Changing what college students eat, one dining hall at a time

By TOVIN LAPAN

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SANTA CRUZ -- If Tim Galarneau used his consensus-building skills in Washington, D.C., a federal debt ceiling deal would probably have been done weeks ago.

The food systems working group coordinator for UC Santa Cruz's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems has a history, dating back to his time as a UCSC student, of getting things done and rallying support for initiatives from disparate groups.

"Tim has a rare combination of being a visionary and also a mover and shaker," CASFS director Patricia Allen said. "He pulls people together in a very effective way."

Galarneau, who has championed several projects to make the UCSC campus and the UC system in general more sustainable, recently received the 2011 UC Sustainability Champion Award.

One of his first achievements at UCSC, once he arrived as a transfer student from Santa Barbara City College in 2002, was to convince students to approve an additional fee that would go toward sustainable food, health and wellness initiatives. Then he convinced them to double it, raising $250,000 per year.

"Money speaks, and the students showed their commitment," the goateed 32-year-old with a blonde ponytail said. "By investing student funds, we were able to leverage much more university money."

AN EARLY VICTORY

Galarneau, who majored in community studies and psychology at UCSC, also immediately got involved with the nascent Students for Organic Solutions.

The group led a campaign against Sodexo Marriott Food Services, which provided UCSC's dining services at the time, because it was resistant to working with students on using locally sourced organic products. At the same time a student group organizing around labor issues raised concerns that the food service workers earned lower wages than other comparable positions on campus and had no access to health care through their jobs.

On Valentine's Day 2003, a coalition of student groups and workers marched on the chancellor's office and helped convinced the school to bring its dining hall management in-house.

That was the first step in what has been an overhaul of the UCSC dining system, which Galarneau later took to all UC campuses.

While the protest was successful, Galarneau typically works behind the scenes to bring together stakeholders to accomplish common goals.
"I'd rather work through collaboration than confrontation," he said.

Instead of picketing in Quarry Plaza, Galarneau did a survey of students to show they were interested in food system issues and would spend their own money to support changes on campus. When he later sought to take his programs to all UC campuses he presented the UC Regents with thousands of postcards from UC students and staff who supported the initiative.

UCSC dining halls ditched serving trays, saving 1 million gallons of water a year and reducing waste by 38 percent annually, according to Galarneau.

TAKING REAL FOOD’ GLOBAL

After graduating from UCSC in 2005 Galarneau started working in CASFS as assistant specialist for food systems education.

As part of the UC-wide sustainable food plan championed by Galarneau, all UC campuses have set a goal of using 20 percent ‘real food,’ defined as local/community-based, fair, ecologically sound, and humane.

Galarneau says UCSC is well ahead of schedule, already at 17 percent, and expects all UC campuses to get to 20 percent in the next couple years.

The Real Food Challenge, co-founded by Galarneau in 2008, is a national campaign to convince 1,000 universities and colleges to buy 20 percent of their food from sustainable sources by 2020, which would shift $1 billion to real food within the next decade. Schools in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and South Africa are also getting involved.

"UCSC has become the testing lab for sustainable food initiatives, and I think that’s really exciting," he said.

THE NEXT GENERATION

Galarneau is loath to rest on his laurels, always looking ahead.

"I've never taken the time to sit back and look at what's been accomplished, there's always the next thing," he said. "I see myself as a dot connector."

With two 11-month-old twin boys, he does not lack for inspiration.

Galarneau grew up just north of Albany, N.Y., in a family that kept a garden and cooked communal dinners, but also liked Velveeta and Hamburger Helper. It wasn't until he visited his uncle's ranch in Santa Ynez that he saw the value and enjoyment that could be reaped from local, sustainably produced ingredients.

"I was blown away by the vivaciousness, color and diversity of the products," he said about his time living in a barn on the ranch and learning about social justice advocates from a cowboy named Rip.

When asked what he would like UCSC food services to look like when his children are college age, Galarneau took a broader view.
"I want them to be exposed to these issues, and get education on food systems before they ever get to college," he said. "My parents were wonderful, loving people, but they just didn't think about what incorporating all these processed foods into our diets meant."

True to his word, Galarneau helped launch the Central Coast School Food Alliance, which aims to provide universal access to nutritious, locally prepared school food to all Santa Cruz County kindergarten through sixth-graders.

He still has ambitious goals for UCSC though, the campus' own sustainability plan calls for using 75 percent real food by 2020.