

Williams College Students Participate in the first National Summit of the Real Food Challenge

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Text by

From February 17th to February 20th we (Eirann Cohen '15 and Jacob Addelson '14) participated in the first National Summit of the Real Food Challenge at the University of California—Santa Cruz, the theme of which was the ambiguously hopeful “Breaking Ground.” The Real Food Challenge is a five-year-old movement, created by students to move \$1 billion of collegiate food purchases to “real food” by 2020-- the definition of real food is being sustainable food that is local, ecological, humane, or fair.

With over 130 students from colleges and universities as diverse as the University of Mississippi, the University of Puget Sound, Beloit College, Carleton College, the Haskell Reservation Indian University, a smattering of University of California system schools, and many others, the summit presented a unique opportunity for the institutionalization of national collegiate collaboration within this movement. In addition to national networking, the summit provided ample opportunities for regional collaboration with the other participating northeast schools of UVM, UNH, Wesleyan, Brandeis, Harvard, Siena, Keene State, and Clark. Coming out of this weekend, we are especially hopeful that we can increase cooperation among New England schools in our efforts to direct our institutional buying power towards real food.

Although the informal conversations between schools were incredibly useful and immensely inspiring, a valuable aspect of the summit was the formal curriculum of workshops available. Over the weekend, we collectively attended workshops on topics such as “Regional and Local Food Systems”, “Farmer-College Relationships,” a “Real Food Calculator” (a tool to audit a college’s dining budget), the “Real Food Commitment” (a formal commitment to the movement to be signed by the college president and director of dining service of a particular institution), “Food Systems Working Groups,” and the question of “Local vs. Organic vs. Fair Trade.” In addition, I (Jacob) co-facilitated a workshop titled “Campaign Planning.”

As incredible as the summit was, its greatest attribute has not yet been realized; as we write this, students are returning from the summit to their campuses, scattered all over the country. Once back at home, we will implement the skills gained and the relationships fostered to create and grow this movement and fix the food system through the collective buying power of campus dining services. There is no doubt that significant obstacles stand in our way, but this summit has given us the tools to deal with them and the inspiration to engage in the type of activism and creativity that will be necessary if we want to resuscitate our broken food system.