



David Porter's 10 Tips for Boosting Meal Plan Participation

Porter Khouw Consulting, Inc.
PO Box 4028
Crofton, MD 21114
Tel: 410.451.3617
Fax: 410.451.3619
www.PorterKhouwConsulting.com

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Meal plans are central to the success of the college dining experience. In order to create the greatest value for your meal plans it is critical to ensure that both the dining program and the method of payments are aligned with the lifestyles and needs of your customers. For over 20 years, the team at Porter Khouw Consulting has used the following proven strategies to increase participation and satisfaction with meal plan programs. Our firm has helped colleges and universities throughout North America re-engineer their foodservice operations, to create the successful, profitable, and award-winning dining programs.

#1. Align Hours of Operation with Customer Lifestyles. The days of three square meals are long gone. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were the traditional staples of the dining program of the past, but nowadays students are eating outside of the traditional day parts and instead, choosing to eat whenever their busy schedules permit, or when it is convenient for them – and they expect their meal plan to accommodate their lifestyle. The number one complaint of meal plan holders, in fact, is that they can't use their plan credit because the facilities aren't open when they want to eat. Typical students are eating small meals throughout the day, as well as later into the evening. You'd be wise to align your hours of operation to match this change in lifestyle.

#2. Focus on Flexibility and Portability. The second biggest complaint we hear from students is that they can't use meal plans in every dining facility on campus, or that they can't consume all the meals their plans entitle them to. To reduce this kind of dissatisfaction, consider offering a continuous-access meal plan in the context of an all-you-care-to-eat facility. Instead of purchasing a set number of meals, give students the freedom to eat as often as they like throughout the day (five or seven days a week) in any of the dining facilities on campus. Worried this will cost you a fortune? Generally, the food costs of continuous access plans are lower than traditional plans. Plus, you're likely to see less food waste as a result of smaller portions being consumed more often.

#3. Eliminate Meal Equivalencies. Meal equivalencies were created to let customers use meal plans when their schedules or lifestyles didn't match the hours of operation of all-you-care-to-eat facilities. This is usually detrimental to the bottom line because the cost of goods in cash operations is significantly higher than in board plan facilities. Instead, maximize student access to all-you-care-to-eat dining facilities, eliminating the need for the meal equivalencies, and offer meal plans that include specified amounts of "dining dollars" that students can use in retail operations.

#4. Add a Guest Meal Option. This is an easy and inexpensive way to add value to your program. Students often complain that friends without meal plans can't eat with them in their dining facilities. Guest meals eliminate this problem, while encouraging participation.

#5. Create Easy-to-Use Meal Plans for Groups. This is especially important for commuters, those in Greek life and non-students. By investing in these plans, groups can eat anywhere on campus without having to worry about carrying cash.

#6. Offer Meal Plan Incentives. As with any customer in any industry, students will be more likely to invest in a meal plan if you offer incentives. The University of Georgia offers commuter meal plan holders free parking if they eat in one of the dining facilities. Meal plan sales to off-campus students significantly increased after introducing the program. Incentives could also include, themed meals, special events, and student programming. Consider what types of incentives you can offer to your customer base to create excitement about your dining program.

#7. Remove Barriers. If the process to sign up for a meal plan is cumbersome, you'll find fewer and fewer students doing it. Make it easy to sign up, whether students choose to do so in-person or online. Along the same lines, it should be painless and quick to add money to a meal plan. Enable students or their parents to add money or make changes to their programs online through your website, a mobile app or both.

#8. Remember that Image Matters. Just as your physical dining facility should be kept pristine, it's also important to keep your menu options fresh and appealing. Find ways to give students plenty of choices, even if they require specific needs (i.e. gluten-free meals, dairy alternatives, etc.). A wide variety of menu options will keep your students coming back.

#9. Seek Input. Don't be afraid to survey both those that hold meal plans and those that do not. You can hire an independent organization to conduct campus-wide comparative surveys each year to gauge customer satisfaction. This will also allow you to identify opportunities and challenges that may not be on your radar.

#10. Market your Program. Last, but not least, remember to share information about your program. Many dining departments market their meal plans at the beginning of the year and then neglect to do so later on. To keep meal plan and dining services options top-of-mind among customers, you must continually market your services to the campus community throughout the entire academic year.