

Just say no to Sodexo



Will Chaney

As sophomore Ben Wallis laid out in last week's letter to the editor, the Sodexo corporation engages in many morally questionable business practices, to put it politely. It fires workers who try to unionize, operates and profits from five private prisons, and pays very low wages to its employees, many of whom rely on federal assistance despite working full time. Truman has not always had Sodexo and does not need its business to provide food. Our campus would improve if we let our contract with Sodexo expire in 2021 and transition to in-sourced food production from Adair County, run either by Truman State or a local entity that is democratically accountable to the community.

First, I would like to clarify I am not criticizing the Sodexo workers or management that staff Truman's dining halls. They do a very good job with the resources they are given and are not at all responsible for Sodexo's prison operations and union busting. If we transition to an in-sourced system, I would hope many of the same individuals would be rehired and offer their experience for the creation of a new system.

I don't think Sodexo is run by bad people, nor is its fundamental problem the fact that it is a large, multinational organization. The issue is that it is organized as a capitalist enterprise where all of its operational decisions — what, how and where to produce — are made by only 14 individuals who sit on its board of directors. There is no meaningful input allowed from employees or customers, who must live with the consequences of the board's decisions. The most important consideration the board takes is not food quality, worker welfare or sustainability, but rather how much profit the company can earn. When Sodexo makes decisions that appear to show concern for the Truman community's well-being, like the equal treatment of men and women in the workforce, promoting diversity or using cage-free eggs, it is just reacting to public pressures to maintain its image. We should not be deceived into thinking Sodexo is inherently good or bad, but instead recognize its capitalist structure allows a small group of people to make all of its decisions based on profit calculations, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Sodexo's record, however, reveals it makes bad decisions often, many of which do not have our interests at heart.

Much of the money students spend on meal plans flows out of our community and becomes the property of people who have no interest in Kirksville or Truman. One portion of this money is Sodexo's operating profit, which last year was \$1.3 billion, according to a November 2015 Market Watch article. The board of directors decides how to spend this money, so it is no surprise little is spent on projects or investments that benefit us. There are no sustainable Sodexo gardens or Sodexo-sponsored cooking classes, for example. Additionally, we pay for overhead costs that come with large multinational corporations, such as transportation costs, a substantial bureaucracy, an elite legal team, marketing propaganda, and the large salaries and bonuses of top managers in other countries. Furthermore, some of our money ends up funding improvements for Sodexo's less legitimate operations, like its five private prisons, all without our knowledge. If Truman ran its own food service program, these costs would evaporate and the goal would change from making money to improving the community.

Other universities have divested from food providers like Sodexo, and this is especially possible given Truman's location. For example, Bowdoin College operates on-campus gardens, has a food cooperative and gets 34 percent of its food from local producers, according to an August 2015 Eco Watch article and Bowdoin's food co-op Facebook page. Oberlin College began its locally sourced food initiative in 2001 and gradually increased the amount of locally grown food in its dining halls from 5 percent to 27 percent, according to the same article. While these universities' meal plans are about double what we pay now, the total cost of attendance is about four times that of Truman, according to their respective websites. The University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, a public university comparable to Truman, has 25 percent of its food grown locally and offers meal plans closer to what we are used to paying, according to the same article and the University of Illinois website. There is not enough information available to conclude that in-sourced dining services would be more or less expensive than Sodexo, but other colleges have proven such a transition is possible.

Truman is conveniently located in a very agricultural part of the world. Adair County farmers produce many different kinds of foodstuff, including grass-fed meats, cheese, honey, and various fruits and vegetables, according to the Northeast Missouri Action and Compassion Team farmer directory. If we start transitioning now and work until Sodexo's contract expires, Truman has enough time to discuss these options with Adair County's farmers. By using local resources, we would stimulate the local economy and create a tighter bond between Truman and Kirksville. Our money would flow into our community instead of undesignated places overseas.

Will Chaney is a sophomore economics major from Bridgeton, Mo.



What businesses would you like to see come to Kirksville?



Talie Cederwall
Freshman

Anything, please God!



Mike Sit
Junior

Chipotle, and maybe an outdoor shop. I think that's it.



Kaylea Bork
Senior

That's a hard one. I'm pretty happy with what's here already, more food options would be nice.



Jordan Waddle
Freshman

I'd like to see more local foods, I know Adair County has a lot of resources and I think that we should use those to uplift the community.



Allison Kickham
Senior

I'd like to see more clothing and retail stores, and maybe a few more restaurants and coffee shops.



Ian Siercks
Junior

I think it's great we're getting a Chick Fil' A in the Sub, that's awesome. Other than that, I'd be cool with more restaurants like maybe a Steak 'n' Shake or maybe some nicer restaurants as well.



Don't say no to Sodexo



Holly Fisher

The general attitude of Truman State students towards Sodexo is pretty negative. The Index received a letter last week from sophomore Ben Wallis to raise awareness about Sodexo's multiple discrepancies and ask students to voice these issues to Truman. Will Chaney argues a similar point in his column, saying Truman needs to look into alternatives to Sodexo. Now, I do not think Sodexo is a model company, but I certainly don't believe it's as bad we make it out to be. Sodexo does a lot of good, and we need to take that into consideration.

The two points people make the most are Sodexo's relationship with unions and its pay rates. Much of this information comes from a TransAfrica Forum that documents Sodexo labor abuses in five separate countries. What they don't tell you is Danny Glover, the TransAfrica Forum board member behind the report, previously was arrested at a Sodexo protest and has been accused of actively participating in a smear campaign against Sodexo with the Service Employees International Union, according to a January 2011 Washington Post article.

The SEIU went so over the top attacking Sodexo it later was sued for "threatening employees" and "damaging company property, engaging in illegal tactics to steer business away from Sodexo and attempting to publicly tarnish its reputation," according to a March 2011 Reuters article.

So yes, Sodexo had some shady issues with unions, and yes, it doesn't always pay its workers much higher than minimum wage. However, a lot of this info is presented as a form of anti-Sodexo propaganda. Sodexo has worked with its employees through more than 300 collective bargaining agreements and labor unions in the U.S. alone, according to Sodexo's website, and companies like McDonalds are just as guilty of paying workers minimum wage. I wasn't lying when I said Sodexo does a lot of good, and when we buy into the propaganda, we miss half of the story.

For instance, no one really talks about how Sodexo has been in the top five of DiversityInc's Top 50 Companies for Diversity list for the last six years and was in the top 20 during the four years before that. Rohini Anand, Sodexo's Global Chief Diversity Officer, has actually been

recognized for her diversity leadership by DiversityInc and Diversity Women, among others, and in 2014, her company model for Sodexo was used by DiversityInc to help other companies improve their diversity programs.

Sodexo has taken huge steps in its commitment to animal welfare. In February 2015, Sodexo produced a news release with its promise to eliminate veal from its supply by 2017 and source all of its eggs from cage-free hens by 2020. Deborah Hecker, Sodexo sustainability and corporate social responsibility vice president, said Sodexo spends nearly \$900 million annually on animal proteins and therefore "has established sustainable purchasing practices with suppliers that drive humane treatment of animals," according to the same news release.

Additionally, the Sodexo Foundation set up the Stop Hunger initiative. Its mission is to end starvation and hunger in the U.S. and around the world. The Sodexo Foundation created the Campus Kitchens Project and the Backpack Food Program, along with a number of scholarships, to raise awareness about people who go hungry and help kids who often go without meals.

Sodexo also started sourcing its foods from local farmers in the northeastern U.S. and plans to expand that process to all of its regions. Even now, Lora Cunningham, Truman's dining services general manager, is pushing for the use of local foods here at Truman, according to a February 2016 Index article. As Chaney argues, using Sodexo means the community loses a lot of economic benefits. Using local food provides some of those benefits, and Sodexo provides a large number of jobs to Kirksville and the surrounding area. Sodexo is a huge global company, but that doesn't mean it is purposely going to harm individual communities for the sake of profit. It's in Sodexo's best interest to help individual communities, and that is exactly what the company strives to do. Sodexo has been a part of some pretty awesome progress and projects. We can't ignore that.

I am not ignorant enough to deny that Sodexo has its problems. I think the company should be held responsible for the issues it has, but no company is perfect. As college students, we finally have reached an age where we can make a difference, and our first instinct is to rise up and fight every wrongdoing head on. However, the world is not black and white. We should not compromise our values by any stretch of the imagination, but we need to make sure our standards are realistic.

Don't jump on the anti-Sodexo bandwagon because of everyone else or because it's the "cool" thing to do. Take the propaganda with the appropriate grain of salt, look at the story from both sides, and take your time to make an educated decision.

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