‘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 rehearse powdered eggs, soggy rice and frozen burritos. But Cal Poly’s mandatory 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 apprehensively skip meals rather than pay for food on campus. At Campus Market, single bananas and apples cost over $1, and a milkshake with triple chocolate milk at Chocalatte costs $5.29.

Cal Poly’s cheapest dining plan is more expensive than most CSU and UC schools’ highest plan prices. In October 2019, Morning News reported prices of various items at Campus Market. Of 14 items that were sold at least once, all were more expensive — more than half of the items were marked up by more than 80%.“Shocking,” News spoke with more than a dozen students.

Chobani yoghurt cup $2.38
Cup of Noodles $1.85 from $0.70
5.3 oz. yogurt cup $3.40 from $1.21
Lambert says the prices. Campus Dining pays for the food they sell 80% over the past three years.

Agribusiness professor Jillicy Valpo, 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 price of any foods produced with wheat, corn or soybeans.

“Just a reminder that you’re not going to be able to afford $10 a gallon of gas what is actually happening with food prices,” Valpo said. “The cost of irrigation, the cost of transportation, the cost of labor, the cost of materials increases because of these things.”

The prices increased nearly 19% nationally in 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“For those who are paying for groceries, transportation, labor wages, all those things are up,” Valpo said. “And so now we’re seeing meal plan prices paid should and um to make up for that. Those increased prices will continue to escalate in the coming months.”

“After the fact, you see students no longer respect it by eating cheap, healthy food. We see the increase in takeout. We see the increase in sodas and snacks. We see the increase in red meat consumption,” Lambert says.

Cal Poly’s most popular meal plan costs $1,022.92 for a student who has the limited plan, or if used more than 20% more than the dining dollars and carries the cost of more than half of their groceries because it’s more than the average student spends on food.

Cal Poly’s 2022-24 cheapest meal plan
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# "CAMPUS MARKET PRICES COMPARED WITH VONS"

16.3% 164.3%

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1 Banana $0.99 from $0.28