University Meal Plan Analysis & Recommendations

A comparative analysis of independently operated university food services in Ontario, Canada, the University of British Columbia, and The University of Massachusetts (Amherst)

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Tiffany Thai and Saffron Locas-Hoeltken
Dalla Lana School of Public Health
MPH Nutrition and Dietetics Students
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Introduction

The following analysis includes all independently operated universities in Ontario, Canada. The University of British Columbia and University of Massachusetts (Amherst) have been included in addition to Ontario universities because of their particularly strong food service reputations.

The analysis reviewed traditional style/mandatory residence plans, unique meal plan options for suite-style residences, and unique meal plan options for off-campus students. Data was collected on the meal plan structure, costs (including discounts and meal and flex dollars), and carryover/refund policies. This analysis also collected information on qualitative factors that contributed to the university dining experience and summarizes how universities have pivoted food services to comply with public health regulations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The compilation of information provided in this analysis was used to inform recommendations for University of Toronto (St. George Campus) Food Services’ 2021/2022 year. All information provided below was sourced from each respective University’s food services web pages, unless otherwise cited. See Appendix B for resources used.

Meal Plan Summary

1. Meal Plan Structures and Options

Mandatory residence plans appear to be the foundation to all meal plan offerings and will be the category of plans discussed unless otherwise specified. Note: prices for UMass are in USD and have not been converted to CAD for this analysis.

![Figure 1. Meal Plan Structures](image)

*Note: Graph displays count for traditional style/mandatory residence plans only.*
The majority of universities use a declining balance meal plan structure. The alternate all-you-care-to-eat structure is used at the University of Ottawa, Ryerson University, and the University of Massachusetts (UMass). UOttawa and Ryerson both additionally offer declining balance structured options for suite-style and off-campus plans. About 55% of universities offer unique meal plan options for suite-style residences and 64% offer unique meal plan options for off-campus students.

All universities but Western University and the University of British Columbia (UBC) offer multiple tiers of meal plan offerings with an average of 3 tiers. Notably, Western has made a change from offering multiple tiers in the recent past. Selecting the appropriate meal plan tier is commonly described by the amount of time the student expects to spend on campus or the student's appetite. For example, if a student plans to return home most weekends, they may select a less comprehensive 5-day meal plan, as opposed to a 7-day. The 5- and 7-day tiers are used by both all-you-care-to-eat structured plans in Ontario. Other tier naming conventions include the gold-silver-bronze hierarchy, and variations of a minimum-light-full-varsity classification. UMass defines meal plan tiers according to the differing amounts of dining dollars (similar to flex dollars) offered by the plan.

Suite-style residence and off-campus plans communicate an idea of low commitment and savings as exemplified by names such as “pay-as-you-go”, “casual”, “saver”, and “freedom plan”. For these students, universities that offer all-you-care-to-eat structured plans also offer block plans or meal packs for a specific number of entries into the dining halls. The other common option for suite-style or off-campus students are reloadable student card funds that offer discounts (5-13%) for a minimum value of the initial deposit and/or reload increments.
Unique meal plan features include the University of Guelph’s (U of G) textbook plan and UMass’ early arrival and summer plans. U of G’s textbook plan is a $1,000 meal plan add-on that would allow a student to receive a 10% rebate (flex dollars) from all University Bookstore purchases. UMass offers meal plans specifically for students returning to campus early or staying for the summer semester. Both summer and early arrival options are block plans of a set number of meals for the all-you-care-to-eat dining halls. Given that early arrival plans are intended for a short period of time, the block plans are available for 5-15 meals.

2. Meal Plan Costs

Total annual meal plan costs range from $3,750 to $7,950 with an average cost of $5,617. Within the lowest tiers ($3,000-$4,000 and $4,001-$5,000) are plans offered by York, Ryerson, U of G, and McMaster. All four tier options from the University of Windsor fall within the highest range ($7,000-$8,000) of prices. Most meal plan options (42%), including the University of Toronto (U of T), fall within the range of $5,000-$6,000.

Meal dollars included in declining balance structured plans range from $2,464 to $5,495 with an average of $3,387.24. McMaster, Waterloo, and Windsor all have constant meal
dollar amounts among meal plan tiers. These plans differ by the amount of flex dollars included which almost all change by a consistent amount of $200 per tier. York also uses a consistent incremental amount of $500 between tiers (differences in meal dollars). U of G’s meal and flex dollar amounts vary by distinct amounts between tiers, gradually decreasing as the size of the meal plan increases. U of T has the highest difference in cost at $645 between the Lite and Standard plan. This is likely due to the number of options available, where a greater number of tiers allows for smaller increments in cost.

Flex dollars make up an average of 15% of total cost among the meal plans that include this component. The lowest proportion is seen in Ottawa’s meal plans (1.65-1.84%) while the highest is seen in U of G’s meal plans (28%). U of T currently does not include flex dollars in the Lite or Standard meal plans.

Figure 4. Declining Balance Plans: Meal vs Flex Dollars

Figure 5. All-You-Care-To-Eat Plans: Total vs Flex Dollars
The percentage of meal dollar value to total cost (with applicable discount factored in) is generally close to 100% with a third of plans offering greater than 95%. These values are significantly lower for U of G’s plans (around 55%) and is a result of similar meal dollars, overhead, and flex dollars values with a relatively lower discount percentage of 30%.

**Discounts, Overhead, & Capital Improvement Fees**

U of G, Waterloo, Western, Windsor, and UBC are the those that offer a discount at location. All of such schools also charge an overhead fee. Waterloo and Western both offer a 50% discount at location and charge an overhead, double the value of meal dollars at Western and in equal value at Waterloo. Windsor also offers a 50% discount and charges an overhead fee that is 62% of the meal dollar value. UBC offers a 25% discount at location and charges the lowest percentage of overhead to meal dollars at about 33%. Overhead percentages of total cost can be found in Appendix B.

All universities but UOttawa, Western, and UMass charge an administration or capital improvement fee (CIF). These fees range from $30 to $350 per year with an average around $200. U of T’s CIF sits on the higher end at $300 per year. Meal plans with higher total costs generally appear to have a higher CIF.

**Suite-Style Plans**

The cost of suite-style meal plans are lower than traditional-style/mandatory residence plans as these students have access to a kitchen and may cook their own meals. These plans range from $780-$4,594 annually with an average cost of $2,669.
Off-Campus Plans

For some off-campus meal plans, there is no defined total cost, rather, it is up to the student, how much they would like to load onto their student card. Initial minimum amounts as low as $5 (at UBC) and as high as $195 (at U of G) can be deposited and used to purchase food at campus eateries. On the other hand, there are plans with defined total costs such as meal pack plans (offered by Ryerson and UMass) which contain a certain number of meals, continuing use of the all-you-care-to-eat structure to off-campus students. Additionally, there are meal plans with a total cost for a specified duration. McMaster offers an unique off-campus plan where a minimum of $260 is purchased for a four-week period. The student then has the option to extend the plan at a rate of $65 per week. U of T offers Commuter Plans per year ($5,795), per term ($2,900/term), as well as per month ($650/month). Additional funds, of a minimum of $100, can be loaded onto the Commuter Plans. Figure 6 displays a comparison of plans with defined total annual costs. For comparability, U of T’s Commuter monthly and term plans, as well as McMaster’s Term plan have been adjusted to reflect a one-year duration (more information on the adjustment can be found in Appendix B). UMass offers a large quantity and variety of different sized plans to off-campus students. U of T’s off-campus options fall in the higher ranges however, it should be noted that Commuter Plan B and Commuter Plan C can be purchased in smaller quantities (ex. 1 term or a duration of less than 8 months).

Figure 7. Defined Total Annual Cost (Off-Campus Plans)
### 3. Carryover and Refund Policies

Carryover and refund policies are similar across Universities. All those who use a declining balance structured meal plan have a separate carryover fund or transfer account for leftover meal plan dollars. Meal dollars from UOttawa’s 7-day plan are transferred to flex dollars. Residence dollars at Western, flex dollars at Ryerson and York, and Card plan dollars at UBC can be refunded. Transfers and refunds are applicable to administration fees as seen in Table 2. Windsor and U of T are the only two universities that have imposed a limit to the amount that can be carried over. U of T limits transfer to 50% of the plan and Windsor caps carryover to $300-$700, depending on the meal plan size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Ottawa</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York University</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>10% of dining dollars being carried over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western University</td>
<td>$40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of British Columbia</td>
<td>$25</td>
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**Table 2. Meal Plan Transfer/Refund Administration Fees**
Affordability

Affordability of campus food remains a problem for Ontario University students, with 72% unhappy with the affordability in general, and two in three university students feeling that they could not afford the healthy options provided (Meal Exchange, 2018).

Some schools have provided tools for meal plan budgeting support. Windsor provides a breakdown of a student’s meal plan budget with a target remaining balance for each week in the semester. UBC has an online budget calculator for students to stay on track. York discloses that their lowest tier, Bronze, is not intended to feed a student three meals per day. Lastly U of T communicates the daily average costs for the Lite ($20 per day) and Standard ($24 per day) plans, similar to Ryerson’s meal plans which work out to be $23.25-$23.45 per day.

As a result of student affordability concerns, several universities have also created programs aimed at supporting students who face food insecurity. McMaster has two significant programs: the Pay it Forward plan and the Signature Meals program. The Pay it Forward plan allows students to add money to their tab at a specific retailer to donate towards a student who is in need. McMaster also produces a collection of Signature Meals, which are sold at a reduced price point (for example, five dollars). According to McMaster's Wellness and Sustainability Report (2019), around 5,200 signature meals were sold in 2019.

UMass also runs meal support programs, including the No Student Goes Hungry policy, the 5K Dine and Dash Fundraiser, and the Meal Plan Scholarship Fund. The No Student Goes Hungry policy allows students who have run out of meal swipes to apply for a supplemental plan on the food services web page, while providing them with fresh food from the campus farm to cook at home. The 5K Dine and Dash Fundraiser collects donations for the Amherst Survival Center, which helps students and community members access food, clothing and support when experiencing income insecurity. Finally, the Meal Plan Scholarship Fund encourages alumni and community members to support students facing food insecurity.

U of G participates in food security initiatives by donating excess food and ingredients to local charities via Mealcare and the University of Guelph Student Foodbank. Opened in 2004, the student funded bank provides food, education, and resources for food insecure students (CSA, 2020).
1. Testing U of T’s Meal Plan Affordability

Using a budget of $24/day (as per the U of T Standard plan), three meals per day were planned for two menu cycles (7 days each). Meals were created using the healthy plate model from Canada’s Food Guide (2019). Daily specials were incorporated where available. Overall, creating a healthy weekly meal plan was difficult under the constraint of a $24/day budget. A budgeting spreadsheet was created and involved a considerable amount of trial and error and time (about 3 hours per week of meals). This is not a feasible exercise for a student to complete each week. On top of this, remaining in budget felt unattainable while achieving healthy meals. The available specials did not support healthy eating as promotional additions were items such as fries, a bag of chips, or a bottled beverage. In terms of quantity, meal plans did not include addition of snacks and were conservative in terms of portions.

Nutrition

1. How is Meal Composition Information Shared with Students?

While all universities provided dining directories, including information on the location of specific diet-friendly meals on campus (i.e. halal, vegan, etc), only eight universities provided easily accessible full ingredient lists with allergen tags (similar to that of U of T). The method of distribution varied from school to school, most commonly, through their food services web page. However, the University of British Columbia uses the mobile application, Nutrislice, in addition to online access to menus and iPad stations within their cafeteria. Nutrislice allows students to view nutrition information of all menu items at UBC food service eateries and retailers, while also being able to filter out menu items made with specific allergens. In addition to menu ingredients and nutrition information, UBC and U of T were the only schools to explicitly outline how they define different food standards (if something is labelled as vegan, what does that mean?) on their food services websites.

2. How Are Special Dietary and Allergen Supports Addressed by Campuses?

Campuses across Ontario, as well as UMass and UBC, have a variety of supports available for students with special diet concerns, allergies, and intolerances. All schools analyzed encouraged students to communicate with either the Food Services team or the on-campus Registered Dietitian (RD) if they have special dietary requirements.
McMaster provides notable dietary accommodations for their students, including a training program for staff working in allergy and special diet zones, a designated allergy/special diet food station for students, and are developing their Allergy Risk Management (ARM) program. At the SIMPL station, students can enjoy a variety of delicious and exciting dishes made without preservatives and the most common Canadian food allergens. McMaster also provides students with the Plantry, a vegan and vegetarian kitchen at the centre of campus, similar to the Green Beet at U of T. Developed in 2019, the ARM initiative is a shared document between food service retailers and eateries on campus which informs staff on “food allergy basics, food allergy management procedures, protocols, and incidence reporting” (McMaster Hospitality Services, 2019). Along with UBC, McMaster also provides detailed information on allergy and special diet support for students on their food services page. Both UBC and McMaster clearly highlight their role in supporting the student, while also describing the student’s role (i.e. meet with staff, carry epi-pen at all times, etc.). Choosing to explicitly highlight each role ensures the maximum safety of the student.

3. Nutrition Education on Campus

One in three Ontario Students does not have appropriate food and nutrition literacy skills (Meal Exchange, 2018). As a result, it is imperative that Universities provide nutrition education and foster the development of these literacy skills in order to help students make healthful diet choices. Only seven of the eleven universities analyzed explicitly stated that they have RDs on their food services team.

In terms of available education programming, McMaster Food Services holds events aimed at increasing food literacy for both student clubs and staff. U of G and Western, however, have student led nutrition education programs. Student Nutrition Awareness Program (SNAP), located at U of G, operates with the goal of ensuring that every student understands where and how they can eat healthy on campus. SNAP provides several educational resources and events for students, has a stamp card program where students are rewarded for fruit, vegetable and breakfast consumption (after 10 stamps, the 11th fruit is free), and the SNAP Your Meal program where students send in a photo of their healthy meal on campus and are entered to win a monthly draw for a $25 gift card to Guelph Hospitality Services. The SNAP program also acts as an intermediate step for students managing special dietary restrictions, as SNAP is contacted first before the food service team. SNAP members help the student to the best of their ability, and then direct them to the food services team if the student needs more help. At Western, students of the
Bachelors of Science Food and Nutrition and Masters of Food and Nutrition (Brescia College) lead their nutrition program, Food Resources and Education for Student Health (FRESH). Similarly to SNAP, FRESH encourages healthy eating on campus with stamp cards and education resources, and additionally, with the Fresh Facts program (food facts placed around campus), Healthier4U program (tags healthier food options at different campus eateries, giving the FRESH stamp of approval), and finally the FRESH Plate program (which encourages the healthy plate model). FRESH also carries out food demonstrations to teach students living in suite-style residences how to cook quick and healthy meals such as stir-frys or savoury crepes. This component of the program is intended to bridge nutrition education with application.

Several institutions also provide online resources for nutrition and food literacy, including blog posts written by the on-campus RD (McMaster, Waterloo and UBC), online fact sheets (U of G, Waterloo, and Western) and shared online cookbooks and recipes (U of G, Waterloo, UBC and UMass). The blog-like posts inform students on a variety of nutrition related topics including meal planning, healthy drink alternatives, and mindful eating. The online resource sheets created by both the RDs and the student-led initiatives at the schools include information on budgeting, allergens, healthy snacking, and management of a variety of diet-related chronic illnesses. Finally, schools often share recipes for cafeteria favorites online, fostering students’ food preparation skills.

4. Testing U of T’s Meal Plan Nutrition

As described previously under this report’s Affordability Section, three meals per day were planned for two menu cycles (7 days each). Meals were created using the healthy plate model from Canada’s Food Guide (2019) where half a plate consisted of vegetables and a quarter each of protein and whole grains. The meal planning activity provided several key takeaways.

Firstly, there are limited protein options available at U of T. Including more protein options in the salad bar (ex. boiled eggs, sliced chicken breast, tofu, legumes, etc.) as well as through the form of grab-and-go snacks (ex. vegetables and hummus, apples and cheese, pita and hummus, tuna and crackers, etc.) provides an opportunity for students to build a balanced meal with a variety of protein sources.

Secondly, soup as a menu item has the potential to be a quick and affordable option to students. However, this option should be supplemented with a whole grain bun/bread or a grab-and-go snack in order to reflect a balanced meal. Having promotions or combos of this sort aid in increasing students’ access to healthy foods on campus.
Thirdly, finding healthy meal options over the course of just one week became repetitive. When daily entrees are based on a themed dish that is typically high in added salt, fat, and/or sugar, nutritious options from this selection are eliminated. A student then may choose an item that is available daily such as a grill item, a salad, or grab-and-go item. The more often the entree theme is based on a dish that makes it difficult to build a nutritious plate, the more often a student may resort to these items that are available daily. The result is a lack of variety in a student’s weekly meals.

On the other hand, when entree dinner or lunch plate combos reflect the healthy plate model, they become a healthy option for students. The fourth takeaway of this project involves communicating to students how they can build a balanced plate using the Healthy Plate Model within the cafeteria. Physical posters, infographics and facts placed around the food options guide the student to make balanced meals while they are in front of the food. Although providing resources online is helpful, it is not realistic to assume a student will go online while they are in the cafeteria line, analyze the food with the online sources, and choose the most appropriate choice. Having the information there in front of them will facilitate healthful decision making.

Lastly, nutrition information provided is misleading. The servings for which items are listed do not reflect the serving purchased or consumed by students. In some cases, servings are too high (ex. 100g of bread vs 1 slice), in other cases servings are too low (100g of a dinner entree item). As a result, students may end up consuming more or less of nutrients than what they believe they are.

**Sustainability**

Sustainability initiatives continue to be valued by students for their impact on the environment and their contributions to a healthy diet. Meal Exchange’s Ontario Campus Food Report Card showed that “76% of students felt it was important for their campus to source and provide locally-grown foods, and 83% felt it was important for their campus to provide sustainably-procured food” ([Meal Exchange, 2018](https://mealexchange.ca/)). Furthermore, “four out of five students felt that more locally-grown food would increase the availability of healthy food options on campus” ([Meal Exchange, 2018](https://mealexchange.ca/)). The percentage of self-operated university food services programs with commitments to various sustainability initiatives is shown in Figure 8. For the purposes of this report, the initiatives were grouped into three categories: Food Recovery Initiatives, Zero Waste Initiatives, and Sustainable Sourcing and Other Food Justice Initiatives. Outstanding examples of each sustainability initiative group will be
discussed below. Further information on each university's sustainability initiatives can be found in Appendix B. In general, UMass and McMaster have significant sustainability programs, releasing reports on campus wellness and/or sustainability programs each year. Each report analyzes the objectives, implementation, and success of the programs, and aligns them with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

![Graph](image)

**Figure 8. University Food Services Participation in Food Justice Initiatives**

### 1. Food Recovery Initiatives

Of the eleven self-operated food services, UMass, UBC, UOttawa, U of G, and U of T are the only five that have explicit commitments to food recovery. UOttawa has several stand out initiatives, including their Love Food Not Waste challenge where for every pound of food recovered by their hospitality services, $1 goes towards feeding local UOttawa students. UOttawa also recently ceased using trays in cafeterias in an effort to reduce food waste. U of G chooses to tackle food rescue by the creation of their **Food Recovery Initiative**. The Initiative works by improving purchasing amounts through the analysis of purchasing data, giving leftover food to the community, feeding animals at local farms with the food that is leftover after processing, recycling leftover fry oil, and composting any final food scraps. UBC and UMass have similarly outstanding programs. U of T Food Services’ composting initiative involves placing composting bins across campus to reduce waste direct to landfills.

### 2. Zero Waste Initiatives

Ten of the eleven university hospitality programs studied had zero waste initiatives on campus. The most common zero waste initiatives included reusable eco-container programs, 100% compostable take-out and single use containers, water bottle free campuses, and recycling and composting education programs for proper waste disposal around campus. Notable zero waste initiatives include the Green Team at U of G and the
“Lug a Mug” program, in place at several schools such as U of T, Waterloo, U of G, and UBC. The Green Team is a student run initiative which is supported through the Sustainability Office. The Green Team aims to make U of G zero waste by consulting and attending on campus events in order to promote proper waste disposal and waste reduction. The Green Team has also developed a sustainable event planning guide, used to educate staff, and has educated students on the importance of waste reduction via social media. The “Lug a Mug” program differs from the regular eco container program as it offers students a discount for using a reusable mug. At U of G, students can buy any drink for the price of a small, no matter the size of their reusable mug. At U of T and Western, students receive 25 cents off their purchase price with a reusable mug. Some schools, (notably, Western and UMass) are incorporating more water and chemical management programs while also choosing non-toxic eco-friendly cleaning products.

3. Sustainable Sourcing and Other Food Justice Initiatives

Every campus analyzed except York University, had explicit sustainable sourcing and food justice initiatives. The most common initiatives included socially responsible sourcing and purchasing certifications (i.e. Fair Trade) for items such as seafood and coffee, increasing purchasing of local food, and increasing education about the sustainability of purchasing local food for students. Western further committed to sustainable sourcing by creating their Hospitality Services Purchasing Committee, which manages purchasing practices and contracts while keeping in mind their sustainability goals. Some schools provided opportunities for students to support their local food communities by hosting farmer’s markets on campus (Western and Waterloo). Alternatively, some schools like U of G, Ryerson and UMass have on-campus farming. Ryerson’s Urban Farm provides a unique opportunity for learning about on campus agriculture as it resides in the same geographical context as U of T. Ryerson’s Urban Farm sits on top of the George Vari Engineering and Computing Centre, with 10,000 sq ft of growing space. Each growing season, it produces 66 pounds of honey and 9,000+ pounds of produce from 50+ crops. Another notable local food program that marries well with U of T’s local food challenge is U of G’s 100 Mile Grille. Located in Creelman Dining Hall, the Grille serves students menu items with products only sourced within a 100-mile radius and acts as an option for sustainable meals as well as a source of sustainable education for students. Additionally, many schools made commitments to plant-based eating in an effort to encourage carbon friendly eating (UBC, UMass and U of G). U of G upholds this commitment with their Forward Food Initiative, which aims to reduce meat purchasing by 20%, educates kitchen
staff on the environmental benefits of plant-based diets, and works with kitchen staff to create more plant based recipes.

**Student Experience**

The communication between students and their campus food service team shapes the students' experience with on campus dining. For the purposes of this report, communications will be analyzed in two categories: communications from students to food services via feedback and communications from food services to students via media and marketing.

1. **Feedback: Students Speaking to Food Services**

All universities analyzed provided opportunities for student feedback. The most common forms of feedback were completing an online form, emailing or calling the hospitality team, or completing a physical comment sheet at the cafeteria. UOttawa and Western both provided students with a “Text/Tell” feedback program, where students text a designated phone number with the appropriate dining code and their comments and suggestions. Similar to U of T, Waterloo additionally has a Food Advisory Board. The Food Advisory Board consists of staff, students, and hospitality team members who meet and provide constructive feedback for the hospitality team. The Board shares their meeting minutes and findings on the hospitality website. Uniquely, U of G appoints one student as the Ombudsperson, and they receive feedback from students through social media. At U of G, the Ombudsperson facilitates communication between the food services team and the students. The Ombudsperson manages all hospitality accounts, responds to students’ feedback via social media, annually surveys 100 people at every dining location, and presents their findings to the food services team. The Ombudsperson is paid with free campus living accommodations and food. Despite all universities providing at least one contact point for the hospitality team (email or phone), very few provided an extensive list of team members, their titles, and their contact information (McMaster, U of G, Western, and UMass).

2. **Marketing and Communication: Food Services Speaking to Students**

The hospitality websites differed mostly in their depth of information and website format. Hospitality programs with higher student satisfaction ratings (i.e. U of G, UMass, Mac, UBC), tended to have more information on their website. Most were easy to use, had clear
section tabs at the top of the webpage, and featured school colours. Social media pages were also linked across each food service website analyzed, with Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter being the most frequently used by food service teams. Youtube and TikTok appear to be becoming more popular. UBC’s food service page was the most impressive, with a clean, visually appealing, scroll through webpage, which was geared towards millennials and generation Z. The page featured bright colours, graphics, and images of food, and communicated with casual, comedic language. For example, UBC’s dining directory page is found by clicking on the “Hungry?” banner at the top of the home page. Furthermore, their sustainability page can be accessed by clicking on a picture with the words “We Dig Real Food”. UBC’s communication with its students goes even further with their weekly email update, which students can sign up for on the website, and their blog section, where the RDs post articles on topics like meal planning, nutrition information, and mindful eating. Waterloo and McMaster have similar blog-like sections, with Waterloo’s incorporating student reviews of new menus and dishes at the campus eateries.

Only four of the hospitality programs analyzed (U of T, Waterloo, Western, and UBC) communicate information about their team members, allowing students to get to know the people who make and serve their food. For example, Western includes a “Meet Our Team” page on their website like U of T. Additionally, U of G has a social media profile for the chef operating the Exhibition station at their Creelman Hall, where he tweets his daily specials, shares the hashtag #exhibitionian and encourages students to interact with him online. UBC successfully introduces their RDs on their web page with photos, biographies and their commitments to encouraging healthy diet behaviours on campus. Unfortunately, the UBC webpage lacks the introduction of their other team members.

Each school communicates hospitality services information a little differently within their webpage. Schools like Ryerson and Waterloo mostly use webpages to communicate content. However, UOttawa, UMass, U of G and McMaster, use other forms of media to communicate information on meal plans and initiatives. Both UOttawa and UMass use clear, concise infographics to outline and compare the meal plans at each school, making it easier for students to make the right selection for them. UOttawa also provides this information in a youtube video. U of G and McMaster both use reports to outline their sustainability initiative goals, with U of G using a short, graphic containing format, and McMaster using a longer, more detailed report format.
COVID-19 Adjustments

COVID-19 has challenged university dining to make changes that ensure special attention is paid to health and safety of the university community and comply with public health regulations. Most universities have reduced hours of operations, closed some dining halls and campus eateries, and switched to take-out only. Few have socially distant in-person dining. Previous self-serve models have transitioned into a full-service model, and any other shared services have been closed (ex. UOttawa’s My Pantry). Other general changes include pre-wrapped cutlery, limited/no dishware, cashless payment, guests not permitted, and delivery service for students in self-isolation. UOttawa and Ryerson continue to operate using an all-you-care-to-eat-model, while notably, U of T switched to declining balance following COVID-19 changes. Ryerson has noted that portions sizes have increased to compensate for limitations on the all-you-care-to-eat model. York, U of T, and Waterloo offer mobile apps for ordering. Meal plan pricing and structure has not changed across schools with the exception of McMaster which has removed mandatory residence meal plans, as a result of the virtual school year. However, most schools are offering the option for cancellations and refunds for students no longer attending school in-person. Comparatively, U of T has provided a very thorough amount of clear information on COVID-19 measures and changes to food services.
Recommendations

1. A Simplified, De-stigmatized, Meal Plan Structure

Upon review of eleven independently operated university food services, the following is recommended for U of T’s meal plan structure:

(a) **Continue use of a declining balance model moving forward.** This structure is used by the majority of universities and is more compatible with COVID-19 in the case of prolonged restrictions. A declining balance model also supports eating patterns that are more customizable and less limiting to the student (ex. Having snacks or small frequent meals). As well, this model fosters the social aspect of eating by allowing students to join one another in the dining halls without having to purchase anything.

(b) **Create one standard meal plan at $5,500 per year.** Although not as common, one single option, as opposed to multiple tiers, simplifies the meal plan selection process for students. As a result, any potential issues related to information clarity and quantity of meal plan inquiries are significantly reduced. It should be disclosed that the one standard option is a baseline amount that should likely require a student to add more money throughout the year. This method could then be marketed as an option that best suits each individual's needs. In addition, by the elimination of tiers or meal plan 'sizes', sensitivity to potential food size stigmatization is considered. This recommendation may also allow a student to feel more at ease around any carryover or loss from a refund. Lastly, by providing a baseline type of meal plan, the student is able to explore some of Toronto's vibrant food scene which can also be marketed to potential students. This recommendation also opens an opportunity to include flex dollars/TBucks into the plan and expand support to local Toronto businesses by increasing partnerships for use with a student's TCard. The meal plan experience then encompasses not only what is offered by U of T but also the greater university experience of exploring the city in which the school is located. A cost of $5,500 per year reflects a near mid-point between current Lite and Standard options as well, keeps U of T within the price range of which most university plans fall. This change would be limited by the potential need for more administrative staff and capacity to fulfill more frequent top-up requests.
2. Further Support Students with Special Diet and Allergen Concerns.

Meal Exchange reports that one in four students found that campus food supported a healthy diet, citing a lack of health, allergen, and diet specific options as one of the four barriers to healthy eating on campus (Meal Exchange, 2018). Furthermore, they cited that “only 69% of food outlets had vegan and/or vegetarian options, while only 43% provided nut-free options” (Meal Exchange, 2018). U of T currently provides support for students with dietary restrictions by providing daily menus with allergen information, outlining their food standards, serving vegan and gluten free meals at The Green Beet, and encourages communication with the Food Services staff. In order to better support students with dietary concerns, it is recommended that U of T:

(a) include more recipes without preservatives or the common allergens, similar to those available at the SIMPL station at McMaster. U of T is encouraged to include these options across campus eateries, in order to support the dietary concerns of students wherever they are on campus.

(b) educate students on where they can find the allergen/ingredient information for the daily meals within the dining hall. Signs and posters regarding the location of meal composition information (i.e. on the website or on the app), should be posted in close proximity to the meals in order to reduce the risk of allergen consumption.

(c) further promote the role of the RD in the hospitality team, by including a biography, description of role, letter to the students and photograph on their website similar to that of UBC. By implementing these measures, U of T Hospitality Services can further support students with special diet and/or allergen concerns.

3. Promote Healthy Items within Dining Halls.

Nutrition education and food literacy remains an important goal for U of T Food Services, as recent student feedback highlighted a disconnect between Food Services’ production of healthy, affordable items and the students’ self-reported ability to purchase healthy items within the meal plan budget. Unsurprisingly, these results are echoed across Ontario Universities, with “91% of campuses reporting efforts to reduce added sugar, salt, and/or fats, but fewer than half of the food outlets promoted healthy menu options and healthy eating” (Meal Exchange, 2018). Therefore, it is recommended that U of T:
(a) implement a stamp card program similar to that of U of G's SNAP fruit/vegetable and breakfast stamp cards to promote healthy diet behaviours and increase availability of healthy foods.

(b) implement a program which tags healthier menu options such as Western's FRESH Facts, Healthier4U and FRESH Plate programs. Ideally, this will help students easily identify healthy options within a cafeteria, allowing them to select one of several healthy options based on preference and price.

4. Foster A Greater Sense of Community Through Increased Communication with Students

As mentioned by management, U of T Food Services aims to create an environment where students enjoy and value their campus food, while also encouraging healthful behaviours and diet choices. Communication, community and coherence remain unique challenges at the University of Toronto St. George campus because of its geographical size and its division into seven colleges. Naturally, the fourth recommendation for U of T Food Services is to bridge this gap and foster a greater sense of community for U of T students by building a relationship with them. U of T is encouraged to:

a) increase student involvement with the Food Services team, similar to the FRESH program at Western and the SNAP team at U of G. With a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs available through the Department of Nutritional Sciences and the Masters of Public Health in Nutrition and Dietetics, there are many students passionate about culinary arts, nutrition and encouraging healthy behaviours that could work alongside U of T Food Services to help increase communication with students.

b) create social media platforms for each dining hall. Although having a general U of T Food Service instagram has its benefits, often the content shared becomes too general and students struggle to identify with the information presented. Having social media for each dining hall allows shared content to be more specific, connecting each student to their residence, the food served there and food services staff that they see everyday. Daily menus, specials and promotions for the specific cafeteria can be shared there, as well as information about U of T's sustainability projects and nutrition education programs. Social media also provides an opportunity for each dining hall to interact with it's students, through online polling, question and answer segments, and contests.
c) increase intransparency via social media. Social media provides an opportunity for U of T Food Services to show students a “behind the scenes” look at how they provide healthy, delicious and creative foods for students across campus. A social media page also allows students to build connections with the people that make and serve their food. Bringing the content from the “Meet Our Chefs” tab on the Food Services website to the social media platforms and expanding profiles to staff both in and out of the kitchen will help further engage students with the team.

d) include more U of T themed items in order to foster school spirit. For example, a menu item such as a Varsity Blues Burger, with a portion of the purchases going towards supporting U of T sports teams, is a great way to encourage students to eat at different dining halls across campus while developing a greater sense of community at U of T.

5. Changes to U of T Food Services Website

A university's food services website is a significant source of important information for students, parents, and faculty. U of T's website's clean, minimalist style allows for easy readability and should be preserved in future iterations. Difficulty navigating other schools' websites was mainly due to overbearing amounts of content and poor organization. Other strengths include indicating where a discount is applicable when using TBucks (Campus Food Locations, Hours, & Menu page) and the Meet Your Campus Chefs page. U of T's website could be enhanced by:

(a) Reducing and re-organizing text through bullet points and different coloured subheadings for improved approachability and white space to text ratio; this particularly applies to the Dietary Accommodations page.
(b) Feature a link to the Dietary Accommodations page on the Main Food Services page
(c) Create a page for the U of T's RD and feature a link on the main page.
(d) Publish a single meal plan page with information on how it works, price breakdowns (meal dollars, overhead), features (tax-exemption), TCard+ and TBucks, and refund policy rather than inviting the viewer to ask for further information via phone or email. Currently, meal plan information is limited and inconsistent as there are two pages that have been found: one on the declining balance meal plan and another with limited information on the 2020/2021 plan. The former contains a placeholder published on the site (see bottom of page on further questions and contacts). It was also noted that there was some duplication between
two different sites, food-beverage.utoronto as well as ueat.toronto; consolidation is recommended.

(e) Include a budgeting tool for students to keep track of their spending according to the time remaining in the semester.
Conclusion

U of T Food Services has already made significant contributions to student health, sustainable dining and a sense of community on campus. This analysis provides an overview of successful programs at various other self-operated Universities in Ontario (including UBC and UMass), in hopes to further improve the U of T Food Service Program. Suggestions for meal plan structure, nutrition information, sustainability and communication with students have been provided to address not only what students eat but how. By the inclusion of the recommendations, U of T Food Services has the opportunity to foster healthy eating habits, social interaction, and enjoyment of food among students, ultimately improving the student experience and promoting optimal nutrition.
References


Appendix A: University-specific Definitions

*Most definitions are retrieved directly from the corresponding university's meal plan webpage and are provided to support information provided in the analysis.

**University of British Columbia**

**Residence Dollars:** Used for tax-exempt (5%) purchases in residence dining rooms and select retail locations. Prices in residence dining are reduced by 25% at the time of transaction and discounted by 5% at select retail locations.

**Flex Dollars:** Used at select retail Food Services locations (5% discount), 16+ Campus Partners, campus vending machines and pay-for-print. Gives students access to convenient locations outside of their residence dining rooms.

**University of Guelph**

**Basic Plan:** is used for the majority of your on-campus food purchases. It is accepted all day in most Hospitality dining locations and after 1:30 pm (Monday - Friday) and all day on weekends in the U.C. Food Court, UC Subway and UC Starbucks. These purchases are tax exempt (HST).

**Flex Plan:** taxable for vending machines, food purchases at the Bullring and the Brass Taps purchases at Eastside Variety, convenience grocery items (i.e. frozen foods, boxes of cereal or granola bars and health and beauty products), dining at specified off-campus restaurants, delivery orders for off-campus restaurants, and Taxi service.

**University of Massachusetts**

**Dining Dollars:** A dollar-for-dollar exchange program that can be used in retail dining locations, food trucks, late night, University Club & Restaurant, UPub, Concessions and Dining Commons.

**Guest Meals:** Guest Meals are invitations to bring someone to dine at the dining commons with you. Each residential meal plan offers 15 guest meals per plan. With the exception of Unlimited DC meal plan, this plan does not include guest meals or dining dollars. With YCMP or YCMP Off-Campus, you can bring a guest to eat as often as you’d like by using an additional YCMP meal swipe per guest.

**Meal Exchanges:** Meal Exchanges can be used at any official UMass Dining retail operation with a value of $10.50 per meal.

**YCMP:** a meal swipe that can be used at any retail dining location for a maximum of $10.50 per swipe. It can also be used as a swipe to enter any of the DCs on campus.
McMaster University

**Basic Account:** represents the mandatory and non-refundable portion of all residence meal plans. It is a non-taxable account saving you up to 13% and can be used for food purchases on campus only

**Flex Account:** an optional account that allows you to continue non-taxable purchases of food on campus once the Basic account is exhausted

**Freedom Account:** gives you ability to purchase confectionery and non-food items on campus at Hospitality Services locations and to dine at the participating Off-Campus vendors. Subject to appropriate taxes.

University of Ottawa

**Dining Dollars:** a tax-free currency to purchase food prepared on campus. Dining $ are available only to meal plan holders.

**Flex Dollars:** allow students to pay from their uOttawa Card for books, printing, photocopying, laundry and much more.

Ryerson University

**Meal Plan Dollars:** go towards dine-in or take-out service at the Pitman Dining Hall. Your OneCard grants you access to the Pitman Dining Hall. Just swipe, select your food and enjoy your meal!

**Flex Dollars:** to spend at campus eateries or participating food retailers. Purchases are deducted from your flex dollar account in a declining balance.

**RUEats Dining Dollars:** allow you to load a custom amount of money on your OneCard that can be used at Ryerson operated campus eateries. Load your OneCard in increments of $100 and receive an additional 10% in bonus dollars.

University of Toronto (St. George)

**Residence Dining Dollars:** purchase food + beverage items at the New College Dining Hall and/or Chestnut Dining Hall (tax-exempt) and at selected retail outlets across campus that are operated by Food Services. Only items prepared by Food Services will be tax exempt.

**TBucks:** TBucks can be added to TCards by visiting ueat.utoronto.ca. TBucks can be used both within New College and at selected food outlets elsewhere on the St. George Campus as well as paying for textbooks, printing and photocopying. Please note TBucks are different from Residence Dollars.
**University of Waterloo**

**Meal Plan Portion:** This portion is reserved for meal plans. It is tax-exempt and can only be used in UW Food Services locations. Every time you purchase food using your meal plan, you will get 50% the set price.

**Flex Dollars:** can be used at non-Food Services locations such as the book store, laundry, photocopying and the W Store. They can also be used at various off-campus partner restaurants and stores. If you run out of meal plan dollars, you can convert your flex dollars into meal plan dollars to use on food!

**Western University**

**Flex Dollars:** can be used to purchase on-campus confection purchases (vending machines) or at the meal plan partner restaurants. Off-campus flex purchases are subject to full retail prices plus applicable taxes.

**Residence Dollars:** can be used in any Residence dining hall, and at on-campus eateries. Food purchased in Residence dining halls is reduced by 50% and tax-exempt. Purchases at Main Campus Eateries are also tax-exempt.

**University of Windsor**

**Basic Plan:** A tax-exempt account designed to be used at all food locations on campus.

**Flex Plan:** A taxable account used for: taxable food purchases on campus, at our convenience store, for vending purchases or with our Off Campus Partners.

**York University**

**Flex Dollars:** required to purchase taxable snacks and beverages when you are not purchasing them as part of a meal under the Meal Plan. Accepted at many locations across campus and can be used to pay for snacks at campus eateries and vending machines, books and supplies at the York University Bookstore, printing and photocopying, residence laundry machines, and goods and services at participating off-campus merchants.

**Meal Plan Dollars:** cannot be used to purchase taxable beverages and snacks (e.g. carbonated beverages, potato chips, granola bars) unless you purchase these items as part of a meal.
Appendix B: University Meal Plan Data

Please see attached excel spreadsheet.