

This document, compiled by Students for Self-Operated Dining, lays out the many reasons why transitioning to a Self-Operated dining system would benefit Western Washington University and help to accomplish the goals laid out in the university's Strategic Plan and Sustainability Action Plan. Ending our contractual relationship with Aramark would sever our university's connection with the racist Prison Industrial Complex and could help us improve the environmental sustainability of our product sourcing. A university-operated dining system would remove the for-profit motive from dining, allowing for all programmatic decisions to be made based on what will best accomplish the university's goals and improve the WWU community. Operating with these goals in mind, we are confident that University Dining could better support workers rights, accommodate diverse dietary needs, and work to combat food insecurity on campus.

University Dining functioning as a department also provides exciting opportunities for collaboration with academic departments across the university. These collaborations could enhance the student learning experience and improve the dining system as the Self-Operated model allows for continued revision and improvement of the dining system, as opposed to the rigid framework of a contract. Self-Operation is a financially feasible choice; start-up costs and capital-revenue are the two areas in which the university expects to lose money in the transition, but long-term operation cost will likely be comparable or even cheaper under Self-Operated Dining, and multiple Dining Managers at other universities who have recently transitioned to Self-Operation have volunteered to be a resource to help guide Western Washington University through the process. Shifting to Self-Operation is a positive project that will generate excitement and enthusiasm from the campus community, alumni, and prospective students. The flexibility, transparency, and possibility for interdepartmental collaboration offered by the Self-Op model mean that it will be a continuously evolving point of pride and positive press for the university, potentially increasing enrollment, alumni donations, and off-campus student participation in the dining program.

Just Sourcing

Western Washington University cannot follow its mission and abide by the values laid out by its Strategic Plan and Sustainability Action Plan while continuing to work with Aramark or similar dining contractors. **The Strategic Plan, Goal 4**, Item 1 reads “**Foster a positive and collaborative campus climate...**”. Provision of dining services through a contractor so deeply involved in the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), on a campus where consciousness of the PIC is high and of great importance to students and faculty is inherently at odds with this goal. Aramark has the largest market share within the prison system for dining contractors at 38% (AFSC Investigate). Aramark has a documented history of serving prisoners dangerously substandard food with things like “rats, cockroaches, and bird droppings...” being found in their food reported as recently as 2020. Commitment to equity and justice, and respect for the rights and dignity of others, are integral parts of WWU’s missions and values. [Real Food Study](#) authored a report in which they acknowledged the massive amount of power that corporate food contractors hold within, stating: “This quantity of food, amounting to purchases worth billions of dollars each year, is contributing to the current patterns in the food system that impoverish rural communities, fuel climate change, and further entrench racial inequity”. We do not need to participate in this. Self-Operated Dining can give us the opportunity to source our food from a just source, from local producers in and around Whatcom County. This would not only take a moral weight off the shoulders of the University but would be a powerful social justice statement with the University divesting from the PIC.

Sustainable Sourcing

As stated in the Sustainability Action Plan: **Western’s path to a sustainable future will be determined by our students, staff, and faculty, and it must be bold.** We, as students, in conjunction with staff and faculty, are boldly calling out for sustainable food sourcing at our University. Our review of Aramark’s behavior on campus, in particular their sustainability actions, and their corporate practices demonstrate that WWU’s goals cannot be readily met unless a change to a Self-Operated Dining System occurs. Western’s **Sustainability Action Plan Section 2.3**, establishes a goal of 25% REAL food sourcing by 2020. In addition, Western’s **Sustainability Action Plan Section 2.2** has a goal of increasing local/regional food purchasing; WA, OR, ID, BC to 25% by 2020. In the 2021 Action Report, these goals were completely ignored. There was no mention of progress toward either of these goals or how WWU dining under Aramark was working towards these goals. Whether or not these goals have been achieved: students and the University need access to food sourcing details and updates on the Sustainability Action Plan. Contracting out dining to a third party has eliminated transparency and creates an additional barrier to student engagement in sustainability efforts.

Under the current contract, and, similar to Sodexo and Compass Group practices, Aramark uses kickbacks in the sourcing of their food. In a report by [Farm to Institution New England](#), it was found that group purchasing organizations (GPOs) typically mandate that institutional customers (Aramark, Sodexo, Compass Group) purchase 80% of their food on

contract with approved vendors. This makes it effectively impossible to meet our sustainability and local sourcing goals under a Big 3 contractor. In WWU's 2019 STAR report, only 18% of our dining services food and beverage expenditures were on products that are third party verified under at least one recognized food and beverage sustainability standards or were local & community-based. We received a score of 0.98/6.00 for Food and Beverage Sustainability.

([WWU STARS Report](#))

Strategic Plan Item 2G commits to increasing engagement between Western and local communities. **Strategic Plan Item 2E** commits to weaving the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability into and throughout the University's practices. Self-operated dining would provide the ability to create long-lasting sustainable ties with local businesses, farms, and community members. A case study of UC Davis's transition to Self-Op Dining found that local sourcing is significantly easier under a self-op system. They found that "while it is true that Sodexo has large national purchasing power, none of the purchasing rebates were being reinvested back into UC Davis operations." In this study, UC Davis asked for the top 100 items used by Sodexo and priced these through the UC procurement system and found that they could obtain these same products at an average of 18 percent less than they were being invoiced for by Sodexo. When returning to self-operations, UC Davis reinvested these savings into 12-15 percent higher food cost per plate, increasing food quality and customer satisfaction, while realizing a net return of 3-7 percent compared to what they had been invoiced by Sodexo under that contract. **It was also found that product sourcing of both local and culturally appropriate options could be accomplished significantly faster** (Kraig Brady, UC Davis dining services director). Under self-op, with a focus on food sovereignty rather than corporate sourcing, Western can: engage with and source from local farms, hire local businesses in non-dining hall food areas, and connect with community members to sourcing from and support our community.

Supporting Equity and Justice on Campus: supporting worker rights, accommodating diverse dietary needs and serving culturally appropriate foods, and alleviating food insecurity

Supporting workers:

WWU's commitment to Equality and Justice is being undermined by our current dining contract. [Aramark](#), [Sodexo](#), and [Compass Group](#), have a history of multitudes of labor violations ranging from wage and hour violations to workplace safety and health violations to employment discrimination.

Western's Strategic Plan Item 4I pursues "just action by taking all appropriate steps to protect survivors and to prevent sexual and other types of violence, discrimination, harassment, and bullying." This goal is at odds with a labor climate where dining employees are fearful of retaliation on the part of management for advocating for better working conditions and pay. Aramark actively intimidated Western dining employees to prevent unionization in 2013 (Wanielista). Student employment in the dining halls is a negative experience for many. In

numerous conversations with current and former student employees, students have expressed disrespectful management conditions, poor wages, unnecessarily strict food waste policy, and an understaffed and under-resourced atmosphere. These conditions lead many students to quit, despite commenting on how desirable and convenient a student employee job is.

While a self-operated dining system does not guarantee excellent working conditions, a dining system without these Big 3 practices would much better support the **Strategic Plan Item 3D**, “improving climate and working conditions for student employees, staff, and faculty at all locations” by giving the University direct control and responsibility for those conditions as it has for other student employment opportunities. Treating employees with respect and value is very difficult to ensure through a dining contract under which the University has little or no oversight.

Supporting those with diverse dietary needs and preferences:

Students with disabilities and special dietary needs do not currently feel supported by the dining system. Sargun Handa shared, for instance, how eating in the Western dining halls, [caused a flare-up of her Crohn's disease](#). Students from different cultures have also expressed dissatisfaction with the ways their cultures’ cuisines are represented in the dining hall; some even experienced health flare ups similar to Sargun’s when they arrived at Western and found that their diet had to drastically change, as the foods they were eating in their communities were not available in the dining halls.

A dining system operated directly by Western Washington University would share the goals and priorities of the university, which include, to “support student, staff, and faculty wellbeing, including physical health and wellness, mental health, and disability resources based on universal design” (Strategic Plan Goal 3, Item B). To accomplish this goal the university would use whatever resources are available within its dining system to ensure that all members of the campus community are nourished and to minimize the mental harm caused by stress over lack of appropriate, affordable, delicious food. However much Aramark, and the individuals working under Aramark, may profess to steward the wellbeing of the Western community this is not their primary goal. As a private, for-profit company, Aramark must justify its decisions based on what will earn a profit for its shareholders; the organization of the dining system under Aramark operation must look to make a profit.

As previously stated, the primary goal of dining as a university department would be to uphold the values and goals of the university. Financial motivations would enter into the system only in as far as they pertain to the continued operation of the system. Thus the financial goal of the dining system under self-operation would be to break even (earning enough revenue to cover the expenses of operation of the dining system) rather than to earn a profit. The U.C. Davis case study, referenced in the previous section, provides proof of how this shifted financial priority can translate to benefits being redistributed to the student body.

Alleviating Food Insecurity:

Under this model of operation, Self-Operated dining could invest in food security measures that do not make financial sense to a for-profit entity but which would be of tremendous value to the Western community. Two examples of such possible programs (which are expanded upon in the [Proposal of Additional Food Security Resources](#)) are a Pay-What-You-Can option within the on-campus markets (which could ensure all students are able to purchase nutritious food) and a redistribution of excess food from the dining halls to refrigerated storage in on-campus food pantries (starting with the WHOLE food pantry and expanding from there). **Under contracted dining, Western may be able to still implement some of these programs** (though we argue that the Pay-What-You-Can model relies crucially on student’s positive perception of dining as a part of the university community rather than as a representative of an outside company). **However, the operation of such programs would be stifled by contractual language and any expansions of the program would be in the precarious position of having to justify their existence to a for-profit entity. Under self-operation, the dining system could continue to innovate and iterate on its food security efforts, instituting new programs to address new needs and working always towards the improvement of the campus community.**

Enriched Curricula through Engagement with Dining System

A self-operated dining system could be intertwined with the curriculum of a multitude of departments across campus to create valuable opportunities for engagement and education. With dining run as a department of the university, the barrier created by outside contracting would be removed, and potentially every College could collaborate in some way with the dining system. Participation in and observation of a dining system has potential to give students first-hand, real-world experience of how food gets to consumers in large-scale food provision systems from a range of academic angles. With the fulfillment of possibilities for sustainability, equity, and justice outlined in other sections (see “Sustainable Sourcing” and “Supporting Equity and Justice on Campus”) and continuation of current sustainability practices, student engagement in a self-operated system could give “students educational experiences [...] beyond the classroom that help them develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to nurture and create the conditions for people and planet to thrive” (SP Goal #2, Item F). **Students could witness a complex large scale dining system designed to support the thriving of people and planet, participate in that system and pursue projects that work actively to continue the dining system on its journey to fulfilling that goal.**

The possibilities of interdepartmental collaboration with the Dining system are immense and varied. Business students could be involved in back-of-the-house decisions and logistics including seasonal sourcing decisions, contract drafting and negotiation with vendors, evaluations of system efficiencies and inefficiencies. Curriculum for marketing students could function similar to a position that used to be available through the VU—students would spend a year as an intern running publicity for the VU accounts. If a position similar was made available for dining, the intern could run the dining instagram and analyze metrics from that.

Environmental Studies and Fairhaven students studying sustainable food systems, food justice, and sustainable agriculture could study how those approaches can be implemented at the scale of a University dining system. This would make their education more applicable to the project of shifting global, industrial food systems towards more equitable, just, and sustainable foodways. This could include learning how budgetary systems work and the politics of food systems, working with producers and farmers, choosing menus built around sustainable choices, and innovating sustainable solutions for sourcing and operations. Anthropology, Latin American Studies, and East Asian Studies majors could run projects to ensure dining halls at Western serve culturally appreciative foods. Students in Human Resource Management courses could do case studies on the retention and training norms for the dining halls across campus. Data Science classes could work with usage data from the on-campus markets to determine what products should be stocked or discontinued.

Integration of dining systems into the academic sphere could both both expand educational opportunities beyond the classroom and potentially alleviate the workload of the dining system itself as students take on logistical considerations through projects and class work. Students for Self-Operated Dining is committed to continuing to engage faculty about these and other ideas, which could be further developed by departmental experts.

Benefits of a Flexible System

A key aspect of self-operated systems is the ability of the University to maintain flexibility and responsiveness in the dining system. Where in a contracted system any changes within the contract period are minor and must be approved by the contracting corporation, a self-operated system would allow the University the autonomy and agility to make changes at will based on student need and interests. This is supported by the case study of UC Davis's transition to Self-operated Dining, which found that changes to sourcing more sustainable and specialized foods such as those required to meet certain religious and medical dietary restrictions could be accomplished significantly faster than under a contracted system (Kraig Brady, UC Davis dining services director). This will play a crucial part in fulfilling **Goal #1, Item F of the university's strategic plan**; "Through shared governance, align budgeting, capital planning and development to allow for agility in response to changes in student interests, state needs, and knowledge production and dissemination." It would also contribute significantly to **Item A**; "Strengthen shared governance to ensure that students, staff, and faculty are meaningfully empowered in the university's policies, decisions, and direction." Self-operated dining expands the reach of shared governance into a realm that affects both the day-to-day quality of life of students and the effects the University has on the wider world through supply chain impacts. The flexibility of Self-operated Dining also ensures that the University can work continuously and incrementally toward fulfilling its Goals as they apply to dining, working year by year to make dining more sustainable, equitable, and just. This is fundamentally different from contracted systems, where any significant changes that can be made must be made at the time of contract turnover.

This responsiveness to student interests would create an opportunity for students to identify areas of need or areas of potential improvement and engage with the universities system of governance to advocate for those changes. **Goal #1 of the Strategic Plan** states “Western will prepare students to be successful and engaged members of society, and will provide the tools to work in and across disciplines to identify and creatively solve key societal problems, both local and global.” Engaging in advocacy at the University level requires very similar basic understandings and drive as advocacy through local, state, or even federal government systems, or that of a business or employer. Lasting change for societal problems is made in large part through changes to our institutions, meaning that working for those changes is a key skill for students to learn.

The flexibility of self-operated dining would also support **Goal #4, Item H**; “Expand and support respectful collaborative relationships with community partners and underrepresented groups to advance equity and social justice.” The University could maintain continuous collaboration with community members and underrepresented groups, working represent their interests in a way that is impossible in the rigidity of a contracted system

Feasibility

A transition to self-op is financially possible. The reduction in the return to the university of \$840,000-\$1.24 million predicted by Envision Strategies, is wholly accounted for by transition costs and the loss of outside capital investment. **Using Envision Strategies predictions, the net return from self-operated system A, is actually about \$310,000 higher than with contracting** and from self-operated system B, is only about \$85,000 lower than with contracting.

Data from Envision Strategies’ 2019 Campus Dining Services: Operator Model Analysis

	FY18	Self-Operated A	Self-Operated B
Gross Return	\$3,243,772.00	\$3,604,679.00	\$3,884,679.00
Net Return	\$2,777,380.00	\$3,088,287.00	\$2,692,255.00
Difference from FY18		\$310,907.00	-\$85,125.00
Amortized (10yr)			
Capital Investment	\$831,527.00	-\$1,020,551.00	-\$1,020,551.00
Amortized (3yr)			
Transition	-\$177,144.00	-\$496,000.00	-\$496,000.00
Adjusted Return	\$3,431,763.00	\$2,592,287.00	\$2,196,255.00

*Envision does not take capital investment into account as part of a self-operated system.

Purely in the operation of the dining halls, a self-operated system with its own administration (scenario A) generates more return to the university. That means the labor

and product costs of self-operation do not make self-operation infeasible. This conclusion is consistent with reports from universities that have transitioned to self-op and an understanding of corporate purchasing behaviors.

In transitioning from Sodexo to self-operation, the University of California, Davis was able to buy most products for 18% less than Sodexo had been invoicing for (Brady 2018). UC Davis also saved about \$1.6 million in administrative labor costs when they transitioned.

At Sewanee, The University of the South, the dining system kept its budget the same after transitioning to self-op (Farm to Institution New England 2010). That is, self-operation did not strain the University's financial resources.

The purchasing power of large food service companies has little financial benefit for their clients. In general, the bulk discounts that food service companies receive are not passed on to the client because at each step of the supply chain, a cut of profit is taken out.¹ What the client tends to get is lower-quality food at a higher price.

To make up for the loss of external capital resources, the university could open a line of credit, but doing so would lead to a yearly decrease in revenue of about \$1.8 to \$2.2 million. If the \$8.4 million needed for capital investment under self-op were sourced from the University's cash reserves, it could be replenished in 10 years with a modest student fee of about \$19 per quarter. Funding from the State government is another possibility for raising the requisite capital.

It is also possible that dining's revenue increases. A switch to self-operation by the University of Winnipeg saw an increase in sales from less than \$1 million to \$2.5 million in the first three years (Bohunicky, Desmarais and Entz 2019). This increase came alongside high ratings of the healthfulness of the dining system. Similarly, UC Davis saw its retail locations go from losing money to making money after a switch to self-operation. **As described in the "Positive Image for Western" section, Students for Self-Operated Dining would not be surprised to see such an increase in student financial support for the dining system under self-op.** Should such growth happen at Western, servicing a debt would become much easier.

We also want to reiterate that in previous conversations with Kraig Brady from UC Davis and Kerry Paterson from Oregon State, both people said that in the case that WWU decided to transition from contracting to self-operated dining, they are more than willing to provide resources and assistance to help us. Additionally, they noted that they likely have connections to other university administrative positions that could also help with this transition.

Positive Impact on Western Washington University's Reputation

For all the reasons outlined above and more, self-operated dining would be an exciting new project for the university to undertake. Many alumni (some of whom have written to the university to express this view) are concerned about the presence of Aramark on campus and would view Self-Operated dining in a more positive light, possibly supporting the shift to this system with donations to the university foundation. The design of a new dining system under

¹ Conversation with a local chef who worked eight years for Compass Group in Hong Kong

self-operated dining could be informed by students and faculty (both of whom have demonstrated repeatedly their interest in and passion for this work). The continued collaborative development of such a system, which incorporates the innovations in food security, workers rights, and diversity, equity and justice outlined above, could be a major draw for prospective students, both those interested in how the system functions and those just happy to be the beneficiaries of an amazing dining program.

Shifting to self-operation is a positive project that will generate excitement and enthusiasm from the campus community, alumni, and prospective students. The flexibility, transparency, and possibility for interdepartmental collaboration offered by the self-operating model mean that it will be a continuously evolving point of pride and positive press for the university. Currently, Western dining is viewed negatively by many students and passed over by almost all off-campus students. Self-Operated dining could transform the dining system into a facet of on-campus life that reflects Western's values and provides a setting to showcase student, faculty, and staff creativity, care, and ingenuity, a system that students can be proud to participate in as first year students and beyond.

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