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**Diet and Sustainability in the Workplace**

Sustainability in the food system is necessary to mitigate climate change and ensure equity in food security. According to the United Nations, a sustainable diet is one with low environmental impacts that contributes to food and nutrition security and to healthy lives for current and future generations (Hess, et. al., 2019). Our current food supply depends on a highly engineered agricultural industry with a primary goal of huge productivity (Becker, 2021). Meat consumption is linked to negative health conditions and increased greenhouse gas emissions. It is projected that the world demand for animal-based foods will increase by nearly 70% between 2010 and 2050 (Lonnie, et. al., 2020). According to the EAT-Lancet report, we will fail to meet the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals unless our food systems and way of eating are altered (Willet, et. al., 2019). The EAT-Lancet report provides a reference diet that is sustainable and affordable, where plants are the predominant food but not necessarily the sole component. This report drew much needed attention as a blueprint for feeding 10 billion people, while retaining planetary health, by the year 2050 (Lonnie, et. al., 2020).

The focus of this paper is to recommend initiatives on a smaller scale that help work towards the goals of adopting food and diet practices that are more beneficial to the environment and human health. In this paper, I will first provide a detailed description of my current workplace setting and the current practices within the setting related to food and health. Then I will provide two initiatives that are already in progress that will help to improve the current setting.

**Current Setting**

The setting for this paper is my workplace at Old Dominion University. Specifically, Spong Hall which is an office building that contains several departments at the university including my office, Environmental Health & Safety. My position typically includes office work as well as periodic visits to research laboratories. The building is located at the North end of the campus, about a quarter mile from the center of campus. Our office space consists of 6 personal offices with a shared kitchenette. The kitchenette contains a refrigerator, sink, coffee maker, microwave, and toaster oven. It is convenient for bringing food from home to reheat and for conducting minimal food preparation. In general, most of the employees in my office will bring their own lunch and eat at their desks. Other employees will walk to the Webb Center food court or go out to lunch. On the first floor of Spong Hall, there is a large break room area with a kitchenette and vending machines. This space belongs to the Human Resources department but is available for others to use. However, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been minimal use of the break room for eating lunch.

The Webb Center and other dining options on campus offer a wide variety of vegetarian and plant-based options. In general, the campus is very vegetarian-friendly. Also, the campus offers a seasonal community farmers market, presenting the opportunity to buy fresh foods from local farmers and suppliers. Additionally, there are many health-related opportunities in the workplace. For example, the Student Recreation Center is offered to employees at a discount and is free for students. Also, the Elizabeth River Trail goes through campus and provides a scenic path to walk during the lunch hour. In general, management at the university supports and encourages the use of employees’ lunch hour for health-related activities. I have one co-worker who swims at the Student Recreation Center every day, and I frequently walk or jog on the Elizabeth River Trail during my lunch hour. Overall, the campus as a workplace setting offers an environment that is conducive for healthy activities and a nutritional diet.

One common negative habit of office workers is that we tend to eat at our desks while working. This is contrary to Michael Pollan’s advice from “In Defense of Food”, where he recommends eating slowly and enjoying the meal (Becker, 2021). When we eat at our desks, we are typically eating fast which may lead to overeating. It would be healthier to eat in a break area with co-workers. This used to be a common practice before the pandemic, but in the current environment it is safer to eat alone to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

**Recommendations to Improve Current Setting**

The first recommendation is to implement Executive Order #77, which was signed by the Virginia Governor on March 23, 2021. The goal of the order is to reduce plastic pollution and solid waste by requiring all state agencies, including institutions of higher education, to phase out the use of disposable plastic bags, single use plastic cutlery and water bottles, and plastic and Styrofoam food containers (Exec. Or. 77, 2021). Agencies are required to immediately stop purchasing or selling these materials, which means that when the current supply runs out additional materials cannot be purchased. This order also applies to contractors of state agencies (e.g., Aramark at ODU). The order will be enforced by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). This department is responsible for enforcing regulations involving water and air quality, and pollution prevention. They regularly inspect ODU for various reasons, such as stormwater requirements. This order will likely increase the rate of inspections by DEQ and result in more broad-scope inspections.

Additional requirements of EO 77 are to find replacements that are compostable, recyclable, or reusable. The primary goal is to greatly reduce the waste that ends up in landfills. An example is to have an agreement with manufacturers, such as Coca Cola or Pepsi, to use aluminum instead of plastic for beverage products, including water. The aluminum would then be recycled. Other options are a large-scale composting operation with agreements to supply the compost to local farms. State Universities should work together to come up with innovative ways to meet and exceed the requirements of the EO. Research supporting such innovations should be encouraged and incentivized.

My recommendation is to find ways to expedite the requirements of the order within my own office. We have already ceased the use of plastic cutlery and bottles. Filtered water pitchers are filled and kept in our refrigerator to encourage the use of reusable water bottles that can easily be refilled. We have multiple recycle bins in our office and empty them into large containers outside the building, which are then picked up by our Facilities Department for processing through the University’s recycling program. Small-scale composting for the EH&S office is possible through a countertop collection system and small compost bin placed outside the building. Once ready to harvest, the compost could be provided to our Grounds Department or Biology Department for gardening use.

The second recommendation is to apply to the STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System) rating system. STARS is a program under AASHE (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education). This is a voluntary application system that allows a Univeristy to be “graded” based on its sustainability performance. STARS pertains to environmental and food sustainability, as well as academics, enrollment, operations, planning, and innovation.

ODU has only applied for this rating on two occasions, both times utilizing interns in the EH&S department to perform the arduous work of tracking down information from various departments at the University. In 2012, the University received a Bronze rating and in 2015 received a “reporter” rating which is the lowest level rating that can be received. Specific attributes of the STARS application include sustainability dining, purchasing of foods and beverages from sustainable sources, offering plant-based dining options, providing sustainability outreach and training to students, staff, and the local community, and supporting sustainability research.

There are multiple universities in Virginia that are currently Gold or Silver rated for sustainability with the STARS program. In this aspect, sustainability is currently an area of weakness at ODU. It is likely that prospective students and researchers will consider sustainability programs and actions to be a distinguishing characteristic when choosing a school to attend. Therefore, it is recommended that ODU not only apply to the STARS program but achieve and maintain a Gold rating by constantly improving areas and programs for sustainability. ODU should also hire an employee whose primary responsibility is sustainability, making the annual STARS application a part of a full-time job rather than a temporary internship task. Eventually, the University should seek to create an Office of Sustainability, which is a common element at many other universities.

If performed and maintained, these recommendations could have many benefits to campus life for students and employees. Universities in general should strive to be leaders in sustainable innovations regarding the food system and environment. In addition to benefitting the campus, these actions set a good example for other organizations, both public and private.

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