

CAMPUS

# Meal Plan Toolkit



Strategies to improve your  
elective meal plan participation



For the past several years, many colleges and universities have been addressing challenges related to declining student enrollment. More and more schools are taking a closer look at their revenue. They are sharpening their pencils as they evaluate four critical revenue streams:



**01. Tuition Fees**



**02. Endowments**  
(Private Gifts)



**03. Government Funding**  
(state grants, financial aid)



**04. Auxiliary Revenue**

As a means of increasing revenue streams, the question arises:

**“HOW DO WE GET MORE STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN ELECTIVE MEAL PLANS?”**

If you can relate, then we invite you to use this Meal Plan Toolkit in your planning. This is the same approach we use when reviewing and developing dining and meal plan programs for our clients. It will help you:



Determine your total revenue potential for meal plans



Learn the right questions to ask your students who are eligible for elective meal plans in order to market to them effectively



Position your college or university in relation to your competition

# Your Meal Plan Revenue Potential

Most campuses have mandatory meal plans for certain on-campus students, such as those in resident halls. Whether you are experiencing a decline of in-person enrollment in this pool of students or it remains steady, it is beneficial to tap into an often overlooked population for meal plans: **elective** meal plan participants.

That's right, the purpose of this Meal Plan Toolkit is to help you determine the potential additional meal plan revenue from elective meal plans.

How? By capturing on-campus residents, commuters, or flex students (those taking some classes virtually and some in-person) that don't have to buy meal plans but certainly will want to when they see your offerings and realize all of the benefits of having a meal plan.

The capture rate of your elective meal plan holds the most upside revenue potential.

Unless you add more mandatory housing AND fill it, growing the elective meal plan participants while maintaining your mandatory or fixed meal plan participation is the key.

**Let's go!**



# Probing Questions to Ask

First, you need to be able to persuasively articulate why students would continue on an elective meal plan. These critical questions will help you brainstorm in order to develop your strategic approach.

1.

## What's the value proposition of elective meal plans?

You will need to position the benefits of meal plans differently to an elective audience. Your target student has different needs than students on mandatory meal plans due to their different schedules or food preferences. How is the meal plan a better option than cooking for themselves, take-out, or dining out?

2.

## What type of dining experience would attract this population?

Which service hours would best suit this student's needs and preferences? What would be helpful from a customer service perspective? For example, grab-and-go containers may be helpful so that they can get food on their way to their jobs or internships. Which menu selections appeal more to them? How can you support these students with their academic schedules?

3.

## How can you segment potential elective meal plan participants?

Do they participate in athletics? Athletes tend to have specific dietary needs and nutritional requirements, and they often have less time to prepare meals themselves. What are their academic majors? Student teachers are gone all day in their classrooms, so they may appreciate extended dining hours. Look for other ways to segment students and identify that segment's potential needs.

4.

## What else do students want to purchase on-campus?

A parking pass? Sporting or other campus event tickets? Coffee and snacks? You can incentivize students to purchase an elective meal plan by bundling things like parking passes, bookstore credit, event tickets, and dining dollars at campus retail locations with the elective meal plan. Asking questions and understanding your unique campus culture will help you unearth what students most desire.

# Gathering Feedback

**Uncovering preferences, desires, and logistical considerations for your student population will enable you to develop target messaging that will resonate with the student and improve meal plan participation.**

When in doubt, ask the students directly. Don't guess!

When we work with our clients to formulate questions, we then pull together focus groups of students who don't currently have meal plans. They generally consist of both commuters and residential students and are most often juniors and seniors.

**Be sure to ask your students behavioral questions - what they do - versus what they want.**

It's easy to make inaccurate assumptions if you are not asking the right questions or the right type of questions. Your goal is to gather feedback and insights from students that will drive modifications to your meal plan offerings to make them attractive to a broader range of students.

## **DON'T FORGET THE PARENTS!**

**Colleges and universities often neglect to market directly to parents. For some students, parents or caregivers ultimately make the meal plan decision. Marketing campaigns directed at this group can be highly effective, as many parents want to be assured that their students have consistent access to nutritious meals.**





# Competitive Intelligence

**Understanding your competition will help you differentiate your offerings.**

Campus dining often faces competition from a variety of commercial restaurants and retailers. Quick service restaurants like McDonald’s, Panera, Subway, and Qdoba are all expanding their reach with the use of call-ahead apps and delivery services such as UberEats and GrubHub. These restaurants also benefit from brand recognition and the students’ perceived value and quality of the menu offerings.

Traditional grocery stores and supermarkets provide convenient options and “grocerant” environments, and many offer delivery or order-ahead pickup. Even value-priced groceries from ALDI and Walmart pose a threat. Some students are shopping at warehouse clubs like Costco and Sam’s Club and splitting the oversized portions among their friends.

**Presenting the specific advantages your meal plan has over other relevant competitors makes your positioning more impactful.**

Competitor	Basic Information	What’s Challenging?	Why is a Meal Plan the Better Solution?
UberEats UberEats.com	Main Offering: Door-to-door restaurant food delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery Fees</li> <li>• Depending on your area, limited availability and variety of food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Order ahead mobile app</li> <li>• No delivery fees</li> <li>• Variety of options</li> <li>• Less waiting</li> </ul>
Qdoba qdoba.com	Main Offering: Mexican, fast casual restaurant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery Fees</li> <li>• Limited Hours</li> <li>• Same menu everyday: taco salad, burrito, tacos, nachos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can eat between classes, saves time since don’t have to drive off campus</li> <li>• Open for breakfast</li> <li>• Many types of global food</li> </ul>
Aldi	Main Offering: Groceries, discounted prices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have to leave campus, have a car, have a large enough refrigerator space to store food</li> <li>• Takes a lot of time to plan, shop, prep, cook, and clean</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal food waste and no storing food</li> <li>• More times for studies, athletics, clubs, internships, work, volunteering, and fun.</li> </ul>

# Get the Word Out!

**Leveraging all of your marketing channels in a timely manner gets your meal plan offerings in front of as many students as possible at just the right time.**

Understand your academic calendar and when decisions need to be made for room and board so you can align your meal plan marketing efforts accordingly.

Electronic and print promotional pieces sent to eligible students and/or their parents provide the most targeted approach. Other effective platforms may include word-of-mouth and grassroots efforts, pop-up ads during online registration, or special dining-related events and promotions. These will help gain the attention of students eligible for elective meal plans.

## What gets measured gets managed.

Determine your meal plan goals. If you could get 10% of students to enroll in elective meal plans, would that number be helpful, valuable, profitable? Which subset of the total eligible students represents the biggest opportunity? For example, upper-class students who are athletes living on campus might be your sweet spot.

## Make Your Plan Today.

- What is your number one goal for meal plans in the next fiscal year?
- What are the revenue goals for Q1? The rest of the year?
- What is your plan for achieving your goal? Do you have enough information to develop your plan?
- Which segment(s) of students will you be targeting? And what are the questions you will be asking them?
- What tweaks and changes need to be made, and by when, to enhance the dining experience for elective meal plan students?
- What's the message and value proposition?
- How will you creatively bundle other offerings?
- How will you promote the meal plans? Which marketing channels? Do you have the right resources in place to implement this plan?
- What is the timetable to execute this plan?
- Who is the decision maker (the student or the parent)?
- How will you know that the plan is working or that you need to change your strategy?



If you would like further assistance in assessing your meal plan strategy, Creative Dining is here to help, no strings attached. Call us for a free consultation and learn how to expand and enhance your meal plan participation. We will share our best insights based on 31 years in the hospitality management business.

**Luke Apiecionek | Great Lakes Region**  
[lapiecionek@creativedining.com](mailto:lapiecionek@creativedining.com)

**Susan Smith | Southeast Region**  
[ssmith@creativedining.com](mailto:ssmith@creativedining.com)



@creativedining | 616.748.1700 | [creativedining.com](http://creativedining.com)  
One Royal Park Drive, Suite #3, Zeeland, MI 49464