# Values-based institutional food procurement programs:
# A narrative review

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## Abstract

Food provided in school cafeterias, hospitals, prisons, and institutions of higher education is referred to as "institutional foodservice." Values-based institutional foodservice procurement programs are designed to prioritize certain values or criteria, such as environmental sustainability or local economies, in addition to price when purchasing food for institutional settings. Organizations and programs have been developed to provide guidance and monitoring for institutions seeking to adopt and implement values-based procurement programs. These programs have increased consumer and decision-maker awareness of opportunities to leverage institutional purchasing to support food systems change. Institutions that have adopted values-based procurement policies have documented increases in purchases of local, sustainable food from cooperatively and independently owned farms. While organizations supporting values-based institutional procurement have made documented progress in supporting food systems change, there have been difficulties with adopting and adhering to these organizations' standards. Because institutional policy adoption and implementation requires a substantial amount of effort, practitioners should be aware of these difficulties in advance of making purchasing commitments.

## Keywords

Institutional Procurement, Foodservice, Higher Education, Values-based Supply Chains, Local Food Systems, Farm-to-Institution, Good Food Purchasing Program, Real Food Challenge, Sustainability, Social Justice, Transparency

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## Introduction

Foodservice establishments—such as restaurants, caterers, and cafeterias—provide the bulk of food that is consumed outside of the home. In 2021, foodservice establishments supplied US$1.17 trillion worth of food (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2022). One segment of this industry is the institutional foodservice sector, which includes hospitals, kindergarten through twelfth grade (K–12) schools, institutions of higher education, and prisons. The institutional foodservice sector has been estimated to account for US$200 billion in annual sales in the U.S. (Thottathil, 2019). Because of its large market size, institutional foodservice has the possibility to influence substantial change in food systems.

In this narrative review, I situate efforts to create positive change in food systems via institutional procurement programs under the broad heading of "values-based procurement" and describe common goals in values-based procurement. I describe the primary sectors of institutional procurement and the values-based programs that have been developed to guide and monitor purchasing in those sectors. I then discuss problems that have been identified with those programs. I conclude by discussing key considerations practitioners should take into account when considering adopting a procurement commitment or program.

## Values-based Procurement

Values-based procurement prioritizes specific values or criteria in addition to economic indicators such as price (Thottathil, 2019). Values-based institutional food procurement (IFP) falls under the broad heading of values-based supply chains, which focus on "the incorporation of factors other than price in supply chain coordination, including social, health, and environmental values" (Klein, 2015, p. 637). Key elements that distinguish values-based supply chains from traditional supply chains include product differentiation (e.g., by product characteristics, such as organic, local, fair trade); committing to the welfare of all participants in the food supply chain; and creating partnerships based on trust and shared governance (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011; Stevenson & Pirog, 2008). Key goals for contractual and policy changes in values-

based IFP are shortening the supply chain, supporting local agriculture, improving equity and transparency, and advancing environmental sustainability, nutritional quality, and the livelihoods of workers along the supply chain (Farnsworth et al., 2019; Goger, 2019; Jones et al., 2019).

Because of the scale of IFP's market size and the fact that it sources only a small proportion of food locally, IFP has been called the "sleeping giant" in the local food movement (Clark, 2016; Thottathil, 2019). In values-based IFP, local purchasing and sustainable purchasing are often treated as synonymous due to a focus on "food miles" or greenhouse gas emissions from food transportation (Jones et al., 2019). Local food procurement efforts are supported by farm-to-institution programs that have the goal of improving access to both local and nutritious foods (Harris et al., 2012). Formalized contracts to ensure buying commitments and strengthen relationships between institutions and farms are a key strategy that can be used to support local food purchasing (Perline et al., 2015)

IFP can affect the health and wellbeing of consumers by ensuring the availability and access to safe, high-quality, and nutritionally adequate food. This is particularly important because core institutional settings—such as K–12 schools, hospitals, and prisons—serve vulnerable populations. Given its size and buying power, IFP is positioned to successfully support social and economic equity. For example, IFP can promote fair labor practices by purchasing food from sources that prioritize workers' rights and pay fair wages.

While third-party certifications play an important role in ensuring products have characteristics that consumers are looking for, the costs of the certifications are often borne by the food producers. The cost burden can make these certifications inaccessible to small farmers who do not have the resources available to receive a third-party certification (Jones et al., 2019).

## Sectors of Institutional Food Procurement and Monitoring Programs

Several organizations and programs have been developed to support IFP programs with values-based procurement efforts and transparency objec-

tives by providing recommendations, guidance, and technical assistance for goal setting, measurement, and tracking of institutional food purchasing efforts. These programs differ in emphasis, level of specificity, and rigorousness of monitoring and reporting. Some programs are purely informational, while others require contractual relationships between an institution and a third-party verifier. Most of these programs focus on one sector of IFP because each type of procurement is subject to its own constraints. Historically, values-based IFP predominantly targeted K–12 schools, with a lesser focus on hospitals and institutions of higher education. In what follows, I review these three key sectors in IFP and programs that have been designed to support or monitor values-based procurement efforts in those sectors.

USDA farm-to-school programs in K–12 schools have laid the foundation for initiatives that leverage IFP as a mechanism for food systems change because of both the scale and the uniformity of the sector (Harris et al., 2012; Izumi et al., 2010). The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced low-cost or free lunches to students at participating schools, administered by the USDA. In 2019, NSLP provided 4.8 billion lunches to children in the U.S. (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.). NSLP has specific nutrition standards for meals with which schools must comply in order to participate in the program (USDA, 2012). Schools that meet these requirements and participate in the program receive reimbursement from the USDA for each meal, with the amount of reimbursement depending on income level of the students enrolled at the school (USDA, 2017). The focus on supporting local economies and nutrition via the school food programs is at least partially justified by the fact that K–12 schools are spending public funds for food, and hence can be seen to have an obligation to pursue the public good with these public funds (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011; Farnsworth et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2012). These nutrition standards, menu requirements, and reimbursement policies create a uniform set of standards for all K–12 schools participating in the NSLP, which makes this sector a prime target for developing policies and programs

that can be replicated in school districts across the U.S.

Local food procurement in NSLP has been facilitated by USDA farm-to-school efforts as well as the National Farm to School Network (Izumi et al., 2010). Given the structure and uniformity of the NSLP, it is unsurprising that the most well-known and well-established values-based procurement program—the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP)—focuses on procurement in K–12 schools. GFPP was developed by the nonprofit organization LA Food Policy Council to help the Los Angeles Public School District make food purchasing decisions that support local and sustainable agriculture, promote healthy and sustainable diets, and ensure fair labor practices (Farnsworth et al., 2019). The GFPP is guided by five core values, which are connected by the key theme of transparency: local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition (Daniels & Delwiche, 2022; Farnsworth et al., 2019). The pursuit of these values is measured using a specific set of metrics and standards, which are used to guide institutional purchasing decisions and evaluate program performance. GFPP's standards recognize existing third-party certifications, but the organization also provides research and verification support to participating institutions to help identify products that meet the GFPP standards but may not have an existing third-party certification (Center for Good Food Purchasing, n.d.). The GFPP has been adopted by many school districts across the U.S., including the school districts in a number of very large U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. (Daniels & Delwiche, 2022). GFPP highlights its flexibility in helping organizations select their own priorities for improvement within GFPP's certification framework and in helping develop plans to achieve those goals. However, GFPP requires that institutions meet baseline standards in all categories to prevent institutions from only committing to easy changes to their programs (Farnsworth et al., 2019; Jablonski et al., 2020; Lo & Delwiche, 2016).

The Real Food Challenge (RFC) has developed a set of standards, known as the Real Food Standards, to guide colleges and universities in their purchasing of "real food." Their standards classify real

food into four categories: fair, ecologically sound, humanely raised, and local and community-based. The first three categories are primarily focused on products meeting existing third-party certifications, while the local and community-based category is intended to be researched and verified by students or members of the participating institution (Real Food Challenge, 2016). The scale and complexity of foodservice programs at institutions of higher education make it infeasible for most universities to analyze all purchases, so RFC suggests deriving the "real food" percentage by averaging the results of a two-month analysis annually (Berger et al., 2022). Due to the complexity of university dining programs and the labor involved with auditing purchase data, some institutions have audited two months' worth of data on a subset of the dining operations, such as University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill's choice to audit only two large dining halls for two months' worth of purchases (Cline et al., 2022).

GFPP and RFC provide the most specific value statements and metrics of values-based IFP programs. (See the Appendix for a comparison of GFPP and RFC's core values.) There are two other values-based IFP programs that provide more general guiding principles—Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) and Menus of Change (MOC).

There is increasing recognition that the food system impacts public health. Given their missions, some hospitals are seeking to support food systems change by committing to procure more local and sustainable food via farm-to-hospital programs (Dauner et al., 2011; Thottathil, 2022). Close to one third of U.S. hospitals have signed on to the Healthy Food in Healthcare Initiative developed by HCWH. Founded in 1996, HCWH is an organization that targets the hospital sector (Heilig et al., 2002). HCWH based its purchasing recommendations on the environmental nutrition model, which focuses on the connections between food, nutrition, health, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Environmental nutrition is based on the recognition that the food we eat impacts individual nutrition, as well as the environment, workers in the food supply chain, and the food system more generally (Klein et al., 2014). HCWH has three primary initiatives in their Healthy Food in Healthcare

Program: people- and planet-friendly food, healthy food and communities, and food policy action to support sustainable food systems. HCWH recommends several practices to help achieve these goals, including reducing the amount of meat that is served and purchasing meat that is raised without the use of routine antibiotics, increasing purchases of sustainable foods and local foods, hosting farmers markets, screening patients for food insecurity, and establishing food-based interventions for community benefit (Health Care Without Harm, n.d.).

The Culinary Institute of America's Menus of Change (MOC) program is based on the beliefs that the food system has a significant impact on public health, the environment, and social and economic justice and that culinary innovation and sustainability can drive positive change in the food system (Menus of Change, 2020). The program focuses on promoting healthy, sustainable, and delicious food in the foodservice industry, with the ultimate goal of driving positive change in the food system. Unlike the GFPP or RFC, MOC does not have specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for products but instead has core values and principles to guide procurement decisions and menu creation. These principles include the promotion of plant-forward diets, the use of culinary innovation to drive change, and the integration of sustainability throughout the food value chain. The program emphasizes the importance of shifting toward diets that are rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other plant-based foods and that minimize the consumption of animal-based foods (Menus of Change, 2023). The MOC approach is intended to help the foodservice industry adapt to the growing demand for healthy and sustainable food and to support the development of a more diverse and vibrant food culture. MOC promotes the integration of sustainability throughout the entire food value chain, from production and processing to distribution and consumption (Menus of Change, 2023).

Institutions of higher education often contract with foodservice management companies to run their operations. Three large companies—Compass Group, Sodexo, and Aramark—dominate the university food service landscape (Friedmann, 2007; Santo & Fitch, 2019). They account for 45% of the

market in North America and jointly generated $37 billion in revenue in 2017, an increase of roughly 150% since 2004 (Goger, 2019; Santo & Fitch, 2019).

Institutional foodservice programs typically purchase the bulk of their food via broadline food distributors (Goger, 2019). They do so not only because of the scale of IFP but also because of long-standing organizational standards and practices (Goger, 2019). Hospitals participate in Group Purchasing Organizations, which can require them to purchase 80–90% of their food through specific food distributors, limiting their opportunity to purchase local or sustainably produced foods (Klein, 2015; Thottathil, 2019). The food distributors that institutions rely on to purchase food are also highly concentrated, with two companies—Sysco and US Foods—accounting for 75% of the market (Santo & Fitch, 2019). This concentration has been identified as a key obstacle for incorporating local purchasing into university foodservice programs because these distributors generally have limited availability of values-based products (Goger, 2019; Martin & Andrée, 2012)

Local, sustainably grown food is often more expensive than conventionally grown food from large farms. Institutions typically are constrained by limited financial and human resources available to support new programs, making price an overriding concern (Izumi et al., 2010; Kloppenburg et al., 2008). Lack of buying commitment, lack of formal contracts, and high turnover in institutions have also been identified as barriers limiting local purchasing (Perline et al., 2015). Values-based IFP can also encounter resistance from food suppliers or foodservice program operators who may not be accustomed to the requirements of a values-based food procurement program or may be generally resistant to making changes to their operations. Food service staff generally have limited and time resources, which can make them resistant to adopting new practices and procedures (Perline et al., 2015; Rosenthal & Caruso, 2019). It is important to be aware of the impact of workload and other practical limitations on school foodservice staff's ability to implement new policies (Rosenthal & Caruso, 2019). For example, food sourced from small producers may require additional cleaning

and processing by foodservice staff compared to food sourced from broadline distributors. In addition, institutional foodservice program operators and chefs have limited ability to work with individual farms due to the coordination time required (Dauner et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2012; Perline et al., 2015).

The scale of the IFP market is both the reason that it has the potential to create change in the food system and the reason that there are difficulties with adopting values-based procurement initiatives (Klein, 2015). As discussed above, a key area of focus for IFP are farm-to-institution initiatives, which target increasing purchases of sustainable, locally produced food. The nature of the institutional value chain can make it difficult for small farmers or processors to meet the demands of scale and uniformity required by large institutional programs (Goger, 2019). The scale of institutional foodservice programs, in addition to the seasonality of local food, may make it difficult to source the quantity, variety, and volume of food required for the program (Berger et al., 2022; Cline et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2012).

Customer demand and preferences also influence institutional purchasing decisions. For example, several studies of the hospital sector noted that hospital staff perceive limited customer demand for local food, which limits their interest or motivation to develop local purchasing efforts (Abdul Rais et al., 2022; Dauner et al., 2011; Perline et al., 2015). Because universities need to sell meal plans to students, university dining programs have to consider student demand and satisfaction when making values-based purchasing commitments. For example, students may desire chicken tenders, which are only available from large food processing companies and may conflict with values-based procurement programs (Berger et al., 2022).

For both RFC and GFPP, the criteria for products to be considered "local" is not merely geographic. They also include limitations on farms' gross sales and ownership structures, requiring them to be independently or cooperatively owned (Center for Good Food Purchasing, n.d.; Real Food Challenge, 2016). These limitations on gross sales and ownership type preclude some farms from counting as "local." Institutions of higher

education require such large volumes of food that it may not be possible for institutions to purchase the quantity of food they need from farms that are geographically local, have sales below the gross sales limit, and are independently or cooperatively owned (Baldwin, 2017; Berger et al., 2022). Similarly, RFC does not count food from local businesses as "real food" if the ingredients used by those businesses were not sourced locally (Berger et al., 2022; Cline et al., 2022). For example, products from local bakeries that cannot source their flour locally could not be counted as "real" according to the RFC standards. For this reason, the standards have frustrated stakeholders by disqualifying vendors that campus stakeholders have wanted to support (Cline et al., 2022). Others have noted that sustainable food production practices are not one-size-fits-all and cannot be established for a locality without taking into account the specific environmental context (Jablonski et al., 2020).

RFC was designed to be used by institutions of higher education. However, after using it for close to a decade, foodservice stakeholders at Johns Hopkins University want to develop their own unique standards and targets for a local food procurement program "as part of a broader picture of local, sustainable, and ethical commitments, including maintaining facilities sustainably, valuing local workers, and measuring and reducing waste" (Berger et al., 2022). Similarly, UNC has also expressed an interest in developing their own standards that they could use in place of RFC but acknowledged that it would be resource intensive. Standards and metrics created at the institutional level raise questions of long-term legitimacy and accountability (Cline et al., 2022). When questioned about whether creating their own metrics could be considered greenwashing, Johns Hopkins University dining program stakeholders indicated that the university has resources and centers outside of the dining program that would be able to support the development of metrics and keep the dining program accountable (Berger et al., 2022).

Beyond the programs' standards being difficult to apply to local contexts or failing to reflect local values, shifts in program standards can negatively impact efforts that are already underway at an institution. For example, UNC Chapel Hill made a

commitment to adhere to RFC 1.1 standards and implemented purchasing practices to meet those standards. When it came time for UNC to be scored for their efforts, they were scored according to the 2.0 standards without receiving notice that the standards had changed. Thus, UNC's dining program adhered to its purchasing commitment but received a lower score due to the new 2.0 standards (Cline et al., 2022) Specifically, the RFC changes between 1.1 and 2.0 standards introduced the above-discussed income cap on farms for them to be considered "local." This change in standards caused a decrease in the amount of food purchased by UNC Chapel Hill that could be classified as "real" according to the new RFC standards. However, the decrease in the amount of food that could be classified as "real" was not associated with a change in UNC's purchasing practices. The decrease in the amount of food they purchased that could be classified as "real" was due to the fact that a geographically local dairy from whom UNC purchased had income that was above RFC's newly established threshold for it to be considered local. Purchases from the dairy could no longer be counted as local according to the new Real Food Standards (Cline et al., 2022).

Many of these programs focus on changes that are "low-hanging fruit," changes that are easier to implement (Berger et al., 2022). In some cases, the organizations focus on helping institutions find ways to "count" products that they are already purchasing, for example, by identifying products or producers that meet certain standards. This actually provides a more accurate assessment of the institution's purchasing habits than the initial assessment did. However, finding items that can be counted toward goals can yield changes in scores without encouraging changes in practices. While it is good to acknowledge good practices that are already in place, some people may—intentionally or unintentionally—make the false claim that the programs are increasing purchases of "good" or "real" food. In reality, the practices are the same, and the institutions are just able to count food that they were already purchasing. It is good that they are making those purchases, but it misrepresents the situation to describe it as an increase or a change. As with the above-described situation with UNC, this issue

can also cut the other way—an institution may actually be making positive change in their practices, but a change in scoring could lead to a lower score.

If changing standards can change institutions' scores without any corresponding change in purchasing, it could be seen to call into question the whole enterprise of scoring procurement programs. Given that the purpose of these programs is to effect change in the food system by changing purchasing practices, changes in scoring that make program look better or worse without any change to the purchasing practices undermines the motivation that brought them into existence.

In addition, some have observed that this focus on low-hanging fruit is giving universities the opportunity to avoid making some of the most difficult procurement changes (Berger et al., 2022). This observation points to an objection that has been raised in the literature, namely, that the nature of IFP replicates some of the largest problems in our food system (Goger, 2019). Like many other segments of the agrifood industry, it is dominated by a few large multinational companies that wield disproportionate control over the market (Thottathil, 2019). IFP relies on efficiency, scale, and uniformity to deliver foodservice programs for the lowest price yielding the highest profit, and some have argued that even farm-to-school programs supporting nutritious, local produce in schools recreate many of issues that already exist in our food system (Allen & Guthman, 2006).

Thus, some food systems advocates object to the entire approach of focusing on institutional settings at all. They argue that targeting IFP as a tool for social change ends up replicating or reinforcing the values that progressive food systems advocates are seeking to change—unsuccessfully trying to promote change by working within current problematic systems rather than seeking to fundamentally alter them (Klein, 2015). Similarly, institutional procurement efforts have also been criticized for reinforcing the neoliberal ideal of utilizing capitalist market values and methods to influence change, rather than pushing the change via adoption and support of nonfiscal values and means (Allen & Guthman, 2006). A key question then, is "can values-based procurement initiatives in institutions integrate with conventional supply chains while maintaining the robustness of the values and goals that motivate them?" (Klein, 2015, p. 636). We don't yet know the answer to this question, but if the answer is "no," what is the way forward?

## Conclusions

Values-based IFP thus has significant promise to influence positive change on the food system, but the institutional sector also has a variety of barriers that need to be addressed in order for institutions to make changes to their policies and programs. Programs exist to help institutions identify goals and priorities, and some of these programs, particularly GFPP in the K–12 sector, have had success in creating change. These programs, however, are limited by their inapplicability to local contexts, lack of representation of local stakeholder views, and logistical difficulties, which are particularly prevalent in institutions of higher education, due to the scale and complexity of those programs, and their consumer-focused, for-profit business models.

If an institution is considering adopting a values-based procurement policy—a formal contractual agreement, such as enrolling in GFPP, or simply selecting a set of principles to use to guide purchasing decisions—the following six questions are useful to consider in evaluating options and making that choice.

1. *Institutional Sector:* Is this program or set of principles designed to be used by this sector of institutional procurement operations? If not, how hard would it be to modify or adjust them to fit this sector?

2. *Institutional Values:* Do the values and commitments embedded in this program reflect the values that this institution holds? If not, could this adoption create conflict within the institution, stakeholder groups, or the end users of the program?

3. *Agricultural Context:* Do the metrics in the values-based program match the agricultural context of the location of the institution, including requirements related to farm ownership and production practices? Can the volume and types of products

required by the program be sourced consistently with the program requirements? If not, what adjustments would need to be made, and are they feasible?

4. *Administrative Effort:* How much work will be required by the institution to participate in this program? Will additional staff or staff time be required to collect data or manage reporting?

5. *Cost:* Is there a direct cost to enroll or participate in the program? Will there be additional costs for food purchases meeting the program's specifications? If so, who will bear the burden of those costs—the consumer, institution, or foodservice management company?

6. *Operational Effort:* Will this program require additional time, effort, and training for staff to create new menus, handle minimally processed foods, and implement new

policies and practices? If so, is there staff buy-in, and do they have the time, skills, and resources to take on these new responsibilities?

Each of these questions highlights the real-world difficulties and implications of adopting a values-based IFP program. There is a general tension between having standard metrics that apply across all contexts to allow for apples-to-apples comparisons between institutions and having metrics that are uniquely applicable to a local context. While one specific values-based framework may not uniquely fit a particular institution's food-service program, there is also a substantial burden of time and effort involved in building a values-based IFP framework, and individual institutions may not have the time and resources available to do so. While change is always hard, the overall goal of these programs is to make changes at the institutional level that can support broader change in local and regional food systems.

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## Appendix. Comparison of Good Food Purchasing Program and Real Food Challenge Standards and Value Statements

| | Good Food Purchasing Program [a] | Real Food Challenge [b] |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainable | "**Environmental Sustainability:** Source from producers that employ sustainable production systems to reduce or eliminate synthetic pesticides and fertilizers; avoid the use of hormones, routine antibiotics and genetic engineering; conserve and regenerate soil and water; protect and enhance wildlife habitats and biodiversity; and reduce on-farm energy and water consumption, food waste, and greenhouse gas emissions. Reduce menu items that have high carbon and water footprints, using strategies such as plant-forward menus, which feature smaller portions of animal proteins in a supporting role." | "**Ecologically Sound:** Farms, ranches, boats and other operations involved with food production practice environmental stewardship that conserves biodiversity and ecosystem resilience and preserves natural resources, including energy, wildlife, water, air, and soil. Production practices should minimize toxic substances, direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions, natural resource depletion, and environmental degradation." |
| Local | "**Local economies:** Support diverse, family and cooperatively owned, small and mid-sized agricultural and food processing operations within the local area or region." | "**Local & Community-Based:** These foods can be traced to nearby farms, ranches, boats and businesses that are locally-owned and operated. Supporting small and mid-size food businesses challenges trends towards consolidation in the food industry and supports local economies." |
| Social and Economic Equity | "**Valued workforce:** Ensure that food suppliers respect workers' rights to freedom of association and to bargain collectively for better wages and working conditions, free from retaliation." | "**Fair:** Individuals involved in food production work in safe and fair conditions, receive fair compensation, are ensured the right to organize and the right to a grievance process, and have equal opportunity for employment." |
| Animal welfare | "**Animal welfare:** If animal products are a featured menu item, source from producers that provide healthy and humane conditions for farm animals." | "**Humane:** Animals can express natural behavior in a low-stress environment and are raised with no added hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics." |
| Nutrition | "**Nutrition:** Promote health and well-being by offering generous portions of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and minimally processed foods, while reducing salt, added sugars, saturated fats, and red meat consumption and eliminating artificial additives. Improving equity, affordability, accessibility, and consumption of high quality culturally relevant Good Food in all communities is central to our focus on advancing Good Food purchasing practices." | N/A |

[a] Center for Good Food Purchasing, n.d.
[b] Real Food Challenge, 2016.