

# Campus Dining Decision Makers Can Be **Climate Change** **SUPERHEROES**

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When I attended college in the mid '70s, dining options were very, very limited. Choices were limited to a primary protein, a few veggies, maybe a fruit choice (e.g., apple, banana, or orange), and a sugary dessert with an option of a milk, juice or soda to drink. Today, the myriad of options for students are endless. Food choices and dining are as important to attracting high-quality students to attend an institution as world-class faculty, dorms and athletic facilities. However, did you know that mild mannered dining directors are campus climate and sustainability superheroes?

Collegiate dining directors and procurement teams make decisions every day that contribute to helping their institutions meet their sustainability goals and are critical contributors to The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's (AASHE) Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System™ (STARS®) and Second Nature Climate commitments. We certainly think of the operational footprint associated with running campus dining facilities, energy, water, waste, and packaging as important—and they are. However, did you know that menu choices and ingredient supply chains can represent more than 75 percent of emissions associated with dining services? According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN FAO), food systems account for more than 30 percent of GHG global emissions (in excess of 16.5 billion tonnes/year)<sup>1</sup>.

Today more than half of American consumers are open to incorporating more plant-based foods into their diets<sup>2</sup>. What does this shift mean for you and your menu options? What does it mean for your campus sustainability commitments for AASHE STARS® and Second Nature? We need to find ways to upend the food system and feed an anticipated 10 billion people on planet Earth healthy, nutritious food without converting more land to agriculture. This will mean creating not just a more sustainable, but a regenerative, agricultural system. “Plant forward” meals, particularly those containing alternative proteins, are key to this transition. For example, producing beef uses 20 times the land and emits 20 times the greenhouse gasses as producing beans, per gram of protein.<sup>3</sup>

A 2022 National Institutes of Health (NIH) study suggests that 85.2 percent of college students are willing to try more plant-based meat and believe that increased consumption of plant-based meat can positively impact the environment. Expanding information availability through social marketing campaigns to increase knowledge and interest in plant-based meals could help promote greater consumption, better health and greater environmental protection.<sup>4</sup> College and university campuses are well-suited to getting this message out.

What should you consider when making menu choices for alternative proteins for your students and how can you make the right choices? Only 14 percent of college

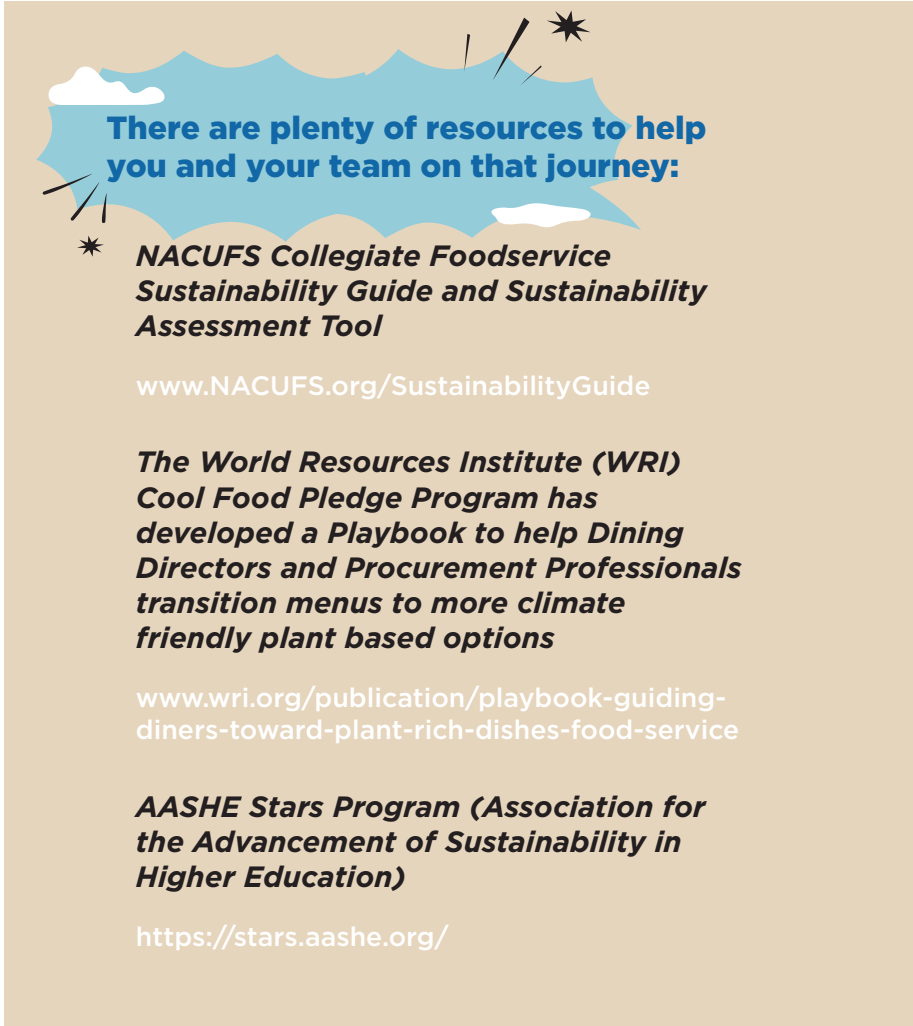
students identify as vegan, and many of them aren't necessarily interested in eating a meat or seafood alternative.<sup>5</sup> The remaining students, like the population at large, are flexitarians, those willing to incorporate more plant-based options into their diets. Analogs to chicken, beef, and seafood might be a gateway strategy to incorporating more plants into their diets.

However, all alternative proteins are not equal when it comes to nutrition. Things to consider may include: too much fat, too much sodium, or too much processing. It is important to look behind the "plant forward" moniker and make sure that you are delivering good, healthy, and sustainable choices for students. Many plant-based companies tout their environmental and social credentials, but it is very important to look for 3rd-party certifications such as United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Organic, Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance or B Corporation-certified to ensure that suppliers are "walking the talk." For example, ISH Food's B Corp certification provides a framework and validation of our "Whole System Approach," which holistically considers human health, community health, and ecological health and their contribution to planetary health.

There are global efforts to move away from large-scale monoculture to permaculture, crop rotation and to protect and enhance soil health and reduce the agrochemicals used in farming and enhance biodiversity in ecosystems. According to the UN FAO there are over 608 million smallholder farmers<sup>6</sup> producing over one-third of all of the food in the world.

How can your purchasing and menu decisions as dining or procurement director help ensure a just and equitable transition to a regenerative future for smallholder farmer communities? Your actions support college and university presidents' climate leadership commitments through Second Nature and AASHE STARS®.

While you and your team might not wear capes or leap tall buildings in a single bound, make no mistake: Shifting to more plant-based menu options makes college and university dining service directors powerful climate superheroes and helps create a more sustainable institution, community, and planet.



**There are plenty of resources to help you and your team on that journey:**

- ★ NACUFS Collegiate Foodservice Sustainability Guide and Sustainability Assessment Tool***  
[www.NACUFS.org/SustainabilityGuide](http://www.NACUFS.org/SustainabilityGuide)
- The World Resources Institute (WRI) Cool Food Pledge Program has developed a Playbook to help Dining Directors and Procurement Professionals transition menus to more climate friendly plant based options***  
[www.wri.org/publication/playbook-guiding-diners-toward-plant-rich-dishes-food-service](http://www.wri.org/publication/playbook-guiding-diners-toward-plant-rich-dishes-food-service)
- AASHE Stars Program (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education)***  
<https://stars.aashe.org/>

- 1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105172#:~:text=Of%20the%2016.5%20billion%20tonnes,according%20to%20the%20new%20analysis.>
- 2 Watson, A. (2020). The Food System & Climate Change. Climate Action Princeton University.
- 3 WRI Cool Food Pledge [www.coolfood.org](http://www.coolfood.org)
- 4 Avelino DC, Gaylord A, Lin C. College Students' Awareness, Beliefs, Attitudes and Consumption Intention Towards Plant-Based Meat and Its Environmental Impact. *Curr Dev Nutr.* 2022 Jun 14;6(Suppl 1):476. doi: 10.1093/cdn/nzac059.004. PMID: PMC9193591.
- 5 <https://www.tun.com/blog/14-of-college-students-are-vegans-or-vegetarians-study-finds/>
- 6 <https://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1395127/icode/>