

# DINING AT OHIO STATE: Task Force Report



1/13/2015

The Ohio State Undergraduate Student Government

## **Dining Task Force**

This report was written by the twelve members of USG's Dining Task Force with the intentions of gathering student input and comparing meal plans from other schools in order to recommend a direction in which the University might go regarding dining plans for future on-campus students at The Ohio State University.

*chaired by:*

**Annie Greer**  
Director of Student Affairs

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## Introduction

Dining is a topic that is consistently and unwaveringly relevant on college campuses across the United States. Whether the discussion is about the quality and variety of food, the availability of options for those with restricted dietary needs, the slow and steady increase of meal plan prices, the transparency behind the finances, or the facilities in which the food is prepared and served, the construct of university dining is constantly evolving and changing to meet the needs of the students, the parents, and the university. Dining is something students inevitably interact with multiple times a day, and for this reason there will always be questions and discussions surrounding it.

This is why it was no surprise to the Undergraduate Student Government when campus was abuzz about the new meal plans that were implemented this past fall. To gather more student feedback on the successes and the failures of the new plans, USG partnered with the Residence Hall Advisory Council to present the RHAC Dining Discussions, a series where students' questions could be answered by Senior Director of OSU Dining Services, Zia Ahmed. It was through these sessions that it was confirmed that further research on meal plans—not only at Ohio State, but at universities all over the country—was required to fully understand how dining has become such a complex issue on campuses nationwide.

In the following report, the Dining Task Force aims to explain the history of Ohio State's meal plans, break down the nuances of the most recently implemented meal plan, present student feedback gathered via our Task Force survey, and voice our recommendations for the direction that we believe Dining should take here at The Ohio State University.

## The Task Force

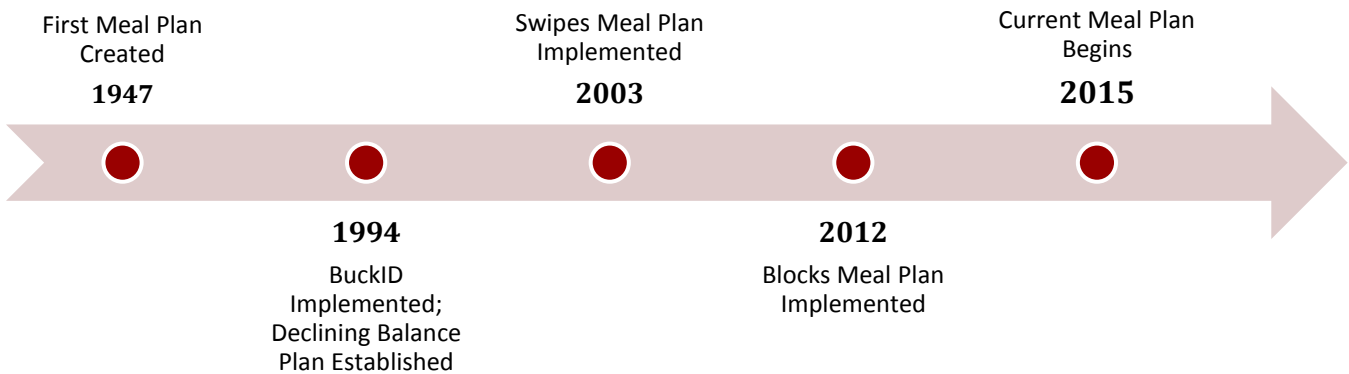
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*Special thanks to the Residence Hall Advisory Council and their dedication to the Dining Discussions and the Task Force Dining Survey, both of which greatly impacted the outcomes of this report.*

## Historical Context: How Did We Get Here?

Meal plans at Ohio State have changed considerably since their debut in 1947. Meal plans, as we know them today, took on a whole new face around 1994 with the creation of the BuckID. At the time, meal plans would simply come with \$100 loaded on the BuckID to spend at on-campus fast-food locations. This structure is what many today would call “declining balance,” or giving the students dining credit upfront to be budgeted throughout the academic quarter. In 2003, the university moved away from their contract-based system in order to adopt “swipes.” Each plan came with a quarterly allotment of swipes, which could be exchanged for meals of varying sizes based on location. A swipe would generally be traded in for an entree and two sides, or some equivalent. Although the plan had its benefits, it was very hard for students to determine whether or not they were getting full value from their meal plans.



During the semester conversion, the plans were switched over to the “Blocks” system (starting with the 2012 academic year). The blocks plan, at its start, consisted solely of a one-semester allotment of blocks that would expire at the end of the term. This meant that the number of “blocks” a student had would roll over from week to week. Each block carried a \$5 value which could not be subdivided. Because a block could not be subdivided, students would either be required to make up the remaining balance of a transaction with money not from their meal plan (i.e. pay an extra dollar for a \$6.00 purchase), or waste an entire block on a value less than \$5. While this plan seemed wasteful for students, many saw it as a step up from the less transparent “swipes” plan, especially since—unlike swipes—the unit of currency (blocks) had a fixed monetary value attached to it (\$5). At the end of the Autumn 2012 semester, many students had extra blocks left over. In response, Dining Services implemented a buy-back program where students could exchange their extra blocks for money (\$3 per block in BuckID cash). To correct for this, all following semesters under blocks contained smaller semester-long plans, as well as weekly options.

## Why We Ended Blocks

The blocks system remained implemented for a full three years. While the idea of being forced to spend money in \$5.00 increments may have seemed wasteful, most students would use up all of the blocks or find a way to do so. The “Missed Meal Factor” under the blocks system was 2%\* – this means that only 2% of students had blocks going unused. However, the 2% of students that didn’t use all of their blocks were very upset and vocal about it.

The Ohio State University Dining Services hired a professional third-party dining consultant and created a committee/focus group with representatives from USG, RHAC, and other organizations. In Autumn 2015 during the RHAC Dining Discussions, it was reported that the focus group supported the idea of ending rollover and changing to a weekly-basis plan to encourage the use of meal plans on a weekly basis. Changing to a plan that provided a set number of meals/meal plan currency per week would potentially help students with budgeting. In addition, this focus group spoke out against the idea of an “Administrative Fee” paid at the beginning of each semester\*—this is a fee that is often associated with plans similar to “declining balance” or a debit card structure. For these reasons, Ohio State changed from the “block” meal plans to the plans that are in place today.

## Dining On-Campus: Ohio State’s Current Meal Plan

### *Understanding the Current Plan*

Ohio State Dining Services has over 27 Dining Locations on campus. How are students able to utilize their plan at these different locations? Each plan has three components to it.

#### **(1) WEEKLY TRADITIONAL “VISITS”**

Visits are weekly units that can be used to access 3 Traditional “All-You-Can-Eat” Dining locations on campus. Each meal plan (with the exception of the Unlimited Plan) has a set number of visits that a student can use each week to gain entry to these dining halls. If a student does not want to visit a Traditions location, however, but would still like to use their meal plan, Visits can be used in two alternative ways:

**(A) Dining Dollar Exchange** Each visit can be traded in for 5 Dining Dollars, a currency that can be used at all 27 dining locations. This exchange must occur during a transaction; one cannot exchange Visits for Dining Dollars and save the Dining Dollars for later.

**(B) Visit Exchange (VX)** Each visit can be used for a Visit Exchange or “VX” at specific dining locations (similar to a “You Pick Two” at Panera and other well-known restaurants). This option is available at some locations and was implemented during the first few weeks of the Autumn 2015 semester as a result of student feedback regarding meal plan flexibility.

# VISIT EXCHANGE: MARKETS

A Visit Exchange (VX) gives dining plan holders the option to exchange one traditional visit for his or her choice of select entrees, sides and a drink. The Visit Exchange (VX) options below are available in **Curl Market, Union Market and Marketplace on Neil.**

Choose one item from each category

## 1 Entree

- Small "build your own" salad or yogurt parfait
- 8 ounce cup of soup with roll or crackers and Grab n' Go side salad with dressing
- 12 ounce bowl of soup with roll or crackers
- Any Inspired by Fresh Grab n' Go sandwich or wrap
- Any one (1) regular sized panini, wrap or dell sandwich (toasted, hot or cold)
- Regular sized pasta entrée with sauce and toppings

## 2 Side

*piece of seasonal whole fruit*

- apple
- banana
- pear
- orange

## 3 Drink

- 12 ounce water
- 8 ounce chocolate or %2 milk
- 24 ounce beverage from a Coke Freestyle Machine



Figure One: An example of a "VX" menu for Market Locations.

**(2) DINING DOLLARS**

Dining Dollars are a currency that can be used at any of Ohio State’s 27 dining locations and qualify for a 10% discount at these locations. Students receive a set number of Dining Dollars with their selected meal plan, and these Dining Dollars roll over from week to week and semester to semester until the student’s graduation. Students can also choose to add Dining Dollars to their meal plan throughout the course of the semester.

*(This is why the aforementioned exchange from Visits to 5 Dining Dollars is useful—while unused visits disappear at the end of the week, unused Dining Dollars do not.)*

**(3) BUCKID CASH**

BuckID Cash is a currency that can be used at more than 300 vendors surrounding Ohio State’s campus, in addition to locations on-campus. BuckID cash can be used at OSU’s 27 dining locations, however, more often it is used at locations on High Street (i.e. Panera, Chipotle, Barnes & Noble) or for non-food purchases on campus (ie. printing at the library, laundry in the residence halls). Students receive a set amount of BuckID Cash along with their meal plan, and the student can add to this amount throughout the year as needed. BuckID Cash, similar to Dining Dollars, rolls over until graduation.

**Below are Ohio State’s five on-campus meal plan options and their prices, located on the OSU Dining Services website.** *(Not pictured are the commuter and off-campus options.)*

	UNLIMITED	SCARLET 14	GRAY 10	ACCESS 7	BUCKEYE 5
Weekly Traditional Visits	UNLIMITED	14	10	7	5
Traditional Visit Exchange	N/A	YES	YES	YES	YES
Dining Dollars	\$100	\$300	\$300	\$300	\$900
BuckID Cash	OPTION TO ADD	\$150	\$150	\$75	\$100
Total Price (per semester)	\$1,850	\$2,258	\$1,895	\$1,295	\$2,015



## USG Dining Survey

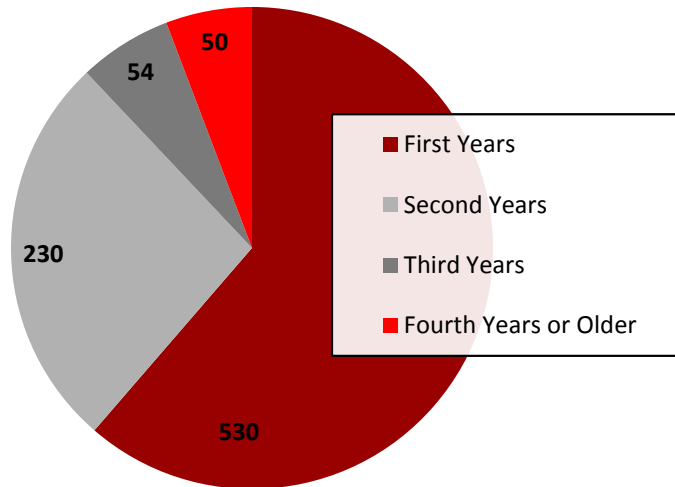
In the Autumn Semester of 2015, USG partnered with RHAC (the Residence Hall Advisory Council) to host the RHAC Dining Discussions, a series where students were invited to ask questions and share opinions on the new meal plan with Zia Ahmed, Senior Director of Dining Services at Ohio State. These Dining Discussions proved to be an effective way to gather student opinion and ask questions of why and how dining at OSU has changed this year. Information learned at these events will be referenced throughout this document.

Following these Dining Discussions, USG was inspired to investigate further. Upon the creation of the Dining Task Force, USG released a survey to Ohio State to gather student opinions on the current meal plan. With help from RHAC and other food-related organizations on campus, USG's anonymous survey resulted in 864 responses from students interested in the topic of meal plans.

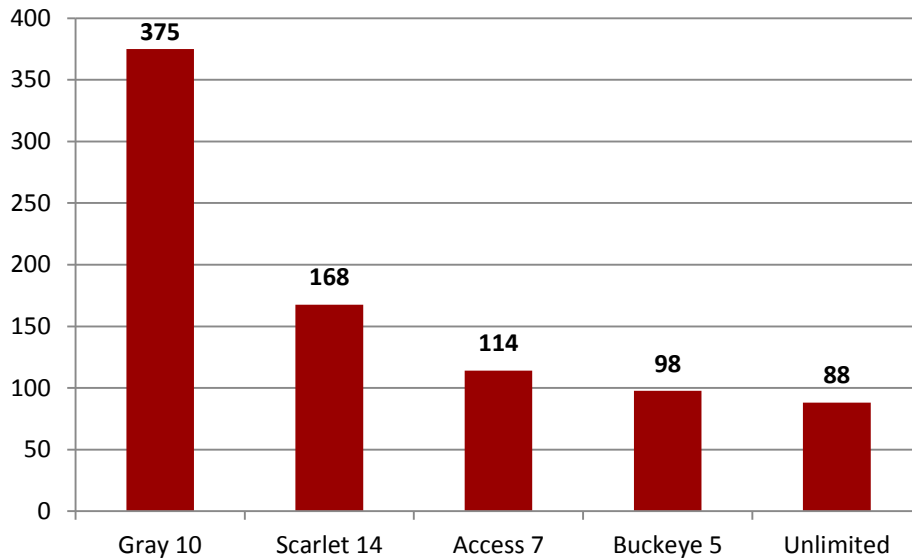
**94.3%** of responses were from **ON-CAMPUS STUDENTS**, and the remaining students lived Off-Campus or were Commuter students.

**89.4%** of responses were from **FIRST & SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS**.

### Survey Responses: Student Rank



## Survey Responses: Student Meal Plan



*A Quick Note:* While students with the Off-Campus/Commuter meal plans, Carmen 1 and Carmen 2, completed the survey, the Task Force decided to restrict data analysis to students holding one of the five On-Campus meal plans. The first- and second-year students who purchase On-Campus plans are more invested in and reliant on the services. Thus, the remainder of the report will focus on the 5 meal plans shown above.

### ***Analysis of the Current Meal Plan***

Results of this survey point to a few key reasons as to why students are questioning and/or dissatisfied with the current meal plan. Especially during the Dining Discussions, students revealed a concern for the increase in complexity of the meal plan’s structure. This complexity includes the concepts of “Visits” and “Dining Dollars,” both of which affect students and their ability to budget their meal plan properly. As a result of the complexity, student participants in the USG Dining Survey expressed that they view the meal plan as inconvenient, unaffordable, and uncondusive to a healthy lifestyle.

### **Complexity and a Loss of Faith**

The implementation of any new meal plan will come with a certain amount of time in which students do not fully understand the best way to utilize their plan. This is a natural occurrence for every student, especially for first years who have never budgeted for their own meals. Students overwhelmingly expressed, however, in both the Dining Discussions and in the Dining Survey that the complexity of this meal plan, in particular, was overwhelming and continued to affect their view of the plan beyond the initial selection of a meal plan and adjustment phase.

The dissatisfaction with the plan’s complexity was often tied to a growing lack of faith in the university’s pricing and affordability. One student elaborated, “I feel misled, misinformed, and abused by my University, which deliberately abstracted the campus dining process in order to find more

money from its students; the lack of clarity and student input in the selection process was abominable.” Another student commented, “The current meal plan is overly complicated, which seems like a cover so that OSU can trick people out of extra money.”

➤ **51.3% of students *feel that they are not getting their money’s worth under the university’s current meal plan.***

While the majority of students express satisfaction with OSU dining menu options and food quality, a more significant number of students expressed that they feel the meal plans are more of a profit venture than they are a way to provide affordable, healthy food for students.

One such statistic contributing to this sentiment is the “Missed Meal Factor,” or a way that OSU Dining Services measures how often students use their meal plan. The goal of an effective meal plan is to minimize the Missed Meal Factor.

On the Block Meal Plan, the Missed Meal Factor was **2%**.

As of Week 10 of the Autumn 2015 semester, the Missed Meal Factor was **8.3%.\***

This means that *proportion of meals that are paid for but never redeemed has increased by 6.3% under the new meal plan*, leading to the dissatisfaction among students that was vocalized in the survey. This statistic was taken from Week 10, providing an adequate period of time for students to adjust to and fully understand the new meal plan.

## Vanishing Visits and their Impact

Due to the nature of Visits and their disappearance at the end of each week, “Vanishing Visits” has become a concern for students. While rollover of these visits—similar to blocks—has potential to lead to poor student budgeting and loss of money at the end of the semester, visits provided on a weekly basis are inflexible and can result in weekly loss of money for students. The weekly expiration penalizes students who have classes during Traditions Dining Hall hours, as well as those heading home for the weekend or eating lunch with parents. Unused visits vanish at the end of the week, and the Dining Survey revealed consistent student dissatisfaction as a result.

As was mentioned previously, the Missed Meal Factor has risen to 8.3%<sup>o</sup>; much of this statistic can be attributed to the vanishing visits. Collectively, students lose thousands of dollars in value every week because using all of their visits at Traditions locations is inconvenient and, for many, impossible.

➤ **42.2% of students said they have visits left over at the end of the week.**

There is some evidence that the structure of the meal plan is the cause for discontent among the students. Students with a set number of visits per week tend to view the meal plan as more cost-effective than those who chose a more expensive plan with “more flexibility.” Students on the unlimited plan, who do not have to deal with vanishing visits and complicated exchanges, reported some of the best opinions of the current plans on the USG Dining Survey. Only 3.6% of these students did not feel confident in their ability to budget their meal plan effectively, and only one third of these students felt that they were not getting their money’s worth out of their meal plan.

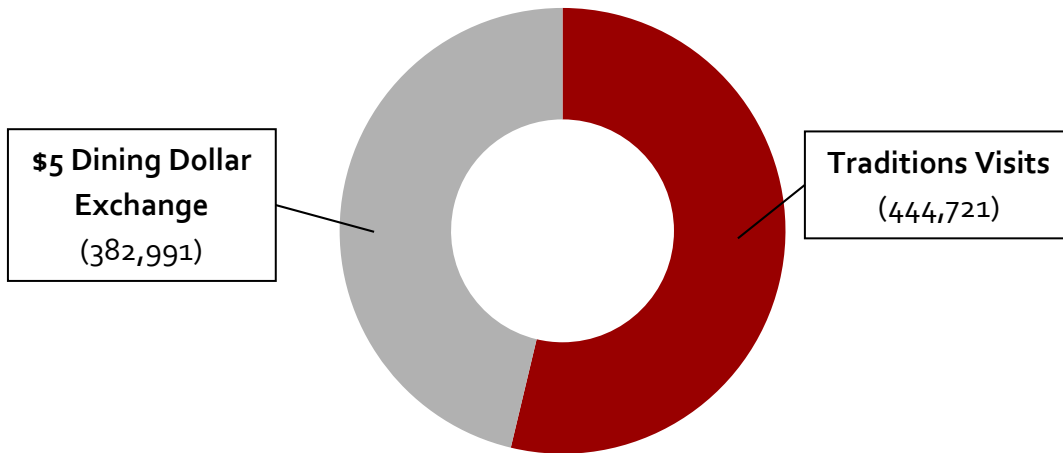
**However, many of these students complain that they are only able to utilize 3 out of Ohio State’s 27 dining locations.** So while the unlimited meal plan seems to be the most cost-effective option, it does so by eliminating the flexibility and variety that Ohio States exhibits on admissions tours to potential students. Shouldn’t we strive for all five on-campus options to be both affordable *and* flexible? The “vanishing visit” makes it difficult for Ohio State to achieve this goal.

***Students should not have to sacrifice flexibility, variety, and quality of food in order to achieve affordability.***

## The Dining Dollar Dilemma

According to the Missed Meal Factor discussed above, 91.7% of visits purchased by students are ultimately redeemed in some manner. Upon first glance, this seems like a positive reflection of the current plan. However, this is mainly due to the fact that many students use the remainder of their visits in the form of the Dining Dollar Exchange. As was stated in the Meal Plan explanation, students may exchange their weekly Visits for \$5 in Dining Dollars.

## Student Use of Visits as of Week 10



Note: Since the VX Program was not implemented until later in the semester, the numbers in this graphic do not include the number of times students utilized the VX Program.<sup>o</sup>

The graph above displays that according to Dining Services statistics from Week 1 through Week 10, it is clear that **students exchange their Visits for 5 Dining Dollars almost equally as often as they use Visits at Traditions dining locations.**

### → Why are these numbers troubling?

Each meal at a Traditions location—whether breakfast, lunch, or dinner—costs a student on the meal plan one Visit. However, if a faculty member or a non-student who was not on the meal plan wanted to dine at a Traditions dining facility (Scott Traditions, Morrill Commons, or Kennedy Commons), the prices he/she would pay in cash or by credit card are shown below. Also shown below is the cost of a visit to a Traditions location if a student were to pay using Dining Dollars, which qualifies for a 10% discount at all OSU dining locations.

Meal	Cost (in cash)	Cost (in Dining Dollars)
Breakfast	\$7.00	\$6.30
Lunch	\$11.00	\$9.90
Dinner	\$12.00	\$10.80
Average Value	\$10.00	\$9.00

This means that **the average value of a Visit for any given meal is: \$10.00 cash or \$9.00 in Dining Dollars.**

The values above are not advertised to students<sup>o</sup>. This means that every time a student exchanges a Visit for 5 Dining Dollars, they are losing an average of 4 Dining Dollars, or \$4.50, and as was shown earlier, students use this option often. In the USG Dining Survey, 82.9% of respondents say they use the \$5 Exchange, and 46.8% of first and second year respondents said they use the \$5 Exchange once a day or more. This means that 82.9% of students are regularly losing money in these \$4.50 increments, and 46.8% of students are losing \$4.50 at least once a day, totaling at least \$30 per week.

Whether or not they know it, **almost half of first and second year students lose unreasonable amounts of money every week** because they believe that the \$5 Dining Dollar Exchange is a good deal.

Using this loss of \$4.50 per Dining Dollar Exchange, it can be calculated that students lost \$1.72 million between Weeks 1 and 10 of the Autumn 2015 semester. Since Visits change in dollar value depending on the meal, student loss was between half a million dollars and \$2.49 million.

*As of Week 10 of Autumn 2015 semester, there were 382,991 \$5 Dining Dollar exchanges, leading to a student loss of up to \$2.49 million.*

*After Week 10, there had been only 444,721 visits used at Traditions locations—their original intention.*

Average Loss = ( $\$4.50 * 382,991$  Dining Dollar Exchanges = \$1,723,560)

Minimum Loss = ( $\$1.50 * 382,991$  Dining Dollar Exchanges = \$574,487)

Maximum Loss = ( $\$6.50 * 382,991$  Dining Dollar Exchanges = \$2,489,442)

72.7% of students said they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: “I feel confident in my ability to budget my meal plan effectively.” It is not out of the question to assume that many of these students don’t know how much money they are losing each time they use the \$5 Dining Dollar Exchange. While on the surface, the Dining Dollar Exchange seems like a means by which students can increase their flexibility and use their Visits at more than 3 out of all 27 dining locations, it is a complex and unfair exchange that wastes students’ money, potentially without them even knowing.

## How the Meal Plan Affects Student Health

Besides the issues created by the complexity of the current meal plan, the most concerning and unanticipated result of the USG Dining Survey was the number of students who noted that the meal plan structure has forced them into unhealthy eating habits. While the Survey did not include any questions regarding the impact of the new meal plan on student health, the “Additional Comments” section reveals an abundance of input from students on the subject.

**"I go hungry all the time.** I am paying so much money and not getting my money's worth."  
 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Gray 10 Plan

"I've spoken to several 1st and 2nd year students who have budgeted **one large meal per day** for themselves, and perhaps a snack, which is unhealthy and frankly ridiculous."  
 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Access 7 Plan

"This meal plan **forces me to limit myself to two meals a day** with the rare possibility of a coffee or bagel for breakfast and I *still* run out of visits too early in the week."  
 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Gray 10 Plan

"By stretching the Gray 10, it has [led] me to [eat] approximately **one meal a day** and then a couple of times [per day] towards the end of the week."  
 – 1<sup>st</sup> Year, Gray 10 Plan

"I believe that this new meal plan has **taken a toll on my health** because I am eating excessively large meals at two points during the day, and I am starving at other times."  
 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Scarlet 14 Plan

"This new meal plan restricts me and makes me feel like **I can only have one proper meal per day.**"  
 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Access 7 Plan

"[I] can only eat about **2 meals a day on this plan if I'm lucky.** With the blocks plans I could eat up to 4 times in one day."  
 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Buckeye 5 Plan

As is displayed above, the commentary is not directly correlated to a specific plan—students from 4 of the 5 on-campus plans reported issues with the health implications of the new meal plan. One contributing factor to the sentiments of these students may be that, according to OSU Dining Services as stated in RHAC's Dining Discussions, **only two of the five on-campus meal plans are designed to be "full" meal plans**\*. This means that students are expected to add Dining Dollars to their plan on top of the Visits and Dining Dollars provided upon purchasing a plan.

However, the fact that the Buckeye 5, Access 7, and Gray 10 plans are only "partial plans" is advertised *nowhere* on the website, which is a lack of transparency that may be leading to student confusion. The Buckeye 5, Access 7, and Gray 10 meal plans are advertised as flexible options for busy students—alternatives to the only "full" plans (Unlimited and Scarlet 14) which force students to eat at Traditional dining locations. Students are being punished for choosing a plan based on flexibility without knowing that the plans are not designed to be "full" plans. In addition, many students' parents cannot afford to fund their children's meal plan beyond the plan purchased from the university, leaving students who unknowingly purchased one of the three "partial" plans hungry and without funds.

**"I also feel like I only can afford one meal a day now that I am out of dining dollars and that is unhealthy."** – survey response submitted November 12, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Access 7

First and second year students should not have to worry about how they are going to strategize what they eat. The transition from high school to college can be overwhelming for underclassman. The convenience of an on-campus meal plan should be intrinsically designed to prevent students from worrying about having enough food. Due to student perception that they are unable to eat properly because of their meal plans, students feel that they are wasting their money and have lost trust in Ohio State Dining Services. Whether or not the current meal plans were designed with the intention of decreasing value for students, The Ohio State University should find these statistics and concerns to be a compelling call to action—enough so that a change must be made.

### Inconvenience & Unaffordability

Although it is not realistic to expect the entire student body to agree on a meal plan, there should not be such a disparity of habits where some students are overstocking and continuously forced to spend Visits while others are barely maintaining healthy eating. For example, one student commented, "I think that it is a huge inconvenience that the Visits don't roll over every week, making me have to use all the Visits every week instead of just using what I need." Simultaneously, many students are restricting themselves from eating three meals a day, as was discussed in the previous section. A meal plan should make obtaining food an ease for on-campus students so that they may focus on other matters such as their academics and extracurricular activities.

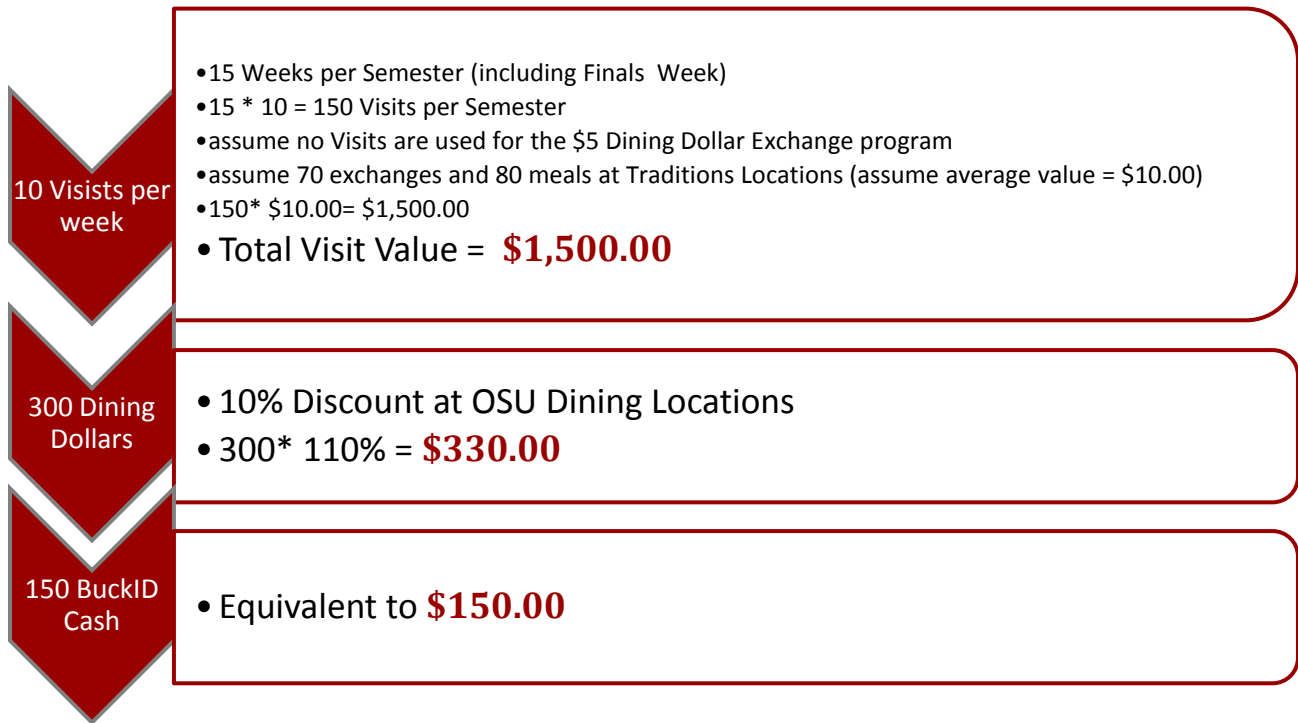
Even first years, who have no preconceptions of what a meal plan looks like, have issues with the current meal plan. Only 34.5% of first years agreed or strongly agreed that they were getting their money's worth out of the current meal plan. If such a large number of students with no real basis for judging the relative merits of a plan are not content, there should be a reason for concern. The feedback from students of other years, who have seen many different plans, were noticeably even more negative.

There are many who would argue that a plan designed to encourage students to eat at Traditions locations is the tradeoff for a plan that is more affordable. This argument would indeed justify the recent increase in emphasis on Traditions Dining under the new meal plan. However, many students feel that the new meal plan is even less affordable than in previous years.

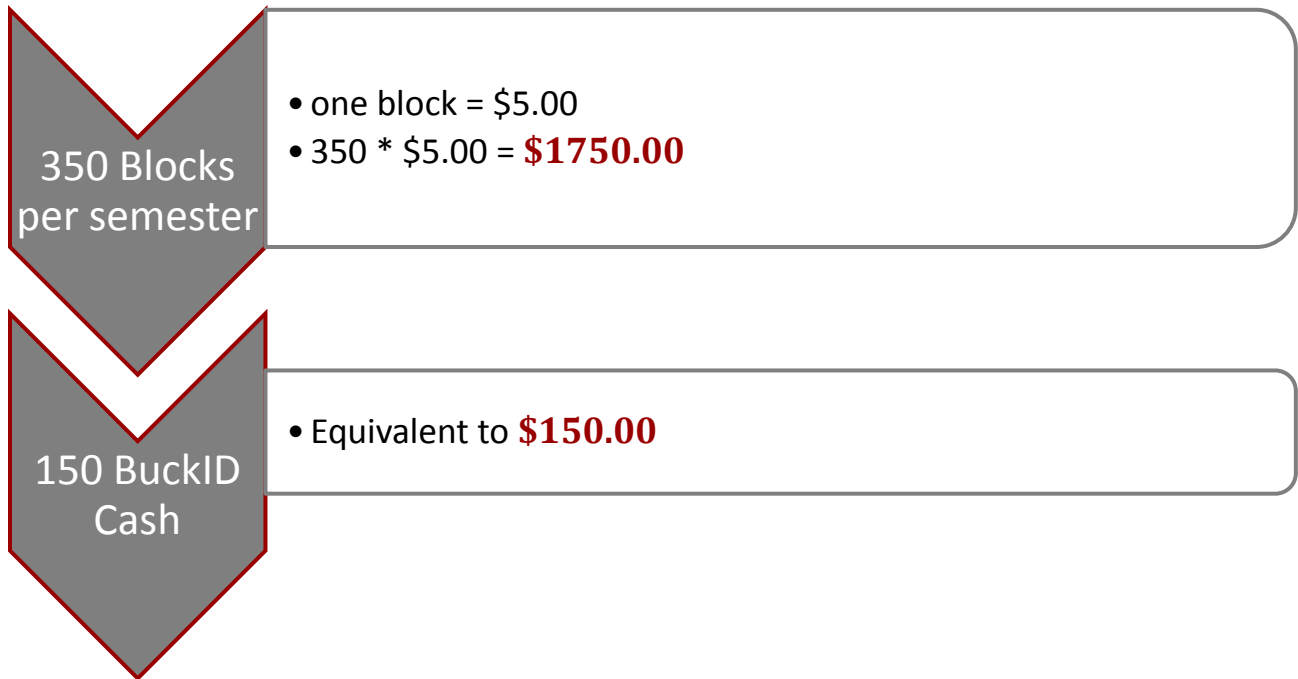
"I had the block 350 meal plan last year which costed \$1895 a semester. I had more than enough food to last all semester and not once did I have to worry about whether or not I could afford to eat. This year, the equivalent meal plan costing \$1895 is the Gray 10 meal plan."

Note that the student who provided the previous quote is on the Gray 10 Plan—this is one of the "partial plans." **This partial plan is the exact same price—\$1895—as the 350 Block Plan of years past, which was advertised as a "full plan."** Below is a comparison of the value attached to these two plans.





**Gray 10 Plan TOTAL VALUE = \$1,980.00**



**350 Blocks Plan TOTAL VALUE = \$1,900.00**

*It is worth pointing out that, under the new meal plans, the behavior of the student dictates the exact value of the Visits (whether or not the student uses Dining Dollar Exchanges or Visit Exchanges). Pages 11-13 explain why expiring visits and \$5 Exchanges generate lost value. \$1,980 is a very generous assessment, as few students are able to redeem the complete value of the Gray 10 plan. Calculations use the average value of Traditions Visits as reported by OSU Dining Services.*

It is also useful to analyze the affordability of what is defined as a “full” meal plan—one which is designed to last a student an entire semester without additional Dining Dollars or BuckID cash added. Let’s take a look at the Scarlet 14—the only “full” plan with flexibility for Visit Exchanges and Dining Dollar Exchanges.

The Scarlet 14 Plan comes with 14 Visits per week, 300 Dining Dollars, and \$150 in BuckID cash\* .

(A) Assuming a student wants to get the most value out of their meal plan (and therefore will not use visits for Visit Exchanges or Dining Dollar Exchanges), these 14 Visits account for 14 Traditions meals per week, or **2 Traditions meals per day**.

(B) This means that every day, that student must pay for one meal using Dining Dollars or BuckID cash. A semester is 15 weeks (including finals), meaning **105 days**.

(C) Due to the 10% discount on Dining Dollars, the 300 Dining Dollars provided is equivalent to \$330. This means the student has  $\$330 + \$150 = \mathbf{\$480}$  to fund all **105 non-Visit meals**.

(D)  $\$480 / 105 = \mathbf{\$4.57}$  per non-Visit meal, or less than the value of a block. Inevitably, the student will end up adding additional personal funds to their plans, as this is not enough money to purchase a healthy meal.

*A student who is using their Scarlet 14 “full” meal plan exactly as it is designed (no Dining Dollar Exchanges or Visit Exchanges) will inevitably be forced to use personal funds, as \$4.57 per non-Visit meal is not enough to purchase a substantially healthy meal either on-campus or off-campus.*

Ohio State is a school that encourages students to get involved on campus and invest in all of the opportunities that Columbus has to offer. Student feedback implies that the current meal plans work directly against this goal, punishing active students who do not have time to sit down for all 5, 7, 10, or 14 meals per week. Even the students that make the time to use all Visits at traditions locations are penalized with an unaffordable plan, while 24 of the 27 dining locations go unused by students forced to commit to the Traditional-style dining hall.

One student summarized, “Having worked as an orientation leader this summer, I was required to be extremely well-versed in these new meal plans. ***I believe that they are excellent ideas in theory, but they simply cannot work on Ohio State's campus in practice.*** Blocks, despite being in five-dollar increments, have proven to be far more flexible for on-campus students, considering most of us don't have time to sit down at Scott Traditions or Kennedy Commons ten times a week.”

Ohio State Dining Services has done a great job considering student feedback when formulating new plans and making changes suggested by the student body; for instance, the VX (Visit Exchange) program was implemented as a result of the first RHAC Dining Discussion. Since there is a strong, positive record of working with Dining Services to adapt for an affordable, flexible, and healthy plan,

USG sees the results of the USG Dining Task Force Survey and concerns precipitating from the current plan as a significant stimulus for action on behalf of the university.

## Results Summary

The success of a meal plan can be measured in many different ways. One of the most important aspects of a meal plan is the student perception of it. First and foremost, students are paying for a service, and it is logical that it should be useful and desirable to them. The complexity, unaffordability, inconvenience, unhealthiness, and lack of transparency of the current meal plan are concerns voiced by the student body via the USG Dining Task Force Survey that should serve as a call to action. Dining is becoming a critical field in which schools compete for the best students, and if there is a considerable student population that views current meal plans as flawed, it will be reflected in the long-term health implications of the university as a whole. For these reasons, it is clear that student concerns with the meal plans should serve as an important source of feedback for the university.

# Feeding Young Americans: How Ohio State's Approach Compares to that of Universities Nationwide

## *What We're Doing Right*

The Ohio State University strives for excellence in all areas of the university, and dining is an opportunity for the university to teach students skills for when they are on their own after graduation. While there is always room for improvement on the meal plan, The Ohio State University excels at some aspects of the meal plan in comparison to other universities around the nation. For example, Dining Dollars rolling over until graduation is a unique trait of the OSU meal plan. While most universities have dining dollars expiring per semester or at the end of one year, Ohio State offers students the opportunity to have dining dollars roll over until graduation. In addition, ***Ohio State does a fantastic job at offering a variety of menu choices to students*** in three traditional locations and twenty-four additional locations around campus. Numbers such as these are incomparable to those at other universities. Not only is the variety great, but Ohio State is very conscious of special dietary needs and allergy needs, offering an adequate supply of options for those whose needs require special attention. Finally, Ohio State's meal plans have always been, and continue to be, on the more affordable end of the spectrum when it comes to meal plan costs at institutions across the country.

## ***Traditional-Style Dining***






The Ohio State University has three traditional dining locations, with one on each side of campus (North, South, and West), where students are permitted to eat as much as they would like for one visit. In the current state of the meal plan, traditional visits are given to students weekly with the leftover visits expiring at three o'clock on Monday mornings<sup>1</sup>. Ohio State values teaching personal accountability to students while they are at the university<sup>2</sup>, however with the current meal plan, students are not given the opportunity to prepare for adulthood by budgeting long term on their own. With the vast opportunities and events that happen on campus, schedules for students change from week to week, and as a result, students have weeks that they have time to sit down at a tradition location and weeks where they are too busy to have a sit-down meal.

The University of Pittsburgh has been successful in their use of “dining passes” on a semester basis<sup>3</sup>. Students at the University of Pittsburgh are given a set number of traditional visits, but they have the flexibility of using traditional meal visits throughout the semester (rather than on a weekly basis at OSU) and are able to budget their visits according to when they have time to sit-down and have a meal. Michigan State University’s meal plans take a different approach; all students have unlimited access to traditional meal visits, as long as the students reside on campus<sup>4</sup>. At The University of Iowa, students are given traditional visits per semester<sup>5</sup>. It is clear that it is possible to have an effective and successful meal plan with traditional visits provided on a semester basis rather than a weekly one.

**Ohio State can learn from our brother and sister universities and investigate implementation of weekly visit rollover here in Columbus.**

## Affordability

One area of the dining plans in which Ohio State excels is affordability. While the overall costs do appear quite high, this is mostly due to the fact that the cost of a meal plan is an upfront expense that includes fixed costs for maintenance, operating hours, utilities, etc. When compared with other universities, Ohio State’s prices are for the most part similar. Below is a chart detailing various prices for a number of universities’ meal plans.

				
\$1295	\$1627	\$1780	\$2065	\$1588
\$1850	\$1743	\$1935	\$2600	\$2052
\$1895	\$1865	\$2275		
\$2015		\$2675		
\$2258				

Ohio State’s meal plan prices range from \$1,295 to \$2,258. Similarly, Virginia Tech’s meal plans are slightly less expensive than Ohio State, but still very comparable, with three on-campus options ranging from \$1,627 to \$1,865. Virginia Tech specifies that the meal plans include a base cost “that covers mortgage, utility, and labor costs need[ed] to support the food service program”<sup>6</sup>. Their on-campus base cost is \$1,037. While all universities include a base cost in their meal plans, most (like Ohio State) are less transparent and do not state the explicit amount. Historically, OSU has provided such transparency, but this has since changed with the evolution of meal plans.

Kent State’s meal plan prices are also in line with Ohio State’s. Their on-campus costs range from \$1,780, to \$2,675. Likewise, Penn State’s six on-campus meal plans range from \$2,065 to \$2,600 and Bowling Green State University’s on-campus plans range from \$1,588 to \$2,052.

While it is clear that Ohio State’s meal plans have a cost parallel to other universities, this is based on the assumption that the meal plans are a one-time, per semester cost. Zia Ahmed, the Senior Director of Ohio State’s dining services stated at one of the 2015 RHAC’s Dining Discussions that the Scarlet 14 Plan and the Unlimited Plan are the only meal plans of Ohio State’s that are designed to last a student a full semester\*, implying that parents or students are expected to load additional money onto students’ plans in order for the plans to realistically last a full semester. While this is a nice feature for those who felt that past dining plans were too large to suit students who don’t eat as frequently as others, this feature is never stated on the website, and the prices of the “partial” plans do not match

their intentions. If Ohio State’s meal plans really are only partial plans, then our prices are not in line with prices at other universities.

*Therefore, Ohio State can improve affordability in two ways:*

**(1) Transparency of the Base Cost**

**(2) Transparency of Partial versus Full Meal Plans**

***Schools We Can Learn From***

OSU has room to drastically improve on the flexibility of the meal plans that are offered. Students are restricted to using Dining Dollars rather than cash, as they receive a 10 percent discount rate when using this form of payment at OSU dining locations. With this discount factored in, students are paying \$6.30 for breakfast, \$9.90 for lunch, and \$10.80 for dinner at Traditions locations. This is not much of a savings compared to the cash cost (\$7.00, \$11.00, and \$12.00, respectively). There are other Big Ten and large public schools, both in and out of Ohio, which offer students greater discounts for dining at on-campus all-you-can-eat (AYCE) locations and still have a comparable overall meal plan price to that of the average Ohio State plan.

**Virginia Tech**

Virginia Tech students can choose from the Major, Mega, or Premium Flex Plan. Each plan has a \$1,037 base cost and consists of a balance of flex dollars, similar to OSU’s dining dollars. The cost of each plan as well as the amount Flex Dollars allocated to students per semester are shown in the chart below.

Virginia Tech Meal Plan Pricing

MEAL PLAN	Cost per Semester	Flex Dollars per Semester
<i>Major Flex Plan</i>	\$1,627	\$590
<i>Mega Flex Plan</i>	\$1,743	\$706
<i>Premium Flex Plan</i>	\$1,865	\$828

When students use their Flex Dollars, they receive a 50% discount at à la carte facilities and a 67% discount at the campus’s AYCE dining center (similar to OSU’s Traditions locations). The cash rates for breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the Virginia Tech AYCE dining location are comparable to those of OSU, however, when students use their Flex Dollars, they are only charged \$2.60 for breakfast, \$3.75 for lunch, and \$4.65 for dinner<sup>7</sup>.

Traditions Meal Pricing: OSU vs. VT

	Ohio State	Virginia Tech
<b>Breakfast</b>	\$6.30	\$2.60
<b>Lunch</b>	\$9.90	\$3.75
<b>Dinner</b>	\$10.80	\$4.65

➤ ***Eating at a Traditions location at Virginia Tech costs less than 50% of what it costs to do so at Ohio State.***

Bowling Green State University

Second year Bowling Green State University students can choose retail meal plans that solely consist of Falcon Dollars, comparable to dining dollars at OSU. This structure is what this report has previously referred to as “Declining Balance.” Students can choose from the Gold, Silver, or Bronze Retail Plan--all described in the table below.

BGSU Meal Plan Pricing

MEAL PLAN	Cost per Semester	Falcon Dollars
<b>Gold Custom Plan</b>	\$2,052	2,052
<b>Silver Custom Plan</b>	\$1,890	1,890
<b>Bronze Custom Plan</b>	\$1,588	1,588

If Bowling Green students want to visit an AYCE/Traditions dining facility, they pay the door price. With the exception of breakfast, these prices are less expensive than paying for a traditions visit at OSU<sup>8</sup>. Breakfast costs \$7.25, lunch costs \$8.50, and dinner costs \$9.75<sup>9</sup>.

Though there is not a drastic difference between the price of an AYCE visit at Bowling Green and a traditions visit at OSU, one important aspect to note is that the price that students pay for their meal plan goes entirely back into the amount of falcon dollars they receive each semester. This transparency justifies the relatively higher meal prices listed compared to some of the other schools discussed.

Penn State University

Penn State University meal plans are split into six different “levels”. Each plan has a \$1,330 base cost as well as the amount of dining dollars associated with the chosen level. The total cost (including base cost) and the amount of dining dollars associated with each plan are shown in the chart below.

Penn State Meal Plan Pricing

Meal Plan Level	Cost (minus Base Cost)	Cost per Semester	Dining Dollars per Semester
1	\$735	\$2,065	\$735
2	\$825	\$2,155	\$825
3	\$885	\$2,215	\$885
4	\$1,010	\$2,340	\$1,010
5	\$1,095	\$2,425	\$1,095
6	\$1,270	\$2,600	\$1,270

Students receive a 65% discount on pre-prepared food items from residential retail facilities, a 10% discount on pre-prepared food items from other retail locations, and a 65% discount when eating at AYCE/Traditions facilities. With this AYCE discount rate, breakfast costs \$2.00, lunch costs \$3.75, and dinner costs \$4.75<sup>10</sup>.

Traditions Meal Pricing: OSU vs. PSU

	Ohio State	Penn State
<b>Breakfast</b>	\$6.30	\$2.00
<b>Lunch</b>	\$9.90	\$3.75
<b>Dinner</b>	\$10.80	\$4.75

➤ ***Eating at a Traditions location at Penn State costs less than 50% of what it costs to do so at Ohio State.***

Miami University of Ohio

Meal plans at Miami University of Ohio allow students to choose the amount of “Diplomat Dollars” (comparable to OSU’s Dining Dollars), that they wish to add for each semester. Students pay a \$1,625 base cost and choose a Diplomat Dollar amount ranging from \$800-\$2,100<sup>11</sup>. This meal plan is admittedly more expensive than the average meal plan at Ohio State, but comparing the cost of tuition at Miami (\$14,233 for in-state students<sup>12</sup>) to that of Ohio State (\$10,037 for in-state students<sup>13</sup>) shows a trend of higher pricing for Miami University in comparison to that of OSU. The wide price



range for selecting Diplomat Dollars also gives students the freedom to choose an amount that fits their dietary habits and needs. Students that may not eat as much are not forced to buy a higher priced meal plan that will go to waste, and students who may eat more than average have the freedom to choose a Diplomat Dollar amount that gives them the room to fulfill their needs.

When students pay using Diplomat Dollars, they receive a 30% discount at à la carte locations and a 50% discount at AYCE/Traditions buffet locations<sup>14</sup>. With this AYCE discount, students pay \$4.75 for breakfast, \$6.13 for lunch, and \$7.75 for dinner<sup>15</sup>.

### A Note on Flexibility

The meal plans of these schools offer students the flexibility of having dining dollars that they can use day-to-day at whatever dining location best fits their schedule or needs for the day. Though they are strictly retail plans, students are not restricted to only eating at retail locations and can visit an AYCE facility at a discounted rate when using the equivalent of their schools' dining dollars. This provides students with flexible choices and takes into account the fact that students have different dining habits each day as their class and extracurricular schedules vary. Retail plans at other universities give students this ultimate flexibility.

### ***Summary: Where Can We Improve?***

Although there are aspects in which The Ohio State University's Dining Services are superb, there is opportunity for improvement in order to give students ultimate flexibility and ensure that they are receiving their money's worth out of their meal plan. Ohio State meal plans consist of an appreciable dining dollars roll over system; however, the weekly rollover of traditions visits is restricting. Though the University is comparable to other Big 10 and large public universities in their overall cost of the meal plan and the amount of meals possible through each meal plan, Ohio State must improve the discounts given to students who want to use dining dollars to eat at traditions locations. These changes are already in place at other universities and afford students the flexibility of using their meal plans in a way that best fits their changing daily routines. This, in tandem with cost transparency, ensures that students are realizing their plan's full monetary value.

## Recommendation

### *Long-Term Solutions*

The Ohio State University should seek a long-term goal of establishing a **declining balance meal plan structure**, which allows students to be given dining credit upfront that can be budgeted throughout the academic semester. This will give students the ease of an affordable, transparent, and easy-to-use dining experience. Several Universities offer this declining balance structure including Bowling Green State University, Penn State University, and Miami University of Ohio.

As noted through our previous Dining Survey and Dining Discussions, students revealed a concern for increasing complexity in our current meal plan structure. If the complexity of the current meal plan is indeed not intended to purposefully confuse students into mispending their money, The Ohio State University should be concerned that this is the perception that our students have. The new dining structure that we recommend will replace “Visits” and “Dining Dollars” with the simpler declining balance concept, clearing misconceptions and giving students the opportunity to have a non-complex meal plan experience.

Furthermore, The Ohio State University should **specify upfront the base cost** that covers the mortgage, utility, labor costs, and administrations fees needed to support the food service program. As previously mentioned, this baseline transparency is specified at schools such as Virginia Tech. A meal plan structure composed of an upfront administration fee has more potential for transparency than consistently inflated costs throughout the year.

### *Immediate Recommendations*

In addition to setting long-term goals, there are immediate steps that can be taken in response to this report. The Dining Survey revealed consistent student dissatisfaction with the current structure of Traditions Dining Visits. Unused visits vanish at the end of the week and can result in weekly loss of money for students. OSU should **investigate the implementation of a rollover** on the current weekly Traditions Visits to ensure that students are receiving their money’s worth from their meal plans.

Additionally, The Ohio State University should **strive to improve the discounts** given to students who want to use dining dollars to eat in Traditions Dining Locations. As mentioned earlier, discounts already in place at universities such as Virginia Tech, Bowling Green State University, and Penn State University are significantly higher than Ohio State’s 10%. This will give Buckeyes the opportunity to use their meal plans flexibly in a way that best fits their changing daily routines.

If the majority of meal plans are indeed only designed as “partial” plans, this should be noted in all **descriptions of the meal plan** so that students are aware of this when they select their meal plan at the beginning of the semester.

Furthermore, we recommend that a **declining balance meal plan option** be offered as a pilot program for students to try while other existing plans are still made available. This declining balance pilot program might be implemented in place of the Buckeye 5 Meal Plan. If this approach was to be taken, OSU Dining Services must provide the base costs and operation fees upfront in order to fully test the feasibility of implementing a declining balance meal plan structure. This pilot program option will not be a permanent solution, but rather a step towards fulfilling the long-term recommendations for the direction that dining should take at The Ohio State University.

## Notes

For questions or comments on this Task Force Report, please contact Annie Greer, [greer.182@osu.edu](mailto:greer.182@osu.edu).

\* Any statistic or fact cited with an asterisk was collected from OSU Dining Services, whether it was through direct contact with dining officials, statements of dining officials during RHAC Dining Discussions, or numbers presented in various meetings.

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