Cleveland, D.A. (2026) Campus food: What's wrong with it, and how can we make it better? Interview with host Ari Romanoff on podcast *Project Logos*. PODCAST ON LINE.

Moderator:
You study the food on college campuses: fast food, vending machines, and sodas, and what they do to students and the planet. If a friend who had never really thought twice about campus food asked you to explain what you were actually studying in one or two sentences, how would you put it?

David Cleveland:
That's a challenge. I guess I would say that I'm interested in how the campus food and beverage environment influences student food and beverage choices, and how those choices influence health, student health specifically, but also social health and the environment.

Moderator:
You started in genetics and agricultural anthropology. You worked with a lot of farmers around the world. How did that end up turning your lens onto your own university's dining halls and convenience stores? Is that shift still driving you?

David Cleveland:
As you said, I started off with my PhD research, a year and a half of work with farmers in Northern Ghana. One of the things I realized in that research was that those farmers work so hard, they grow most of all the food they eat, and they live in a very difficult growing environment, yet they worked out ingenious ways of coaxing food out of that environment.

And yet they still experienced a hunger season almost every year, and famines sometimes. I puzzled over why: these people are working hard, they really do have these ingenious ways of getting food out of their environment. And I realized that one of the major causes was the total world environment. Climate change was beginning to affect them even though they didn't contribute to that climate change. The colonial occupation of that part of Africa destroyed a lot of their traditional social coping mechanisms. So I realized that to understand the local problem you needed to really back out to the global level.

Moderator:
When you walk across your own campus, what do you actually see in the food environment, and why does that picture bother you more than it bothers most other people walking by?

David Cleveland:
I think we have become so used to the ubiquitous presence of food and beverage advertising by for-profit companies that we do not notice it anymore. Right down the main streets of many towns in this country, they are inundated with fast food restaurants that mainly sell food that is unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable. We have just gotten used to that. We have become so used to it that more than about 50% of all food eaten in this country is eaten outside of the home, which means that people are buying mostly junk food to eat.

Students, when they come to campus, they see something that is the stuff they see every day off campus. Our campus food and beverage environments basically reflect the food and beverage environments in the United States as a whole. And that's why students and other faculty and staff do

not really take it as exceptional. What I see is that this is on a college campus whose mission is to educate, to do research, to understand our world. And yet that educational and research approach is not evident in the food and beverage environment.

Moderator:
A lot of universities talk about food insecurity and they try to fix it by just handing out more food. You argue that misses the point. What is the problem with only asking whether students have enough to eat instead of what they are eating?

David Cleveland:
There is a movement now to look more at nutritional security rather than just food security, in other words, looking at how adequate the food is. But still the predominant approach is: do they have enough food? Not: do they have the right kinds of food? Just looking at increasing the amount of food, if it's the kind of food that predominates on campus, is not going to solve the underlying health problem.

As we are all becoming increasingly aware, our total food supply is not healthy. We are experiencing a pandemic of noncommunicable diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes, cancers, coronary heart disease, liver disease, dental disease, and so on, which are all related to what we eat and drink.

Moderator:
You write that most campus food environments are shaped by business deals, not health. You point to the soda "pouring rights" contracts that almost no student knows exist. What are those, and what would surprise people about how they work?

David Cleveland:
Pouring rights contracts are contracts between institutions. It can be hospitals, sports teams, but what I am concerned with is the contracts between higher education institutions and predominantly Coca-Cola or PepsiCo. These are what are called revenue-generating contracts, which means it is not just a contract to purchase their product.

The company actually pays a cash bonus to the campus for basically access to the students. Beverage companies know that students at college age are at an age when they begin to establish their food and beverage habits, and it is also a time when brand loyalty is established. Coke and Pepsi are fighting over brand loyalty. If they can establish a pattern of beverage consumption on campus, they expect that some of those students will continue that pattern throughout their lives, which is a revenue stream for these companies.

So what I see in these pouring rights contracts is that campuses are selling access to students to companies for a little bit of cash, and the companies get access to sell their product and promote brand loyalty. And that goes against what the campuses say their mission is, which is to promote student health. If you look on the website of practically any higher education institution, you will find these wonderful statements.

I am sure many of your peers, when they start applying to college, will look on those websites and see these wonderful statements about how the University of X, Y, and Z promotes student health, is interested in planetary sustainability. And they do a lot to implement those, but they also do some things that go directly against that. That is what I see when I walk across campus: these conflicts, these underlying problems that most people do not see.

Moderator:
The core of your argument is that we need to consume less, not just swap one product for a healthier one that still gets sold hard. Why is "buy the better version" not actually a solution here?

David Cleveland:
This gets to a basic issue that we all need to learn more about. I start off that article very aware of how overarching the issue of the Anthropocene crisis is. We are now in a period of human impact on the planet that is incredibly huge compared to anything in human history. Climate change is probably the biggest one that people know about, but we are also in a huge planetary crisis in terms of our water supply, our air quality, our soil, our biodiversity. This is what people call an existential crisis: it threatens the continuing existence of our species at the rate it is going.

And as you know, in spite of all the commitments and meetings, our greenhouse gas emissions are still growing. The predominant response to this crisis is: let us do it better, let us keep producing and consuming but with less impact. But you cannot zero out impact, which means the more you consume, the higher that impact will go, even though it is going at a slower rate. What we really need to do is reverse it. That means decreasing growth. That means decreasing excess consumption. And that is really hard for people to get their heads wrapped around.

Moderator:
On a scale from one to five, five being the most urgent, how worried should the average person be about the food on college campuses, or you can apply it to the bigger picture?

David Cleveland:
As you can probably tell, I am pretty biased and I think we should be jumping off the five into the six on that scale. I was just reading this morning about how in the UK they have been recording bird songs in the morning between the 1970s and the current day. There has been this huge reduction; they have lost about 70% of their birds already.

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson in the sixties was a wake-up call: if we continue to use pesticides, we will not hear birds singing in the morning because they will not be there anymore. Her message was very impactful. We had great environmental legislation in the seventies, but today we are right back to destroying those protections. The very environmental protections that were put in place in the seventies are now being stripped away.

On college campuses right now, there are movements for healthier food, but it is all driven by "let us have more of it, let us consume more of it." That is an example of how we can supposedly be more sustainable by consuming things that have less impact per unit. We have beverages that are sparkling water with real fruit added. Well, that is better than Pepsi or Coke with sugar. But if students are encouraged to drink more and more of that, then it is still increasing our impact. I think this is the lesson that campuses need to discuss: how can we move forward on campus and as a global society toward less consumption in order to save our planet and our society for the future?

Moderator:
What is a specific thing that a student or anyone can actually do about the food environment around them that makes a real difference, beyond just changing your own lunch?

David Cleveland:

I have been working with students on the UCSB campus on food systems since probably about 2008 or so, and we have made some positive changes working with dining staff. But the dining staff are constrained by the overall campus policy. They only have so much wiggle room. Students have been frustrated in trying to get changes because the staff do not have the authority to make those fundamental changes.

So I think one thing students can do is inform themselves more about what the actual campus policies are around food and beverages, what effect they have on the environment and on health, and how they as students can increase the awareness of their fellow students and everyone else on campus. I think if that awareness gets high enough, then we can begin to have conversations on campus about what we should really be doing, what we really want our campus to be doing in terms of the Anthropocene crisis, in terms of the health crisis. And I am hopeful that increasing awareness could lead to those fundamental changes.

Moderator:
Who are a few scientists or thinkers you think I should interview after you? They do not have to be in food.

David Cleveland:
In terms of food sustainability, I am part of a Research Consortium on Food, Beverages and Health at the University of California, and I can send you the link to that. We have faculty members from all 10 UC campuses. We meet monthly, and one of the things we have done is try to get the UCs to drop their pouring rights contracts, unsuccessfully, unfortunately. One of the reasons, which we did not talk about, is the increasing pressure on universities to raise income however they can.

Public universities have seen a dramatic drop in the money they get from their states over the last decades, so they are increasingly expected to find their own money. Even though pouring rights contracts bring in way less than 1% of average annual campus budgets, they are part of an overall strategy of selling campus cachet to private corporations in return for income. Since the Reagan-Thatcher revolution in the eighties, we have forced public institutions to become more privatized, and that is one of the underlying causes of our very commercialized campus food and beverage environments.

Moderator:
If every teenager on Earth had to hear one final sentence from you, what would it be?

David Cleveland:
Question authority.