

'It's not enough food': Students battle food insecurity as campus meal plans exceed cost of other options

BY COLE PRESSLER

Mandatory dining plans are a rite of passage for college freshmen across the nation who have to endure powdered eggs, soggy pasta and frozen tortillas.

But Cal Poly's freshman plans are among the most expensive of any public school in California — and prices for packaged food and items are disproportionately high compared to off-campus grocery stores.

Many upperclassmen skip meals rather than pay for food on campus. At Campus Market, single bananas and apples cost 99 cents, and a single Claritin tablet costs \$3.39.

Cal Poly's cheapest dining plan is more expensive than most CSU and UC schools' highest-priced plans.

In October 2023, Mustang News recorded prices of various items at Campus Market. Of 44 items that were also sold at Vons, 42 were more

expensive — more than half of the items were marked up by more than 50%.

Mustang News spoke with more than a dozen students who

expressed frustration over the price and quality of campus food.

"They're forcing them to get the most expensive food possibly in SLO," former ASI Board of Directors member and political science alumna Alexandria Raynes said.

Cal Poly Corporation (CPC) Spokesperson Aaron Lambert claimed that Campus Dining looks for "economically feasible solution[s]" working with Chartwells (the multinational food service group that runs Campus Dining's daily operations) to determine their food prices.

"Chartwells has an internal team with nationwide buying power that works with distributors to get the best deal possible," Lambert wrote.

But in the past, Chartwells has promised other universities "the maximum financial return" and other multi-million-dollar monetary incentives, according to the Hechinger Report. The company was once forced to pay \$19 million dollars after overcharging Washington D.C. public schools for school lunches.

Lambert suggested Cal Poly dining plan prices cost more than other California schools because of its Dining Dollar system, where students use a declining balance to pay for single food items rather than swiping into a buffet-style dining hall.

Cal Poly's meal plans still cost thousands of dollars more than other Dining Dollar schools.

And unlike many other schools, Cal Poly charges a \$1,026 "operational fee" on top of their meal plans which funds maintenance and construction for buildings like Vista Grande and the 1901 Marketplace.

"The Corporation is putting their own revenue streams above the needs of students," Raynes said.

A YEARLY ADJUSTMENT

In the last five years, Cal Poly freshman dining plans have increased between 24% and 33%.

While the cheapest plan increased at roughly the pace of inflation, the more expensive plans outpaced inflation by \$500-800.

The three freshman meal plans — First Year Limited, Plus and Max — cost \$6185, \$6743 and \$7400.

The cheapest 2023-24 plan costs more than the most expensive 2021-22 plan.

But Campus Dining defines a "full meal" as costing around \$15 — meaning students on the Plus (which provides \$24 a day) or Limited (\$18 a day) plans have enough money for less than two meals a day.

On average, Americans spent \$12.80 on food per day in 2022, according to Bureau of Labor statistics.

Sociology freshman Api Kaila, who has the Limited plan, eats one meal a day with her dining dollars and cooks the rest of

her meals in the dorms using food she bought off-campus.

"It's not enough food," Kaila said about what her dining plan provides.

WHY ARE PRICES SO HIGH?

Lambert says the prices Campus Dining pays for the food they sell have increased 30% over the past three years.

Agribusiness professor Ricky Volpe, who specializes in food pricing, said that rising prices reflect national trends of food inflation in the past year due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict — which affects the prices of any foods produced with wheat, soybeans or sunflower oils.

"It just sounds like they're just lagging a year to 18 months behind what is actually happening with food price inflation in the United States," Volpe said. "Even if the conflict ended today, we'd still be feeling those impacts for months."

Food prices increased nearly 10% nationally in 2022, according to the US Inflation Calculator.

"The prices they're paying for goods, transportation, labor wages, all those things are up," Volpe said. "And so now we're seeing meal plan prices push ahead and try to make up for that."

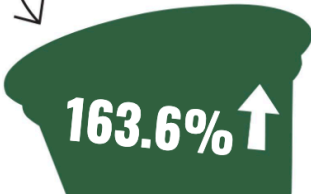
Lambert claimed food prices will continue to skyrocket in the coming years.

"The rise is driven by increases in labor and food costs, which is consistent with institutions across the nation," Lambert wrote in an email to Mustang News this spring. "Long-term forecasts found that these costs would continue to rise exponentially."

Volpe questioned the "long-term forecasts," saying inflation does not work as CPC suggests.

"The idea that costs will increase

CAMPUS MARKET PRICES COMPARED WITH VONS



Chobani 5.3 oz. yogurt cup \$3.40 from \$1.29



Cup of Noodles \$1.85 from \$0.70



1 Banana \$0.99 from \$0.28

double-digit inflation indefinitely moving forward, that's not happening anywhere," Volpe said. "That's not even happening in developable nations. That sounds like an exaggeration."

CAL POLY STUDENTS AFFECTED BY HIGH FOOD INSECURITY

After their first year, students are no longer required to buy a dining plan.

When they have to pay for tuition, rent, textbooks and other necessities, food can slip down on a given student's priority list — especially if the food that's available on campus isn't affordable.

"Food insecurity risk tends to skyrocket after you get off your meal plan," nutrition professor Aydin Nazmi said. "It's not a problem that is restricted to quote-unquote, poor people."

Cal Poly students experience food insecurity at a rate close to 30%, according to the school's Basic Needs Reports from 2018 and 2022 — about three times higher than the national average.

Nazmi leads Cal Poly's CalFresh Outreach initiative. The initiative helps students apply for CalFresh — California's version of nationwide EBT benefits — which provides low-income Californians and college students up to \$291 a month to buy groceries at virtually any store.

Since you can't use EBT benefits on prepared meals, the only places on campus where students with EBT can buy food are at Campus Market, Market Grand Ave and Market Poly Canyon — where food frequently costs double of the same items at Ralph's or Vons.

But rather than making up for it by buying food off-campus, many students simply don't eat.

In a March Campus Dining survey, 49% of respondents — nearly 1800 students — said they skip meals if they don't buy food on campus.

One of these students is economics junior Sam Huang. Huang doesn't have a car and has to rely on friends to drive him from his house on Foothill Boulevard to grocery stores several miles away.

He also works early mornings at the Business Building and has early classes on the days he doesn't work.

"I don't really have time or the energy to make breakfast at home," Huang said. "Usually I don't eat lunch or breakfast unless there's food on campus through a club."

Even with his CalFresh EBT

benefits, Huang avoids Campus Market because of the disproportionately high prices. He said he wishes there was more affordable food near campus.

"It's not Cal Poly's fault that they can't sell prepared food with EBT, but a grocery store that charges normal prices would be very helpful," Huang said. "Even if it's not at Cal Poly."

Huang said he's concerned about the rising costs of meal plans and campus food.

"Their obligation is to make sure the price of on-campus food is at a level that is accessible to students without having it take up too much of your income," Huang said about Campus Dining.

According to Nazmi, students skipping costly meals is devastating to Cal Poly's academic environment.

"If [students] are not getting enough food to sleep properly or stay awake, our educational mission is completely moot," Nazmi said. "If you can't eat, you can't study."

According to Lambert, CPC combats food insecurity by allowing the Food Pantry to purchase food through Campus Dining's vendors, discounting meal plans for 100 student-athletes each quarter and providing frozen meals to the food pantry.

They also offer students the option to donate any unused Dining Dollars to low-income students through Mustang Meal Share.

Unless students purchase another meal plan or donate through Mustang Meal Share, their Dining Dollars are automatically forfeited into CPC's emergency reserve fund. At the end of the 2021-22 school year, CPC re-absorbed more than \$300,000 unused Dining Dollars.

"It just feels a little unfair," Raynes said.

Raynes authored a Board of Directors resolution in the spring calling on CPC to either let students roll over Dining Dollars without

purchasing another plan or to direct all surplus dollars to the Food Pantry or to Mustang Meal Share.

"If it's that easy — you basically have to fill out a form saying you want to donate this amount of money — it should be that easy for them to just do that automatically at the end of the year," Raynes said.

CPC spokesperson Andrea Burns told ASI that Campus Dining has \$44 million of outstanding debt, claiming they would be forced to increase their prices if they donated the unused Dining Dollars.



I feel like I haven't had vegetables in so long. Is that just the college experience? It shouldn't be.

BIANCA BROWN

Landscape architecture freshman

"Campus Dining could not assume the cost of [the] resolution without increasing its prices," Burns wrote to Raynes.

Burns also claimed that sending unused Dining Dollars to the Food Pantry would cripple Campus Dining.

"Funding university programs such as the food pantry using student meal plan dollars results in a negative spiral of increasing campus food costs and decreasing affordability for

Cal Poly's Meal Plan Prices Compared to other Dining Dollar Schools

