

# An ILLiberal Education

10 critical lessons  
about the state  
of food-system education  
in American colleges  
and universities



In 2009, the Food and Agriculture Organization's expert paper, *How to Feed the World 2050*, ranged widely on immense potential solutions to eradicating hunger, including the world's socio-economic environment, the use of natural resources, the political will of governments, the necessary investment in agriculture research, climate change and sustainability. But starkly missing was one natural element to their solution: the human element. FAO circled – but overlooked – the continual need to infuse man's ingenuity, and to recruit, form and develop that ingenuity. How and where do this recruitment, formation and development occur? Where do we look for future food system leaders?

Many will answer: the university.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more young men and women now attend degree-granting institutions than ever before, approximately 21 million. Even though only a small percentage will graduate with a degree in agriculture and natural resources, one in five will nestle into a career within the U.S. food system as scientist, farmer, veterinarian, nutritionist, retailers or other.

In addition, all will go on to accept their ever expanding and most powerful role: consumer.

Therefore, what is being taught to impressionable young men and women at the university becomes immensely important, not only for the health of agriculture and agribusiness in the United States, but also for the health and well-being of the world.

Recognizing this reality, in 2012 *Truth in Food* began a college-outreach program targeting three universities – one large, one medium and one faith-based. Shortly after the program's launch, three schools became six, six became 12 and today that program targets all 62 four-year colleges and universities within the state of Missouri. As the program's success has widened, so has its reach to universities throughout the United States.

Accumulated in the following pages are the top 10 lessons from this outreach effort.

These lessons are piercing! At *Truth in Food* we hope these conclusions change the way agriculture goes about "university relations," since agriculture, agribusiness, the U.S. food system and farmers themselves are experiencing an unprecedented assault on their integrity, either originating from or compounded at the university level.

It's certain that agriculture can no longer wait for the university to produce the next generation of food system leaders and then pursue the timely and costly process of challenging and attempting to convert deeply imbedded and taught flawed views. Modern agriculture must show up on college campuses and contend for the truth at the moment of impact, not merely abiding in the agricultural halls but interacting with the humanities where the conversation is rife.

*Truth in Food* has engaged in this process, and we urgently ask you to do the same. Call (816) 863-8880 if you'd like these findings presented to your team, or email [kmurphy@foodchaincommunications.com](mailto:kmurphy@foodchaincommunications.com).



# Not the message but the medium

**F**ood, according to the editors of the Winter 2013 *Transformations*, an academic journal that explores how to teach issues of identity, power and social justice, "...supplies the ingredients for students to explore economic systems, to analyze cultures, to examine identities and traditions, to connect with communities, and to engage political, ethical, and scientific discourses." Through its "Teaching Food" special issue, teachers learn how to teach students not just basic culinary arts and food-system structure, but questions such as the economics of food production, the relationship between local and global food systems, how food expresses culture, labor issues, and how to "move beyond the classroom and kitchen and become activists." (It's particularly noteworthy not a single professor of agriculture is represented.)

From its outset, the organized study of agriculture on college campuses was positioned in contrast to an abstract, elite liberal arts education. The formation of land-grant universities through 1862's Morrill Act aimed to transform agriculture into a profession "as intellectual and dignified as Physic or Law," in the words of Horace Greeley. Yet even 150 years after the first of those institutions opened, the science of agriculture and the humanities departments on those campuses remain at odds today. The disciplines have largely become segregated, with each existing in its own sphere. Ag students now represent less than 10 percent of total land-grant institutions' enrollment, and those students intent on higher education in an agricultural field may never darken the door of the humanities department.

Meanwhile, the humanities departments have gravitated towards agriculture. There, professors of anthropology, sociology, minority studies, political science, and more have grown intensely interested in farm management, food production, food distribution, food consumption and their social, environmental and cultural impact. As the editors of *Transformations* attest, every major now feels compelled to enter into the discussion about modern farming and food production.

This is a tough lesson for traditional agriculture that fancies higher learning and the historical land-grant university as its faithful friend. Intermittent and selective engagement can leave the false impression that any discussion about agriculture is a good discussion about agriculture. Instead, the Truth in Food College Initiative has discovered the precise opposite: Agriculture is often presented as the culprit for today's social ills. What used to be unquestionably the solution is now the problem. Greeley's visionary professional ag science is now simply a vehicle to study other issues bound by a competing world view wholly apart from the one that founded the institutions.

In response, agriculture needs a strategic, orchestrated and long-term commitment to deep "university relations." It must move beyond mere research funding, job recruitment and selective engagement with only the agricultural campus. It must actively counter at the root of the debate – the humanities departments.

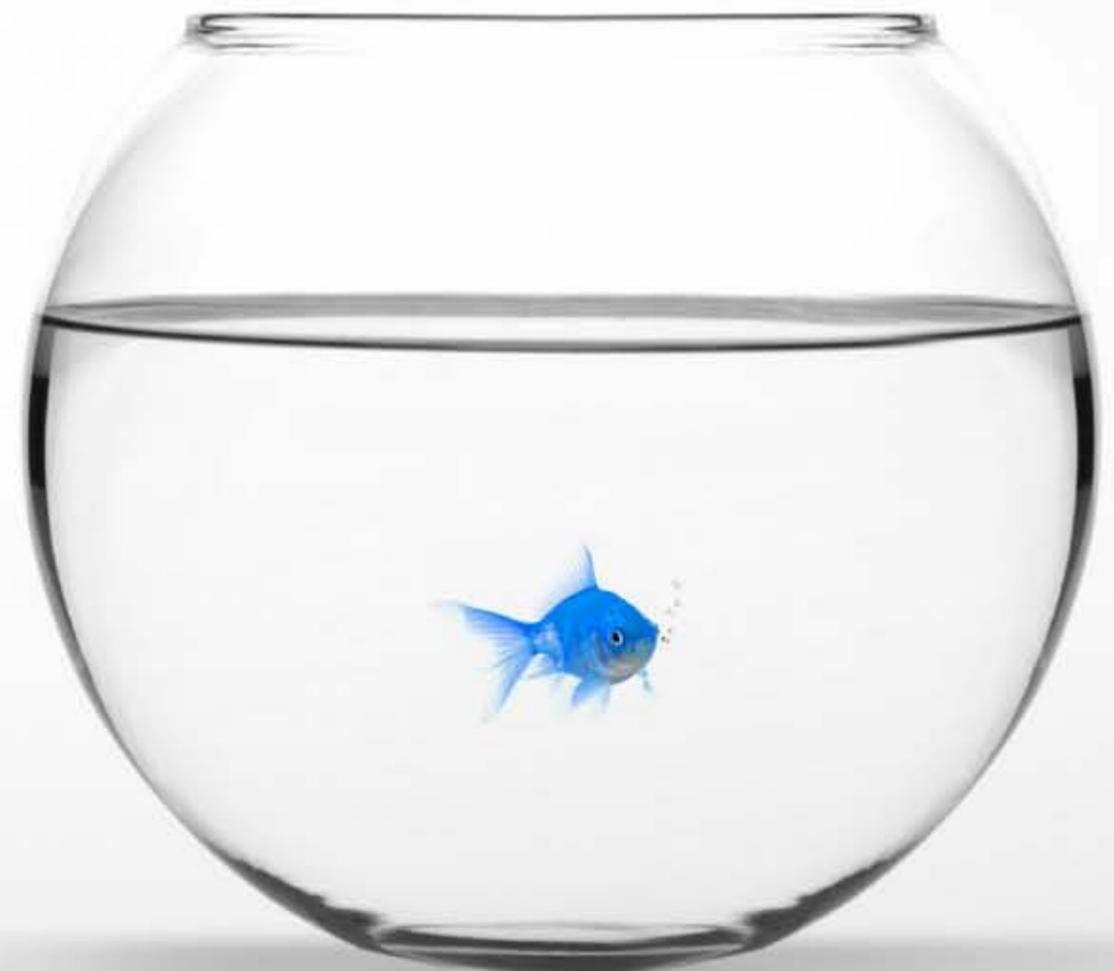
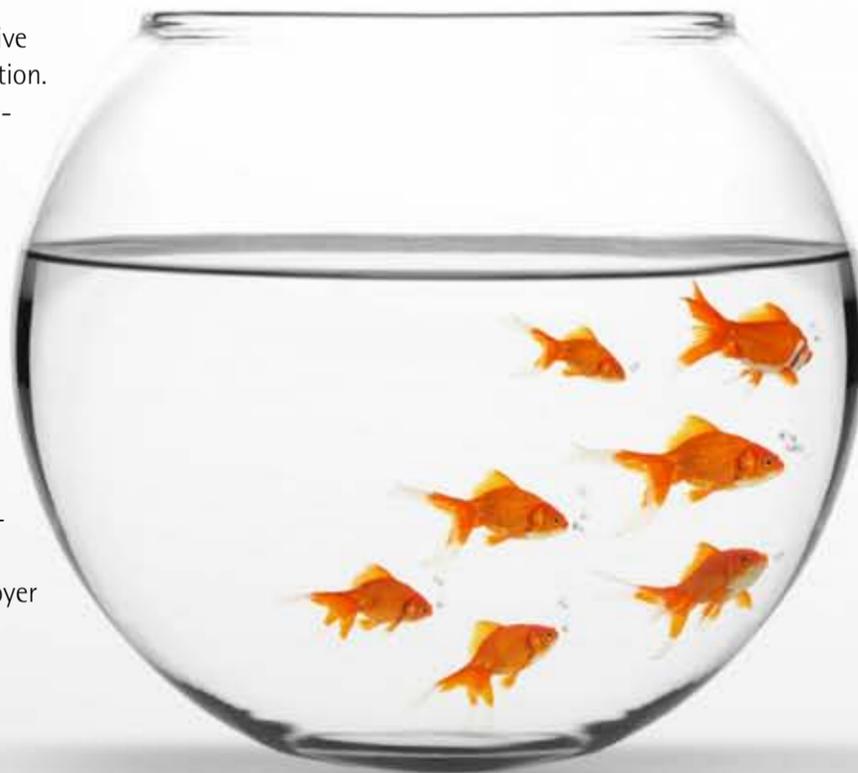


# Academically Segregated

The vision of 19th Century Senator Justin Smith Morrill may have opened the college gates to farmers, but from the start agriculture, even on the land-grant universities, has remained separated. Ag-school departments and those students within remain regularly at odds with food, nutrition, health or social issue classes, rarely, if ever co-mingling. That self-segregation often leaves students unfamiliar with and ill-prepared for the arguments leveled against agriculture.

Immediately following the publication of South Dakota State student Kyle Krantz' accusatory "Healthy Eating Leads to a Healthy Person, You Truly Are What You Eat," many students wanted to formulate a response. Many tried. Some argued his accusation of wanton cruelty over generalized conditions on all large-scale animal farms. Others defended working conditions at packing plants. Others detailed the scientific reasoning that castrating farm animals was both physically justifiable and economically sound. But each ultimately failed to address Krantz' criticism. In each response, a morally based answer to his morally based outcry was missing. Agriculture's student defenders charged in, ready to debate their critics upon grounds they were comfortable with. But they were unwilling and incapable of venturing into the philosophical and moral ground upon which Krantz, as a humanities student, had lead them.

Even more daunting, as the Truth in Food College Initiative uncovers, the inability to engage continues post-graduation. Vulnerable students become vulnerable professionals. According to one 25-year public affairs veteran for a large agricultural company, new recruits enter the workforce ill-equipped to counter the myriad of ways agriculture is coming under attack. "By the time a young person gets up to speed on the issues and motivations driving those arrayed against agriculture, the employee turns over, either transferring within the same company, taking a position at another company or switching careers altogether," she says. The turnover depletes momentum, energy and knowledge that otherwise might have been applied to answering critics. If the gaping hole in agriculture's intellectual response created by the university's self-segregation is to be filled, the employer assumes the de facto role of perpetual educator.



The theological notion of concupiscence – mankind's over-riding desire that consumes his reason, his succumbing to pride, ambition, greed and envy's temptation to choose evil over good – has today interbred in university food-studies courses into "concupiscence." Today's college student inclines to accept a negative narrative about agriculture, especially agribusiness, believing its native, original impulse inevitably ripens into evil.

Many students arrive on the college campus holding distorted or preconceived notions about agriculture. Others arrive naive, but lack a filter that questions the attack they encounter on the integrity of farming and food production. Irregardless, the result is the same: Both seem unaware of the obvious benefits of a sound agricultural system, proven to strengthen the nation's financial position, feed its citizens, build up the human person – physically via nutrition and spiritually via the dignity of work – and ensure stewardship of the land and of the animals.

Their lack of felt agricultural knowledge focuses a broader lack of felt knowledge among students about the exceptional nature of the history of the United States. For example, a 2013 survey of University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M – a land-grant institution – by the Texas Association of Scholars and Center for the Study of the Curriculum at the National Association of Scholars, showed a high emphasis on race, class and gender assignments in the U.S. history courses required of all incoming freshman. Classic texts like Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the Gettysburg Address and the Mayflower Compact were seldom, if ever, assigned. Instead:

- Almost eight in 10 UT faculty members were high assigners of race, gender and class readings and special research interests in the topics
- Half of A&M faculty members were high assigners of race, gender and class readings, and 64 percent of them had special research interests in race, gender and class.

The demonstrable failure the Truth in Food College Initiative has uncovered of universities like these to present a broader picture of the story of American agriculture beyond the politicized sources representing resentment studies ultimately shortchanges students of the American story. It puts not only the exceptionalism of the food system at risk, it puts the nation's long tradition of shared civic literacy at real peril.

# Concupiscence



# Void of Passion and Purpose

The land-grant university system that eventually grew out of the Morrill Act is supposed to remain "nonpolitical," wrote Cornell Education Professor Scott Peters in the June 2002 edition of the *Journal of Extension*. "It should be above or apart from politics," Peters said. "Our work is education, many educators and administrators tell themselves, not politics." Peters captures an unstated hesitance among agricultural academicians uncovered by the Truth in Food College Initiative, that openly lobbying for agriculture and our modern food system will offend or make them appear biased.

A similar compunction toward "objectivity" doesn't seem to hobble the professors on the non-agriculture side of campuses. Michael Pollan, for instance, a professor at the University of California Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, openly invites Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, to address all his upper level writing classes. Why? What could possibly be Michael Pollan's goal if not to raise a future generation of Michael Pollans — students who one day might use their writing skill to affect change within the food system? Wikipedia actually lists Pollan's profession as "activist" before professor. Yet Pollan appears to suffer naught for his open advocacy against modern farming, rising to the ranks of the most celebrated author in food over the past decade, featured in movies, documentaries and talk shows.

In contrast, agriculture professors opt only "to expose kids to agriculture and let them make up their own minds." They hew carefully to formal vision set forth in the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's 2002 guidelines. The system, it recommended, should "address contemporary issues relevant to constituents residing within and beyond [the land-grant university's] traditional rural and agrarian heritage" by, among other recommendations, maintaining "academic neutrality." Neutrality turns agriculture mechanical, uninspiring and dispassionate.

Nowhere is ag's lack of passion more acutely felt than in young people. Youth are drawn to a passionate plea, and passion turns to action. Take Minnesota student Lindsay Guthrie, featured in the August 2012 issue of *Sustainability*. Guthrie joined her local campus group Food Truth to recruit for change toward a "just and sustainable" food system. "We have to construct a more formalized way to educate our campus, because we can't make the economic policy changes without the social shift as well," Guthrie says.

And despite ECOP's assurance neutrality would keep it relevant to those within the agrarian heritage, the lack of passion also explains why farm families are losing farming vocations. Sending a young person to a university where agriculture fails to enthuse or, worse, withers in an academic environment hostile to the formation of a farming vocation channels talented young men and women in pursuit of careers elsewhere, careers presented to them as "more meaningful."



Professors today source pop culture, either as foundation or as reinforcement to curriculum materials. These sources include *The New York Times*, *Food Inc.*, *King Corn*, *Fast Food Nation*, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Eating Animals*, *Animal Liberation*, Humane Society of the United States animal abuse videos and other materials hostile to the modern food system. In turn, publishers of these sources successfully target college campuses to sell their wares, book speaking engagements, recruit future personnel and influence future food-chain stakeholders.

Consider these Truth in Food findings:

- At one university, a business-school course in leadership and social issues derives its core curriculum from four books: *Fast Food Nation*, *Garbology*, *The Wal-Mart Effect* and *The Starbucks Experience*.
- In human health classes at a large land grant university, students sat through a series of animal abuse videos from the Humane Society of the United States, prompting one student to investigate how exactly farm animals were treated by attending an Animal Welfare Club meeting across campus.
- Farm Forward, a group devoted to "implementing innovative strategies to promote conscientious food choices, reduce farm animal suffering and advance sustainable agriculture" says a key part of its work is outreach to educators and students to raise awareness about the ethics of animal welfare.
- Recently, the *New York Times* ran an advertisement seeking an Account Manager of Education for the Midwest. This professional was to "sell the *New York Times* products and programs on college campuses; work with college decision-makers from deans to students to incorporate the *New York Times* resources into their curriculum and collaborate with The *New York Times* marketing department to build the brand within the campus community."

## The Force in the Course



Early efforts by the Truth in Food College Initiative brought about an over-the-transom e-mail from an FFA advisor in one of Missouri's larger rural school districts. He reported he had been contacted by the director of a new film documentary "American Meat" and asked if his FFA chapter would host a screening of the film. He was on the verge of accepting the request before Truth in Food helped warn him off cooperating with the decidedly anti-large-scale farming film. Upon further research Truth in Food ascertained the production company had similarly approached FFA chapters across the region to help buy credibility for the piece.

The American Meat incident illustrates another finding of the initiative: Activities of the anti-agriculture professors on campus often "set off the internal warning buzzer" of agricultural students, as the advisor so aptly phrased it. However, once they take the initiative to respond, students *do not know* where to go for accurate, balanced information about agriculture and the modern food system. As a result, they default to self-directed Internet searches and self discovery.

Anyone who has conducted such a search knows how detrimental results tend to be toward agriculture. For example, one young man in contact with Truth in Food investigated the innocuous term "red meat." Serving the phrase to Google search led immediately to Wikipedia. There, a fairly lengthy entry gave an official definition of red meat, a morsel about its nutritional significance, details about its role in the food pyramid – obviously dated, as the USDA transitioned away from the pyramid and toward the food plate more than three years ago. But then, Wikipedia's "encyclopedic" entry swiftly changes direction, spending the majority of its text detailing the negative health repercussions associated with red meat: Colo-rectal cancer – a rather graphic start – other cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, hypertension and arthritis.

Wikipedia's veiled attack on meat – something that has played and continues to play such a vital role in the development of the United States nutritionally, economically and even symbolically is not unique. Although every agricultural entity has online resources and some have even been cloaked in innocuous sounding terms such as "Sustainable Table," "Responsible Agriculture" or "Food Source," virtually no awareness of these tools exists among college students. Lacking no consensus for a single, reliable resource to support an argument in favor of agriculture, feeling isolated and disconnected from other students on their campus or another school who might share their sentiment, today's students feel a profound unmet need for not just resources, facts and figures to support their vocation, but also persuasive, well-reasoned arguments prepared to help them launch a meaningful counter-argument in support of the modern food system.

# Food (Information) Desert



# The Silencing of the Lambs

When Truth in Food first published its series "The Ten Reasons They Hate You So," a detailed look at the ideology driving modern academia's attack on the modern food system, many of the nearly quarter million views the series has eventually attracted originated – as might be expected – from those academics. What was unexpected was the degree of vitriol this class of "professional, balanced, critical thinkers" directed toward the piece: In just the first 48 hours after posting, series author Mike Smith was accused of being a propagandist, an uncritical thinker, polemical, hyperbolic, a screedist, twisted, nasty, a ninny, a political poser, an idiot, a twit, a dork, wacky, paranoid, delusional, afraid of change, a fiction writer, a paid shill, slanted, an anti-farmer, a ranter, and Glenn Beck.

As veterans of publishing, Truth in Food's principals are accustomed to such unfortunate intellectually bullying. However, imagine you're an 18-year-old freshman, dropped suddenly into a 400-seat "Navigating the Food System" lecture that begins, as does a recent National Geographic feature written by Jonathan Foley, a professor at the University of Minnesota and director of the Institute on the Environment:

*"Agriculture is among the greatest contributors to global warming, emitting more greenhouse gases than all our cars, trucks, trains, and airplanes combined – largely from methane released by cattle and rice farms, nitrous oxide from fertilized fields, and carbon dioxide from the cutting of rain forests to grow crops or raise livestock. Farming is the thirstiest user of our precious water supplies and a major polluter, as runoff from fertilizers and manure disrupts fragile lakes, rivers, and coastal ecosystems across the globe. Agriculture also accelerates the loss of biodiversity. As we've cleared areas of grassland and forest for farms, we've lost crucial habitat, making agriculture a major driver of wildlife extinction."*

Foley perfectly captures what students encounter from activist professors on a daily basis. His story is loaded with personally prejudiced, politically correct accusations. The young person wanting to mount a defense, even were she versed enough in just one of Foley's laundry list of accusations, could quickly be overwhelmed with the sheer volume of accusations. Responding intelligently requires in-depth research and a mature, multi-disciplined approach. Because most young people have not yet mastered this level of discourse, the professor is able to continue to propound his position through a kind of academic bullying. Silence results.

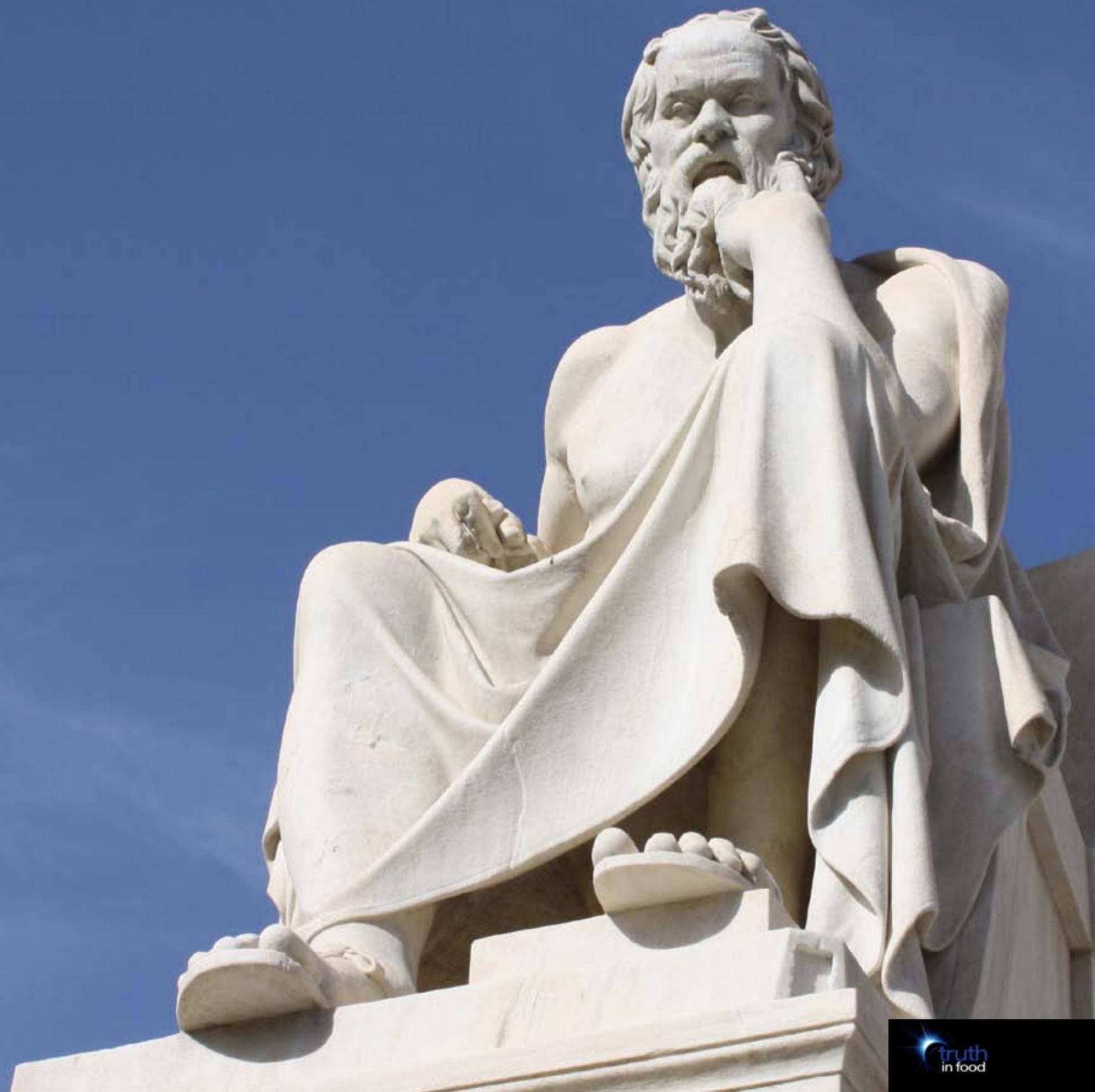


# Peer Reviewed: University Approved

**T**ruth in Food's College Initiative has uncovered a common pattern in which politically motivated professors can critically deconstruct the food system to gain rapid peer acceptance and esteem while simultaneously using the university brand to substantiate and catapult their findings. For example:

- Professor Kelly Brownell, formerly of Yale University and now the dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke, taught psychology, epidemiology and public health while at Yale. He also founded the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, becoming an outspoken critic of the food system and food marketing in the process. Featured in the documentary *Super Size Me*, Brownell openly advocates for new laws to protect the health of the overall citizenry, even if those laws infringe upon individual rights and freedoms. Because Brownell was associated with Yale, his findings were broadcast far and wide. Freely borrowing the powerful Yale brand, he became known as the expert on obesity.
- Similarly, eight books – two of which are about *pet* food – scores of articles, presentations, book chapters and forwards, a daily blog, a monthly column for the San Francisco Chronicle and more have created the aura for New York University microbiologist Marion Nestle as the go-to media source for not just human nutrition, but food policy, food sociology, the Farm Bill, ethical issues surrounding food and even food writing, subjects all of which she teaches at some time during the school year at her university, from which she borrows instant authentication.
- Food policy advocate Mark Winne last year joined the highly visible Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future as senior advisor to the center. Winne, a long-time advocate for local food-policy boards that work within city and county governments to control access to inner-city food systems to favor small, local, typically organic companies, was hired to help the Baltimore university "explore opportunities to diversify its engagement in local and state food policy work." Winne has in past books accused the U.S. food system of purposely starving poor, inner-city racial minorities because it is racist.

Such partnering between centers of higher learning and activist politics of resentment and aggrieved classes represents "part of a dangerous dumbing down of liberal education in which the pursuit of knowledge is replaced by frantic social programming and promotion of state programs," wrote CampusReform.org blogger Abigail Alger in 2009. New-age, food-critical academic "disciplines" like "fat studies," Alger argued, doesn't encourage open debate the university is traditionally prized for, but instead "begins with the end in mind," and brands as a bigot anyone who disagrees.



The history of agriculture, its role in the development of the world, its service to mankind and its lasting impact for the greater good have gone missing in the presentation of agriculture and agribusiness on our college campuses.

When one does hear of the marvels of agriculture, it's often only as a reluctant acknowledgment from an activist professor before he lists a litany of accusations or casts agriculture as "big business," "big food" or "powerful lobbyists." Agriculture as noble cause gets lost in the harangue.

Young people, whether they know it or not, often yearn for that cause.

Because they understand the young student's drive to make a difference, activist recruiters first present their cause and vision of the world, and only then do they recruit for a job. In contrast, agriculture and agribusiness talk solely about employment. In the end, students who could make a difference are never shown an image of the grandeur of agriculture and agricultural related work that inspires their imagination. Two examples illustrate this chasm between food activism as passionate cause vs. agriculture as simply a job:

Within the same week recently, both an email message and a Twitter message came from two different activists, both opposed to modern agriculture. The email came from Matthew Prescott, director of corporate outreach at the Humane Society of the United States. It was delivered at 2 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. In his quest to eliminate swine-farm gestation crates, Prescott has passionately and relentlessly targeted ag industry professionals. In 2013, on average he sent Truth in Food one personal email message every week. This included messages being sent on Christmas Eve and other holidays. If Prescott viewed his efforts as simply a job, his work would stop at 5 p.m. on Friday, or at least be interrupted for holidays. Instead, Prescott sees his job as a cause; therefore, it never really takes a break.

The Twitter message was from Alice Waters, the chef and organic food proponent who believes eating organic food is not only essential for taste but for better health of the individual and the planet. Her message read, "The Fate of Our Nation Rests on School Lunches." Now, if someone asked you about the fate of the United States would you reply "it rests on school lunches?" Yet this is the outlook of those opposed to modern agriculture and the modern food system. To overcome their desire to revolutionize our food system, it must be met with equal verve and a vision that sees agriculture as a great cause.

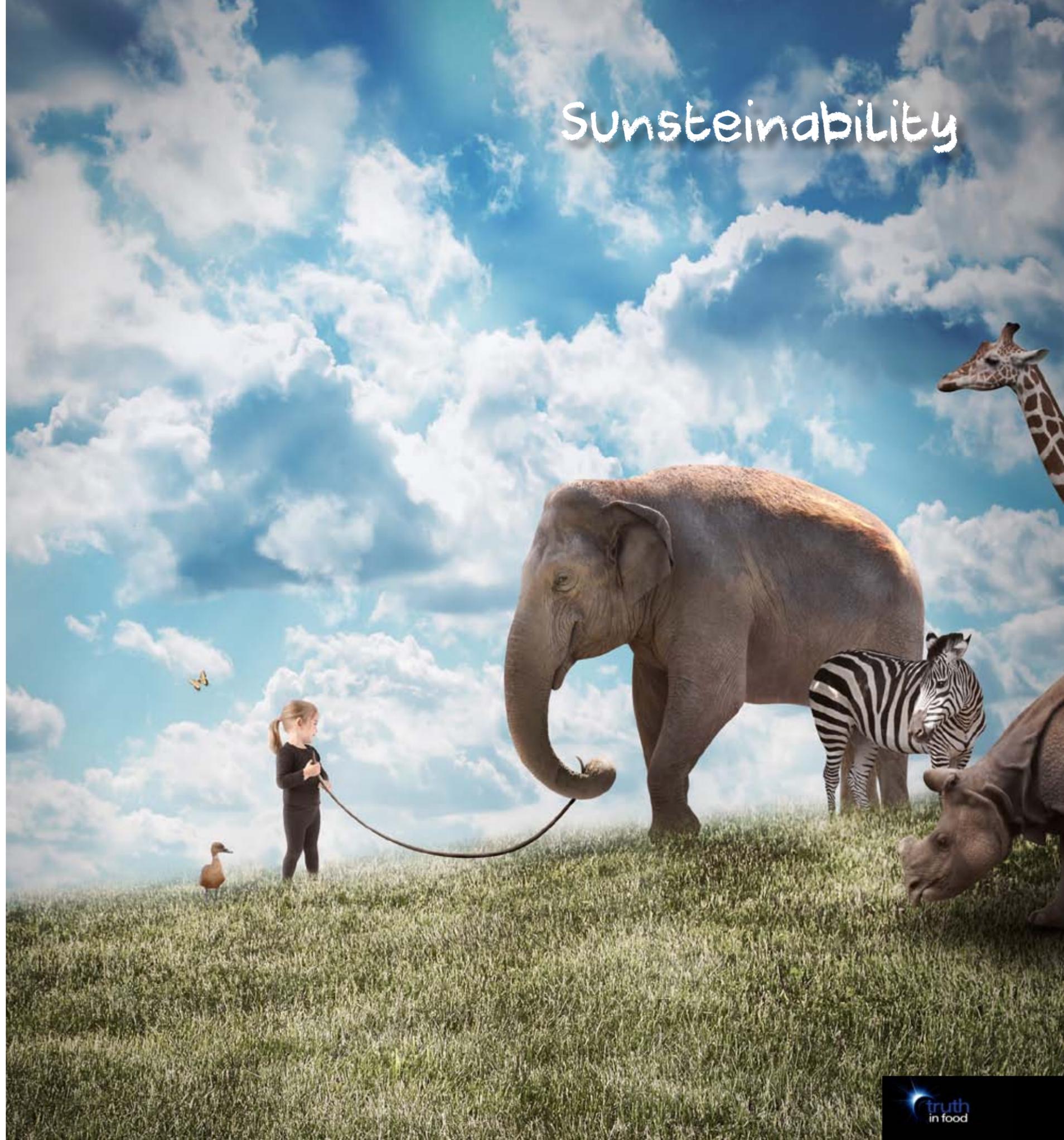
**B**efore Cass Sunstein served as regulatory czar in the Obama Administration, he taught law at Chicago University and co-authored a book with fellow professor Richard Thaler. *Nudge, Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* is all about "organizing the context in which people make decisions." By doing so, Sunstein believes you can subtly "nudge" people to come to the conclusions you want them to come to.

As a university professor, Sunstein knows well the power he possesses in molding impressionable young minds. Perhaps this is why he left the Obama Administration to return to teaching law at Harvard, with an emphasis on ethics in animal law. Sunstein holds the opinion that the best means to protect animals from abuse and cruelty is to grant animals status as persons.

The concept of nudging has been applied to the topic of sustainability for years. Youth have been taught about sustainability as early as elementary school. My own son's middle school was the first in the state designated a "green building" having met certain ecological standards and verified through a third-party auditing program. Lining the hallways of his school are plasma screens emblazoned with words such as "responsibility," "efficiency" and "conservation." This in turn not only became a key part of the curriculum incorporated into many classes but also a key part of how the school was positioned to the public.

Along with this nudging, youth have also seen an increase in society evaluating corporations based on the theory of the Triple Bottom Line. A 2013 Governance and Accountability Institute study found 72 percent of Standard & Poor's top 500 companies issued a report on their social responsibility and sustainability initiatives, up from 53 percent the year before. TBL holds a company accountable for its environmental, social and economic impact. This analysis is highly subjective and often pre-loaded with an indictment for modern agriculture so much so that if agriculture or those in agribusiness dare speak of sustainability their claims are viewed with intense skepticism if not outright disdain. At one university I addressed a Global Health class and three of the students were outspoken, dominating the discussion and seething with condemnation for modern day agriculture and the food system. Their criticisms ranged from GMOs to food deserts to global warming to petroleum-dependent farming to profit-hungry, unfeeling corporations preying upon consumers rather than serving them. It seems agribusiness couldn't possibly be sustainable even if objective science declared them so.

# Sunsteinability





The Truth in Food College Initiative needs your support.  
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