

Making Institutional Foodservices More Healthy & Sustainable

Role: Foodservice; Administration

Activity: Menu Change; Policy Change

Region: North America, Europe, Australasia and anywhere else with similar institutional food service models

Materials:

Paper and a pen or pencil, printed templates for some activities.

Objectives:

- Consider and identify opportunities for making food at your organization more healthy and sustainable
- Identify effective strategies and perspectives for communicating the benefits of making menu and policy changes in institutional settings
- Create a strategic plan for moving forward in creating practical change

Strategic Planning and Implementation:

The following is a series of brainstorming and planning exercises based on practical experience and research on facilitating shifts towards more healthy and sustainable institutional food conducted at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, Canada. This series of activities is designed to share insights from the work and research at Acadia and support dietitians who are involved in institutional foodservices in similar contexts create strategic change. The process has several steps and we recommend setting aside short periods of time to work through each exercise (approximate times are included as a rough guide).

Assessment and Potential Strategies (30-60 minutes):

- Take 5-10 minutes and consider the food that is currently offered by your institutional foodservice. Write down the factors that you believe influence the decisions about what food is served (for example, nutritional requirements, cost, availability, consumer preferences, etc.)
- If necessary, review some of the key sustainability concepts in the ICDA SFS toolkit including glossary terms and resources related to sustainable diets. Brainstorm ideas for menu shifts that could help make the food served at your institution more healthy *and* sustainable. After spending 5-10 minutes coming up with your own ideas, refer to the list of suggestions below and see if there are any ideas there that you might add to your list of potential shifts.
- Consider: what would make these changes possible? What obstacles are you likely to run into? What kinds of policies currently exist in your institution that would support or hinder these changes?

Potential Changes	Health Benefits	Sustainability Benefits
Substituting meat with plant-based foods (beans, lentils, seeds, nuts, tofu, etc.)	Reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases and some cancers associated with excessive consumption of meat, specifically animal fats, and low consumption of fiber	Plant-based diets have significantly lower associated GHG emissions, land use and water use per unit of food produced ¹
Using local food products	May be fresher (in season) and are more likely to be ripened naturally with nutrients better preserved	Lower GHG emissions associated with transportation; support for local economy; less food loss associated with transport
Using seasonal produce	May be nutritionally beneficial by providing nutrients needed by the body in that season ²	Lower GHG emissions associated with transportation and storage
Substituting processed and ultra-processed foods with whole foods	Provide a balance of macro- and micro-nutrients compared to processed foods which are typically low in fibre, vitamins and minerals and high in refined sugars, salt and unhealthy fats	Lower energy use associated with processing and increased transportation to and from processing facilities; less packaging waste
Reduce food loss and waste	Cost savings from reduced food waste can be reinvested in better quality food ingredients with nutritional benefits	Avoid all environmental impacts associated with production; reduce methane production associated with inappropriate disposal of organic waste
Substitute sugary drinks with tap water	Reduce risk of diseases such as diabetes and obesity associated with refined sugar intake	Lower GHG emissions associated with production, packaging and transportation ³ ; reduced packaging waste
Use field-grown fruits and vegetables	Increase fruit and vegetable intake with associated health benefits	Reduce GHG emissions and energy use associated with greenhouse or climate-controlled production

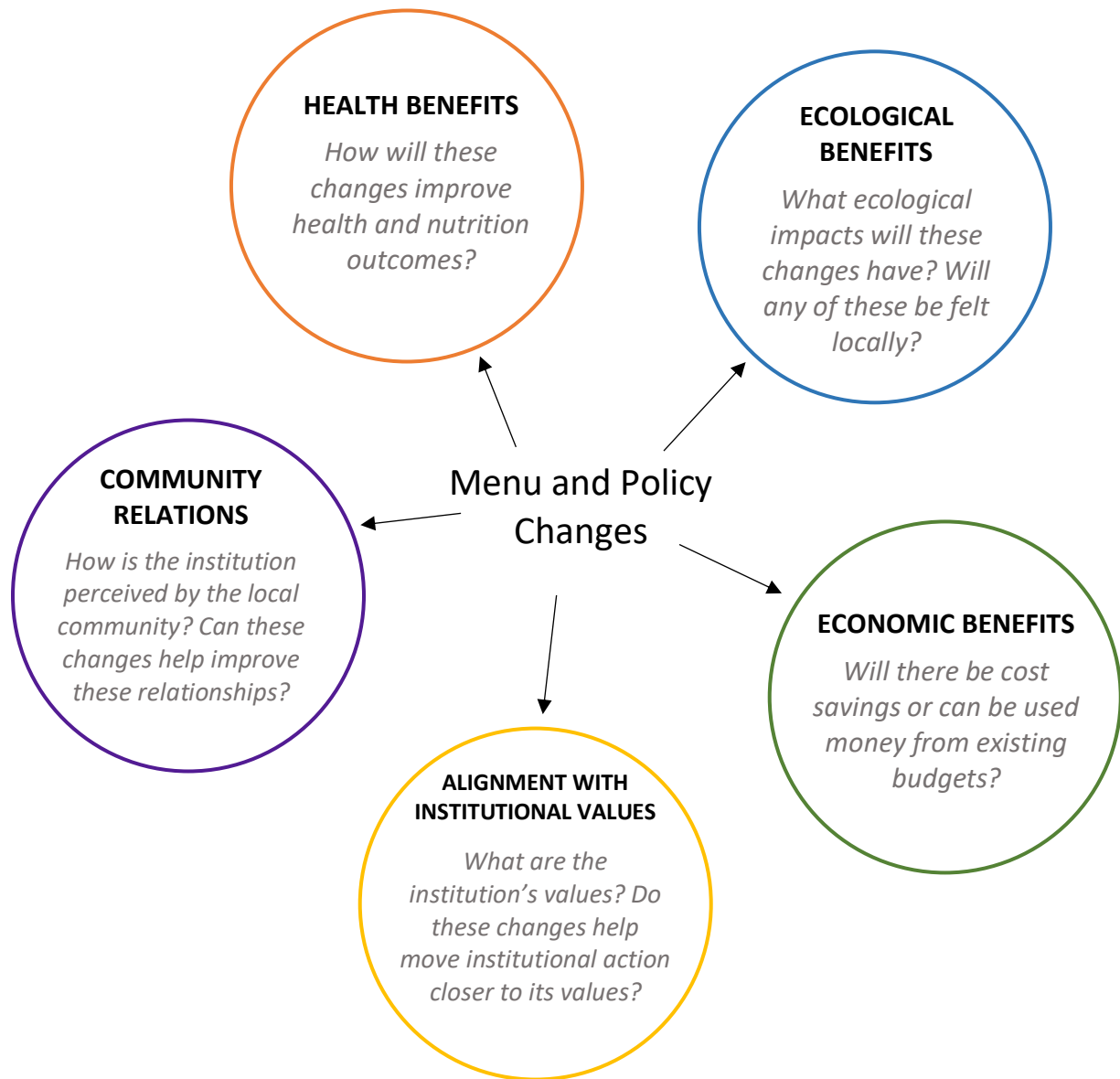
¹ For example, industrialized beef production requires 2 to 20 times as much land as required to produce an equivalent amount of protein from grains or pulses (Horrigan et al., 2002)

² For example, watery produce such as watermelons or cucumbers for adequate hydration in drier, hotter seasons/ climates and more energy dense foods such as squash and root vegetables in colder seasons/ climates.

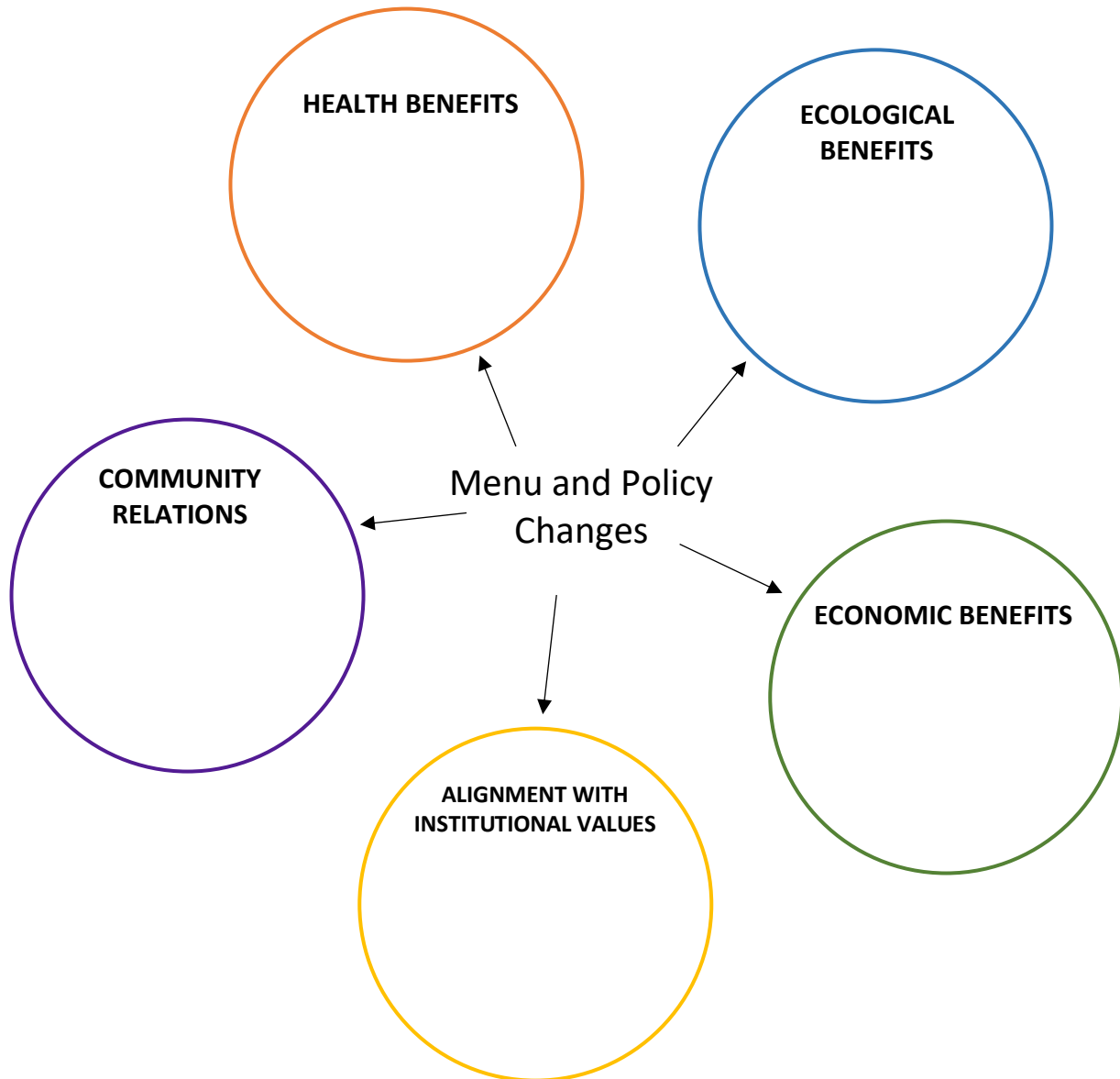
³ Soft drinks and fruit juices are the third biggest contributor to dietary GHG emissions (BDA, 2018)

Mapping the Impacts (30-60 minutes):

Once you have created a list of potential menu and policy changes appropriate for your institution, use the systems thinking map and guiding questions below to consider what impacts these changes would have, then print and fill out the template on the following page.



Use this systems thinking map as a reference for the following exercises and developing your strategic plan.



Stakeholders and Decision Makers (30-60 minutes):

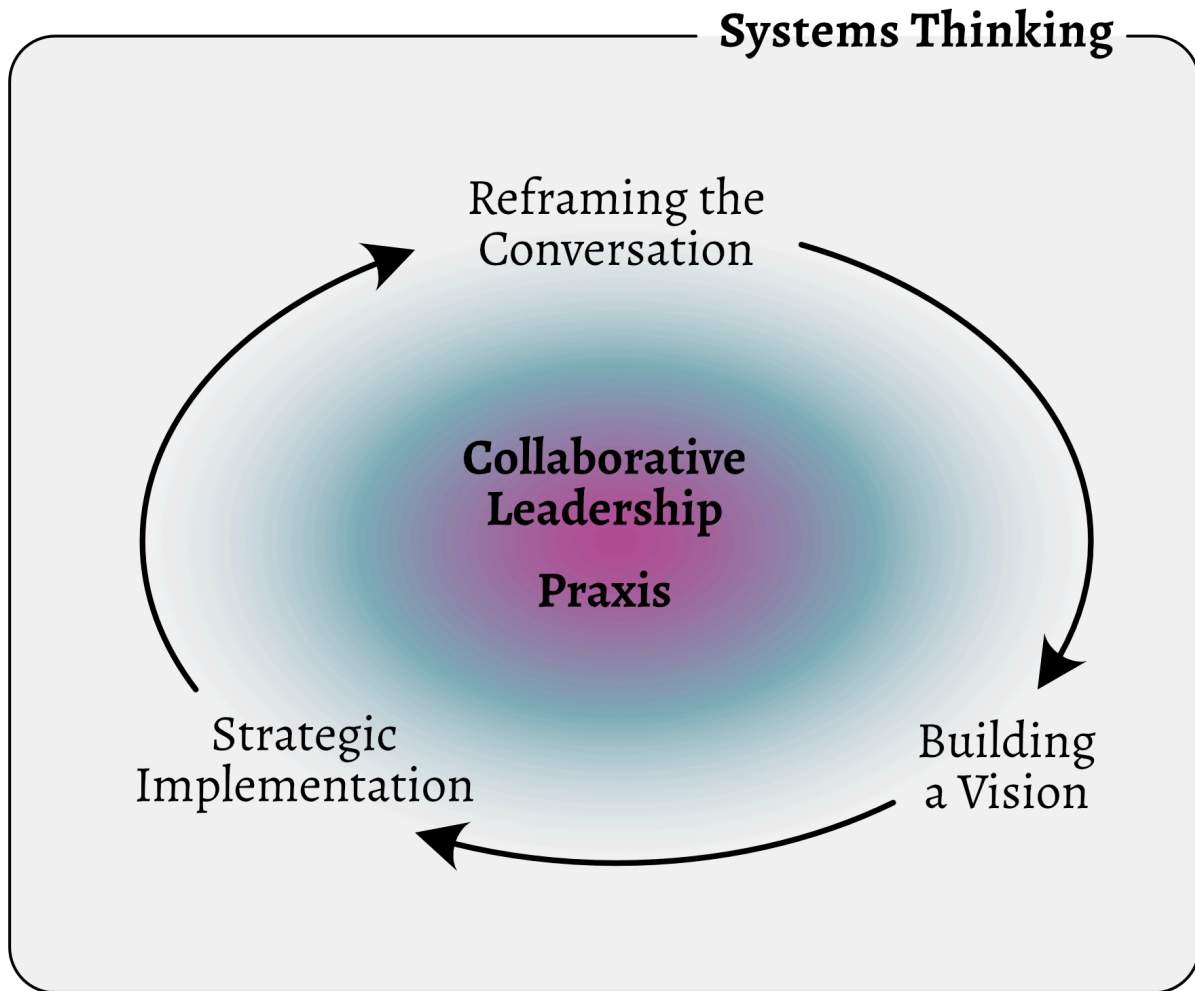
It is important to consider who makes decisions about and has influence over the foodservice in your organization. Use the guiding questions below to clarify and deepen your understanding of decision making structures and processes, then consider the suggestions to create a strategic plan for facilitating change.

- Think about and list the **decision makers** in your organization who influence the institutional foodservice. Who is involved at the administrative and staff levels? What are their work roles and responsibilities? What are their personal values and priorities? Who is the most invested and for what reasons?
- Think about the **primary eaters** at your institution (for example, students in a school, university or college; patients in a hospital or residents in long-term care facilities). How much influence do they have over foodservice? Do they recognize and articulate the central role that food and the institutional foodservice play in their everyday life? Do administration and staff recognize the central role of the institutional foodservice in the lives of primary eaters? For example, at Acadia University students, staff and administration articulated that food influences students' physical and mental health, academic performance, satisfaction with the university experience, and decisions about whether to live on or off campus.
- Refer to the systems map you created in the previous exercise. Which of the various aspects affected by the institutional foodservice (health, environment, economics, community relations and institutional values) matter most to your various stakeholders? Clarifying which benefits or aspects are likely to appeal most to each stakeholder group will help you craft an appropriate message and be strategic about how you engage stakeholders and communicate the change process.

Research Insights (20 minutes):

Read the following section and consider some of the insights from the research conducted at Acadia on an ongoing process of facilitating shifts in the institutional foodservice to focus on more healthy and sustainable food. At the time the research was conducted in 2019, these efforts had been ongoing for over 7 years. Staff, students, faculty, administrators and foodservices staff had been involved through the process including faculty from the School of Nutrition and Dietetics, public health nutrition professionals and registered dietitians employed by the external foodservice provider.

The figure on the following page is a model for facilitating shifts towards more healthy and sustainable institutional food proposed by Chaiti Seth based on the research at Acadia.



The model above proposes that there are three critical stages for making these shifts in an institution: (i) reframing the conversation around food to recognize its health, sustainability and other impacts, (ii) building a collective vision amongst the various stakeholders for a foodservice that can provide nutritious and sustainable food, and (iii) strategically implementing practical steps to work towards this vision. It also emphasizes that collaborative leadership and praxis as key processes to support these three stages. Collaborative leadership involves recognizing all stakeholders as potential leaders and therefore, including all stakeholders in the process and working to ensure that everyone has a voice that is heard and considered, especially those of your primary eaters who typically are the most numerous stakeholder with the least official decision making power over foodservices. Praxis is the process of using a combination of research and practice to inform change. One example is doing some background research on various menu changes before bringing these for consideration to the administration and the primary eaters, then making adjustments to the proposed changes based on their feedback. Multiple cycles of such consultations mean that a range of stakeholders will engage with the work you are trying to do, helping them understand and feel invested in the changes as well as feeling empowered to support your efforts.

Based on this model and the research findings, here are some key insights on facilitating change in your institution's foodservice:

1. Engage and empower stakeholders across all levels of the institution.
2. Create and protect spaces that strive to challenge the power dynamics of institutional hierarchies and support collaborative leadership.
3. Seek and nurture trustworthiness, persistence, expertise, and core values within the group of change makers. Invest in building facilitation skills in yourself and within this group.
4. Sustain the long-term work of reframing the conversation so that stakeholders begin to see and talk about the health, ecological, economic, community, and social impacts of food.
5. Strive for a vision for food services that is grounded in both health and sustainability and arises collectively from stakeholders at all levels of the institution.
6. Find ways to shed light on often hidden capitalist structures and procedures that obstruct institutional food systems change. Find ways to leverage, neutralize, or work around such structures.
7. Focus on procurement, food environments, food services contracts, and communication as key areas of strategic implementation. Define strategies that meet multiple desired outcomes simultaneously.
8. Understand organizational structure and culture and strategically align with organizational and community values, assets and resources.

Creating a Strategic Plan (30 minutes):

Based on your reflections through the previous exercises in light of the model and insights described above, make a list of 4-8 specific strategic steps that you can take to begin the process of bringing more healthy and sustainable food to your institution's foodservice. If you have been in your current role for a period of time, you will recognize that such change is a long-term process requiring significant commitment. Try to keep in mind that as you are influencing large quantities of food and institution-level practices and policies, the benefits will be proportionally significant as you can impact the health of many people as well as have a large environmental impact. Your work can also be a source of inspiration for others attempting to make such change—and there are many!

Below is a list of potential strategic steps you might want to include in your plan. After generating your own strategic steps, review the list of suggestions below and adapt your plan as necessary. Try and include short-, medium- and long-term processes and goals in your plan. Note that some of these steps will occur multiple times as the process of change is iterative.

Strategic Steps
Background research on the most effective menu and policy changes
Accessing and analyzing institutional procurement data to understand what is currently being offered
Consultation with primary eaters (see appendix for suggestions of consultation processes)
Meeting with decision makers
Communication strategies to engage stakeholders around food (consider posters, presentations, social media campaigns, etc.)
Identify allies throughout the institution
Form a committee with representation from as many stakeholder groups as possible
Connect with others doing similar work at other institutions to share insights, barriers and solutions
Explore and understand options for healthy and sustainable foods available in your area or through current or potential supply chains (consider local farm visits, connecting with relevant organizations, etc.)
Host workshops to build food literacy and food skills as a way to support stakeholders to be involved in the change process
Seek out available resources to support this work

Stakeholder Consultation Ideas:

1. Put up a large sheet of paper or chalk/ white board in a high traffic area of the institution. Pose 1-2 questions about the foodservice and invite responses from those passing by. Consider having food samples available to increase participation.
2. Organize an information and discussion session. Put together a brief presentation sharing your ideas for menu and policy changes. Depending on the size of the group, break into small groups and allow time for discussion on the ideas presented. Invite feedback, questions and new ideas from the group.
3. Create a proposal for menu and policy changes and post it online. Promote the proposal through online channels. Set a deadline for comments and invite feedback, questions and suggestions.
4. If appropriate resources are available, conduct focus group interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders to gather priorities and interest and assess level of commitment towards making change. Use this opportunity to briefly share background information and your ideas for change.