

Michelle Russell '11, ES Policy major, Attends Sustainable Foods Conference in New Orleans

Michelle Russell is a senior Environmental Science Major at Colby, whose interest in local and organic foods has led her to work on organic farms 6 summers, and to be part of the Colby Organic Farmers and Gardeners Club. Recently she attended a Sustainable Foods Conference in New Orleans to represent the Colby Dining Service Program in a presentation called "The Journey to Local". The following is Michelle's personal reflection on attending the conference.

In Mid-October, I had the opportunity to present at a Sustainable Foods Conference in New Orleans, called "Food, Culture, Justice: the Gumbo that Unites Us All". I felt honored to be asked to share what the Colby Food Service, with our food service provider Sodexo, is doing to become a more sustainable program and to attend this conference. At Colby we are lucky to have some very dedicated individuals, including Varun Avasthi and Joe Klaus, who work to strengthen quality and sustainability in the Dining Service Program in response to students who ask for more local and organic foods and in cooperation with the Colby Environmental Advisory Group and the Colby Physical Plant Department. I spoke alongside a representative from the UC Davis Food Service, another Sodexo Program actively working on sustainability initiatives. Our hope for the presentation was to share what we have done as two institutions who are committed to making our food service programs more sustainable, to inspire other institutions and organizations with practical steps they can take to begin their own sustainability process.

While preparing for the conference, I learned more about the variety of changes that have taken place in the last ten years through Colby's Dining Service. Among these changes are:

- An increase to 22% of the food budget spent on local foods
- A half-acre student organic garden, which supplies food to the dining hall and provides an educational opportunity for interested students and the community
- Decreases in dining hall waste with the composting pre and post-consumer waste, and additional decreases in water and energy waste
- 100% Free Trade Coffee and 100% Organic Tea
- Local and Seasonal catering options
- A farm to fork program, which utilizes connections that Colby Food Service has developed, to transport excess farm crops that would rot in the field, which instead are donated through the Northeast Dream Center to 60 central Maine food pantries

Above all, I learned how much can be accomplished through dedication and perseverance, because changing a program takes considerable time and effort. It is good to know that we are off to a significant start!

What may have been the most exciting part of the conference for me was to meet with some of the 900 people who came together from around North America and who are all involved with the growing movement for a more sustainable and just food system. I heard an amazing and effective group of K-12 students who call themselves the Re-Thinkers tell about a list of recommendations they developed to improve their school food, all of which were implemented, and are now being considered by other schools. I heard from three young Toronto residents who have formed a youth policy council in their city and who hope to inspire a broader network of

food policy councils among youth. I heard an eloquent agricultural worker speak about his success at organizing to increase wages and improve the rights of fellow tomato harvesters in Immokalee, Florida. And, I attended a Community Food Security Council meeting to brainstorm projects to support in next Farm Bill, including increased money for urban farming, food-stamps for farmers markets and public health initiatives for better, local nutrition. I was impressed by all of the hard work that has been done, and the enthusiasm to do even more.