Co-founded and jointly led by Stanford University Residential & Dining Enterprises, Stanford Prevention Research Center, and The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) – and as an extension of the groundbreaking Menus of Change initiative presented by the CIA and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Department of Nutrition – the Menus of Change University Research Collaborative (MCURC) is a working group of leading scholars, foodservice business leaders, and executive chefs from 50+ colleges and universities who are accelerating efforts to move Americans toward healthier, more sustainable, plant-forward diets.

To learn more about the MCURC, please visit moccollaborative.org
This report highlights key insights from the early phases of the Collective Impact initiative, and it outlines potential paths to progress as we move towards our ambitious target of a 25 percent reduction in food-related GHG emissions by 2030.

This report was developed thanks to the exceptional feedback and input we have received from our members over the past 2+ years of this initiative.

This report is the culmination of many conversations, email exchanges, surveys, and interviews across the MCURC. We hope it helps provide a framework for understanding the process of assessing collective impact--and accelerating progress towards our collective target.
MCURC Collective Impact (CI) is a strategic initiative of data collection and impact analysis that empowers members by enhancing the understanding of their institutions’ protein portfolios and the collective impact of MCURC’s combined protein purchases.

Protein has been determined by the Menus of Change initiative, and related platforms, to be the single most important area of change with respect to advancing healthier, more sustainable menus.

The opportunities for reimagining our institutions’ protein portfolios—and in turn, the opportunities for improving the combined protein portfolio as measured across the MCURC—translate to tremendous potential for collective impact.
Collective Impact Goals

- Understand the scale of the health and environmental impact of our collective purchases
- Establish metrics and collective targets to measure that impact
- Test, iterate, and share solutions to accelerate progress
- Create annual reports and case studies to highlight successes of member institutions
Collective Impact Progress

2017
Piloted the CI concept with 5 indicators and 28 institutions

2018
1st year of data collection
28 institutions
53.5 million lbs of food

2019
2nd year of data collection
26 institutions
100 million lbs of food

2020
Due to COVID-19, collecting 2020 annual data in early 2021
MCURC has set the **collective target of a 25 percent reduction in food-related greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) from protein purchases by 2030**, aggregated across all participating MCURC institutions.

This reduction will be driven by changes in the ratios of the various protein sources in the collective protein portfolio, aligning with the following MOC principles:

- Make Whole, Intact Grains the New Norm
- Move Legumes and Nuts to the Center of the Plate
- Serve More Kinds of Seafood, More Often
- Use Poultry and Eggs in Moderation
- Serve Less Red Meat, Less Often
- Reimagine Dairy in a Supporting Role
MCURC is introducing an additional metric to the Collective Impact analysis. This metric represents how GHG-intensive food purchases are, regardless of the variations in the amount of food or diners served.

Even in years where food operations have grown or reduced substantially, a downward trend in this metric indicates progress towards less greenhouse-gas intensive food purchases overall.

This metric was included in the individual reports provided to each institution and will be used moving forward.

As we continue to work collectively to reduce MCURC’s food-related GHG emissions, this new tool will help us assess our progress.
Process & Implementation Key Learnings

Over the past 2+ years of collecting and analyzing purchasing data from across the MCURC, we have refined our understanding of what it means to evaluate collective impact, allowing us to reframe how we approach this process in support of our goals.

**KEY LEARNINGS**

- “Baseline” data collection is an ongoing process.
- Expect trends in the data to fluctuate.
- Empower each of our member organizations while continuing to focus on collective progress.
- Leverage the breadth of knowledge, innovation, and creativity within the MCURC.
Process & Implementation Key Learnings

“Baseline” data collection is an ongoing process.

As interest in the CI initiative grows and new members join, participating institutions will be submitting data at different stages of their own progress towards GHG reduction. This means that there will not be one “baseline” assessment but instead, there will be multiple cohorts at different stages of the data submission process that will be evaluated moving forward.

We anticipate that participation could fluctuate year to year, and we want to allow the flexibility for institutions to submit retroactive data to fill any gaps in the annual assessments.

While this means we will need to be regularly re-evaluating our collective data and progress, allowing the most flexibility for our members is essential to maintaining the collective spirit of this initiative.
Process & Implementation Key Learnings

Expect trends in the data to fluctuate.

It is challenging to assess progress towards a long-term goal with only a few data points to consider. **Fluctuating influences and circumstances can have substantial effects on purchasing data year-to-year, and it’s unlikely that reductions in GHG emissions over time will be smooth or consistent.**

For instance, we anticipate that the 2020-2021 data is likely to be heavily impacted by the changes that COVID-19 has brought to our campuses.

This further highlights the importance of the newly introduced intensity metric (lbs of CO2 per lb of food) to continue to monitor progress even as food purchases fluctuate.
Process & Implementation Key Learnings

Empower each of our member organizations while continuing to focus on collective progress.

Collective Impact participants have emphasized the importance and value of providing data insights at the institutional level (through individual impact analysis we provide to participating institutions) and across the collaborative. This allows participants to monitor and evaluate their institution’s progress while offering insights into how they are tracking in comparison to the collective MCURC data.

Empowering our members to enact changes at their institutions, while working together towards a collective target of a 25 percent reduction in food-related GHG emissions, underscores the MCURC’s potential to exponentially enhance the health and sustainability of the food system beyond that of any one university.
Process & Implementation Key Learnings

Leverage the breadth of knowledge, innovation, and creativity within the MCURC.

From the earliest stages of this initiative, we have relied on feedback and input from members’ diverse roles and perspectives.

The collective aspect of this initiative does not just refer to the aggregated data, but to the collaborative way in which the CI initiative has grown and developed. We are committed to engaging with our members, listening to their stories, taking their feedback and evolving this initiative to continue serving the needs of each institution and the collective as a whole in support of our goals.

As we transition from early learnings to informed action, we believe this crowdsourced approach is key to maintaining the momentum of this effort and accelerating impact across the MCURC.
Paths to Progress Moving Forward

Throughout these early stages of the initiative, we have gathered feedback to support positive shifts in protein portfolio purchases across our membership. These Paths to Progress are the common themes that emerged--focus areas to expand on to define best practices, crowdsource solutions, and accelerate impact across the MCURC toward our collective GHG reduction target.

PATHS TO PROGRESS

- Shifting Consumer Demand
- Creating a Culture of Healthy, Sustainable Food
- Inspiring Culinary Innovation
- Operationalizing Best Practices
- Generating Value for Our Students and Customers
Paths to Progress: Shifting Consumer Demand

As a collaborative of forward-thinking scholars, foodservice leaders, executive chefs, and university administrators, our students (customers) are at the heart of all we do. While trends and insights into the changing values and eating behaviors of Gen Z and upcoming generations are encouraging, customer demand and preferences are still the number one challenge to implementing more plant-forward menus (and therefore food purchases) cited by our members.

We know given the urgency of climate change and the health challenges facing our world’s growing population that it will not be enough to wait for our customer tastes to change.

In order to accelerate progress, we must find new and creative ways to inspire a majority of students and customers to make healthier, more sustainable food choices day in and day out that leave them feeling happy and satisfied.

“The student population wanting less meat is not large. It is a challenge reducing meat while making students feel like we’re not taking food away from them.”
Paths to Progress: CASE STUDY
Shifting Consumer Demand

University of North Texas

Mean Greens Cafe Builds Demand for Vegan Options

In 2011 the University of North Texas opened Mean Greens Cafe, the first all-vegan university dining hall in the country. A focus on producing fresh, flavorful, and satisfying food from scratch quickly earned Mean Greens a loyal following of students, the majority of whom are omnivores. Executive Director of Dining Services Peter Balabuch credits Mean Greens with building demand for plant-forward dining on campus.

“Mean Greens began as a value-add for the students on campus who were looking for vegan options, but plant-forward choices have become an expectation in residential dining, retail restaurants, and catering. Students think ‘that’s interesting food they are making’ and they get on board quickly.”
Paths to Progress: Creating a Culture of Healthy, Sustainable Food

In a recent survey of CI initiative participants, changing organizational culture was cited as one of the top barriers to shifting protein purchasing behavior.

To instill this kind of culture, where healthy and sustainable food is the norm, leadership and buy-in are essential at all levels of an organization. Significant progress towards lowering food-related greenhouse gas emissions will require a shift from encouraging each other to work towards change, to empowering each other to take necessary actions within our organizations and across the MCURC.

As part of this process, we must ensure we celebrate and elevate people and organizations that are creating change, establishing new norms and successfully shifting cultural mindsets in support of healthier, more sustainable food.

“To really succeed, we need to build a culture of support for plant-forward that influences every dish, menu, and cafe.”
Paths to Progress: CASE STUDY
Creating a Culture of Healthy, Sustainable Food

University of Maryland

Finding Win-Wins to Generate Support for Plant-Forward Initiatives

In support of University of Maryland Dining Services’ public commitment to reduce food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2030, Assistant Director of New Initiatives Allison Tjaden is using a multilevel approach to build momentum and buy-in from students and dining staff for new plant-forward initiatives. In addition, a new steering committee “will inform how we engage our staff and students on our plant-forward initiatives in order to meet our emissions target.”

“For something to work it has to meet multiple goals, like enhancing student satisfaction and reducing plate costs while also being more sustainable. When people see these win-wins, it creates a positive feedback loop that helps generate buy-in.”
Paths to Progress:

Inspiring Culinary Innovation

Chefs and culinary staff have a central role to play in advancing healthier, more plant-forward menus and food purchases. MCURC members have observed that more effort and care is typically put forth into preparing foods that the culinary staff enjoy cooking and eating. **Providing culinary staff with more opportunities to create new culinary concepts or platforms for plant-forward dishes can help to drive innovation and create buy-in from both staff and students.**

It is also important to find ways to engage foodservice workers and others who are ultimately responsible for executing plant-forward dishes and delivering them to students, to ensure that the same amount of care and pride goes into a dish at all levels.

“Chefs don’t love getting a recipe, they want the creativity to develop a dish. Giving chefs ownership removes the taboo of vegan and vegetarian food because they take pride in what they create.”
Inspiring New Plant-Forward Dishes with Culinary Competition

In response to increasing demand for vegan options on campus, Cal Dining found a creative way to get its culinary staff excited about creating new, globally inspired plant-based dishes. Student groups were asked to select a plant-based protein and a locally grown fruit or vegetable and to challenge Cal Dining chefs to craft delicious recipes. The culinary competition was so popular that chefs began challenging each other to participate, and it spread through the whole organization, from executive chefs to sous-chefs and senior cooks.

“The chefs were really proud of what they created. We were able to highlight the talent of our chefs and give them an opportunity to share a piece of their culture, while also giving students something they’re excited to eat.”
Paths to Progress:

Operationalizing Best Practices

One of the strengths of the MCURC network is our capacity to develop and share best practices in support of healthier and more plant-forward initiatives. However, emphasis must also be placed on how these practices are effectively operationalized and reinforced in our institutions and foodservice operations.

Operationalizing best practices throughout the MCURC will require a deeper examination of how new programs are successfully implemented across institutions, what barriers our members face to implementation, and in what contexts different approaches will work best.

Through this work, we hope to create new tools, resources, and platforms to elevate strategies that enhance the uptake of evidence-based practices.

“You can develop a program in theory, but in practice it takes an enormous amount of constant attention. New initiatives don’t become established habit in a week.”
Operationalizing Best Practices

Stanford University

Operational Research Demonstrates the Power of the Protein Flip

The Protein Flip has been ranked as one of the most promising strategies for shifting protein purchases by MCURC CI participants. We operationalized and evaluated the Protein Flip across our dining halls. We focused on dishes using ground meat that could be blended with vegetables, finding that a ratio of 60 percent vegetables and 40 percent meat was ideal. Dining halls where the Protein Flip was implemented saw a 40 percent reduction in the amount of meat served per student, prompting Stanford Dining to adopt the Protein Flip recipes as the default across its menus.

“What is the best ratio for plants to protein, how do we ensure the dish is properly executed, and what is the overall impact of changing the recipe on student meat consumption?”
Paths to Progress:

Generating Value for Our Students and Customers

Food cost remains an important consideration for institutions wanting to incorporate more plant-forward menu items, such as meat alternatives. From finding innovative solutions to control food waste to leveraging collective purchasing agreements, the MCURC has unique opportunities to generate value and promote affordability across our member institutions--while shifting protein purchases to reduce food-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Some MCURC members have moved to producing plant-based alternatives in-house, like seitan or vegan cheese, to have greater control over costs and quality of ingredients. Others are finding creative ways to dispel the mindset that plant-forward or plant-based foods do not offer the same value as meat-centric dishes. **Uniting efforts to positively shift protein portfolio purchases with strategies to promote greater value to our students offers a win-win approach for everyone.**

“[Our institution] is value sensitive in terms of what our customer’s cost tolerance is, so we focus on how this work adds value to the meal plan.”
Generating Value for Our Students and Customers

Harvard University

Introducing Bistro Bowls for a Restaurant-Like Experience

Thursday nights are a highlight for students eating a meal with Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS). It’s the night that they showcase “Bistro Bowls,” a chef-curated dining experience that aims to give students the same excitement and satisfaction as eating in their favorite restaurant. Students often don’t even notice that their favorite Bistro Bowl is plant-forward, with meat either omitted or served as a condiment.

“We feature a composed bowl that’s intended to be a complete meal. The dish is beautiful, carefully assembled, chef-curated, and filling. Treating plant-forward options as a delicacy and providing a restaurant-like experience in the dining halls creates value for our students.”
Conclusion

- There are multiple paths to progress--within each university and across the MCURC collectively.
- Entering Year 3 of this initiative, we must keep in mind that we are still in the early phases of this effort. **This is a marathon, not a sprint.**
- That said, we feel the enthusiasm and sense of urgency amongst MCURC members to advance us towards our collective GHG reduction target, and to utilize this incredible network to reach our goals.
- We expect that in the coming years we will continue to leverage insights from CI participants and evolve our paths to progress as we continue to learn and grow this initiative.
About the MCURC

The Menus of Change University Research Collaborative is a nationwide network of colleges and universities using campus dining halls as living laboratories for behavior change. It is a collaboration of forward-thinking scholars, foodservice leaders, executive chefs, and administrators for colleges and universities who are accelerating efforts to move people toward healthier, more sustainable, and delicious foods using evidence-based research, education, and innovation.

The MCURC was co-founded and is jointly led by Stanford University, one of the world’s leading research institutions—specifically Stanford Residential & Dining Enterprises and Stanford Prevention Research Center at Stanford Medical School—and The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), the world’s premier culinary college.

It is a diverse, extensive, and inclusive network of 250 members representing 59 colleges and universities, two ex officio organizations, and five Research Collaborator organizations. Our work is made possible by the generous support of industry-leading sponsor organizations. The MCURC’s vision is cultivating the long-term well-being of people and planet—one student, one meal at a time. For more information, please visit moccollaborative.org.