



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY NICK HASELOFF

Students serve up alternatives to private food corporations on campus

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When students entered Brown Hall in the fall of 2014, they were greeted by a completely new cafeteria, decorated with signs reading “nurture,” “nourish” and “savor” over various food stations. The excitement was palpable. But behind the glossy posters of rolling hills and farm-fresh food lies a multi-billion dollar industrial food corporation.

Chartwells Food Services had just renewed their contract with UNC Asheville, according to a 2014 university press release. The company provided \$3 million worth of renovations in exchange for a 10 year commitment from the university.

A subsidiary of Compass Group, Chartwells leads as a multinational corporation based in London, with operations in more than 50 countries. Compass Group, the largest contract foodservice firm in the world, brought in more than \$28 billion in revenue last year.

Emma Hutchens, North Carolina coordinator for the Real Food Challenge, said students may not see the connection with food provided in Brown Hall and the enormous corporation.

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“The thing that is interesting to me is that nobody’s heard of Compass Group. They don’t realize that company exists, much less that they control this much of the food system,” Hutchens said. “There have actually been years in the past where Compass Group actually makes more money globally than McDonald’s per year.”

Incentives play a prominent role in

Compass Group’s distribution of food. Hutchens said the corporate giant participates in “kickbacks,” a system in which other large companies, such as Tyson or Pepsi, offer rebates to Compass Group to place their brands in school cafeterias. Hutchens said the kickback system often results in high-sugar, low-quality food for students.

“These large companies like Chartwells Compass Group get these earmarks. They’re not really interested in doing the extra work that it takes to spend their money differently,” Hutchens said. “And business is like a sanctioned bribe.”

The Compass Group did not immediately respond for comment to *The Blue Banner* on this topic.

Critics of corporate food manufacturers, including Compass Group, often cite poor food quality as a complaint. Chartwells made headlines in 2014 when *The Washington Post* reported students at a Connecticut high school boycotted school lunches due to unsavory and sometimes moldy food. Many students took to social media to document and share their experiences, which led to assurances of change from Chartwells, according to *The Washington Post*.

Jenna Ventrella, co-president of Active Students for a Healthy Environment, said UNCA can ensure quality food on campus by slowly shifting from corporate-controlled food providers to local and sustainable farms. Ventrella would like the university to implement the Real Food Challenge, a nationwide program which encourages schools to provide at least 20 percent of food that is organic, local, free-trade or humanely sourced.

“I’ve always just been really passionate about food,” Ventrella said. “I’ve heard so many students talk about how they hate the food on campus and I think this is a good way, or a good step in the right direction, toward getting better food on campus that actually nourishes us.”

Ventrella said multiple student organizations, including ASHE and the Student Environmental Center, have been negotiating with administrators to endorse the initiative. However, progress stalled due to concerns about cost and practicality. Ventrella said while cutting ties with Chartwells will not be easy, greater student involvement may lead to changes.

“We control the supply and demand of the food that we eat and students have the ability to break contracts with big institu-