

From: Shui(Crystal) Hu

To: CMU Dining Services

## Proposal for Enhancing CMU Dining Experience

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Carnegie Mellon University

## Executive Summary

In response to the three major problems caused by students dining at CMU: health, long queues, and student meal plan, I put forward suggestions to enhance the CMU dining experience, and provide corresponding solutions for the school dining services team. The goals are to enhance the diversification and quality of food, create a more convenient and efficient dining procedure, as well as improve some of the impractical policies of the student meal plan. By presenting students' thoughts and concerns for dining to our dining services, I hope to make CMU students have a better dining experience and make dining a source of happiness for all CMU members.

## Background

The ancients said that "food is the first necessity of people." In school life, three meals a day is the most basic guarantee. Dining locations - where every student visits every day - are not only places to eat, but also critical components of school management.

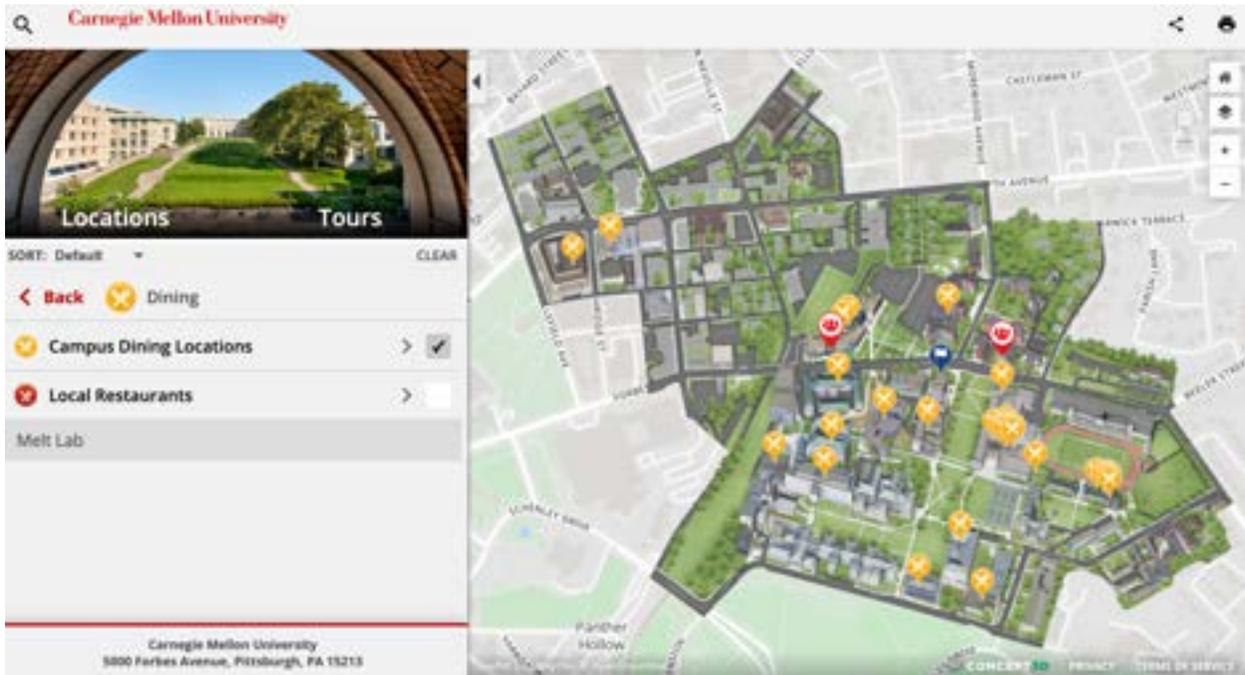
As always, school dining problems possess an important position in modern universities: it directly affects students' life, health, and study. Only by solving those problems can students concentrate on school life, form a good learning atmosphere, and reflect CMU's school motto "My heart is in the work".

By collecting evidence from students, such as surveys, quotations, anecdotes, etc., I found that students are generally okay with the school dining services: 53.6% of my survey participants said that they "somewhat like" our school meals. Nevertheless, they still believe that further improvements are needed in dining management. Problems that arise in school dining experience have led to negative impacts on students' school life, such as physical health problems, which is why this proposal is needed to communicate students' concerns to authoritative dining services directors.

# What has our dining services done well?

## 1. Dining Locations' Distribution on Campus

All dining locations are distributed evenly throughout the campus, and it is convenient for students to access a dining location. Please refer to the map below.



<https://map.concept3d.com/?id=192#lce/1565?ct/19362,7382,1568,0,7308,7376>

## 2. Staff Are Trying Their Best

Several students said that they appreciated the dedication of the dining staff.

During the pandemic, our school's dining team followed HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) training protocols and established plexiglass screens at each dining location. Moreover, CMU food services partner with third party organizations such as Allegheny County Health Department to supervise food safety. In addition, Justin Goel, the Associate Director of Dining Services, "always goes to each location and looks at temperature logs and talks to partners about refrigeration and ensures the practices are in place" (Beaman).

### 3. Strive to Provide Food Diversity

In the CMU community where students come from at least 47 countries and international students make up about 41.0% of the student body (College Factual), dining services have strived to create a diversified dining experience for all students.

CMU has a few representational dining locations that provide food with different cultural characteristics. For example, burgers and fries in The Underground, Chinese dishes in Hunan Express, and Sushi & Curry in Resnik are popular student choices.

Despite this, most students still think that our dining team can improve food diversity, taste, and quality (please see the student responses below).

#### Student Responses:

What is/are your favorite dining location(s) at CMU and why?

"Hunan Express (because I like Chinese food and the portions are large) and the Underground (I like their burgers)"

"Resnik, not too much wait and has multiple good options (taste of india, cucina, innovation, wild blue)"

"The Exchange and Au Bon Pain because of the higher quality and large selection of food. Real eggs, actual baked goods, customizable, and large selection of good sides."

"Underground, ABP (when they actually serve hot sandwiches), and hunan but even these are ridiculously unhealthy"

"Schatz, not because it tastes wonderful all of the time, but because they offer substantial options that are usually healthy (ish). Taste of India is wonderful, tastes great, but in an effort to avoid eating too much bread and rice I limit my visits there. Hunan in my opinion has the best tasting food, but again, not many healthy options available within the meal block and I end up paying extra for vegetables."

## Main Problems

1. Lack of food diversity and quality leads to student health problems and the phenomenon of students buying takeaways from outside restaurants.
2. Long queues during meal times are time-costing and cause students to skip meals.
3. Student meal plans are not practical and worthy of price since meal blocks have limitations in food choice and purchasing extra food requires DineXtra and flexible dollars.

## Problems Breakdown

### 1. Food Diversity & Quality

#### 1) Insufficient Food Diversity

75% of my survey participants think that our school meals are not diverse. In addition, I've seen more students, especially international students, order takeaways from outside restaurants.

#### 2) Lack of Fruits and Vegetables

60.7% of my survey participants thought CMU has not provided students with enough fruits and vegetables every day. The inability to guarantee student health will affect their academic performance, increase depression and the risk of chronic diseases (Flynn). Physical health problems are found in our school where 32.1% of my survey participants said that they have been unable to have bowel movements in a day or more than a day due to lack of fruits and vegetables.

Student Responses (See Appendix A)

#### 3) Insufficient Food Taste and Quality

44.4% of my survey participants had leftovers because food was unhealthy, and 22.2% of them had leftovers because food was not tasty / did not suit their taste.

Also, there are several specific feedbacks for our dining services to consider:

- a. Soups are generally super salty.
- b. Rice is too tough and pointy at Rohr Commons.
- c. A small bug was found in my fruit bowl at the Schatz Dining Room (please refer to the picture on the right).
- d. Flies fly around food at Rohr Commons and Schatz Dining Room.
- e. Moldy sandwiches found at Rohr Commons by my roommate.



#### 4) Food Safety Concerns During the Pandemic

Sometimes the staff and chefs take off their masks at the Underground. Sometimes the soup staff does not wear gloves and directly touches the rims of soup bowls at the Underground. Sometimes the salad staff does not wear gloves and directly touches the rims of salad bowls at Schatz Dining Room.

## 2. Long Queues

During meal times, the queue at each dining location is usually very long. Figure 1 shows this situation in The Exchange where many students wanted to have a sandwich for their lunch. Figure 2 was taken in Hunan Express during dinner time when there was a long queue for ordering food. Such crazy long lines have two negative outcomes: time-costing and students skip breakfast and/or lunch.



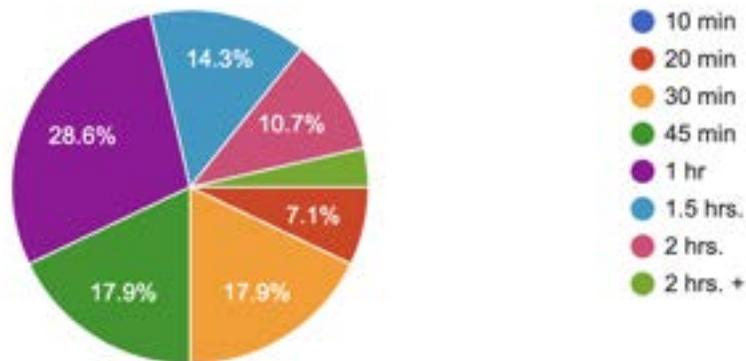
Figure 1: The Exchange on 9/8 at 12:12



Figure 2: Hunan Express on 9/7 at 16:46

### 1) Time-Costing

During peak dining hours, it can cost 2 hrs. + to pick up food. The longest time my survey participants have spent to buy a school meal was ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours, as shown in the pie chart below.



In addition, lack of employees decreases check-out efficiency and food distribution. A consequence is that 46.4% of my survey participants reported being late to class because they waited too long for picking up their food.

### 2) Students Skip Breakfast and/or Lunch

Students giving up breakfast and/or lunch in order to attend classes on time is a common issue. 92.9% of my survey participants said that they have skipped breakfast and/or lunch in a day. If students cannot keep up with their nutrition, they would be tired in class. My classmates and friends often complained to me that skipping breakfast and/or lunch caused poor performance in exams or dozing off in class.

Student Responses (See Appendix A)

## 3. Student Meal Plans

### 1) Not Worthy of Price

Student meal blocks are more expensive than outside restaurants' takeaways. A typical cost for lunch blocks is \$10.40 and for dinner blocks is \$11.25. Students reported that outside restaurants' takeaways are all \$10 with more food variety, quantity, and higher

quality. They complained that school meals are “too expensive” with “Too little food [and] very limited food choice.”

## 2) Not Practical

Meal plans are not practical in that they are complex and have many limitations in food choice. For instance, special food or beverage requires extra spending in DineXtra, flexible dollars, or an extra meal block. 50% of my survey participants have already used \$40+ DineXtra or flexible dollars during their first two weeks of school.

Student Responses (See Appendix A)

## Solution

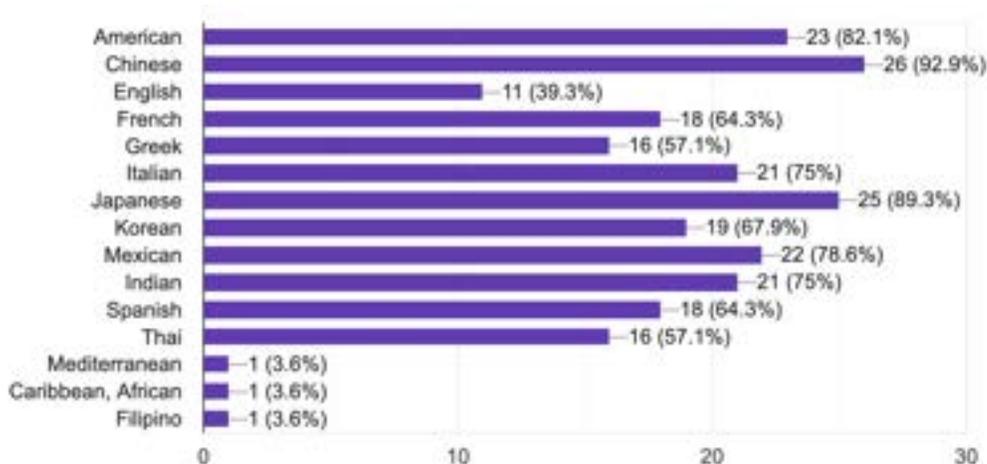
### 1. Improve Food Diversity and Quality

#### 1) Add More Vegetables and Fruits

Student health is the most basic guarantee for school life.

#### 2) Add More Food from Different Cultural Backgrounds

My survey participants expressed their interest in a wide variety of food types. Almost all regions over the world are being covered. Please see the summary of the student responses below.



Compared to our school’s current offerings, we do not have Korean, Spanish, French, Thai, Greek, and English food that most students are interested in. Therefore, dining

services can gradually provide those options in the future, if possible.

### 3) Update Dishes More Frequently

I recommend changing dishes every week to avoid the same item being served in multiple consecutive weeks. At the same time, try to reduce food monotonization at each dining location.

### 4) Improve Food Quality and Safety

Please avoid making greasy, super salty or sweet, and moldy food for good health. While making food, especially soups, less salty, put a salt shaker on the table where the tableware is at each dining location, so students can choose to add or not add salt according to their taste.

Also, check food safety once a week, such as food spoilage, mold, etc. In addition, document each food's expiration date and double check food quality one week before expiration date. Additionally, make sure that dining staff wear their masks during food service and wear gloves when they cook or need direct contact with food (soup, salad, etc.). In order to increase safety awareness and self-consciousness, the staff in charge of each dining location can do a surprise inspection every week during dining hours.

## 2. Reduce Long Queues

### 1) Establish More POS (Point-of-Sale) Systems

Adding one more POS system at each dining location would avoid the formation of a single crazy long line during peak dining hours.

### 2) Create Lunch Blocks

Divide student meal times more specifically to avoid large groups of students having meals at the same time period. For instance, create specific lunch blocks, such as First Lunch, Second Lunch, Third Lunch etc.. First Lunch being the earliest lunch block, Second Lunch being 20 minutes (more or less) later than First Lunch, and so on. Then put students in the lunch block that fits in their schedule.

### 3) Add More Staff at Each Dining location

Typically, a dining location has 4-9 dining staff (Beaman). But in order to meet the high number of student demands during peak hours, having 9-12 dining staff would be much better. This would increase efficiency while reducing the long queues during dining hours.

## 3. Adjust the Student Meal Plan

### 1) Lower the Student Meal Plan Price

Try to reduce lunch blocks price from \$10.40 to ≈\$9 and for dinner blocks from \$11.25 to ≈\$10.

### 2) Have Less “Special” Items that are Excluded from Meal Blocks

For example, include cooked vegetables in a meal block in Hunan Express, The Exchange, and The Underground to ensure student health.

## 4. Feasible Actions for Improving the Overall Student Dining Experience

### 1) Organize an Annual Selection of the One Best Dining Location among Students

This is to better stimulate the competition between dining locations that lead to improvements in all aspects of the student dining experience.

### 2) Establish a Real-Time Dining Experience Feedback Kiosk at Each Dining Location

Feedback kiosks allow students to make suggestions for improvements in time.

## Positive Outcomes

### 1. Student Health Guarantee

The most important outcome of enhancing dining experience should be the student health guarantee. Healthy and diverse meals lead to good health that ensures school life quality.

### 2. Grabs Students’ Stomach and Heart

Trying to solve dining problems that students are concerned about would greatly increase the weight of dining services in students' hearts. Students would know that they are being cared for by the school, thereby shortening the distance between the school and the students.

### 3. College Ranking Improvement

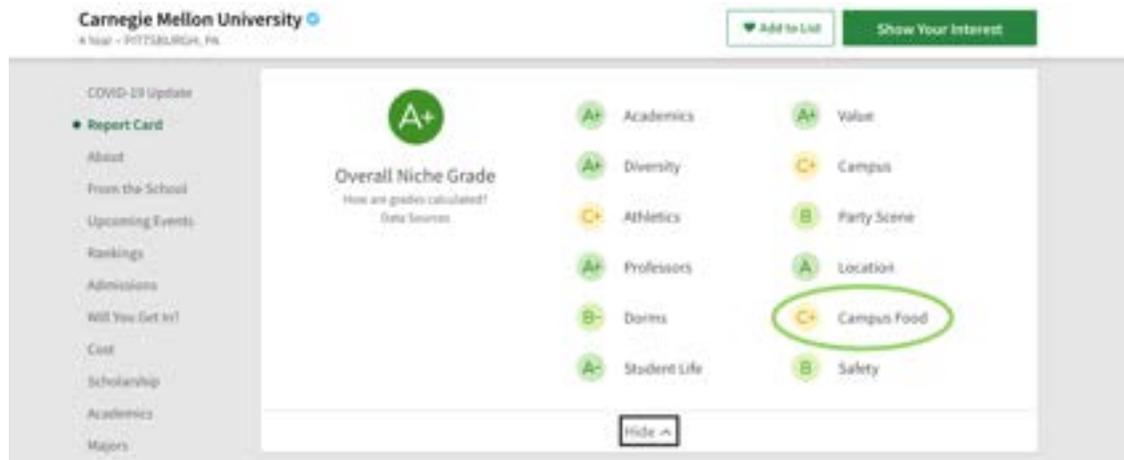
During my research process, I saw that CMU's dining services website states our school has “a nationally top-ranked dining program”.



<https://www.cmu.edu/dining/about-us/index.html>

However, CMU is not on Niche's 2022 Best College Food in America ranking, meaning that our meals do not have enough strength to beat the nominated 1,391 colleges.

Moreover, CMU has a C+ for Campus Food on Niche, which indicates that students are generally not satisfied with our campus food.



<https://www.niche.com/colleges/carnegie-mellon-university/#campus-life>

It is sad for our community to see these results as we have always been proud of our outstanding academic programs and reputation. Thus, to increase CMU school pride in college food rankings and grades, enhancing our dining experience is necessary.

## Constraints

### 1. Space

Establishing POS systems and feedback kiosks requires additional space. But according to my observation, it is feasible to add one POS system and one feedback kiosk at each dining location.

### 2. Cost

Buying more items needs the school to pay an extra amount. Below is a chart of linked items and their price for reference.

Item	Price / Item	Amount Needed	Total Price
<u>POS System</u>	\$467	22 (excluding cafés and grocery stores)	$\$467 \cdot 22$ =\$10274
<u>Salt Shaker</u>	\$0.99	22 (excluding cafés and grocery stores)	$\$0.99 \cdot 22$ =\$21.78
Real-Time Dining Experience Feedback Kiosk	<u>Stand:</u> \$30 <u>iPad:</u> \$329.99 Stand+iPad: \$359.99	26 (all dining locations)	$\$359.99 \cdot 26$ =\$9359.74

### 3. Staff

More staff at each dining location means CMU needs to hire more people, yet recruiting is not an easy task during the pandemic. I suggest doing the recruiting process and purchases and installing simultaneously.

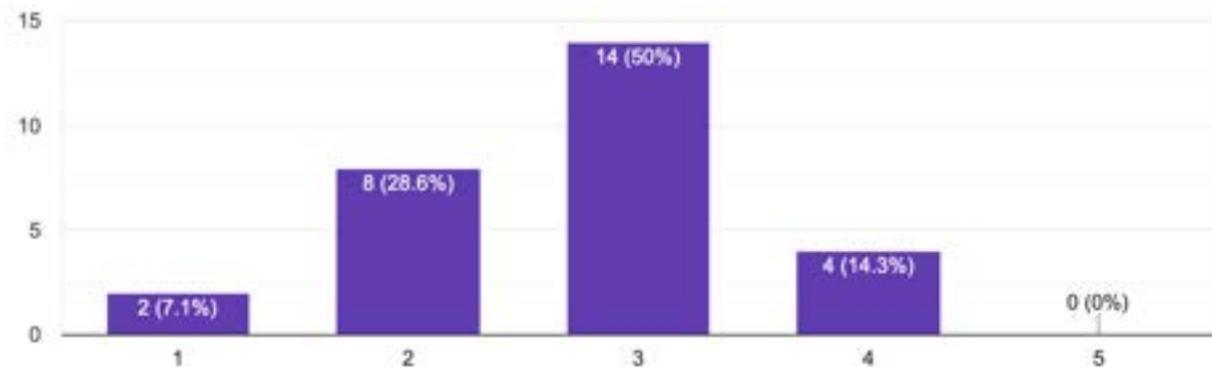
### 4. Time

All solutions are time-consuming. However, the school can utilize weekends and

vacations to take action.

## Conclusion

Generally speaking, CMU dining services has done a good job so far on dining experience. However, most students think that our school's dining experience is moderate, which proves that there is still room for improvement, as seen in the histogram below.



Lastly, this proposal represents the entire student community's concern. The impacts that dining problems bring are not only among students, but also affect our school's reputation. Thus, I sincerely hope that after reading this proposal, CMU dining services would strive to create a better dining experience for all. Thank you.

## Thank You Note

Thank you to Cody Januszco, my first year writing teacher, who supported me to write my proposal to improve our dining experience.

Thank you to Joseph Beaman, director of dining services, who helped me to collect information regarding our school's dining services through a Zoom meeting.

Thank you to my survey participants, CMU undergraduate students, who helped me to collect students' thoughts and concerns for the CMU dining experience.

## References

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2. Interview with Joseph Beaman
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5. Why Should Students Eat Healthy?  
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<https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/best-college-food/>
7. Niche's College Review on CMU  
<https://www.niche.com/colleges/carnegie-mellon-university/#alert>
8. Carnegie Mellon University International Student Report by College Factual  
<https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/carnegie-mellon-university/student-life/international/#secOverall>
9. Item and Price  
[POS System](#)  
[Salt Shaker](#)  
[Stand](#)  
[iPad](#)

## Appendix A

### Student Responses about Dining Quality:

- "In general the food seems too unhealthy and has a lack of vegetables or fruits."
- "Lack of diversity, lack of healthy nutrients, too greasy, no vegetables"
- "It's difficult to find good vegetables or have a side other than fried foods. Most meals have a lot of carbs and it's difficult to eat as healthy as I would like."
- "Food is very fried, unsubstantial calories, very unhealthy for an active person."
- "Lots of fried foods and take a lot of effort to eat healthy, lots and lots of carbs."
- "There's never enough food for student athletes! We're always hungry and are forced to buy our own food while we're already paying for an expensive meal plan. Please help us out and give us food with actual amounts of calories that is healthy! I'm sick of fried food"

### Student Responses about Long Queues:

- "lines too long, not even time to get. meal before/in between classes"
- "The lines are too long for me to wait 1.5 hours when the places open at 7 and my classes start at 8."
- "I rarely eat breakfast because nothing opens till 7:00 or 7:30 and when I have 8 am class I don't have time to wait in line, get the food, and eat it before class. Other times the line is too long for me to get food and eat it in the 15 min to an hour break between classes"
- "None of the dining places are open during breakfast and I didn't like any of the greasy options for lunch"

### Student Responses about Meal Plans:

- "The idea of diverse food options is wonderful, [but] the school just didn't execute this plan well. They took the easy route of making quick, unhealthy foods the basis of the meal block and charging extra for healthy and substantial additions to your meals. It's kinda bogus and super frustrating. Because the potential to have a

great dining system was there, but the effort to provide mostly healthy options was not made at all.”

- “Forced on first years which is not even cheaper than just using our own money. No reason for anyone to get meal plan.”
- “The meal plans are confusing and convoluted”
- “Dinex options cost too much...”
- “The food is often unhealthy, and a little inaccessible. for example at the underground to add vegetables or anything is an extra cost.”