



ENVISION
STRATEGIES



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

Final Report

E20078.001 Residential Dining Program
Assessment

December 3, 2021



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Study Purpose and Methodology

PURPOSE

University of Toronto Food Services (UTFS) retained Envision Strategies to assess the residential dining program, focusing on the services provided to the New College and Chestnut Residence communities. The goal of the study is to develop recommendations that will guide the alignment of offerings and services as the university community anticipates a return to post-pandemic life.

Envision Strategies is an independent consultancy focusing on food and hospitality services with prior experience on the UofT campus (*St. George Campus Food Service Master Plan, 2015*). Through this experience, the consultants were able to gain an understanding of the campus, dining patterns, and the residential dining operations at the time. The limitations imposed by COVID-19 precluded the consultants' ability to visit campus during this time. As such, we wish to express our appreciation for the flexibility of all involved in our virtual process and assistance provided by Ancillary Services, UTFS, New College and Chestnut Residence staff in providing extensive background information, reports and videos to strengthen this process.

METHODOLOGY

The challenge of developing strategic recommendations for a dining program during the pandemic is that some issues are driven purely by the limitations of COVID provisions and may be resolved when the operations return to a “steady state”. Nonetheless, any integral permanent pattern shifts, and expectations should be addressed with short and long-term recommendations. To ensure that the consultants understood and analyzed all the information from the various sources, the study included examining background data, engaging students and stakeholders, conducting a high-level assessment of operations and facilities, and benchmarking peer institutions.

Study Purpose and Methodology

Study Groups: The study was guided by two groups with different responsibilities:

- **Core Group:** The purpose of this group was to be involved throughout the study, collect data requested by the consultants and receive the final recommendations. The members included:

Ron Vander Kraats, *Chief Administrative Officer, New College*

Michael Jeronimo, *Director of Residential and Retail Dining*

Anne Macdonald, *Assistant Vice President, Ancillary Services*

Robert Grieve, *Director of Catering*

Colin Porter, *Executive Director, Food Services & Campus Events*

Jaco Lokker, *Executive Chef*

- **Advisory Group:** The role of this group was to participate in the stakeholder review process, collaborate in the development of guiding principles, and review the consultants' program assessment findings relative to the Guiding Principles. The members included:

Ron Vander Kraats, *Chief Administrative Officer, New College*

Leah McCormack-Smith, *Dean of Students, New College*

Anne Macdonald, *Assistant Vice President, Ancillary Services*

Catherine Economopoulos, *New College Building President*

Tarini Bidaisee, *Registered Dietician, Food Services*

Jenna Borden, *Chestnut Residence Council/food committee rep*

Scott Hendershot, *Manager, Sustainability Office*

Eric Che, *New College Residence Council*

David Kim, *Dean of Students and Director of Student Life, Ancillary Services*

Lauren Baker, *Sessional Instructor, New College Equity Studies*

Colin Porter, *Executive Director, Food Services & Campus Events*

Study Purpose and Methodology

Interviews and Focus Groups: The consultants conducted a series of interviews and focus groups to understand dining patterns, needs and expectations and what the future may hold post-COVID:

Student Food Committee	New College and Chestnut Residence Dons
Student Groups (3)	Foodservice Leadership
Chestnut Residence Leadership (Dean)	Foodservice Managers and Nutritionist
New College Leadership (Dean & Principal)	Sustainability Office
New College and Chestnut Residence Faculty and Staff (2)	Ancillary Services

Peer Benchmarking: The consultants led three virtual roundtables with 15 peer campuses within the US and Canada.

University of Massachusetts Amherst	Northeastern University	Cornell University
Boston University	McMaster University	Kent State University
Queens University	University of Guelph	University of British Columbia
Trinity College (UofT)	Western Ontario University	University of Waterloo
University of Michigan	University of Ottawa	McGill University

Study Purpose and Methodology

These universities were chosen based on the scale of their residential program, urban setting, student engagement and communication practices, meal plan model and other programmatic features. These dining programs are also considered to be the leaders in higher education food services. The four main topics of discussion were meal plans, student engagement & communication, partnerships and food security.

The consultants also attended a Town Hall led by students to understand their concerns and needs regarding foodservice on campus.

The findings from the campus interviews and focus groups are summarized in the next section. We recognized that some of the issues raised by participants, while important to note, were tactical and best addressed by leadership and UTFS management on an ongoing basis. By focusing on principles that are tied to the UTFS mission and aspirational values, we were able to identify and develop more enduring strategies. This report is intended to provide a framework for ongoing discussion, engagement and alignment of the residential food service program with evolving needs.

Engagement Themes

The consultants conducted virtual stakeholder interviews and focus groups with New College and Chestnut Residence community members from March through May 2021. The themes that emerged from these sessions are:

- Food/Menus:
 - Participants indicated that the quality of meals have been better than expected but they are looking for more variety such as authentic, ethnic food and better vegan and vegetarian menu options.
 - The need for more food options based on dietary requirements was consistent throughout the sessions.
- Price/Value:
 - Pay-by-weight salad bar pricing during COVID led to frustration among customers. However, UTFS changed this within a few weeks of fall opening.
 - Due to increase in grab and go food for safety reasons in the dining halls, students viewed that they were not receiving the full value of a meal. There was a disconnect between the price and quality received.
 - Students want to see transparency in pricing when it comes to food products and meal plans.
 - There is a significant need to communicate the value of housing and dining together within the campus community.



Engagement Themes

- Service & Hours:
 - COVID safety protocols such as shields and masks for staff along with the increase in grab and go options, there were less interactions between the dining staff and the customers.
 - Limited accessible hours in dining halls led to students planning their day around based on when the locations are open.
- Meal Plan:
 - As part of the COVID changes by UTFS, the current meal plan was changed to all a declining balance meal plan. This led to dissatisfaction among students because of the perception of the value of the meals purchased using the meal plan.
 - There is a perceived budget of \$21-\$25 per day for the meal plan which restricted the students in getting a healthy and balanced daily meal.
 - Students were concerned about running out of money before the end of the semester. Therefore, the meal plan should have enough funds to last a whole semester so students do not have to plan on how much to spend every day.
 - They indicated the need for meal plan portability to be used at any UTFS location on campus.
- Communication and Engagement:
 - Stakeholders indicated that they understood the challenges faced by UTFS in making quick decisions regarding changes during COVID to better accommodate residents and the campus community. Even though the changes were communicated, it did not reach the students in time to absorb any of these changes and that led to great confusion and dissatisfaction among customers.

Engagement Themes

- Communication and Engagement (contd.):
 - This also brings up the need for marketing and communicating meal plan changes with residents on how to effectively use the plans.
 - One of the goals for UTFS is to engage and sustain in a positive, cooperative relationship with the campus community so communication is timely.
 - Students indicated the need for increased connection between New College resident and commuter students to be part of the College community by working with UTFS on events, promote commuter meal plans etc.
- Other:
 - There was unanimous agreement within both the UofT stakeholders and the peer roundtable participants that foodservices plays a very important role in the university experience.
 - They also indicated the significance of having campus dining services be at the table and lead the conversation with the University and the community regarding food insecurity on their campuses.



Engagement Themes

- Other:
 - Most participants were somewhat aware of the local purchasing and sustainability commitment by UTFS but there is a need for better communication and education about these efforts.
 - There should be more collaborative decision-making between UTFS, New College and Chestnut Residence.
 - Dining halls should feel more welcoming even for the non-meal plan holders and commuter students.



Guiding Principles

“To nourish and bring the campus community together, contribute to the culinary culture of Toronto and support the work of innovative and sustainable local food suppliers.”

The current mission statement of UTFS above emphasizes the correlation between food, culture, sustainability and community. Although UTFS has been working on each of these aspects, there have been gaps in accomplishing the mission. Based on insights gained through the engagement and assessment process, these opportunities were organized into categories related to food, community, meal plans, sustainability and partnership.

In sorting through findings and opportunities with the study Advisory Group, it was determined that, while it is important to take note of issues and concerns that may be resolved “on the ground” by management or as the pandemic recedes, establishing a set of strategic statements of intent, or *Guiding Principles*, would best serve UTFS in its desire to align offerings and services with mission and emerging needs on a forward-looking basis.

The consultants worked with the Advisory Group through a series of work sessions to establish the key *Principles* and articulate statements that further define what the experience of dining in residence at UofT should look like when these principles are embraced. As these are essentially an expression of intent, setting and communicating these guiding principles for UTFS should ensure that the responsibility to work together to achieve the mission would lie with not only UTFS but also with the UofT community. Furthermore, it is expected that the definition of each principle will evolve as work on and with them continues.

Guiding Principles

Thus, we believe that these five guiding principles will support the mission of UTFS and keep the each of the parties accountable to ensure guest satisfaction.

1. Hospitality – *When done well, campus dining exemplifies how the university demonstrates its caring with regard to the “out of classroom” experience it provides for its students, faculty and staff.*
2. Community – *Food is part of what makes the campus experience positive and contributes to the strategic success of the university.*
3. Accessibility – *Striking the balance between flexibility, satisfaction, value, community building and fiscal responsibility.*
4. Sustainability and Wellness – *Supporting the health of community through offerings, service, education, and stewardship.*
5. Partnership – *Leveraging the diverse resources of the university community and beyond through creative collaboration.*



Strategic Opportunities / Hospitality

Hospitality Statements

- Food will be procured and prepared with care and pride by the UTFS team.
- Food will be served with understanding and respect for each guest.
- UTFS shall ensure that attention is given to customers' specific needs.

Hospitality Findings

- The switch from all you care to eat (AYCTE) service over the summer of 2020 was done during a time of significant change and some community members feel they did not have sufficient opportunity to adjust. Their discomfort with this change, and perhaps more importantly, the way they feel decisions about this change were made, planted seeds of distrust among students that then extended into concerns about other aspects of the food service program.
- COVID safety measures challenged the food service staff's ability to interact with students and customize meal options. This negatively impacted the sense of hospitality and was difficult for both students and staff.
- Another significant impact of the pandemic was the supply chain challenges that limited availability of items and caused sudden increases in costs – both resulting in added frustration for customers.
- The large number of international students at UofT and evolving expectations of the general population will continue to drive demand for greater cultural diversity and authenticity in menus.
- Likewise, the call for addressing special dietary preferences and restrictions are on the rise and is viewed as a basic expectation – part of overall hospitality.

Strategic Opportunities / Hospitality

Hospitality Opportunities

- Going forward, investing in training and orienting staff to build personal connections will be important. This should include regular training of staff to communicate and educate about daily menus and interact with students on a consistent basis.
- Continuous two-way communication with students to understand their needs and ideas for specials, menus and customization.
- Using student groups for taste testing new menu items to involve them in the continuous improvement of quality, diversity and variety.
- Bring about an element of surprise, delight, celebration and fun through regularly-scheduled special meals as well as pop-up events (*a practice noted during peer roundtables that was increased during COVID to counter stress and maintain connections with students*).
- Position culinary staff and dieticians on the front line of communication with students to reinforce hospitality, care and responsiveness – as well as strengthening connections.
- For New College, design specific and appropriate modes of communication with non-resident students about their dining needs and the to help them feel included.

Strategic Opportunities / Community

Community Statements

- UTFS plays an important role in residential life wherein gathering over meals adds richness to the experience and helps create important connections.
- “Community”, especially in the case of New College, is not limited to those that live in residence.
- UTFS is an extension of Chestnut Residence, New College and UofT more broadly. Thus, the services provided are an expression of the University’s commitment to values shared by the community.
- Support diversity and inclusion through offering authentic menu items and providing dining spaces that are welcoming.

Community Findings

- The dining rooms in both New College and Chestnut Residence represent important gathering spaces for the entire community. When the structure of the dining program excludes some (for instance when dining is dedicated to all-you-care-to-eat service), others (i.e., those not on meal plans) are less likely to engage and the community value of the space can be compromised.
- However, gathering over meals is a highly-valued part of both residential and campus life more broadly. New College and Chestnut Residence staff have endeavored to strike a balance that is right for each of their respective communities.
- Students noted some cultural menus were not authentically represented; getting this right is very important to helping international students feel they belong.
- As members of their community, students are seeking more meaningful ways of engaging with UTFS staff and participating in future decisions that impact their dining experience.

Strategic Opportunities / Community

Community Findings, continued

- *Peer Observations:*
 - Introduction of food advisory groups based on interests such as sustainability, vegan diet, climate change, student employees etc. increased discussion and awareness.
 - Embracing social media channels to communicate and bring the community together to still feel like a part of campus even for online students.
 - Peer-to-peer programs for nutrition awareness and sustainability along with paid student committees helped with two-way feedback.
 - Other ideas include surveys, mystery shopper programs and consistent feedback from foodservice leadership on issues.

Community Opportunities

- While recognizing the value of leveraging the shared resources of UTFS as a campus dining program, work to tune offerings and communications to the specific culture and needs of the New College and Chestnut Residence communities.
- Establish regular communication with students in a variety of ways on a consistent basis, especially embracing social media channels with virtual cooking demos and interaction. (*peer practice*)
- Successful engagement methods include: robust food advisory interest groups, monthly interaction with student government, Student Ambassadors/Ombudsmen, continuous feedback, regular quality audits conducted by student mystery shoppers.

Strategic Opportunities / Community

Community Opportunities, continued

- Collaborating with residences and colleges in using dining as a platform to build community among residents as well as non-residents. This may expand to the broader UofT population.
- Annual strategic marketing/communication plan: UTFS brand development, story telling, different target markets engagement within and outside UTFS and receiving feedback in multiple ways.

Strategic Opportunities / Accessibility

Accessibility Statements

- Students on meal plans and other community members can access food when and where they need to on campus, to be successful in their academic pursuits.
- The cost of services are reasonable, and affordable options are made available.
- UTFS should communicate the true costs of meeting programmatic expectations (e.g., sustainability, wellness, etc.)
- UTFS collaborates with relevant campus stakeholders to address food security and potentially draw on institutional resources to improve access.

Accessibility Findings

- The complexity brought on by the many factors involved in the change from AYCTE dining to retail/a la carte over the summer of 2020, and the timing of the related decisions left little opportunity for sufficient engagement of students and residential staff in the consideration of this change.
- Furthermore, the overlay of COVID-related changes to menus and service ... and really, the entire dining experience ... made it difficult for students to discern whether changes they were dissatisfied with were related to the DB meal plan structure, the pandemic, or both.
- Students and staff from New College and Chestnut Residence were of differing opinions: some missed the simplicity, security and community benefits of AYCTE while others welcomed the switch to DB as it provided them greater control over their funds and more flexibility as to where they can eat.

Strategic Opportunities / Accessibility

Accessibility Findings, continued

- However, students voiced consistent concerns over the pricing of individual items, some feeling they found it difficult to stretch their meal plan funds to last the full year.
- From a financial perspective, an advantage of the AYCTE structure is that very few plan holders eat all of the allotted meals, and thus, the true cost of each meal is obscured by the value of unused meals. Under a pure Declining Balance structure, the cost of every meal must include contributions to overhead costs (such as support for living wage and sustainability initiatives), which can result in prices that are perceived as high.
- The consultants are aware that it is the policy of UofT that no student offered admission to a program at the University should be unable to enter or complete the program due to a lack of financial means. Qualifying students are supported by a significant financial aid program of grants and bursaries, as well as programs to support student life to ensure overall affordability. While UTFS may be called upon to offer solutions to food insecurity, peers from some campuses shared they have greater success when dining program work on this is part of a cross-disciplinary effort prioritized by institutional leadership.

Strategic Opportunities / Accessibility

Accessibility Findings, continued

- *Peer Observations:*
 - Some peers moved to a declining balance plan while others did not change their meal plans. This reduced students' value perception of dining on campus. However, all peers focused on student experience through special events, mobile ordering and delivery, meal exchanges, increased grab and go food options and accessibility to staff.
 - Food Security is not just a foodservice issue but an institution-wide issue; however, foodservice should lead the discussions related to it.
 - Educating students on their efficiency in their purchases and how it relates to food waste.

Accessibility Opportunities

- The Declining Balance structure provides several benefits that appear to be advantages for UofT: it provides seamless access to venues across campus, facilitates gathering in common dining spaces regardless of meal plan or residential status, holds the potential for offering a wider range of price point options, and this structure is more likely to act as a common currency that could extend to other food venues on (and off) campus not currently accessible with the UofT meal plan.
- Better collaboration with UofT stakeholders to assist in addressing the Food Security issue that may also include some non-financial resources.

Strategic Opportunities / Sustainability and Wellness

Sustainability and Wellness Statements

a) Environmental Sustainability

- UTFS shall be guided by environmental sustainability standards, practices and policies established by the Residences, College or University (e.g., sourcing, service wares, recycling, composting, energy use).
- Provide leadership in adopting standards and practices not currently developed by the University that may be specific to the food industry, such as the AASHE STARS sustainability tracking system.
- Offer opportunities for students, faculty and staff to increase their “food literacy” with respect to food sourcing such as connecting with local growers/farmers and supporting social justice in purchasing.

b) Fiscal Sustainability

- UTFS shall continue to be committed to offering full time employment, fair wages and benefits, and furthering the professional development of its employees.
- As a non-profit entity, UTFS shall manage the program so as to meet its fiscal responsibilities, including contributions to overhead allocations and reinvestment to maintain viable, relevant services.

c) Wellness

- Offer fresh, healthful food options prepared from high quality ingredients.
- Assist those in need of special dietary accommodations.
- Support students in developing healthful eating habits.
- Support the University in cultural wellness and mental health through menu planning, building and embracing cultures and providing a connection to the community through food.

Strategic Opportunities / Sustainability and Wellness

Sustainability and Wellness Findings

- Nutrition, wellness and food literacy are very important to the community. Education and communication about current sustainability initiatives is already in action in UTFS.
- Students are seeking greater support from UTFS in navigating their dietary preferences and restrictions, including making a true allergen-free service station available and improving the accuracy and completeness of content labeling.
- Some students shared the perception that UTFS reduced its commitment to sustainability (primarily through increased use of disposable wares) during COVID service. While we found this to be true, we also noted it to be an appropriate safety measure during the pandemic that is also a common practice among all peer campuses polled.
- In response to this concern, most of the peer programs continued (or started if not already in place) a reusable container program, such as the Eco2Go program in place at UofT.
- The UTFS Dietician not always included in planning special wellness-oriented events and feels the program can improve in addressing special diets, i.e., gluten-free and allergen-free stations.
- Food Services has been operating at a deficit since the start of the pandemic due to a significant drop meal plan revenues while endeavoring to maintain service and staffing levels and experiencing sharp increases in food and supply costs. While these losses have been covered by Ancillary Services' reserves, they cannot be sustained indefinitely and so it is hoped that a return to pre-pandemic residence occupancies will restore revenues to break-even levels and allow the program to rebuild its financial position.
- *Peer Observations:* Peer-to-peer educational events for nutrition awareness programs

Strategic Opportunities / Sustainability and Wellness

Sustainability and Wellness Opportunities

- Collaborate with the UTFS dietician and UofT's Health and Wellness department in educational and communication opportunities regarding nutrition, wellness and promoting healthy eating habits.
- Create a student nutrition awareness program that includes “peer-to-peer” education by UofT dietetic students. Leverage academic resources to develop coursework and general student education about the UTFS's commitment to “procurement to plate” process.
- Collaborate with the UofT's Sustainability department in providing accessibility for reusable and recyclable opportunities both front and back of the house. Also, working with them in telling the story to the UofT community.
- Provide education and professional development opportunities around sustainability and wellness for UTFS staff as part of the ongoing training program.
- Provide an appropriate level of insight into UTFS budgets and financial performance to designated student representatives (perhaps through an appointed, paid ambassador or advisor program as some peer campuses have done) to establish greater trust based on a more complete understanding of the program's non-profit financial model.

Strategic Opportunities / Partnership

Partnership Statements

- Partner with academic colleagues on opportunities to collaborate on, or support coursework and projects connected to food security, nutrition, sustainability and wellness.
- Establish effective and consistent practices for informing community members as to services available, special events, educational opportunities and other items of concern.
- Build trust and strengthen relationships with community members through transparent and responsive two-way communication.
- Provide opportunities for community members to become active and invested participants in identifying opportunities for aligning services with evolving needs and assessing the feasibility of making proposed changes.

Partnership Findings

- Student and stakeholders would like to be involved in decisions that impact them directly.
- Partnerships include facilities, student groups, sustainability group, faculty/staff groups, deans, dieticians, admissions etc. and even community food banks.
- New College administrators and faculty indicated it has resources it is willing to share/collaborate on with UTFS.
- *Peer observations:*
 - “Food is powerful and a great way to make connections across campus.”
 - Focus on aligning department with strategic university mandates and communicating how food contributes to the success of the university by leveraging partnerships.

Strategic Opportunities / Partnership

Partnership Opportunities

- Relative to establishing the sense of a partnership relationship with students, rather than that of an external vendor, stakeholders from both New College and Chestnut Residence pointed to a culture of shared governance as a desire if not an expectation among students in all areas, including Food Services. While this may not translate to decision-making, it does suggest that students see the food program as integral to their lives on campus and want to have a voice.
- It is important that UTFS build strategic partnerships with stakeholders on campus to be ahead of the curve when decisions are being made and not reactionary.
- UTFS takes on a leadership role in facilitating community conversations around food.
- Seek out internship opportunities within UTFS students in related disciplines (hospitality, nutrition, marketing, management).
- Leverage relationships with UTFS vendors and manufacturers to offer external internship opportunities.
- Communicate that partnership can be enhanced in non-financial ways as well.
- Apprenticeship program by UTFS pre-COVID - look to support small community-based food vendors in the city.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Hospitality

- Re-establish a culture of hospitality in UTFS that is reflected in everything you do.
- Encourage staff at all levels to seek out informal input from students about what will make their lives at UofT better.
- Find ways to celebrate food in their lives every day: surprise, delight and show you care (because we know you do!)
- Embrace and celebrate the cultural diversity of students, faculty and staff within the community; engage them to help build authenticity and relevance into menus and events.

2. Community

- Establish an ongoing food Advisory Group, potentially building on the great group assembled for this study. Continue work on developing strategies that put the Guiding Principles into action.
- Create an annual communications plan that is funded and staffed to ensure it is implemented properly and thoroughly.
- Create meaningful engagement opportunities for students to contribute to the continuous improvement of the program. Possibly create a food board of concerned individuals that are paid a stipend (or award scholarships?) and have formal responsibilities. Examples from peer campuses:
 - U Mass Dining: Student Ambassadors act as secret shoppers, provide regular feedback, and participate in an annual planning forum. They are paid a stipend for their work.
 - SUNY New Paltz: CAS (College Auxiliary Services) awards scholarships of \$575 to 10 student workers a year.
 - Duke – DUSDAC, Mystery Diner Program <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/dining/about-us>

Summary of Recommendations

3. Accessibility

- UTFS should continue to operate under a declining balance meal plan structure, but transition to an overhead fee-based model executed through a deliberate and inclusive process (see further discussion under Recommendation #6).
- Pursue an interdisciplinary, university-wide and collaborative approach to understanding how food security programs can be integrated with broader, more holistic initiatives to support student success.

4. Sustainability & Wellness

- Lean into the role of subject matter expert, advocate and educator on the many ways institutional values around sustainability and wellness are reflected in food.
- Build and leverage connections across the university, in industry and among peer campuses to bring resources and programs into classrooms and dining rooms that will raise the level of understanding and dialog around food.
- Commit to regular, consistent and relevant communications, engaging students to advise on how to reach their peers most effectively.
- Provide greater transparency into the financial structure and performance of UTFS, including context for the need to maintain sufficient margins to cover overhead commitments, retain and develop staff, and support ongoing program innovation.

Summary of Recommendations

5. Partnership

- As noted under Community, continuing the work with the Advisory Group, or a similar cross-disciplinary body can also serve to strengthen relationships and collaboration with other departments and colleges at UofT.
- The group should have a specific charge and should meet at least quarterly, with meeting minutes published on the UTFS website.
- Borrowing from peers, consider holding an annual visioning/planning forum to address current issues and strategic opportunities. Time this event early enough in the annual planning cycle to allow for the possibility of putting some ideas that come from this into action in the next academic year. Publish a report summarizing the discussions, findings and ideas.

6. Meal Plans

Several alternative meal plan models were evaluated relative to these factors:

- Simplicity / Transparency – The degree to which a model is easy to understand and use. The pricing structure seems logical and fair.
- Affordability/Value – Plans tend to be affordable and inherently provide strong value.
- Flexibility/Portability – Model provides access to other dining venues (especially retail) across campus and enables a high level of control over purchases.
- Food Security – Tends to ensure greater assurance of access to food throughout the semester.

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- Financial Sustainability – Given pressures to control the cost of attendance, which model does a better job allowing Food Services to meet its operational costs and overhead responsibilities more effectively?
- Wellness – Lowers barriers to, if not supports eating decisions based on dietary restrictions or goals.

For the University of Toronto: New College and Chestnut Residence are sub-communities within the broader university environment, and so it would be reasonable to conclude that an AYCTE format would be favored as emphasizes community through a shared dining experience. However, we have come to the opinion that a more open, flexible model is better suited to both communities for these reasons:

- Access to venues across campus. Chestnut residents attending classes or labs on campus typically don't have time to return to their dining hall for lunch and need access to nearby venues. Even New College students are on the go at all times of the day and may not be able to get back for a meal.
- Diversity of dietary needs and eating patterns. The mix of residents and non-residents in these communities, and their diverse menu requirements are more difficult to accommodate in a traditional AYCTE dining format. Community members that choose not to purchase a meal plan, or feel that an AYCTE format does not meet their needs are effectively excluded from the group dining experience unless they pay the fixed entry price for a meal.

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- Optimal utilization of dining space. AYCTE requires a dedicated dining space, which discourages mixing of residents and non-residents (or really, those not on meal plans). This presents a dilemma for New College as the vast majority of affiliates are non-residents and thus, the dining room is out of play for most, at least during meal service. While the College considered a “hybrid” option in which one dining area is dedicated to AYCTE service and the other open for everyone, the operational implications are complicated to say the least and the bifurcated model works against the broader concept of community and highest/best use of common space. This is also a consideration for Chestnut Residence, as the dining areas represent some of the largest common spaces in the building. Closing them off for eating purposes only limits the flexibility of this space.
- Potential to act as a university-wide plan. While the UofT has and will continue to be a highly decentralized community, food is one of the potential aspects of campus life that can provide links across organizational boundaries. In this regard, a highly portable meal plan model can act as a common currency that facilitates cross utilization of dining venues.

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- Short-Term Recommendation (FY2021-22)
 - Continue with the current plan structure and pricing as shown on the Food Services website.
 - Establish a working group or committee comprised of student, faculty and staff representatives charged with reviewing these findings and either endorsing the recommendations of this study or recommending an alternate model for implementation next fall
- Full Implementation (Fall 2022)
 - We recommend UofT adopt one of two DB with Overhead models commonly used in collegiate dining:
 - A. Flat Overhead Fee – All meal plan subscribers pay the same fee, regardless of the size of the plan they purchase. In some instances, this fee is built into the housing contract and thus becomes a set cost. Residents can then elect not to purchase dining funds if they wish to, but will still be required to pay the dining overhead fee. Use of dining funds provides a discount on cash pricing, typically 30%. Some institutions reduce the discount on pre-packaged foods and beverages, reflecting a higher cost of goods sold.
 - B. Variable Overhead Fee – The overhead fee is set at a percentage of the total plan price (recommend 50% for simplicity), so the larger the plan purchased, the higher overhead fee paid.

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- DB w/Overhead Model Considerations

- A. Flat Overhead Fee

- Advantages: Budgeting simplicity – total forecasted overhead costs are divided by the number of residents to arrive at a basis for the dining overhead fee. Transparency – can characterize overhead fee as going to pay for costs that Food Services must commit to covering, regardless of students' actual usage of dining (labor, benefits, energy, equipment maintenance, facility renewal, technology, etc.). Also, the fixed overhead model provides greater flexibility in sizing and pricing plans: with overhead costs theoretically covered, a dining program can afford to offer smaller plans to students that do not need as much access to campus meals and incentivizes higher engagement/larger purchases of dining plans as the overhead does not increase with the size of the plan.
 - Disadvantages: Can be more complicated for students to understand at first (especially if there are multiple tiers of discounts) and could result in lower revenues if a large number of residents elect not to purchase any dining funds.

- B. Variable Overhead Fee

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- DB w/Overhead Model Considerations

- B. Variable Overhead Fee

- Advantages: Intuitive model that is easier to understand. Flat 50% discount on all purchases provides a simple formula for students to use in budgeting their purchases throughout the semester.
 - Disadvantages: Contribution to overhead is somewhat dependent on the number and size of meal plans actually purchased. A downward trend could put financial pressure on the department. Less incentive for students to purchase a larger meal plan (which could lead some to buy less than they need and run out before the end of the semester).
 - We recommend incorporating the Residence Capital Improvement Fund (CIF) into the preferred dining overhead fee structure to simplify messaging and support the concept that the overhead fee is all-inclusive.
 - Regardless of the fee model chosen, all dining overhead fees should be non-refundable.
 - Offering a single set of plans is highly recommended.
 - Qualifying this recommendation, Food Services should consider offering smaller plans to non-resident students, especially for New College affiliates. Assuming most if not all overhead costs are covered by revenues from resident meal plan sales, many campuses offer attractively priced plans to commuter students, faculty and staff as a means of generating incremental revenue and raising engagement in the campus dining experience.

Summary of Recommendations

6. Meal Plans, continued

- We support the current practice of bundling a small balance of TBucks with every plan and encourage the continuation of this as it acknowledges the diversity of eating options available off campus that complement campus dining offerings. As part of the design of non-residential plans, consider bundling a higher balance of TBucks to make them more relevant and attractive to those living off campus.
- Rollovers and Refunds: Dining programs employing the overhead fee model are generally more open to allowing students to roll over unused dining funds to spring and summer semesters, and in many cases, to the next academic year. The current practice of converting rolled over funds to TBucks at the end of each academic year may be necessary for accounting or policy reasons, but as this transaction carries a cost to it, a gesture that is intended to provide flexibility becomes a point of complaint. Suggest allowing a more liberal rollover policy in lieu of conversion.
- Consider building in admission to a set of special theme meals as a perk to residential plan holders. These could be structured as ACYTE community meals serving as cultural food events featuring special menus and related programming.