

UBC Social Ecological Economic Development Studies (SEEDS) Student Report

**UBC Food System Project: AMS Food and Beverage Service**

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# **UBC Food System Project: AMS Food and Beverage Service**

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### **Abstract**

Our analysis of the AMS Food Services is based on a systems approach using a community-based, weak anthropocentric ethical perspective. From personal interviews and research articles, our group concluded that the AMS Food Services has done a fair job in meeting certain criteria of sustainability. AMS has shown increased profits over the past four years and has made efforts to support the local economy. For social sustainability, we focused on food security and profit distribution issues. Composting, waste management and purchasing practices contribute to ecological sustainability. Overall, our group recommends that the AMS Food Services has to increase support and awareness from the university community to help create a sustainable UBC food system. [REDACTED]

### **Introduction**

The results of our preliminary assessment of the UBC food system show that steps are being taken to make the system more sustainable. However, much more awareness and support is needed from the UBC community in order for the food system to move towards long-term sustainability. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Economic factors have primarily been the impetus when decisions are made of how food is obtained, produced and distributed on campus. Because of this, *how* and *where* we spend our money on campus is just as important as “recycle, reduce, and re-use”. In order for a sustainable food system to be economically viable on campus, the UBC community must be willing to support the current initiatives developed to contribute to the sustainability of the operation as well as the recommendations set out in this paper.

A more holistic paradigm must also be adopted in order to create long-term economic, social and ecological sustainability. Sustainability is not one set practice, but rather an ideal of how land, food and community should be utilized. Our recommendations are based on a systems approach of the campus, where components of the system are comprised of the people and businesses involved in food manufacture, processing, distribution and marketing. The system also includes the local environment, local communities, and anything else that could be affected by UBC food policies. Although we have made an effort to focus on

the well-being of the system as a whole, rather than its individual components, our task requires assessing and making recommendations pertaining specifically to the Alma Mater Society's (AMS) Food Services and their practices. [REDACTED]

### Value Assumptions

When evaluating and offering recommendations concerning the sustainability of the AMS Food Services we must keep in mind that the viability of this operation, like that of any other business, is ultimately determined by the customer. Hence, the success of our group's analysis will require an understanding of the values and ethical principles that influence the customer's decision to patronize the AMS food and beverage outlets. In attempting to ascertain these principles our group consulted with the AMS Food and Beverage Manager, Nancy Toogood, to discuss matters regarding customer purchasing practices. We were informed that while an increase in demand for items produced in a more environmentally and socially sustainable manner has been observed, the overriding decision to purchase a product remains dependent upon the benefits to be acquired by the customer, namely affordability, accessibility and taste preferences. This knowledge has led our group to conclude that the dominant philosophical perspective held by the majority of patrons is an anthropocentric or human-centered view. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We realize, however, that an assessment of the current and future sustainability of the AMS Food Services, informed solely by an absolute human-centered view, would make for an incomplete and flawed analysis. As mentioned, to achieve long-term sustainability we hold that a more unified approach must be taken, one that views the AMS Food Services as a system comprised of the people and businesses involved in running the operation, the local community, which includes the food outlet patrons, and the local environment. Therefore, when undertaking this task we acknowledge that the views of our group are likely to complement the perspectives held by the majority of the AMS Food Service patrons. Hence, the ethical principles that will guide the group's analysis will consist of a weak, community-based anthropocentric perspective informed by Murdy's view as explained in

Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence (Murdy, 1993). This definition contends that to be anthropocentric does not mean that no value is held on the natural world, rather “it means to value things human more than other things in nature.” Based on this perspective, when assessing and making recommendations concerning the sustainability of the AMS Food Services, a higher regard will be placed on those aspects of the food system which place human needs before the best interests of the natural world. Specifically, factors contributing to the economic and social sustainability of the AMS Food Services will be viewed as being more critical components in achieving long-term sustainability than will factors bestowing environmental sustainability. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

### **Description of AMS**

The Alma Mater Society, established in 1915, is an independent nonprofit student society of UBC. All UBC students are members of the AMS whose mission is “to improve the educational, social and personal lives of each and every member” (<http://www.ams.ubc.ca>). The AMS Food Services are run by the AMS and consist of many restaurants and food outlets that are all located in the Student Union Building. These outlets include Bernoulli’s Bagels, Blue Chip Cookies, Burger Bar, Gallery Lounge, The Moon, The Pendulum, Pie R Squared, The Pit and Snack Attack.

Currently, the major food distributor of the AMS Food Services is Sysco Konings Wholesale (Brown, 2001). The AMS also purchases a small percentage (<5%) of produce from local farms (N. Toogood, personal interview, 27 March 2002). This relationship is limited by the seasonality and the quantity of food that can be provided. Cost considerations also play a pivotal role in purchasing decisions. Most of the food being served at the AMS food and beverage outlets is made from raw materials on site; almost no pre-packaged food products are purchased from food distributors.

The AMS Impacts Committee, consisting of students and a representative from the UBC Sustainability Office, is a standing committee formed each year under the VP Administration to look at the ecological and social sustainability of the businesses and activities of the AMS (<http://www.sustain.ubc.ca>).

Data used in this analysis of the AMS Food Services operation was gathered from personal interviews with Nancy Toogood, the AMS Food and Beverage Manager, casual interviews with students, the AMS website, documents produced by the AMS and UBC Food Services as well as our own personal experiences. Using this information, we concluded that the AMS Food Services meets certain necessary economic, social and environmental criteria, as determined by our group, to be considered a sustainable operation. While some efforts, geared towards attaining sustainability, have been successful others leave room for improvement. To ensure long-term sustainability, increased awareness and support of current and recommended initiatives is needed from the UBC community.

### **Economic Sustainability**

Profitability is the principal criteria to consider when assessing economic sustainability. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The AMS Food Services has exhibited increased economic gains over the past four years (N. Toogood, personal interview, 27 March 2002). Nancy Toogood has attributed this to stagnant tuition costs, confidence in the economy and to the increase in flow of people through the SUB due to the addition of new food outlets as well as amenities such as the bank machine. However, she feels that due to imminent tuition increases, this trend is unlikely to continue. Unplanned purchases, such as “grabbing a coffee on the go”, will likely bear the greatest impact of reduced spending. Also contributing to the observed profitability is the composition of the work force; approximately 90% (about 300 positions) of all employees are students (<http://www.sustain.ubc.ca>). Employing non-unionized students as the majority of their work force, an option not available to the UBC Food Services, enables the AMS to control labor costs and increases profitability. [REDACTED]

Supporting the local economy is another criteria for economic sustainability. [REDACTED]

The AMS has exhibited a positive influence over the state of the local economy by enhancing the equitable distribution of income. Casual interviews with students [REDACTED]

██████████ led to the conclusion that general contentment exists regarding the AMS Food Services prices. ██████████ Prices, considered to be fair and stable, were stated as being within the budgets of the majority of individuals wishing to patronize the food outlets. Student wages are also considered satisfactory as they are above minimum wage. The student may then be paid more than his/her counterpart working at a similar food outlet off campus. In addition, the AMS is increasing the use of local products ██████████ this may enhance local food production in the community and increase job opportunities. Purchasing locally, however, may result in increased costs; therefore, this practice is currently being performed on a relatively small-scale as purchasing decisions are primarily determined by cost. ██████████

██████████ Attempts to seek new and strengthen existing relationships with local producers (including the UBC Farm) should be explored for the potential to buy locally at decreased costs.

### **Social Sustainability**

Key criteria to examine when assessing the social sustainability of the AMS Food Services include its impact on food security in the UBC community as well as a look of how the benefits obtained through this operation are distributed. Food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Tarasuk, 2001). ██████████

██████████ The AMS outlets help to contribute to food security by providing a variety of nutritious food that is affordable (as discussed previously) and culturally acceptable. The Moon, for example, was established to cater to the increasing Asian population at UBC. However, the accessibility of the food presents a problem since all of the providers are located in the SUB. This set-up is not convenient for customers who are in less central areas of campus and whose food purchases are constrained by time. Long line-ups during the lunch hour may also impede accessibility to food for individuals budgeted for time. In addition to the sometimes lack of attainability of food, during peak operating hours, there exists

the problem of insufficient seating and lack of a relaxing atmosphere in which to enjoy the meal (Farrell Research Group, 1996).

Benefits from food and beverage sales by the AMS are distributed in ways which contribute to social sustainability. All profits received from the outlets are cycled back into student initiatives that are provided for and by UBC students (N. Toogood, personal interview, 27 Mar 2002). Examples of such services include: Joblink, Safewalk, Speakeasy, Ombuds Office, Volunteer Services, and the Advocacy Office. As this practice on campus is unique to the AMS Food Services, efforts to distinguish themselves from the UBC Food Services may result in increased community support and may play an influential role in attracting customers.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

The impact of a food system on environmental quality is a critical component to examine when assessing for sustainability. As an element of the overall food system at UBC, the AMS Food Services has shown many indicators of environmental sustainability. For example, a composting set-up has been established in close proximity to the SUB (N. Toogood, personal interview, 27 March 2002). The development of this system indicates an effort to reduce landfill and promote local nutrient cycling; these are both significant indicators of sustainability. While the effort should be applauded, refinement of this system is dearly needed. The composting system itself is unsightly and has been placed in planting beds with the removal of small shrubs. A system of compost pick-up is needed throughout campus. This would then see food wastes cycled to South Campus Farm and used for crop nutrients in a larger campus-wide composting program. The AMS Food Services would not need to maintain the composting system and the nutrients could be managed to grow food.

In addition, waste reduction programs are in place throughout the AMS food service outlets. Discounts are offered for those who bring their own coffee mugs, such as the 10-cent savings available at Blue Chip Cookies. An opportunity to purchase Tupperware containers at cost is also offered indicating a sincere desire to reduce the garbage produced at the SUB. Although these initiatives are in place, consumers are generally oblivious to discounts and promotions offered by the outlets. Matters are further complicated



by staff members who are either unaware of the discounts altogether or who are providing patrons with misinformation with regarding discount amounts. Also, contributing to waste reduction is the fact that almost all of the food is prepared from scratch. This reduces the amount of packaging that is brought on to campus. By decreasing the amount of garbage, trash removal costs and environmental impacts are minimized.

Furthermore, more informed purchasing practices are increasingly being implemented. An example is the recent switch of coffee brands from Nestle to Canterbury, a more local company (N. Toogood, personal interview, 27 March 2002). This practice has reduced shipping distances, thereby decreasing the usage of fossil fuels and environmental pollution. As mentioned previously, opportunities to increase the level of local purchasing should be sought.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

AMS is already taking many steps to ensure the ecological, economic, and social sustainability of the UBC food system. The initiatives in place form an integral component in reaching the goal of sustainability; however, many have not been successful. Since the AMS is student run and driven by demand, it is essential that both the students and the rest of the UBC community are knowledgeable about the issues and the attempts that are made to make the food system more sustainable. With added support and commitment there is a great opportunity for change in AMS Food Services, which would put pressure in the rest of the system to make a greater move towards sustainability. While this transformation is in progress, the AMS should continue to make sustainability a priority and attempt to expand and promote the current initiatives. The following recommendations are ways in which the UBC Sustainability Office can help with this endeavor. As previously mentioned, due to the ethical principles which have guided this analysis, recommendations contributing to the economic and social sustainability of the AMS Food Services should be viewed as being more critical in achieving long-term sustainability than efforts aimed at obtaining environmental sustainability. [REDACTED]

1. Make efforts to promote/advertise current AMS sustainability initiatives.

2. Attempt to make more obvious distinctions between AMS and UBC food services. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

3. Develop AMS outlets in other areas of campus to increase accessibility.
4. Develop more areas where one could sit and enjoy his/her meal.
5. Expand the current composting system.
6. Implement policy that makes sustainability efforts universally incorporated into budgeting allowances.
7. Support buying relationships with local growers, including UBC farm.

There are few questions that need to be addressed in the future to assist in this movement towards sustainability. Since information provision to employees and customers by the AMS is obviously failing, it is necessary to determine what methods would be successful in promoting sustainability issues and how more support can be obtained. It will also be helpful to obtain data regarding what impact tuition increases will have on the demands and spending habits of the students. As well, a thorough analysis of what opportunities exist to utilize the resources of the UBC Farm for provision and waste management is needed.

## References

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