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Organic initiatives provide food for thought, action

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Organic initiatives provide food for thought, action

In response to students' requests, Illinois Wesleyan's food service offers environmentally friendly options.

Story by **REBECCA WELZENBACH '07**



Jeff Scott '06 (right) and Leslie Coleman '07 were among students who explored the possibility of having organic foods options on campus. A variety of organic selections are now available at the DugOut and Bertholf Commons. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Veggies grown without pesticides at the dining hall salad bar? Hormone-free milk and yogurt available for purchase on campus? Students new to Illinois Wesleyan this fall might take earth-friendly food options like these for granted. But organic foods are only beginning to take root as standard fare on campus — the fruit of nearly two years of labor by students, faculty, and staff to increase sustainability in the University's food service.

Organic foods, which are raised without the use of pesticides and other chemicals, are healthier for the earth, consumers, and field workers than conventionally farmed products, says Abigail Jahiel, associate professor of Environmental and International Studies. They are also significantly more expensive. As a result, in today's high-tech world of agribusinesses it hardly comes naturally for a large-scale food service provider like Sodexo, which runs IWU's dining commons and several other on-campus eateries, to serve organic food on a regular basis. Responding to voiced student interest, the University and Sodexo are pursuing a balance of ecology and economy that is environmentally responsible but also affordable for students purchasing meal plans.

Whether at the salad bar or in an entrée like chicken or steak, "we're committed to having organic food at least once or twice a week in the Commons," says Mike Welsh, general manager of Sodexo at IWU. In the DugOut, a popular à la carte grill and snack bar, students can purchase fresh fruit, mixed green salads with organic dressing, and Naked brand organic juices, in addition to hormone-free dairy products. "We even have organic chocolate bars at the Coffee Shoppe," Welsh says. Both he and Vice President for Business and Finance Dan Klotzbach — who, along with Vice President for Student Affairs

Kathy Cavins, oversees the University's contract with Sodexo — indicated that this year the campus community should expect continued expansion of the organic food opportunities offered in 2005. For example, while in the past organic foods were mixed in with the other snack choices in the DugOut, this fall they will be highly visible and easy to find in a new open-air cooler.

Although Welsh and his staff actually procured the produce, the concept of bringing organic food to campus began with students as “a grassroots movement,” Klotzbach says. In the spring of 2005, Jeff Scott '06 and Tina Brionez '06, members of the Committee for a Sustainable Campus (now the Green Network), assessed student interest in organic foods by polling their classmates in the Bertholf Commons. Scott, along with Jahiel and Given Harper, professor and chair of biology, brought the issue — and a petition of student signatures — to the attention of Klotzbach and former Dean of Students Jim Matthews, whose role included addressing student concerns regarding food services. From there, Klotzbach and Matthews expressed to Welsh that organic food was a high priority for the University.

With this challenge set by the administration, over the summer of 2005, “Mike Welsh really took off,” Jahiel says. By the time the Environmental Studies Department held its annual picnic in the fall of 2005, Sodexo was able to provide an entirely organic catered meal — on biodegradable plates. “It was delicious and everyone loved it,” Jahiel says. But that was only the beginning. “We're just at the infant stage of this program,” Welsh says. “Sodexo has a national committee evaluating all programs; they want to be very progressive in all areas. I think it's fantastic that we're becoming aware of the products out there and providing them.”

The on-campus environmentalists are already looking ahead to one project in particular. While Jahiel is pleased to see organic food at the University, she and her students believe that in order to “stay ahead of the curve” in sustainability, the school must go even further: while organic food is good, locally grown organic food is better.

Buying local produce — which is still fresh, flavorful, and full of vitamins when it reaches the table — would support the Bloomington–Normal economy and the small family farmer. Another factor is perhaps even more important. “The average bite of food travels around 1,700 miles to get to your plate,” Jahiel says. “That means a lot of fossil fuels are burning. Fossil fuels contribute to the greenhouse effect, and they are expensive.”

Currently, Sodexo purchases its organic food from a Minnesota-based purveyor called Roots and Fruits. However, Sodexo is open to the possibility of purchasing local produce. In the fall of 2005, while Welsh focused on broadening organic options, Leslie Coleman '07, along with Brionez and Scott, researched the feasibility of bringing one locally grown organic product to the campus. Through a fall internship with the Land Connection, a Bloomington-based organization that supports local organic farms, Coleman sought a nearby apple orchard to supply fruit weekly to the campus.

“Sodexo really went the extra mile” to support the project, Coleman says, even bringing in a regional director to help draw up a contract with a local farmer. Unfortunately, as Coleman was frustrated to find last year, it is difficult for a small family farmer to meet the delivery, insurance, and transportation needs of a corporation like Sodexo. Local organic produce will not make it

into campus dining areas this year, but neither the students nor Sodexo has given up. Continuing to pursue this option “is a challenge and an opportunity for Sodexo,” says Jahiel.

Purchasing organic food locally is undoubtedly a challenge — especially in the Midwest, where the climate from September to May is hardly conducive to growing a variety of produce. “Illinois is just kind of a corn-and soybean place, so finding farmers who can provide fruits and vegetables on a large scale is hard,” Coleman says. However, other colleges and universities have made the leap successfully. “Middlebury is the classic example,” Jahiel says. According to a November 2005 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Middlebury College in Vermont makes an effort to purchase much of its environmentally friendly foods — from maple syrup to ice cream — locally. Other small, private colleges have done likewise: Bates, Luther, and Williams are among those mentioned in the article. Unlike Illinois Wesleyan, all of these schools operate their own food services.

According to Klotzbach, Illinois Wesleyan is “on the leading edge” of Sodexo’s clients in pursuing organic food options. He suggests that the new vendors and processes Sodexo has developed to work with IWU will benefit the company’s other clients in the future, as it becomes able to offer more environmentally sustainable options nationwide. Meanwhile, Welsh remains focused on the task at hand. “Our intention is to grow and to provide more selection for the students, staff, and administration,” he says. For the many students hungering for healthy alternatives in their food choices, that’s appetizing news.