DSAC Meal Plan Analysis - DRAFT

Carnegie Mellon University Dining Services Advisory Committee
Prepared by the DSAC Meal Plan Subcommittee '23-'24
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Background

There is a need for a paradigm shift in the approach to dining at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The CMU student body has expressed growing concerns about the current state of dining on campus, as enumerated in this report. In an ideal scenario, the meal plan should not only provide sustenance for students but also contribute to the overall dining master plan.

In recent years, student-driven initiatives have proven successful, such as the introduction of popular vendors like De Fer, Redhawk, Salem's Market, and Stack'd Underground. Moreover, recent concepts like Revolution Noodle and Wild Blue Sushi have proved to be highly successful for historically underrepresented areas of campus dining. These successes demonstrate the power of student feedback and the need to represent the diverse student populations on campus. While student feedback has been engaged in the form of the Dining Services Advisory Committee (DSAC), the smaller Meal Plan Subcommittee was convened to allow for a more committed set of students, representing various aspects of student government, to handle more sensitive information and make further progress.

CMU's current meal plan program has been in place for over 20 years, and no one has kept a comprehensive record of the changes made during this time. This lack of documentation makes it challenging to assess the program's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. The Dining Services team has expressed their focus on bringing value to students through the meal plan, particularly in terms of block spending. While the student body appreciates their efforts, through anecdotal, numerical and peer analysis of dining systems at other universities, we believe that there is still room for improvement. Additionally, the program has been found to be very expensive for faculty and graduate students in the community who typically do not participate in the meal plan. These issues highlight the need for a more inclusive and accessible dining system that caters to the entire CMU community.

As a subcommittee, we want to address whether the current meal plan model is sustainable in the light of potential price increases. To achieve this, the Meal Plan Subcommittee aims to analyze growth, identify slowdowns, and investigate different scenarios for alternative meal plans for students. By doing so, the committee hopes to identify areas for improvement and ensure that the meal plan remains a viable option for students and can develop a sustainable model for the administration.

Objective

The objective of this analysis is to develop an understanding of CMU's current meal plan and the directions a new meal plan could go. We will present an analysis of the current state of dining and student opinion. We then provide an overview of potential metrics and meal plan scenarios for consideration. We provide further analysis on dining at CMU and at peer institutions. We conclude with a summary and our recommendations from the scenarios we have analyzed.

We identified and prioritized four goals that shaped our analysis and recommendations:
1. **Improve student satisfaction** with campus dining as a whole and, in particular, with the meal plans.
2. **Protect CMU's unique eateries** that feature small businesses, local vendors, and diverse cuisine.
3. **Increase transparency** to students in the finances and operations of dining.
4. **Make data-driven decisions**

Current State of Dining

Across campus, CMU has 34 dining concepts across 13 buildings with 13 different vendors. Currently, CMU's dining services operate under a poly operational dining model. Dining partners with Chartwells Catering to provide food to students. Along with this private catering company, CMU dining also contracts independent vendors. These independent vendors are almost all local small businesses in the Pittsburgh community. For example, Redhawk Coffee Roasters is owned by a local Pittsburgh family. While Chartwells have their own dining concepts on campus, there are also vendors that are subcontracted by Chartwells rather than the university. In addition to the locations listed below, Dining runs the Pantry out of the Residence on Fifth.

Current independent vendors:	Current concepts under Chartwells:
- Au Bon Pain - Taste of India - Stack'd Underground - Tahini - The Edge - Zebra Lounge - Redhawk Coffee Roasters - La Prima (Wean and Gates) - De Fer - Salem's - El Gallo de Oro - Millie's - The Exchange	- Schatz - Build Pizza - Forbes Avenue Subs - Tepper Taqueria - Cucina - Grano Pizza - Burger 412 - Ciao Bella - True Burger - Entropy+ - Urban Revolution - Nourish - Egg Shoppe* (closed)
	Current concepts subcontracted under Chartwells:

- Tartan Food Truck	- Wild Blue - Hunan Express - Revolution Noodle - Capital Grains

In terms of the current meal plan system at CMU Dining, it is under a Block + Flex system. Blocks are essentially a single "swipe" for a meal set. The set includes an entree, a side (or two for a dinner block), and a drink. Flex is an all declining balance that comes with each meal plan that can be spent like cash and can be used in any way. A great example of this is at the Exchange where a sandwich is an entree, chips or a brownie is a side, and a fountain drink is the drink that comes with a block. Over the course of the past two years, Dining and vendors started being less restrictive in what is considered a Block. There previously was no way to use a block at any of the many coffee shops on campus. This has shifted to where students can add drinks, pastry's, or anything else the shop offers into their block up to the vendor's value of a block; currently $8.50 for breakfast blocks, $11.25 for lunch blocks, and $12.70 for dinner blocks. Currently, Scotty's Market and Entropy only accept flex. All dining locations also accept DineXtra, which operates in the same fashion as flex but can be added into any student account, regardless of the student being on a meal plan or not. Lastly, all vendors take credit cards as payment as well. With the current structure of CMU's Dining Services, it means that all concepts and vendors compete with each other for student's blocks.

Current State of Student Opinions

Student survey data has previously been collected by CMU's student government (Undergraduate Student Senate and the Graduate Student Assembly), with the most recent Fall 2021 Campus Dining Survey reaching 1868 students (13% of the students enrolled at the Pittsburgh Campus). The results of that survey were compiled in this document with additional commentary from the graduate perspective on this slide deck, but made eight primary recommendations:
1. Prices should be *the same* as equivalent off-campus options
2. More vegetarian and halal options should be available on-campus
3. The new grocery store should be affordable (i.e., similar to prices at Trader Joe's, Aldi).
4. Try online-only ordering to expand hours and explore ways to ensure that workers are not overwhelmed by orders, also keeping wait times down.
5. Install more signs around campus directing students to dining locations. Encourage small on-campus group meetings to serve food to order from on-campus locations, to help students learn about dining choices.
6. Offer more pop-up dining locations and/or food trucks near buildings with few dining options (e.g., Hamburg Hall).
7. Regularly publish statistics about working conditions. Information about how workers are compensated is helpful, but turnover rate could be a good proxy.

8. Return to pre-pandemic reusable utensils, trays, and other dishes (e.g., at Schatz). Encourage students to bring their own reusable utensils and dishes by offering discounts.

These recommendations have been worked on to varying degrees by CMU Dining, particularly recommendations 3 and 4, with the introduction of Scotty's Market and the addition of Grubhub-based online ordering. However, issues around pricing and affordability, satisfaction around dining options, and food quality, as identified by the below figures, continue to be issues to this point.

Figures from the Senate-GSA Student Dining Survey (n=1868, 901 grad, 967 undergrad)

Overall Satisfaction?

Quality of food compared to off-campus?
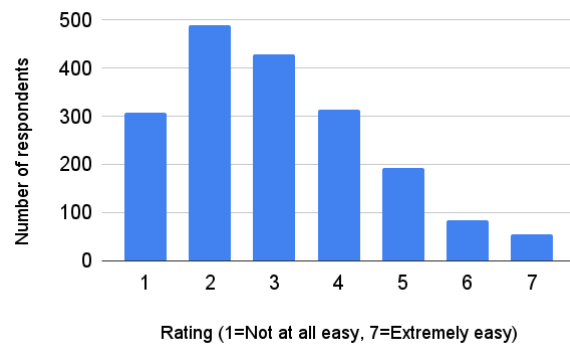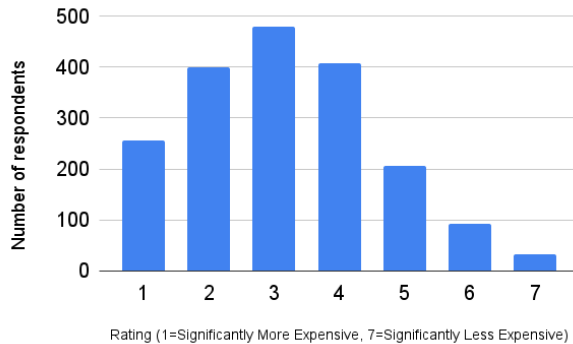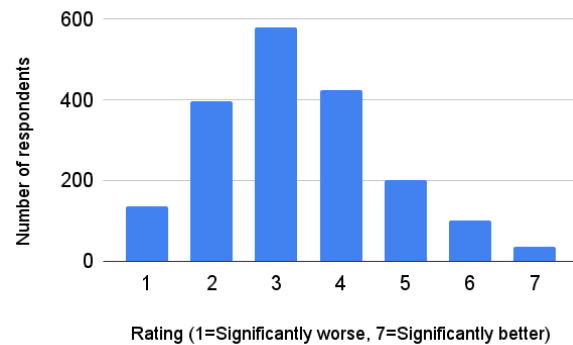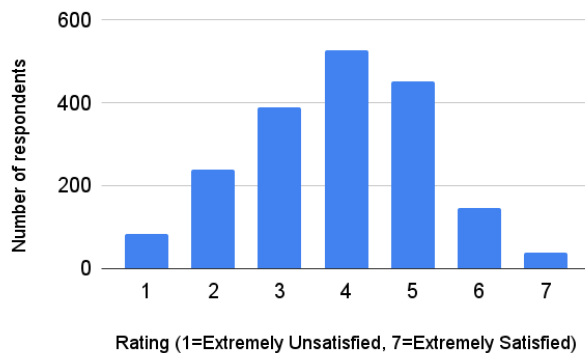
Affordability compared to off-campus?

How easy is it to find food on the weekend?
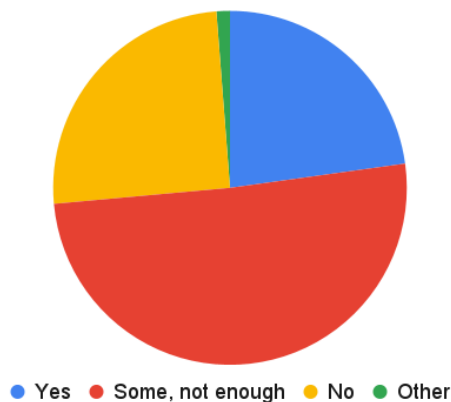
Are there enough "healthy" dining options?   Eating with a dietary restriction/preference

CMU Dining has also begun collecting data through the Dining Student Advisory Committee, using "Secret Shoppers" to purchase block meals from campus dining vendors. While the sample size of the data set is small, consisting of surveys from Fall 2023 and Spring 2024, metrics of quality, customer service, value from block, and cleanliness have been relatively high; by far the metric that has scored the worst is "Was it easy to understand what you could purchase with a block?", which highlights another issue around confusion about the dining system (particularly from non-undergraduates), creating barriers towards meal plan adoption.

Secret Shopper Data, Fall 2023 and Spring 2024, ratings on a 1 to 5 scale (n=36)

Question	How would you rate the quality of the food you purchased?	Was it easy to understand what you could purchase with a block?	How would you rate the customer service you received?	How would you rate the value you received from your block?	How satisfied were you with the nutrition of your meal?	How would you rate the cleanliness upkeep of the location?	How would you rate your overall experience with dining at this location?
Average	4.1	2.9	4.3	4.3	3.9	4.1	4.1
Standard Deviation	0.9	1.5	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.0	1.0

Metrics

In order to better understand the dining program's successes and areas of improvement, we propose that the following metrics be evaluated and tracked, based on the results of the surveys described above and discussions conducted in the Dining Student Advisory Committee and Meal Plan Subcommittee. We suggest that these metrics, or numbers similar to these, be annually reported from CMU Dining Services to the relevant managing administrators (e.g. the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs Business and Financial Operations, the Dean of Students, the Chief Financial Officer), as well as the Dining Student Advisory Committee.

For each metric, we describe the relevant data that would need to be acquired, where text highlighted in orange represents data that is currently not collected. For the comparison against peer institutions, the Meal Plan Subcommittee has acquired data for the 2023-24 academic year, but this benchmarking analysis will need to be redone periodically as other institutions change their fees and programs.

Metric	Ideal trend	Data required	Reasoning for inclusion
Meal Plan Churn Rate (# of students leaving the meal plan after each year)	Lower (i.e. less turnover)	Number of students on meal plan from year to year	Higher implied satisfaction, more revenue

Number of non-undergraduates (graduate, faculty, staff) on meal plans	Higher	Breakdown of meal plan purchases by personnel type	Shows effectiveness of dining's communication to non-primary market, affordability / desirability
Missed meals rate (i.e. number of unspent blocks or flex/dinex)	Lower	Amount of missed meals and/or unspent declining funds	Measure of desirability of food options + students "eating enough"
Average transaction cost (perhaps credit card only to avoid distortions due to blocks/flex/dumping)	Lower	Total sales and transactions	Campus food prices should be on near par with off-campus options, as per GSA/Senate survey
Relative cost of most popular meal plan vs total cost of undergraduate attendance	Lower	Comparisons of CMU's meal plan and tuition/fees vs. comparable institutions	Dining costs can be an important factor in student/family college choice decision-making
Student satisfaction - food quality, variety, healthiness, sustainability	Higher	Dining survey, either conducted in-house or externally	No direct customer satisfaction metrics along several dimensions

While we recognize that these metrics may not be easily projected in the context of future meal plan options, we provide a qualitative discussion of the extent to which each of the proposed scenarios/interventions will improve on each of these metrics.

Meal Plan Scenarios

Blocks and Flex

In any reconsideration of the current Block and Flex dining system at CMU, we recommend a number of overarching changes while keeping within this general operational system. We then suggest further changes to adjust the value of the block depending on dining's financial and operational capabilities, either keeping the block values similar to the current state of affairs or moving to a standardized 'entree-plus' system.

There is a significant issue around the perception of the value of a block, given that any missed meals or unusable blocks cause students to feel that they are being "ripped off" or "cheated". Similarly, not all students conform to the schedule of the meal periods. To remedy this, in conjunction with other changes below, **we suggest that the maximum number of meals per day be increased to two per period**, potentially with a cap at six meals redeemable per day, if necessary. This would allow for more use of blocks while not overstressing dining infrastructure,

and allow for students to purchase more non-traditional meals or food items with the blocks they paid for.

Additionally, many improvements need to be made about the communication of the block system. In many cases, it is unclear what is covered on the block and what is not, and students face a very large learning curve when figuring out each of the 34 concepts' take on the block. **We suggest that all vendors be required to submit on a semesterly basis a clear menu to be featured on the website, with examples of the most common block meals, and furthermore clarify in their in-person signage exactly what belongs on a block**. These menus should be linked directly on the "[Places to Eat](#)" dining page, similar to the student-run [CMU Eats](#) website, rather than having to click on "More Info" and then "View Menu" (if applicable).

Lastly, if the block+flex system is continued, **we heavily suggest that Dining reconsiders the division between Flex and Dinex, because the two systems are very confusingly similar**. The FAQ does not state that Flex dollars expire semesterly, while the 1% bonus for DineXtra is a small incentive that not only loses Dining money but also, in our opinion, is not a sufficient enough incentive for people to actually use it.

We identify two scenarios to be considered for the value of a block: the current, entree + side + drink (1a), and a more streamlined entree-only (1b).

The main benefit of the current meal plan system is that it in theory provides a "complete" meal. While the concept of a "complete" meal is admirable, many of the offerings from vendors on campus do not fit the rigid definition of a meal including an entree, a side, and a drink. **For this system to be successful in the future, what can be purchased on a block at a given vendor must be standardized and clearly communicated**. At Revolution Noodle, for instance, students receive a noodle bowl with protein and vegetables with bottled water as the drink, meanwhile, at Taste of India a block gets you three items from the hotbar along with rice and naan. Students that carry a reusable water bottle are given the choice between unnecessarily taking a single-use plastic water bottle and not getting the full value from their block. **Remaining with the current model will minimize the learning curve** that any redesigned meal plan would create for both students and vendors, **but may not result in a significant change in meal plan retention rates or student satisfaction.**

The streamlined entree-only system would be similar to the price differentiation seen in most fast casual business models where add ons can be purchased by those who desire them. This latter system would define **one value for a block across all time periods of the day at a lower price point (e.g. $9)** with the rest of the money in the meal plan reallocated to flex dollars that students can choose to use to add onto their meals or spend on other items (e.g. snacks or small purchases). This would not only better accommodate vendors who have offerings that don't cleanly fit into a meal + side + drink system (such as coffee shops), but also allow students to not feel 'cheated' by not getting the full value of their block. Students will have more incentive to

spend across the day, rather than just in the period in which they perceive they get the most value. In particular, this will shift consumption away from the dinner period. Currently, CMU Dining actually tends to lose money on each block. Additionally, by not including plastic water bottles as the 'drink' part of the block, we believe this change can significantly contribute to reducing CMU Dining's environmental impact.

There would be a concern that running out of flex would be detrimental to the student dining experience and their health. Thus, **we propose a weekly flex spending maximum that could vary depending on meal plan size.** Taking the red plan, the most popular of all dining plans and most limited in terms of blocks supplied and plan cost, we currently have 205 blocks and 850 flex dollars per semester, at a cost of $3,534. Noting our assumption that the dining commission of 12% results in $425 being allocated out of this cost, at a $9 value per entree block, that would result in $1845 of value for blocks, and $1264 remaining in flex. By putting a limit of $125 maximum being spent on flex per week, this will **ensure that students have at least 10 weeks of flex spending at the maximum amount** (out of a 14 week semester), and reduce 'dumping' of flex at the end of the semester. This limit can be adjusted for the other plans.

(1A) Entree + Side + Drink	(1B) Entree Only
PROS	PROS
Familiar system, minimal learning curve/adaptation period	Vendor offerings don't have to conform to entree + side + drink standard
Guaranteed "complete" meal	The value of the block is consistent across time, so perceived value is better
	Students who eat less or require less food at a time are better accommodated
CONS	
Students are overall dissatisfied with this meal plan system. Larger changes may be necessary to significantly increase meal plan retention	Reduced single-use plastics due to lower [usage] of plastic drink bottles
	Dining will not lose money on dinner blocks
Poor value perception for students	CONS
Vendor offerings are not consistent with block value	Things still might not fit cleanly into the definition of an entree
Often unintuitive what comes on a block	It is possible people run out of flex too early

All Declining

A second consideration for a new meal plan structure at Dining Services is an all declining structure. This all declining plan would operate similar to how flex and DineXtra operate on campus. All vendors would price their menu items and students would pay that exact amount with their balance.

In order for this plan to be successful, there would have to be some sort of incentive for students to go on a meal plan compared to them just paying by credit card. Currently for the DineXtra balance, students get 1% extra with every $100 they add. For example, if a student adds $500 to their account, they get an extra 5% and end up with $525. The max is 10% at $1000, meaning that if a student adds $1000 into their account, they get $1100. Any amount over $1000 only provides 10% extra. The DineXtra balance gets rolled over at the end of the fall semester but not at the end of the academic year. This system leaves many students feeling like DineXtra isn't worth the "discount" and end up buying meals with a credit card instead. Students worry that they won't be able to go through the entire balance by the end of the academic year but also feel that DineXtra is worth it with the larger "discounts".

If CMU Dining was to switch to an all declining system, then different meal plans would come with different balances. One concern for these all declining plans is that a student will spend all of their balance in a month and not have money for food for the remaining two months in the semester. One mitigation of this is to release the balances by week or biweekly. That means that every week or every other week, a certain amount would be added into the student's account. This balance could either operate as a "you use it you lose it' model, or it could rollover until the end of the semester or mini.

PROS	CONS
Students aren't restricted to an entree, side, and drink, or any other meal structures.	Meal plan structure does not explicitly encourage eating full/healthy meals
Students would not be restricted by meal periods	Students are at more risk of mismanaging their meal plan budget
	Dining would have to rely purely on commissions; revenue from missed meals would likely be very minimal

All-You-Care-To-Eat

A meal plan built around an All-You-Care-To-Eat (AYCTE) dining hall would be the largest change that dining at CMU could undergo. There have been attempts at AYCTE at CMU previously and although they have not succeeded, we want to explore this option again as a possibility because there are many benefits to this plan.

The biggest challenge to this plan would be the actual space and setup of the AYCTE dining hall. There has been an estimate done on Resnik Hall as an AYCTE dining hall and the renovation cost is around $15 million. We understand the weight of a decision to include this new addition, but we do believe it is worth exploring as we feel there are two ways to make it a successful investment into the CMU campus community.

This AYCTE location would likely be run by Chartwells and include staples from pizza and pasta to a salad bar and tacos. Not only would it provide these popular items but also a rotating section that would give students options to try new cuisines and dishes from around the world. An AYCTE dining hall provides the campus with a location to socialize and eat meals as a community and ensures that students receive a full meal when they need one.

The two ways we could see this plan working out is to have an AYCTE location in Resnik with a) an unlimited number of times that a student can eat at the dining hall in a day, or b) a fixed number of times a student can eat at the AYCTE location in a model we are calling the "Cruise Ship" plan.

Unlimited

An AYCTE location with an unlimited number of visiting times is a plan that various other Universities have employed and run successfully for generations. This plan would utilize Resnik as the primary place for students to eat their meals on campus as they can have as many meals there as they want, every day that it is open. This will allow athletes to have a hearty meal after working out and for groups of students to congregate over a meal and work on a project. Students will be able to choose their meals on the spot and have options to choose from every day. This would mean that independent vendors across campus would only accept a newly formed version of flex dollars and credit cards.

In short, this plan is not possible on Carnegie Mellon's campus. There is not the infrastructure to create a large enough AYCTE space and enough AYCTE spaces for an unlimited plan to work. As seen on other college campuses, the infrastructure would have to be focused solely on AYCTE and this would not be able to work at CMU. The majority of independent vendors would have to be done away with and this is not something that students would want and would also not be something that is financially viable for the university. Thus, the unlimited plan would not work. On the other hand there is a way to have AYCTE and that is in our second option.

Cruise Ship

We are calling the second option the "Cruise Ship" model because, like on a cruise, students will likely have one meal in the central dining hall and then all other meals or snacks will likely come off the ship or at another restaurant on the ship. The meal plans would largely stay the same with a reduction in blocks (from 205 to 135), and there would be one meal at the AYCE facility for every day where school is in session. You would have three levels of Flex that can be added: $700, $800 or $900 (you would save $4 on the $800, and $9 on the $900)

This plan is grounded in the idea that students will be given in their meal plan a fixed number of swipes at the AYCTE dining hall (spending one meal there every day, with no carryover and replenishing daily). A second year plan would be a much lower cost to give students more freedom and any subsequent plans would also be smaller for students. This plan also guarantees an AYCTE block every day, even if they have used all declining balance.

For example, a student could use their one swipe at the AYCTE in the morning and then use either blocks or flex at the other restaurants. The independent restaurants will also still maintain revenue as there will still be a large number of meals bought across campus throughout the day when students don't want the dining hall buffet. Ultimately this is a win because it is a new meal plan with the same or better value, with no price increase for the first year (price normally increases 4% yearly).

There are many details that would have to be thought through but the basic idea is that there would be an AYCTE option, likely with many staples that students enjoy, while still supporting unique independent vendors across campus.

PROS	CONS
Students are guaranteed a full meal when dining at AYCTE	The cost for creating the dining hall in Resnik is heavy upfront
Students will enjoy more flexible spending at other retail locations	Some students might not enjoy an AYCTE restaurant
Can better capture differential demand for food at the same cost per student	The independent vendors would get less business with more business to a Chartwells run AYCTE dining hall
Provides students new options on campus with rotating menus	Would require more AYCTE options across campus

Develops a stronger and larger sense of community on campus	Students might share concerns over the quality of food in an AYCTE buffet
Provides students with more options for food open all-day	Students who eat less food would get "less value" at the AYCTE location

Peer Analysis

Virginia Tech

At Virginia Tech University, students enjoy the third best on-campus food according to Niche while also utilizing a unique meal plan structure. With 47 dining locations including 10 dining centers. Various independent restaurants have locations on campus including Au Bon Pain. Students are offered a choice of 4 meal plans that range in price from $1,389 to $2,999 for a semester. For the main three plans, there is a base cost of $1,688 and the rest of the money goes towards the Flex Dollars that they will use across campus. Students using Flex Dollars to pay for meals get a 66% discount when dining at their D2 AYCTE Dining Hall. At all other locations on campus, they are given a 50% discount off the cash price. If students run out of Flex Dollars throughout the semester, they are able to purchase more Dining Dollars which gives students a 5% discount at on-campus restaurants.

VT is able to provide students with some of the best campus food in the country while having dining halls mixed with other restaurants. They make their meal plans something that most students want with a large discount on food prices for those on the meal plan while those using Dining Dollars or credit cards get a much smaller discount. Students can pay for a meal plan that is much cheaper than the one at CMU currently while also receiving good food in a variety of different locations. We do understand that VT has a much larger population of students and is not located in the city, that being said the meal plans are much cheaper and are a value for students.

Washington University in St. Louis

At Washington University in St. Louis (WashU), the meal plans are structured around an all declining system where the food is also ranked as one of the best in the nation. Like CMU they have many independent restaurants on campus that students can choose from. Each meal plan comes with a set number of points that act as the currency when purchasing food at any of their many locations. The main three plans for those living on campus range from $3,182 to $4,023 per semester. Contrary to CMU the points do carry over from fall to spring semester if a student is on campus both semesters. There is an option for students as well as faculty and staff to add Bear Bucks to their account throughout the semester as a tax-free way to purchase meals on campus.

These prices are in a larger range than the CMU prices and can be more expensive but the students seem to enjoy the food at a higher rate than most other Universities. After talking with a

current WashU student on a meal plan, I received feedback on the student perspective of the meal plan. He explained how he does not like the point system and that most students have to be very conscious about how much they are spending every day in order to stay on budget. The food is very good but the point system is not well liked. Most students will not be on a meal plan after their first year as there is not a large enough incentive to buy one when in a room off campus or with a kitchen. Most meals are $8-$12 and seem to be similar to CMU. They share a lot of the same difficulties that CMU has even though they have an all-declining meal plan. Overall the food is good but the meal plans are not worth it.

John Hopkins University

The meal plans at Johns Hopkins University are built around a few AYCTE dining halls and a two-year live on campus requirement. The options for places to eat feature multiple dining halls with many different options for all cuisines at all times of the day. A meal swipe will get a student into the dining hall or a meal equivalent at select other restaurants. There are also Dining Dollars for students to use to get snacks, coffee and other smaller items. Most meals are used through the meal swipes.

First year students are given the option for a meal plan that ranges with different amounts of meal swipes and dining dollars. There is an unlimited plan which is $4,381 a semester and allows students to have as many meals as they want and whenever they want. They are also given $250 in dining dollars. The other meal plans are all $4,091 and vary with a specific amount of meal swipes, either 21, 19, or 14 and a differing amount of dining dollars: $100, $300, or $500. Second year students are given different options depending on if they are living in an apartment or not. There are the same options as first years as well as other smaller options with less meal swipes or flex and some with just one or the other. For a student with a specific amount of blocks per week, the swipes reset on Sunday morning every week. For those with a semester-long plan, they do not reset until the end of the semester. There is also a 20 minute period between swipes.

Johns Hopkins consistently ranks high on many lists in quality of food in their dining halls. They have a two year live on campus requirement which allows for dining services to make money from two classes of students. That being said, meal plans are expensive but there are many options for how a student wants to structure their plan. This structure is similar to many other campuses with a campus that has AYCTE dining halls and a few other restaurants outside of those halls. There are many variations but this is a standard way to set it up.

Transparency and Data

Independent of the meal plan scenarios, through our analysis, we have identified a number of considerations with respect to our objectives of increasing transparency and making data-driven decisions. Currently, Dining's finances are almost entirely opaque to students and families. In the absence of clear communication explaining the reasoning behind meal plan sizes, costs, and

expiration, many students have developed a negative perception towards DIning. To many students, the lack of a refund for unused blocks and flex feels exploitative.
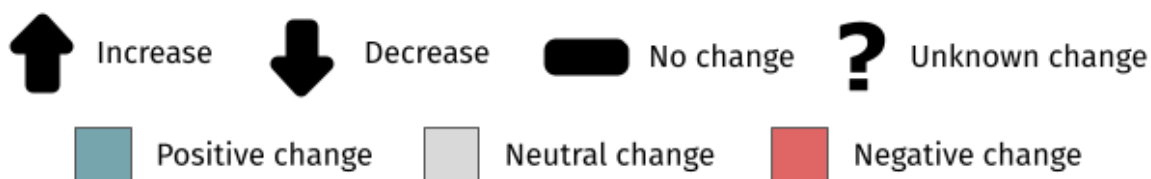
CMU Dining's revenue can be broken down into three streams: override, commission, and missed meals. Override is the difference between what students are charged and what Dining pays the vendor. Commission is the percentage Dining takes from all sales. Missed meals are the unused blocks and flex on a student's meal plan at the end of the semester. Dining's budget is paid for by some amount of each of these revenue streams. For the purposes of our analysis, we consider this budget rigid; **our aim is to improve how Dining generates their revenue, not to change their total revenue**. While override and commission source revenue equally from all meal plan holders, **missed meals disproportionately profits off of some students more than others**. Students with smaller appetites than the meal plan they purchase, especially those who would purchase a smaller meal plan if they had the option, unfairly end up covering more of Dining's costs than students who utilize their entire meal plan. A potential solution to this issue would be implementing a **base cost on all meal plans**, so that the burden of missed meals is equitably distributed to all meal plan holders.

In recent years, many organizations have begun prioritizing data-driven decision making. Dining and Student Affairs have been making intentional strides in this area. For instance, the new Secret Shopper program run by DSAC has provided valuable student feedback to Dining. We encourage Dining to continue their improvements in data collection and broaden the data that they collect. The **metrics** we provide in this report are a strong starting point. Dining should **leverage their ownership of all point of sales systems on campus** to collect additional data from each transaction. Another opportunity for data collection is to post **QR codes at Dining locations** to gather student feedback.

Summary of Peer Analysis

The following table compares each of our meal plan scenarios against our recommended metrics.

	BLOCK+FLEX (with changes)	ENTREE ONLY	ALL DECLINING	CRUISE SHIP
Churn Rate	No change	Increase (negative)	Unknown	Unknown
Non-Undergrads on Meal Plan	No change	Increase (positive)	Increase (positive)	Decrease (negative)
Missed Meals Rate	Decrease (positive)	Decrease (positive)	Decrease (positive)	Increase (negative)
Average Transaction Cost	No change	Decrease (positive)	Increase (negative)	Unknown
Relative Meal Plan Cost	No change	No change	No change	Increase (negative)
Student Satisfaction	Increase (positive)	Increase (positive)	Increase (positive)	Unknown

↑ Increase   ↓ Decrease   ▬ No change   ? Unknown change

■ Positive change   ■ Neutral change   ■ Negative change

Recommendations

Due to the timeline of this study, we do not recommend a specific meal plan scenario. Instead, we provide a series of recommendations for next steps in choosing a new meal plan:

1. **Block+Flex meal plan recommendations should be implemented as soon as possible**
2. **Cruise Ship and All Declining meal plan recommendations should be considered further**
3. **Unlimited meal plan does not meet our goals and we do not recommend its consideration**

Throughout this report, we have mentioned a number of recommendations that do not specifically relate to the meal plan system. Below, we provide a table summarizing all of our recommendations organized by the objective that they support.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS	
Improve Student Satisfaction	Examine methods for improving healthy options on blocks
	Raise standards for consistency, quality and adherence to block structure
	Require improved signage for clarity on block system
Protect CMU's Unique Eateries	Evaluate Chartwells' role on campus
	Evaluate the impact that any meal plan change, particularly increasing All-You-Care-To-Eat options, would have on independent vendors
Increase Transparency	Evaluate opportunities to improve transparency and equity by reducing Dining's reliance on missed meals
	Update SIO and Dining Services website to explain meal plan costs and how Dining's revenue is spent
	Ensure accuracy of vendor information on the Dining Services Website
Make Data-Driven Decisions	Conduct surveys to gather student opinion on meal plan scenarios
	Post student satisfaction surveys at dining locations, such as through QR code posters or on receipts
	Begin tracking and reporting recommended metrics

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