PLANT-BASED UNIVERSITIES MOTION

Proposal Title: For catering to be plant-based by default to tackle the climate and ecological crises

Who are we?

Plant-Based Universities (PBU) is a student-led campaign calling on universities to transition in a **just and sustainable** way to **plant-based catering** in order to address the climate and ecological crises. Having started in UCL, KCL and Warwick in 2021, there are now 80 campaigns across the UK and Europe. Students at 24 universities, including UCL, Cambridge and Queen Mary, have already voted in favour of plant-based catering on campus in landmark Students' Union votes and referendums, recognising that we cannot reach climate targets without **institutional** shifts like these. The campaign has been endorsed by over 1000 academics and notable people, including the Co-Executive Directors of Greenpeace, leader of the Green Party and UoS alumnus and broadcaster, Chris Packham, in an open letter to University Chancellors and catering managers at the end of 2023.

A SUSU petition to adopt plant-based by default at SUSU and the University was launched on the 2nd February 2026 and in just 7 days, the petition obtained **over 950 signatures**, showing huge student support for this important change on campus. As well as this, **over 40 academics** signed a separate petition in favour of transitioning to plant-based catering.

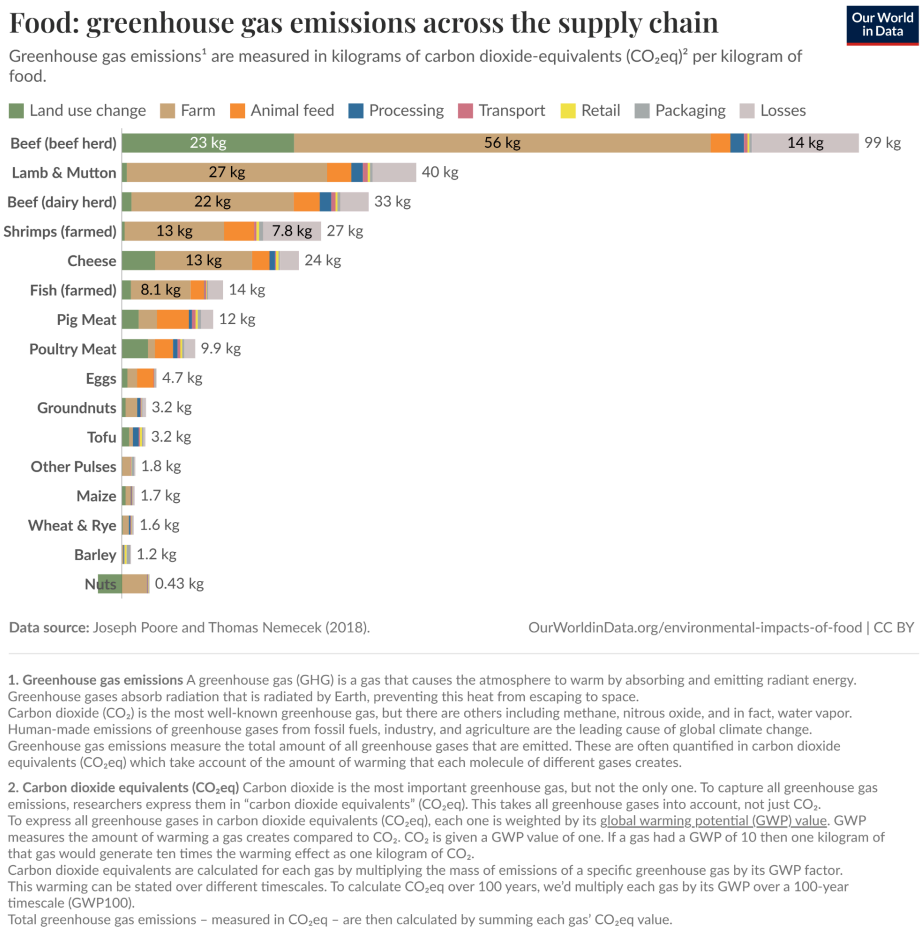
Why should catering be plant-based by default?

Impact of Animal Agriculture on our Planet

Man-made climate change is now scientific consensus, as is the necessity of immediate action. Animal agriculture constitutes between **12-19% of total global emissions** [1-3], roughly on par with all of transport combined. This is such a high level that research carried out at the University of Oxford and Stanford University in 2020 found that even if we moved completely away from fossil fuels right now, we would not stop global warming [4]. This is because of the emissions that would remain from animal agriculture. However, they found that if we moved away from fossil fuels and away from animal agriculture and towards a **plant-based food system, this can stop global warming**. Therefore, there is a necessity to move away from this industry if we want to combat the devastating impact that global warming is having and will have on our planet.

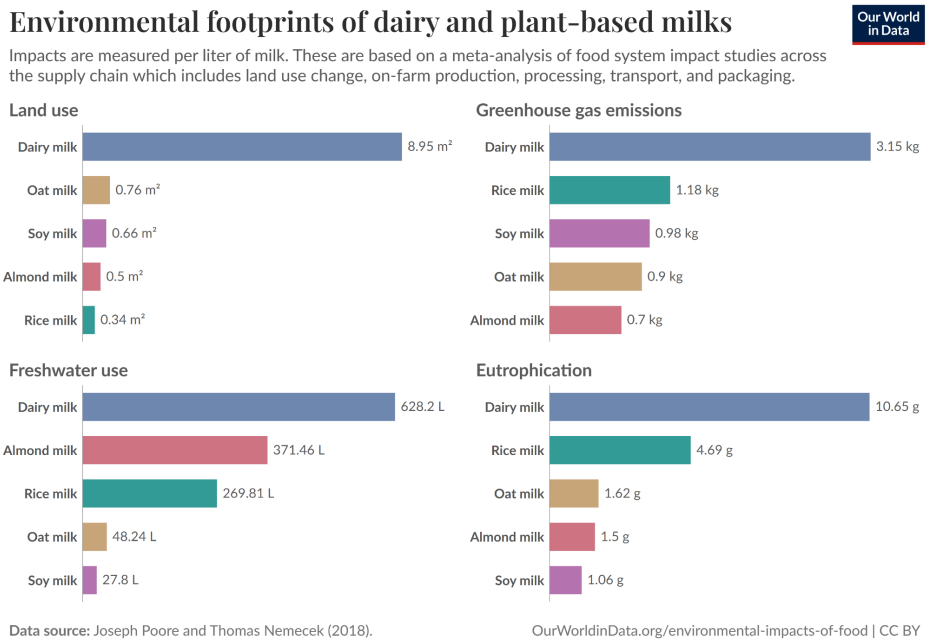
Studies from the University of Oxford in 2018 and 2023 found that if we transitioned to a plant-based food system, **food-related greenhouse gas emissions would decrease by 49%, we would free up 76% of the land** currently used to produce food [5] and **air pollution from ammonia and methane would decrease by 84-86%** [6]. The vast area of land that would be freed up could be reforested to increase carbon capture. Research has found that if we did this, **we could sequester an amount of carbon equivalent to about half of current global emissions** [7]. If 16 major crops were instead used directly for human consumption (i.e. not grown and fed to farm animals), this would **increase the amount of global food calories by 49%** [8].

Below are graphs which compare the environmental impact from different protein sources and different milks.



1. Greenhouse gas emissions A greenhouse gas (GHG) is a gas that causes the atmosphere to warm by absorbing and emitting radiant energy. Greenhouse gases absorb radiation that is radiated by Earth, preventing this heat from escaping to space.
Carbon dioxide (CO_2) is the most well-known greenhouse gas, but there are others including methane, nitrous oxide, and in fact, water vapor. Human-made emissions of greenhouse gases from fossil fuels, industry, and agriculture are the leading cause of global climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions measure the total amount of all greenhouse gases that are emitted. These are often quantified in carbon dioxide equivalents (CO_2eq) which take account of the amount of warming that each molecule of different gases creates.

2. Carbon dioxide equivalents (CO_2eq) Carbon dioxide is the most important greenhouse gas, but not the only one. To capture all greenhouse gas emissions, researchers express them in "carbon dioxide equivalents" (CO_2eq). This takes all greenhouse gases into account, not just CO_2.
To express all greenhouse gases in carbon dioxide equivalents (CO_2eq), each one is weighted by its global warming potential (GWP) value. GWP measures the amount of warming a gas creates compared to CO_2. CO_2 is given a GWP value of one. If a gas had a GWP of 10 then one kilogram of that gas would generate ten times the warming effect as one kilogram of CO_2.
Carbon dioxide equivalents are calculated for each gas by multiplying the mass of emissions of a specific greenhouse gas by its GWP factor. This warming can be stated over different timescales. To calculate CO_2eq over 100 years, we'd multiply each gas by its GWP over a 100-year timescale (GWP100).
Total greenhouse gas emissions – measured in CO_2eq – are then calculated by summing each gas' CO_2eq value.



As well as preventing us from stopping global warming, animal agriculture is a leading cause of ecological destruction across the globe. It is the primary driver of **deforestation** [9], which is the leading cause of habitat destruction, with trees being cut down to make way for grazing animals and growing feed for animals. This is destroying populations of wild animals and increasing the threat of extinction. As well as this, fishing is the **main cause of the decimation of marine species populations** [10] and about **70% of macroplastics** (plastic greater than 20cm) in the ocean come from fishing equipment [11].

Animal agriculture requires **enormous amounts of water** [12] compared to that needed by plant-based agriculture. It also causes a large amount of **water pollution** due to the runoff of animal waste [13].

In 2006, the UN stated “The livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global. The findings of this report suggest that it should be a major policy focus when dealing with problems of land degradation, climate change and air pollution, water shortage and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity” [14]. In 2010, they stated that a global shift towards a plant-based diet is vital to save the world from hunger, fuel poverty and the worst impacts of climate change [15].

Impact on Public Health

Animal agriculture is also behind some of the biggest health threats that we are facing. **36% of emerging zoonotic diseases** [16] are associated with animal agriculture, due to the extremely unsanitary conditions of holding large numbers of animals together in close proximity. The

Spanish flu likely originated from transmission from birds to humans, Covid may have originated at a wet market, the 2009 swine flu epidemic arose from pigs and mad cow disease originated in cattle farms in the UK [17-20]. Animals are housed at high densities, often kept in conditions with poor ventilation and surrounded by their own faeces. These conditions create breeding grounds for viral and bacterial pathogens that can lead to mutation and zoonotic spillover [21]. These industries massively increase the chances of there being another pandemic, which might be far more deadly.

Animal agriculture is responsible for **70% of the world's antibiotics use** [22] (0.5% of antibiotics used in the US are used in plant-based farming [23]), making it a leading cause of antimicrobial resistance [24]. Last year, over 1 million people died globally due to antimicrobial resistant infections. Leading researchers have found that drug resistant infections could cause 10 million people to die each year by 2050 [25].

Impact of Climate Change

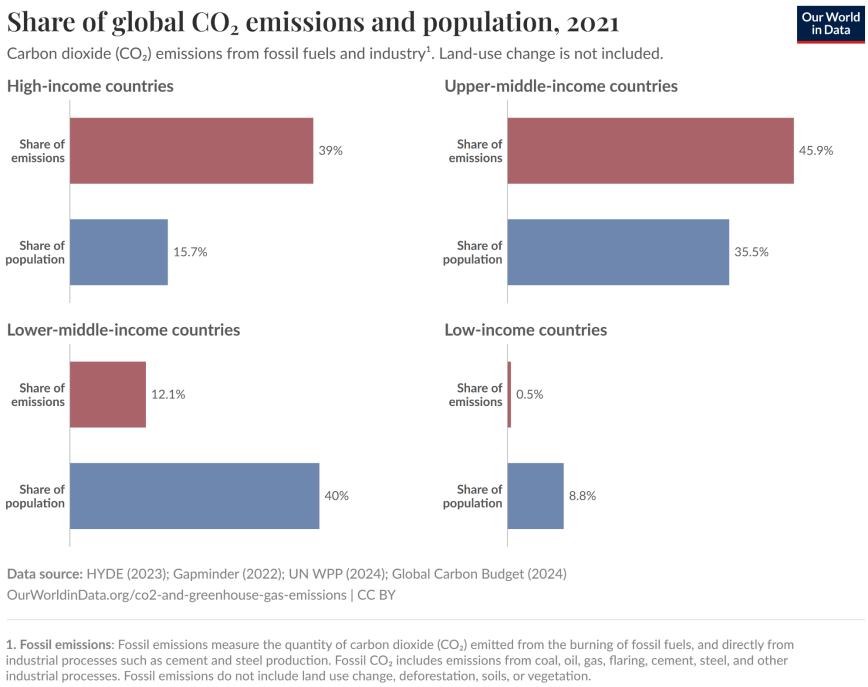
In terms of the climate crisis, if we don't change, we will face even more devastating consequences, such as **droughts, storms, rising oceans, loss of species, food shortages, poverty, displacement and more**.

Right now, the world's most vulnerable people are already facing extreme hardship due to climate change. Climate change has **ramped up extreme weather events**, such as cyclones, in the Pacific and Caribbean as well as **intensifying droughts**. **Rising sea levels** have also made the effects of king tides worse for Small Island Developing States. For low-lying nations like Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, rising sea levels threaten their very existence, as they are only about six feet above sea level. It is projected that **95% of the island of Tuvalu will be flooded by 2100** if we take no action.

In parts of Africa, where 32 of the world's 48 least developed countries are located, the IPCC have said that **heavy rainfall and flooding are projected to intensify**, as well as **extreme drought** in southwest Africa [26].

Courtenay Rattray, the High Representative of the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States has said "The world's most vulnerable nations are already on the frontline of the climate crisis. Not only do they contribute the least to carbon emissions, but they continue to suffer disproportionately. Let's heed the science and make sure that… we take the decisive action that's needed to change course for the sake of the most vulnerable, and the world."

A 2022 IPCC report [27] stated that "Existing vulnerabilities and inequalities intensify with adverse impacts of climate change. These impacts disproportionately affect marginalised groups, amplifying inequalities and undermining sustainable development across all regions".



However, it is not the most vulnerable who are the drivers of climate change, it is wealthy nations who emit the vast majority of emissions. The **average person in a high-income country emits more than 30 times as much as the average person in a low-income country**. High and upper-middle income countries emit over **80% of the world's CO2**. Whereas lower-middle and low-income countries emit less than 20%. In low-income countries, in particular, their share of the population is about 8.8%, yet they only contribute to 0.5% of total global emissions [28]. Developed nations are the main cause of climate change, yet **it is developing countries who are being and will be most impacted by the effects of climate change**. To protect future generations of people across the world, we must transition away from animal agriculture.

Why should the University and Students' Union change?

The reason we are asking the Students' Union and University to move towards plant-based catering is two-fold. One, moving towards plant-based catering means that the University and Students' Union can **decrease their scope 3 emissions**, without a requirement for investment or technological advancements, which are often required for emissions reductions. Second, universities hold a lot of power in terms of the **influence that they have on society**. When universities produce research which says that we need to move to a plant-based food system to deal with the climate and ecological crises, but continues to contribute to animal agriculture, it sends the wrong message to society, which is that there is no need to change. But if the university acts upon this research, and becomes a leader in sustainable food, this will set an example that will show governments, corporations and other institutions the necessity of

transitioning to a plant-based food system. The university has a responsibility to be a leader in sustainability and set a standard that will secure our future.

As well as addressing the climate and ecological crises, by adding more plant-based options to the menu, the menus would become much more inclusive. Plant-based meals eliminate 4 of the most common allergens in Europe (dairy, eggs, fish and shellfish), would increase the provision of Halal and Kosher options, as well as aligning with the principle of ahimsa promoted by Dharmic religions, and plant-based food has been found to cost 30% less on average to produce than animal-based meals, so this could allow for more affordable meals on campus (more information in the next section).

This transition is supported by over **40 academics** at the university, and here are some of the statements given by those academics in support of this transition, including from the Director of the Sustainability and Resilience Institute.

Every year, over 2.5 million students across the UK enrol in university, with the promise that this is an investment in their future. Just as much as these students need their degrees, they need a healthy world to live in, which, as an institution, the University can help guarantee. To allow hope for this generation and generations to come, universities must do what universities do best and ***invest in the future***, which, by and large, means *divesting* from unsustainable practices.

What would we like the Students' Union to do?

Proposal

- For the catering outlets of the Students' Union, which includes The Stag's, The Bridge, Below Deck and fresh food in The Shop[1] to adopt plant-based by default[2] by the start of the 2026/27 academic year, implement an educational campaign on the impact of animal agriculture on the planet and the benefits of a plant-based food system and work with Plant-Based Universities to lobby the University to adopt plant-based by default in their catering outlets.

Our proposals consider*:*

1. **Allergies and intolerances**: Plant-based food cuts out 4 of the most common allergens in Europe (milk, eggs, fish and shellfish) [29]. As this policy will increase the amount of plant-based options on the menu, this will make the menu much more inclusive for those with allergies and intolerances.

[1] For food in The Shop, this proposal applies to wraps, sandwiches, salads, pastries, baked goods and hot food. SUSU Support for All is not included in this proposal.
[2] Plant-based by default: For each animal-based meal on the menu, there is a plant-based option, which is the default option. It will state clearly that it is plant-based in its description and will display a vegan symbol. Underneath the item, it would say "*animal-based option* is available on request" or similar. For example, an item on the may be a "Chickpea Curry" which would display a vegan symbol beside it. Underneath, it could say "Chicken is available on request".

Additionally, there are over 170 species of plants that are cultivated at a large scale on Earth (out of 30,000 edible plant species). This broad range of plant-based food can cater for those with allergies and intolerances. What is important is that the Students' Union makes use of this broad range of plant-based food to cater for those with allergies and intolerances. A common concern around plant-based diets is the presence of FODMAPs in plant-based foods, which negatively impact individuals with digestive illnesses like Crohn's disease or IBS. However, there are many plant-based foods which are suitable for a low FODMAP diet. A guide to making low FODMAP plant-based food can be found here.

To further cater for allergies, PBU works with the company Eat Curious, who focus on making healthy, allergen-free food (food which eliminates all 14 of the regulated allergens) and they can provide training for chefs and taster sessions.

2. **Other dietary requirements**: There is a range of dietary requirements outside of allergies and intolerances, such as ARFID and other eating disorders, that some students may have. It is important to understand that people with these requirements are not a monolith, and needs and requirements for food will vary drastically between individuals. What this means is that our approach will engage significantly with these individuals, and it is imperative that we, Plant-Based Universities, the Students' Union, and the University listen to them articulate their needs, and use that information to inform catering managers about formulating menus and ordering in products.

   Should the proposal be accepted, we want there to be a point of communication to the Students' Union, University and the PBU team through emails, a link on the SUSU website or regular meetings. Communication is essential and that is one of the crucial factors that will ensure that catering on campus can become more inclusive. We have already had very positive discussions with NDDSoc and want to continue these conversations and conversations with any student who believes their dietary requirements are not being catered for. With this approach and by increasing the amount of options on the menu, SUSU and the University can cater for more students than are currently catered for. We lead this campaign with an emphasis on inclusivity, hence, the campaign's focus is on institutional change rather than individual change.

3. **Health:** The British and American dietetic associations have both conclusively determined, based on a systematic review of the literature, that an appropriately-planned plant-based diet is healthy for all stages of life, including infancy, childhood, adolescence, pregnancy and athletes [30,31]. Plant-based diets can also have significant health benefits. It is associated with a lower risk of several chronic conditions, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity and certain types of cancer [32-36]. The high fibre content in plant-based foods enhances metabolic health, helps in maintaining a healthy weight and promotes gut health.

   Statement from Prof. Shireen Kassam, based at University of Winchester, who is the founding director of Plant-Based Health Professionals, a group of health professionals who are experts on plant-based nutrition.

4. **Cost of living and class inequality**: According to an Oxford-Martin School research study, plant-based diets are the most affordable and reduce food costs by up to one third in high-income countries [37]. Research published by the Bryant Research group in October, found that the cost of making plant-based meals, on average, is 30% cheaper than meat-based meals and 21% cheaper than vegetarian meals [38]. We believe catering outlets should reflect this and PBU can coordinate assistance from organisations who can train chefs to make affordable plant-based meals. There are also examples from other universities which the University can follow, such as a food stall at Bristol which provides a £1 soup and £2 hot meal (e.g. curry or stew) on campus, which varies each day and is very popular with students.

   As we have noted, our proposal to adopt plant-based by default does *not* apply to SUSU Support For All, the Student Union's cost of living scheme that provides free food for any individuals who need it.

5. **Financial viability**: As this policy increases the amount of options on the menu and more students will now be catered for, there is reason to expect that sales will increase. The current literature and case studies also strongly support the financial viability of this change. Menus of Change is a university collective which is working to support universities to move towards sustainable catering. King's College London is a part of this and they have 70% plant-based options across all their menus at their 18 catering outlets. That a large university with many catering facilities can implement this shows the financial viability of moving towards plant-based. Research carried out by Sodexo, one of the largest food service providers across the globe, found that when plant-based options are the default, 81% of students choose plant-based [39]. This means that when plant-based food is the norm, the vast majority of students choose plant-based food. Another study carried out at the University of Cambridge found that doubling meat-free options increased the proportion of plant-based purchases by between 40-80%, without affecting overall food sales [40].

6. **Culture**: Plant-based food is a part of all cultures and with this policy, the plant-based defaults would just have the animal products replaced by appropriate plant-based alternatives that would be used in that culture's dish. Communication with plant-based restaurants of other cultures (or restaurants with plant-based options) can provide assistance with any changes if required. None of the major world religions mandate the consumption of animal products and the increase in plant-based options would improve the provision of Halal and Kosher options, as well as aligning with the principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) promoted by Dharmic religions, which includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism and thus, increasing the inclusivity of the menus.

   Statement from Dr. Ellie Atayee Bennett, who obtained a PhD and did postdoctoral research at UoS, on plant-based diets within Abrahamic faiths.

7. **Student support:** In just 7 days, the petition to adopt plant-based by default received over 950 signatures, with the vast majority of students we spoke to being in favour of

plant-based by default. This shows a very strong mandate from students to make this necessary change to address the climate and ecological crisis.

As mentioned before, this policy increases the range of options on the menu, so people of different faiths and people with allergies, intolerances or other dietary requirements and people who want to choose sustainable meals will have more options on the menu which they can eat. Based on the University of Cambridge and Sodexo research mentioned earlier and from our conversations during outreach, we believe that students will choose more sustainable meals when they have more of those options.

8. **Personal choice**: This motion calls for an increase in options on the menu and does not remove any options, so students can still purchase animal-based options. This policy simply increases the amount of sustainable meals and encourages more sustainable choices. Our campaign is calling for *institutional* change, not individual change. This policy is about getting the University to align its actions with its research so that it can reduce emissions and have a positive societal impact in addressing the climate crisis.

How will we achieve plant-based by default catering?

The Plant-Based Universities team will actively work with SUSU and the University to progress this policy and implement the changes. As well as this, PBU can coordinate assistance from **Forward Food**, who can do menu consultancy, calculate the carbon emissions of items on the menu and provide **free training for chefs** on how to make plant-based meals that could be added to the menus. PBU also has affiliations with other plant-based organisations such as **Made in Hackney** and **Eat Curious**, who are also able to provide cooking workshops for students and staff on campus, engaging the community with easy, affordable, plant-based cuisine. We also want to do **taster sessions** and encourage people to try the new options on the menu.

If we consider SUSU menus, for the Redbrick Kitchen menu, the change to plant-based by default consists of adding in 2 plant-based options as defaults. For the Stag's Pizza menu, this change would mean adding 3 plant-based options to the menu. For the Bridge menu, this change would mean adding 5 plant-based options to the menu. This corresponds to a total of 10 additions in SUSU restaurants. 8 of these additions correspond to a simple change of toppings or fillings. This would mean an average of 1.5 additions to the menus each month until plant-based by default is implemented by the next academic year.

We have already begun conversations with the University about moving towards plant-based catering, at both their public events and meetings. These discussions included the Sustainability Implementation Group (SIG) (who plan and implement sustainability policies at the University), University catering managers and the Senior Vice-President of the University, who leads the sustainability strategy. Food is now a consideration on the University's sustainability policy, following these discussions. They will be forming a plan to reduce emissions related to

procurement later this year and we will be meeting with them to make moving to plant-based by default a part of this plan.

Furthermore, we also want to run an **educational campaign** to make people more aware of the impact of animal agriculture on the planet. We plan to invite experts, such as researchers and public figures, who work in this area. We will continue to do regular outreach on campus and would like to collaborate with the Students' Union, by doing events such as the taster sessions mentioned earlier, cooking classes, volunteering with Veg-Out at October Books, documentary screenings and having a section on the SUSU website highlighting the impact of animal agriculture and the benefits of plant-based catering.

Conclusion

The information presented establishes a clear conclusion: we must begin the transition to a plant-based catering system. We have existed with the looming catastrophes of climate breakdown and ecological destruction for decades now, and it is time that institutional change is introduced. The facts demonstrate the detrimental impacts of animal agriculture and the urgency of transitioning to a plant-based food system. If we do not change, there will be dire consequences, but by making this positive change, we can address some of the biggest issues facing humanity today and safeguard our future for generations to come, while also making catering on campus more inclusive and more affordable.

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