involved and interpersonal. (Hansen, Cootz, and Malan, 1997) Many working people do not have the time to invest in such an endeavor.

This is where having a body of students eager to engage in innovative and productive community projects and research becomes an advantage. In “Steps to Starting a Worker Cooperative” an information booklet put out by the Northwest Cooperative Federation and the Center for Cooperatives, University of California, it is made clear that: “As a business, a co-op is subject to the same needs and demands as any business: sufficient

financing, careful market analysis, strategic and comprehensive planning, and well-trained and competent personnel.” (Hansen *et al.*, 1997)

These are all tasks that students can gain credit and valuable experience from doing, and would provide the opportunity to have a direct impact on the Evergreen community and the greater Olympia area. Students could literally hand-craft their dining services department in collaboration with the food service worker-members, and graduate with practical skills such as grant-writing, business planning, and educational material development. This project could involve fields of study such as food and sustainable agriculture, sustainable business, education, community studies, political economy, activism and organizing, statistics, geography, writing, and the list could continue.

It seems a shame to miss out on so much learning that could be taking place around the issue of food. In fall of 2012, Evergreen is offering a scholarship for students committed to the study of sustainable food systems and agriculture. While this is a good development, there are only two academic programs devoted to food and agriculture on offer in the fall; “The Practice of Sustainable Agriculture”, and “Food, Health, and Sustainability”. (TESC undergraduate catalog 2012/2013) While these are well-respected, comprehensive programs, they fill up quickly, leaving many students to go in other directions.

There is definitely room for expansion in the area of food studies at Evergreen, particularly in the area of food preparation. The act of cooking itself is not addressed in Evergreen's curricular offerings, although it is a significant indicator of cultural diversity, and central to being human.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it seems quite apparent that it is time for change in the Evergreen food system. Students have been raising their voices for years, and perhaps it is time to listen and respond. As an institution Evergreen has an obligation to uphold and represent the shared values and interests of it's community. Evergreen encourages it's students to be active citizens, and yet it has not responded to the activism that occurs at the administration's doorstep, this is in opposition to the concept of civic intelligence.

There is a hypocrisy here that must be rectified, if Evergreen desires to be a “lab for sustainability”. The responsibility is not only to Evergreen students, but to the Olympia community, and the world. Evergreen is an institution that others look to for inspiration and ideas regarding sustainability, so if we aren't doing it right, how can we expect anyone else to? As a leader Evergreen has an obligation to put the health of the community and the land before profits. If this is not done, than Evergreen will have failed to live up to it's name, and will fail to increase it's civic intelligence regarding the critical issue of it's food system.

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