



# SWITCHING CAMPUS DINING

## A Student Guide



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## Introduction

Making change can be daunting. Where do you start that doesn't feel impossible, but still makes an impact? Fortunately, small incremental changes add up to have a significant impact. When looking at a larger scale like a university, every student making the same change each day has a profound effect.

Let's look at the hypothetical example of lattes served on campus. A small school might serve 200,000 lattes with milk in one year. If all of those were switched to non-dairy milk, a school could save more than 11 million gallons of water.\* These numbers quickly add up, and that's just from lattes served. Can you imagine if students were eating more plant-based meals three times a day? If even just half of the beef burgers were switched to plant-based burgers, fish tacos switched to bean tacos, and the chicken in Pad Thai switched to tofu, the impact would be exponential.

You are likely already living these changes everyday and setting an example for your peers to understand how easy it is, but we need more people to recognize how their dietary decisions influence their health, the health of our planet, and the animals.

Peer-to-peer education and encouragement is one of the most effective ways to make change. And that's where you come in, with the support of Switch4Good! We are here to help you get started with your plant-based campaign. In this Handbook, you'll learn about different ways you, as a student, can be a changemaker on your campus. This guide was created with the help of students who have been in your shoes and found success. It outlines strategies you can take based on your campus's current dining situation and what you feel excited to tackle. It also outlines potential roadblocks and strategies to keep moving forward and overcome them.

Despite any frustrations that come up, it is possible to lead the change you want to see. At Switch4Good, we are excited to support you in bringing your goals to life.

*\*Let's assume a small campus has 1,000 people who drink lattes on a regular basis. Assuming they drink 200 per year (which is less than 4 per week), that gets us to 200,000 total per year. Then, each of those lattes is a medium containing 12 oz of milk. Dairy milk requires 628 gallons of water to make 1 gallon of milk, whereas soy milk only requires 28 gallons of water<sup>1</sup>. Scaling that to 12 oz per latte, and 200,000 lattes, gives us 11,225,000 gallons of water saved.*

## **Meet the Author**

My name is Jessica Cohen, and I am a student at Cornell University (class of 2025) studying biology, policy, and nutrition. Throughout my time as a student, I have worked on campaigns to encourage Cornell to drop the up-charge on plant-based milk, add plant-based defaults and options, change labeling on plant-based products to make them more appealing, and create a guide to eating plant-based at Cornell. Outside of school, I work with Balanced to increase accessibility of healthy and sustainable food at K-12 schools, Switch4Good on their various campaigns (as well as this guide!), and New Roots on plant-based campaigns at my university. Following graduation, I hope to work in animal- or food-related policy. Outside of advocacy, I love watching movies, competing in and training for triathlons (specifically at the half-Ironman distance), and spending time with my family, friends, and animals.



## Process

This section contains an overview of the process of running plant-based campaigns at your university. It is important to note that, while it is laid out in a step-by-step process, the progress of a campaign is in no way linear and does not always follow this form or order. There is no way to easily map out the complexity of a campaign, especially since it differs from university to university. However, based on conversations with students who ran successful campaigns at five different universities, we were able to put together a general process that students can follow. The process contains four phases—(1) Preliminary Research, (2) Campaign Planning, (3) Implementation, and (4) Assessing Results—which should take place in the order listed, but sometimes you might have to go back to an earlier step. For example, you might run into a roadblock in Phase 2 or Phase 3 and need to go back to Phase 1 to do some more research. We recommend spending sufficient time in each step to ensure your campaign is fully planned out and no important detail or information is missed. Below is a high level overview of the process. For more information on a given step, see the following sections, which contain in-depth explanations of each step and phase, including the questions you should be asking at each step.

### **Phase 1 - Preliminary Research**

Before beginning your campaign, it is important to conduct research, so you can make a fully informed campaign plan. If you do not properly prepare, you might miss important details that can help in your campaign. Additionally, dining staff might see you as less credible if you do not seem prepared or lack knowledge on initiatives that are clearly listed on their website. If you meet with dining staff before you have adequate information, you might waste a meeting asking simple questions easily found on their website - and these meetings are difficult to schedule.

- **Observe current options and assess areas for improvement.** Go to your dining halls or campus cafes and make observations about their current options. Use these observations to determine what can be improved.
- **Research your school's dining service and explore their current dining initiatives.** Use the dining service's website to gain a better understanding of their goals, initiatives, and food procurement process. If they use a large food service provider (Sodexo, Chartwells, etc.), conduct further research into the provider and the options it offers. Look specifically for any statements related to sustainability or student health, including their accommodation of allergies and special diets.
- **Determine your school's goals and priorities.** Use your current understanding of your university and the university's website to identify the school's goals and priorities, such as their sustainability commitments, major programs, and academic or research focuses.
- **Identify potential allies.** Research a range of possible allies, including on-campus allies (student organizations, professors, individual students, dining staff) and off-campus allies (outside organizations, students at other universities who have run similar initiatives). Make sure to look at every relevant subject space - not just animal-related and plant-based clubs and professors, but also those related to the environment, social justice, labor, human rights, public health, and nutrition, and seemingly unrelated areas like art and hospitality.

## **Phase 2 - Campaign Planning**

Once you have gained an adequate understanding of your school's goals, priorities, dining services, and sustainability efforts and developed a list of potential allies, it is time to move on to the Campaign Planning phase. In this phase, you will set goals, plan their campaign, and begin to form connections with allies and the dining service. Please note it is vital to form relationships with allies or partners *before* making an ask.

- **Determine your focus and set goals.** Review your observations and research, and use those notes to set goals for your campaign (see the Example Projects section for example campaigns). Determine long-term goals of what you hope to accomplish and short-term goals that will help you get there.
- **Consider how you can measure success.** If you can't show that your initiative is having an impact or making improvements to the dining service or school, it is harder to convince the dining service to continue with your initiatives. Therefore, before making an ask or starting a campaign, it is important to determine how your impact can be measured.
- **Put your plan into writing.** Putting together all of the information you have gathered, create a strategy for how you are going to achieve your goals. In the following sections, we will provide resources on how exactly to do this, but ensure you know who to reach out to and the angle from which you are going to approach each conversation.
- **Reach out to allies.** Meet with the professors you identified and reach out to the clubs and students you found to see what advice or information they have to offer and who might want to assist on the campaign. The early focus is to establish a relationship and assess who might be of most support to you.
- **Schedule an introductory meeting with the dining service.** The first meeting with the dining service is meant to form a relationship with the staff. Do NOT make an ask in the first meeting - the goal is to get to know them and get them to know you. Seek to understand them - ask about the challenges and limitations they face.

## **Phase 3 - Implementation**

Now that you have gathered your research, created your strategy, and begun building relationships with your dining service and allies, you are ready to begin implementing your campaign.

- **Make the ask.** Schedule a second meeting with the dining service, during which you can suggest the campaign you are interested in pursuing. Be sure to ask what support you can provide to make the proposed changes and determine next steps for implementing the campaign.
- **Follow up and be persistent.** Changes do not typically happen after one meeting—if they do, it means you are very lucky! Usually, change requires persistence, multiple meetings, following up with the dining team about the changes, and ensuring the dining team is actually implementing these changes. If you hit a roadblock on one path, look for another.
- **Hand hold the dining staff through the process.** To ensure implementation of your campaign, you want to make it as easy as possible for the dining staff. For any

challenges they express, present solutions. Consistently offer support and check on progress. Applaud what has been done, before reinforcing further changes.

#### **Phase 4 - Assessing Results and Next Steps**

Your campaign is being implemented—yay! But you are not done yet. In order to demonstrate the value of the change you made and ensure its permanence, it is important to have some measure to show it made a real impact. Don't forget to celebrate small wins, reflect on your campaign, and move on to your next steps.

- **Measure success.** This can look different for each campaign, but be sure to use the metric you identified in Phase 2 (or a new one if you found a better metric) to assess the success of your campaign. This can be a student satisfaction survey, a measure of sales or greenhouse gas emissions, or an assessment of food waste. If you don't measure your success, it can be challenging to demonstrate the value of your campaign and reflect on areas of improvement for your next effort.
- **Celebrate small wins.** Now that your campaign is off the ground, it is time to celebrate. You might not feel like simply adding one plant-based option is that impactful, but it is important to provide positive feedback to your team, your allies, and the dining staff you are working with before moving to your next step.
- **Reflect.** Before moving on from this campaign (or repeating it in another location), it is important to reflect on the campaign process. What went well? Who was helpful in the approval and implementation of the campaign? What are areas for growth and improvement? What lessons have you learned?
- **Determine your next steps.** Your campaign has been implemented, so now it is time to determine your next steps. Use your reflections and your observations from phase 1 to determine what your next goal is. Go back to Phase 2, and repeat.

## Phase 1 - Preliminary Research

The focus of Phase 1 is to conduct preliminary research to better understand your university's systems, goals, priorities, and dining program, as well as identify allies, so you can be better prepared to start your campaign.

### Step 1: Observe current options and assess areas for improvement.

The best first step is assessing the current offerings at your dining service to identify areas of growth. Every university starts at a different place - some have no plant-based proteins or options, while others already offer tofu, seitan, tempeh, and plant-based cheese. You might need to go to different dining halls and on different days to get a full view of what is offered. If you are already familiar with your dining offerings and have an idea of areas for improvement, feel free to skip this step. Here are some guiding questions to ask yourself when assessing the plant-based options, listed under four different categories:

- Offerings:
  - What plant-based alternatives does your school offer - tofu, plant-based cheese, plant-based meat, seitan, and/or tempeh?
  - Is there always a plant-based entree?
  - Are plant-based options offered in the buffet line, or are they only provided upon request?
  - Is the default plant-based and you need to ask for meat, or does the default have meat and you need to remove it to make the meal plant-based?
  - Are there plant-based desserts?
  - For a cafe, what milk options do they currently offer? Do all options cost the same? What is the default option?
- Placement:
  - Are plant-based options in the same section as the meat/dairy options, or is there a special stall for plant-based food?
  - Are plant-based options offered at the beginning or the end of the buffet line?
- Appeal:
  - Are plant-based options appealing? Are there plant-based alternatives to the current options, or are the plant-based options completely different?
  - How are plant-based options named? Are they called “vegan \_\_\_\_\_” or are they labeled in a more interesting/appealing way?
- Cost:
  - Do plant-based meals cost the same as those with animal products?

After you have sufficiently assessed the options, identify areas for improvement.

### Step 2: Research your school's dining service and explore their current dining initiatives.

Understanding your dining service will allow you to understand what initiatives are possible and how to best approach the dining team. To do this, look over their website and find online articles related to initiatives. It is important to not just research plant-based initiatives, but also other changes that have occurred due to student pressure or staff efforts. For example, a



campaign by Jewish students to get more Kosher options might provide valuable insight. Your school might also already be working to improve plant-based options or have signed a pledge to add options, such as the Forward Food Pledge, which has the goal of 50% plant-based offerings in institutional dining programs by 2027.

Some important places to look on your school's dining webpage include tabs on allergen and special diets, sustainability, current initiatives, student engagement, and the dining team. Before moving on from this step, you should know:

- **Food procurement process** - Does your school use a common food service provider (such as Sodexo, Chartwells, or Compass), or is the food independently sourced? It can also be helpful to look further into the food service provider to understand what options are available through them. For example, do they offer plant-based cheese, and if so, which brand? What types of beans are available?
- **Past student initiatives** - Are there students who have run campaigns at your school's dining program in the past? These do not need to be plant-based initiatives, but students who have worked with the dining program in the past can serve as great allies to help you better understand the dining program and which staff members are more open to student initiatives.
- **Sustainability initiatives** - What is currently being done to make the dining program more sustainable? Are any of the sustainability initiatives related to adding plant-based options or reducing animal-based products?
- **Plant-based commitments** - Has your school signed any plant-based pledges (such as the Forward Food Pledge) or made plant-based commitments? Be sure to check your university's website, as well as google "\_\_\_\_ University Plant-Based Commitment" (in case the commitment is not publicly listed on the website).
- **Dining team members** - How big is the dining team? Who might be the best team member(s) to reach out to (in later steps)? Does the dining team have a sustainability coordinator? Who are key contacts for the dining service? Is there a Head of Sustainability in dining, or is the sustainability department separate from dining? Who are people in power to whom you could reach out?
- **Student engagement opportunities** - Does the dining program offer any opportunities for students to become involved? Some schools offer internships, ambassador programs, or student assembly meetings, but any opportunity to gain visibility with the dining team can greatly aid your campaign.

### **Step 3: Determine your school's goals and priorities.**

Every school has different goals and priorities that drive a lot of their decisions. This can take shape in ways that might help your initiative (such as an ambitious sustainability goal) or hurt it (such as a strong dairy or meat program). Either way, it is important to be aware of these goals and priorities, so you can frame your campaign in a way that the school will accept and so you know what initiatives are possible. Here are important areas and questions to consider when reviewing your school's goals and priorities:

- **Sustainability goals** - Typically, one of the most effective ways to frame a plant-based initiative is in terms of sustainability - plant-based foods use less land and water and produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions<sup>2</sup>. Most (if not all) universities have some type

of sustainability initiative, program, climate, goal, and/or climate action plan - these can often be found on their website and help guide your campaign.

- For example, a school might have a goal of being carbon neutral by 2050. Informing your university's dining program that adding plant-based options or switching to oat milk as the default can greatly reduce your university's emissions might help persuade them to go through with your initiative. It is important to check whether food is already part of your university's goal, as schools often neglect this area in their climate efforts.
- **Priority programs** - Some schools have major programs that they focus on or prioritize, and having an awareness of these programs is important to understand how to appeal to the school, as well as what topics might be off limits. Maybe your school has an agriculture, business, labor, art, STEM, or food science focus. For example, NYU has a heavy focus on their arts and business programs, while Cornell has a labor relations school and a large agriculture program. Often this can be found simply by knowing your school - this might be what your school is best known for or the largest program. So how do you use the knowledge of this priority program? Take Cornell as an example:
  - Cornell has a college for labor relations, which means the school might be more sensitive to labor issues and the students might be more passionate about fighting for these issues.
  - Cornell also has a major focus on agriculture - they have their own dairy program that provides milk for the cafes. Due to this, initiatives or arguments that focus on decreasing dairy sales are unlikely to be convincing, and student advocates at Cornell have refrained from using this argument. Instead, they focused on discussing the social justice issues related to lactose-intolerance to advocate to remove the plant-based milk up-charge.

Having an understanding of what is important to your university, its image, and its students can help guide your campaign.

#### **Step 4: Identify potential allies.**

Identifying allies is essential to ensuring a successful campaign, as they can provide support, resources, knowledge, and an additional voice. There are two overarching categories of allies: on-campus allies (i.e. professors, students, clubs, faculty) and off-campus allies (i.e. outside organizations, students at other universities). Let's start with on-campus allies, as they tend to be the most useful.

Some important places to look for on-campus allies are student groups, individual students, professors, and dining staff. It is important to note that on-campus allies can be found in any department or subject and might not be found in the first place you would expect them. For example, looking for sustainability professors is a good start, but students have also found professors in hospitality, economics, art, gender studies, and labor relations, who have helped their campaigns. Here are the different on-campus allies, where to find them, and how they can help:

- **Professors** - Professors can provide resources, connect you with other professors, students, or groups who might be interested in your campaign; give insight into past

student campaigns; spread information about your campaigns or events to students; and present potential obstacles that may arise or have arisen in the past. At smaller schools, professors have a larger pull, so they might be able to advocate to the dining team directly on behalf of your campaign. But no matter the school size, professors are vital resources, especially those who have been at your university for a while. Some professors might even sit in on meetings with you or encourage their classes to fill out a survey you create as part of your campaign.

Your best chance to find interested professors is to look for professors who study and teach related areas (sustainability, climate change, animal welfare/law, labor, food science, nutrition, public health, etc.), but you might also find professors who are interested outside of related areas but are interested in sustainable food (art, hospitality, economics, history, etc.)

- **Student groups** - Student groups can be useful allies to connect with more students, build a team, co-host events, and show that student demand expands beyond you and your team. If there is not currently a plant-based or animal-related student organization, it might be helpful to create your own. But whether or not you have your own club, it is important to look for allies in other areas related to your initiative.

Your best chance to find interested students is to look at your university's list of student organizations and find clubs related to sustainability, food science, labor, social justice, cultural groups with a large percent of lactose intolerance, and animal welfare. Specific clubs that might be of interest and are found at many universities include the Alternative Protein Project, Plant Futures, the Animal Legal Defense Fund, Allied Scholars for Animal Protection, and Students Opposing Speciesism.

- **Individual students** - Sometimes there are students who are interested in adding plant-based or dairy-free options but are not currently part of a student organization. Or there might be students in a club who are interested in your campaign, even though the club itself is not. These individuals can help build your team or demonstrate demand for plant-based options. To find these individuals, ask your friends if they know other plant-based or dairy-free students and reach out to them. It can also be helpful to have an ally in student assembly, if you can find an individual who is interested in your campaign.
- **Dining program staff/faculty** - Dining program staff and faculty can have a large pull in terms of making an initiative happen. Some have the power to directly make the change, while others can aid in its implementation. For example, Cornell had a new plant-based bowl station, but they were going to shut it down because they were understaffed. Luckily, a staff member was particularly interested in this new plant-based station, so he committed to working and staffing that station. He now serves as a useful, inside ally to students at Cornell working on plant-based campaigns.

Some dining staff or faculty are more receptive to student initiatives than others, so it is important to identify those who are more interested and focus on those individuals, as they are more likely to take on your initiative. There might be certain staff known to be plant-based or interested in adding plant-based options. But you also might find allies in staff who are not plant-based, but simply want to help students and improve the food for them. Finding the more receptive staff might take some trial and error - when

you start meeting with the dining staff, you should be able to tell quickly if someone is open to your ideas or dismissing you. Another way to figure this out is to talk to other students who have worked with the dining hall in the past, as they can provide an inside view into the personalities and receptivity of different staff members.

Off-campus allies can also provide guidance on your campaign. While they might not be able to directly help you efforts on campus, outside organizations and students at other schools might have experience working on similar campaigns, resources you can provide to your university, or other services that can aid your campaign. Here are the different off-campus allies, where to find them, and how they can help:

- **Outside organizations** - Some plant-based or animal advocacy organizations have experience working on similar campaigns or resources to help your campaign. Some useful organizations to look into include:
  - [Better Food Foundation](#) has assisted university students with a variety of plant-based campaigns. They provide resources to assist students and dining halls in their transition to more plant-based or plant-based defaults.
  - [The Humane Society](#) (HSUS) has convinced multiple schools to commit to 50% plant-based by 2027. They work directly with university food service teams, providing recipes and other resources to make the switch to plant-based foods more feasible.
  - [Greener by Default](#) works directly with dining services to provide guidance and consulting on how to make menu changes feasible, including looking at the dining service's finances and determining how to increase plant-based options or defaults without losing money.
- **Students at other universities** - There are a number of students at other universities who have run plant-based initiatives, and these students can be a vital resource to better understand the process and possible obstacles. Some ways to find these resources include through New Roots Institute, Plant Futures, or the Hive slack. Feel free to reach out to Switch4Good to be connected directly to students.

## Moving to Phase 2

Now that you have conducted your preliminary research, it is time to move on to Phase 2. Before moving on, ensure you have adequate information regarding each of the four steps in Phase 1, as you do not want to be under prepared heading into your meeting with dining staff and other stakeholders. However, some information is not listed on your university's website or easy to find, so it is okay to enter your meeting with some questions - just make sure you have conducted sufficient research before concluding that you will not find the answer without asking someone.

## Phase 2 - Campaign Planning

### **Step 5: Determine your focus and set goals.**

Review your observations and research, and use those notes to set goals for your campaign. There are likely a dozen different changes you could strive to make or approaches you could take, but it is important to narrow it down into a primary focus, so your goals and asks are clear. Asking for too much at once can be overwhelming to the dining staff, so start with a single ask and then build from there. If there are no plant-based proteins, your goal could be to influence the dining service to add tofu, tempeh, or seitan to the menu. If there is an up-charge on plant-based milks, your goal could be to remove this upcharge. If only one plant-based milk option is being offered, your goal can be to add other plant-based milk options. Or you can go big and try to change the default to oat milk!

When setting goals, it is important to remember that there are multiple types of goals: short term, intermediate, and long term goals. Long term goals are your ultimate end goals. What do you want the dining service to eventually look like? Your big goal might be making 50% of meals plant-based, default oat milk at all cafes, or for the dining halls to be fully default plant-based. Short term and intermediate goals are incremental steps toward the end goal and are easier to accomplish. If your long term goal is default oat milk at all cafes, your short term or intermediate goals can be to launch an oat milk default pilot program at one cafe or convince one cafe to go default oat milk. If your long term goal is 50% plant-based and your dining service currently does not have a lot of plant-based options, intermediate goals could be adding a plant-based option to every meal, encouraging the dining hall to experiment with plant-based recipes, ensuring every dining hall has a plant-based option, or having your dining hall go 30-40% plant-based. It is important to define short term, intermediate, and long term goals. Typically, you might start by writing your long term goals and then considering the steps that it will take to get there, which can inform your short term goals.

For specific campaign ideas, you can jump to the section titled “Example Projects”, which includes detailed explanations for common campaigns that have been successful at other schools, as well as what organizations can help with each of these campaigns and what schools have already accomplished each one. You are in no way limited to these options, but they might provide useful guidance and inspiration. You can also utilize the switches other universities have made to hold your university accountable. For example, if a university sees that their top competitor has already switched to 50% plant-based or default oat milk, that university might become more likely to make that change itself.

### **Step 6: Consider how you can measure success.**

Measuring your success is an important step in ensuring your change becomes permanent. If you can't show that your initiative is having an impact or making improvements to the dining service or school, it is harder to convince the dining service to continue with your initiatives. Therefore, it is necessary to measure your impact, which requires knowing the metric you hope to use before the change is implemented, as there needs to be a baseline. Here are some ways that students have measured success on various campaigns, but you should not limit yourself to these options:

- **Satisfaction surveys** - This involves creating surveys asking students for feedback on the change. The goal is for there to be overall positive feedback, but negative feedback can also help you improve the system you implemented. The process for creating surveys differs by university - some will accept any survey, while others have specific rules and require approval.
- **Assessing waste** - This is a great way to determine if the option you added is actually being eaten. There are two different ways you can measure waste - one is by measuring the amount of leftovers on an individual's plate when it goes into dish drop and the other is measuring how much of the option was not taken. A low amount of waste on either or both ends can indicate satisfaction with the option.
- **Tracking sales** - This method can be particularly effective at cafes or dining locations where you buy a meal (rather than all-you-can-eat dining halls). This requires collaboration with the dining team, as they are the ones who must measure sales. High sales indicate that the option is popular and can encourage the addition of more plant-based options.
- **Measuring the profit margin** - This also requires collaboration with your dining service, but if staff is particularly concerned about cost, this can be helpful. By demonstrating that the school is spending less money with the plant-based option or default, the school might be more likely to continue that option or default.
- **Calculating greenhouse gas emissions or ecological footprint** - Each food item has its own ecological footprint, requiring different amounts of land and water and emitting various amounts of greenhouse gasses. Using the sale of particular items, such as the percent of coffees that contain oat milk before and after it becomes the default, you can calculate the difference in greenhouse gas emissions and land and water use to show that default oat milk is more sustainable.

### **Step 7: Put your plan into writing.**

Now that you know your goals and metric of success, it is time to put your plan into writing. Here are some important elements to consider:

- **Message framing** - How are you going to frame your campaign to appeal to your potential allies? How are you going to frame your campaign to appeal to your dining program or university? Are you going to frame it as a sustainability issue, social justice issues, or labor issue? You can frame the campaign differently for each person you talk to, but ensure that you are clear on your messaging before beginning the conversation.
- **Action plan** - How are you going to go about the goals you identified? What are intermediate steps? Create an ideal plan of what this will look like and prepare ways to address potential pushback. If the dining team does not like the first campaign you suggest, what is your backup? It is important to know the answer to this question, so your team can quickly adjust if needed.
- **Demonstrating student interest** - Dining staff might ask you to demonstrate student interest before going forward with your campaign. It is important to have a plan prepared, so you are ready to measure interest if they ask. The most common ways to demonstrate student interest are through a survey or petition, but it is important to think deeply about the way you frame the survey questions. How are you going to mobilize



your allies - other clubs, professors, individual students - to demonstrate student interest in plant-based options or defaults if needed?

- **Team member roles** - What important roles do you need for your team to function? Dining campaigns require a strong team of dedicated members. Consider all of the tasks that must be completed and determine how you want to split up these tasks. There is no wrong or right way, but you will likely be more effective if you are organized and clear on each team member's responsibilities.
- **Supporting resources** - Providing support and resources to the dining team often makes them more likely to try to implement the change for which you are advocating. What resources might they find useful? This can include research and statistics that support your points, resources with recipes or vendors to source plant-based ingredients, or a list of universities that have made similar changes, which might help them see how the change will look. Make sure you have the answers for most of the questions you anticipate getting asked.

See the Resource Appendix for a strategy pyramid that can help with planning your campaign.

### **Step 8: Reach out to allies and schedule an introductory meeting.**

Now that you have your action plan, it is time to start building relationships with your allies. The first step is reaching out - sending an email to professors, student organizations, and individuals you identified, or attending relevant events on campus where you can find potential allies. In your email, you should introduce yourself, explain how you found them or why they are of interest to you, and ask to schedule a meeting. Once your meeting is scheduled, it is important to create a list of questions for the meeting, as well as a goal, so you know where you want the meeting to go. In the meeting, start by trying to form a connection, introducing yourself and your passions, and then ask them to share about themselves and their own interests. Following the introduction, share your goals and the campaign you are planning to run, and ask them for their thoughts and feedback, as well as what support they can provide. If you are meeting with a professor who has been at the school for a while, it might be helpful to ask about similar student initiatives in the past. They might have useful insights into what has worked and what has not. Before you end the meeting, make sure to thank them and ask if they would be interested in helping in the future. Be sure to send a follow up email thanking them for their time and support.

### **Step 9: Schedule an introductory meeting with the dining service.**

In order to schedule a meeting with your dining service, you must first send an email to the dining staff or program. In your email, introduce yourself, but do not necessarily bring up your campaign idea. You can express your interests in your email, such as your passion for sustainability and desire to learn about your university's dining sustainability initiatives. However, do not make an ask or present a specific campaign idea. It is important to lead the email and the initial meeting with curiosity, rather than an agenda. If the dining staff senses there is an agenda, such as a "vegan agenda", they might be less open to your ideas. Once you have scheduled a meeting, it is important to prepare, so come up with a list of questions and ensure your team is aligned on the goals of the meeting. Here are some important tips on your introductory meeting with the dining service:

- **The #1 goal is to build a relationship and let them know you are there.** For the first meeting, you want to try to get to know the dining team and introduce yourself to them. Share your interests and ask about theirs. The goal is to get to know them and get them to know you. It is important to demonstrate that there is student interest in more sustainable or inclusive food.
- **Do NOT make an ask.** The first meeting should not have an ask, and you should not explicitly talk about your campaign idea. You can express your interest in sustainability or social justice, but do not ask them to add plant-based options or defaults. There will be time for this in your next meeting, but this meeting is focused on building a relationship and letting the dining team know you are interested.
- **Seek to understand them.** The first meeting should mainly consist of you asking questions. These questions should not seem like you are challenging them, but instead trying to understand them. Leading with curiosity and understanding allows them to see that you are coming from a genuine place and simply want to help them improve the school. Some important questions to ask include:
  - What are the current sustainability efforts in the dining service?
  - What challenges or limitations do you face when trying to implement changes? Cost, resources, knowledge, or another factor?
  - What can students do to support initiatives?
  - Are there opportunities for students to become more involved with dining initiatives?
  - Are there any current initiatives to increase plant based options? (if relevant to your campaign)
- **Provide positive feedback.** Let them know that you acknowledge their hard work and desire to improve the food for students. If there is something you especially love at the dining hall, express that. Providing positive feedback can be an effective way to quickly connect with them and let them know that their hard work is being recognized.

As the meeting is coming to an end, be sure to thank the dining team for their time and hard work. Again, do NOT make an ask. In your follow up email, thank them. Discuss the meeting with your team and see if any of the information they provided impacts your strategy or action plan. The dining staff you meet with might direct you to someone else, and if that happens, you should repeat this same step with their new staff member. You want to make sure you find the correct person to advocate to - someone who is likely to be receptive of your initiative and has the power to actually make the change occur. Now that you have formed relationships with your allies and the dining team, you are ready to implement the campaign.

## Phase 3: Implementation

### Step 10: Make the ask.

Now that you have formed a relationship with your dining team and allies, it is time to schedule a second meeting with the dining team. In this meeting, you can finally suggest the campaign in which you are interested. Again, start the meeting with pleasantries, catching up with the staff and asking if anything new has occurred, or following up on items from the previous meeting. Once you have done this, you are ready to make your ask. Figuring out the best way to make the ask can be intimidating, so here is a simple guide on how to do it. Frame the ask in terms of (1) the problem, (2) how it related to their goals, and (3) the ask. Here are two examples:

- Example 1: Increasing Plant-Based Options/Defaults Campaign (Sustainability Angle)
  - (1) The problem: Animal agriculture is one of the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, agriculture is the second leading cause of greenhouse gas emissions after the transportation industry<sup>3</sup>.
  - (2) How it relates to their goals: I know [insert university name] has ambitious climate goals, including going climate neutral by [insert year] OR decreasing emissions by [insert percentage] OR [insert other sustainability goal].
  - (3) The ask: By increasing the percentage of plant-based options OR having plant-based defaults, [insert university] can take a major step toward hitting its climate goals and ensure all students have access to healthy, sustainable food that fits their personal needs.
- Example 2: Default Oat Milk Campaign (Social Justice Angle)
  - (1) The problem: Two thirds of the U.S. population is lactose intolerant, and numbers are even higher in specific racial/ethnic groups, including Asian Americans, African Americans, and Indigenous People<sup>4</sup>. This means that access to non-dairy milk is a social justice issue.
  - (2) How it relates to their goals: I know [insert university name] is devoted to social justice and ensuring all students have equal access to the resources and foods/drinks they need.
  - (3) The ask: By eliminating the up-charge on plant-based milks OR making plant-based milk the default, [insert university] can ensure all students have equal access to drinks that do not make them ill, students who are unable to digest dairy are not being punished (by paying extra), and no groups are discriminated against.

Based on their response, you could be able to assess their interest level. Sometimes dining staff will express interest immediately, but some take more convincing. It is also important to understand when it seems as though they are completely opposed to the idea, in which case you might need to modify your plan or find someone else who has power to enact the change and is more receptive to your ideas. After they respond, ask how you could help them make this initiative possible and make their job easier, as well as what next steps in the process would look like. Offer to provide resources, such as recipes, marketing materials, supporting research, or student surveys to support them or demonstrate student interest. You can even suggest specific switches they can make to increase the percent of plant-based food, such as adding

plant-based cheese, switching a specific station to default plant-based, or launching a default oat milk pilot campaign at a specific cafe. Thank the dining staff for their time, even if they do not immediately agree to work on the initiative.

**Step 11: Follow up and be persistent.**

Following the meeting, it is essential to follow up with the dining staff. Before you follow up, briefly talk to your team about next steps. The follow up email should include thanking the dining staff for their time, providing any resources they have requested (whether that is supporting research, recipes, or an organization that could help their efforts), and reviewing the next steps. If you received pushback in your meeting, try to address any concerns in this email or suggest a new angle. For example, if your campaign is Default Oat Milk and you presented it from a social justice angle and they were not receptive, try suggesting the sustainability angle in the email. If you received pushback and are stumped on next steps, simply thank the dining staff for their time, and discuss with your team how to move forward. When you have decided on a new approach, send a new email asking to meet again or suggesting this new idea.

If your first meeting was a success and the dining team has decided to implement your campaign, it is necessary to follow up and be persistent to ensure the change is actually implemented. Dining staff are busy and have a lot of different projects to work on, so be sure to remind them that you are still there and that there is still demand for the change. Sometimes, dining staff will hope you forget or back down, but by following up, you can show you are still there, ensuring the change is actually made.

**Step 12: Hand hold the dining staff through the process.**

Dining staff are often busy - their job is a lot of work and includes overseeing food for thousands or tens of thousands of students (depending on your school size). This means they might not have the most time to focus on your campaign. To ensure your campaign is still implemented and is done so successfully, it is important to provide as much support as you can and hand hold the dining staff throughout the process. What can you do to make their job easier? How can you support implementation? What suggestions can you provide to ensure the change is enacted smoothly? The answers to these questions differ based on your campaign, but answering them can help ensure the implementation of your campaign. This also means being persistent and following up with emails. If you don't see any progress, send your dining team an email checking up and asking how you can help with implementation. If you want to ensure your campaign is implemented, you must make the dining team's job as easy as possible, providing support and reminders along the way.

## **Phase 4: Assessing Results and Next Steps**

### **Step 13: Measure success.**

Using the method you identified in Step 6, measure the success of your campaign. Ensure the measurement method is being implemented with the changes in your dining service, so you can demonstrate the success of your campaign and make adjustments if needed. This data can be used to show the dining team that the change is a success and positively impacts the student population and/or the university's goals.

### **Step 14: Celebrate small wins.**

When making small incremental changes, it can be easy to get caught up in continuing to push forward until you reach your end goal. For example, once your dining service adds plant-based proteins (tofu, tempeh, seitan, etc.), you are likely going to want to keep pushing forward, requesting for more plant-based options or a plant-based commitment. However, before you start pushing forward with another change, campaign, or initiative, it is important to celebrate small wins with your team and the dining team. Every change takes hard work, so rewarding your team and allies for making that change can provide positive reinforcement that encourages them to make more positive changes. Every small change is a success, so treat it like that; pause and celebrate before moving to your next step.

### **Step 15: Reflect.**

Now that you have completed your campaign or the first part of your campaign, it is essential to reflect on what went well and what could have gone better. Set up a meeting with your team and review the process. Record your reflections in a document that can be passed down to future student leaders. Be sure to consider the following questions:

- What went well? What allowed this to go well?
- What did not go well? How could we approach our next campaign differently to ensure greater success?
- Which allies were useful? What helpful information or support did they provide? Which allies were not of much help? Who should we continue to work with in the future?
- Which dining staff were most receptive? Who was less helpful?
- What setbacks did you face? How did you overcome these setbacks, and what can you learn from them?
- How did the team function? Is there a better way in which your team could split up tasks?
- What outside support did you receive? Which of this support was helpful?
- What are some takeaways from this campaign? What would you do again, and what would you make sure to avoid next time?

### **Step 16: Determine your next steps.**

Using your experience and reflections, decide your next steps. This might be another campaign or another push in the same campaign. Whatever you decide to do, make sure you use your reflection to improve your campaign going forward. If you decide to start a new campaign, repeat the process. Congrats on completing your first campaign!





## Tips

- **Be persistent.** Change takes time, and that's okay! Don't beat yourself up if progress is slow. Follow up with dining staff and allies, and if the current approach still is not working, try a new angle. Is there anyone who might be more receptive to your ideas? Are there other changes that might be more accepted?
- **Change often happens slowly and in small incremental steps.** Do not feel discouraged if the initial outcome is not what you envisioned. Pause to celebrate the step in the right direction, and then push for another step. The dining hall is not going to go fully plant-based overnight - change will take small, incremental steps, so be patient.
- **Be respectful toward dining staff, even if they disagree with you.** Whether you like it or not, the heads of dining at your university will have the most power to create the changes you want. It is important to be respectful and build relationships with them, as disrespect surely will not lead to your desired change - you will likely be dismissed. Make sure you highlight what they are doing well, and not just what they need to improve.
- **Find connections to the dining staff with whom you are working.** Dining staff have their own personal lives and interests. Find connections you share with dining staff, or find ways that they might relate to the initiatives you are working on. For example, they may have a child with an egg allergy or lactose intolerance, which might cause them to be more open to default oat milk campaigns or egg replacement. Or they might be an environmentalist themselves. Find these interests and similarities and appeal to them. Don't be afraid to ask follow-up questions to really get to know them!
- **Celebrate small wins.** It is important to celebrate each small win with your team and the heads of dining. Positive reinforcement encourages both your team and the dining staff, allowing for more initiatives to better the dining service.
- **Adjust your message based on who you are advocating to or working with.** Everyone has their own goals and interests, and even if they do not align with yours, there is likely a way you can change your message to appeal to their goals and interests. For example, most faculty are not focused on animal welfare - their job is to help students and other people. Therefore, you should typically focus on the other impacts of animal-based products, including social justice, sustainability, inclusivity (in terms of allergies and religious diets), and health. Consider the values of the person you are trying to appeal to before choosing your messaging.
- **Find the right people.** Not everyone is going to be open to your ideas and initiatives, so instead of wasting your advocacy on people who will not make change, look for others who seem open to your ideas. This might be someone with a lower rank or less power, such as a staff member at one dining hall, but if you look hard enough and ask other students, professors, and faculty, you might find someone willing to take on your idea. One key determinant of the success of a campaign seems to have to do with who is asked. Someone can do the exact same campaign at two different schools, and only one might be successful because the faculty at the successful school are more receptive.
- **Host supporting events.** To improve the effectiveness of your campaign and demonstrate student demand, it can be helpful to host supporting events, such as plant-based fairs, tabling events, sampling events, and speaker events. These serve two

main purposes - demonstrate student interest in plant-based foods and increase enthusiasm for plant-based options among the student body.

- **Stay organized and remember your “why.”** Running a campaign can quickly become overwhelming if you do not remain organized and motivated. It can be helpful to create a timeline for your campaign or designate time in your calendar to dedicate to your campaign work. It is also important to remember your “why.” Why is running this campaign important to *you*? What are the positive impacts your campaign will have? Keep this in mind when you begin to feel overwhelmed!

## Example projects

This section contains example campaigns that have been conducted at other universities. Your options should not be limited to these ideas, but the successes of these campaigns at other universities indicates their efficacy. We highly encourage you to reach out to students at the example universities if you intend on doing one of these campaigns, as they will likely be strong allies and have useful resources.

### **Cafe oat milk campaigns**

These campaigns involve increasing the accessibility of plant-based milks at campus cafes and ultimately (if possible at your university) making plant-based milk the default

Why oat milk?

- Oat milk is usually used in default campaigns because unlike many other plant milks (soy milk, nut milk, etc.), oat milk does not contain any of the top allergens.
- Oat milk has a significantly smaller environmental impact compared to dairy milk, emitting far less greenhouse gasses and requiring less land and water to produce<sup>5</sup>.
- Additionally, oat milk mimics important properties of dairy milk that make it a desirable choice for baristas - it froths and foams.

What does default oat milk look like?

- In the current system, dairy milk is the default - if you order a coffee, the cafe gives you a coffee with dairy milk, unless you tell them otherwise.
- In an oat milk default system, oat milk replaces dairy milk as the default - if you order a coffee, the cafe gives you a coffee with oat milk, unless you tell them otherwise.

Why default?

- Making oat milk the default preserves individual choice (customers can still opt into dairy milk if they choose), but it also decreases the amount of dairy milk served because most people don't take the effort to opt into the dairy milk.

Example universities

- Pomona College now serves oat milk as a default at campus cafes.
- Pitzer College served an oat milk default at one of its cafes.
- Cornell University dropped its up charge of up to \$1 on plant-based milks at campus cafes.

Organizations that can provide support

- [Better Food Foundation](#) has worked closely with students on oat milk default campaigns
- [Greener by Default](#) will meet with dining staff to work through the finances of switching to default oatmilk to ensure the university will not lose money by making this switch.

### **Plant-based commitment**

These campaigns involve influencing your university to commit to have a certain percent of their food be plant based, usually 50% or 100%.

Why commitments?

- Commitments hold universities accountable to making a change in the amount of plant-based options served. Making plant-based commitments can often help universities hit their sustainability goals by decreasing their environmental impact.

### Example universities

- UCLA, UC Berkeley, Columbia, University of Texas, and Western Oregon University, among others, have committed to serving 50% plant-based (most of them by 2027).

### Organizations that can provide support

- [The Humane Society](#) has worked on successful commitment campaigns at UCLA, UC Berkeley, and Western Oregon, and their Forward Food pledge has been signed by numerous other schools.
- European students have used [Plant-Based Universities](#) campaigns to successfully influence numerous schools abroad to go fully plant-based, including the University of Cambridge, but this campaign has yet to be successful at a school in the U.S. CalTech just started a Plant-Based Universities campaign in January 2024, but it is too early to measure its success.

### **Plant-based nudges and defaults**

This method involves changing the presentation of the food at a dining hall in a way that nudges students to choose plant-based options, encouraging the choice of plant-based foods while preserving individual choice.

#### Why nudge?

- Nudging individuals toward plant-based options is an inclusive way to offer healthier, more environmentally friendly food, while still allowing individuals to choose between plant-based and animal-based products.

#### Why defaults?

- Humans are social creatures and typically stick with the default, so making plant-based the default results in a more inclusive, environmentally friendly food landscape.

#### Example methods:

- Nudges
  - Put plant-based options first in buffet lines, so people fill their plates with plant-based options and have less room for animal-based options.
  - Put plant-based options in the same line as the meat dishes.
    - Having a separate “plant-based” or “vegan” station typically results in these options only being selected by individuals who identify as vegan or plant-based. By incorporating plant-based options into the normal buffet, plant-based students can still choose these options, but they are also more likely to be chosen by students who are not plant-based, increasing the amount of plant-based food consumed.
  - Change the labels of plant-based dishes to make them more appealing.
    - Rather than calling a dish “vegan black bean soup”, you could call it “hearty black bean soup” or “cuban black bean soup”; rather than saying “roasted carrots”, you could call the dish “maple glazed carrots”.
    - Instead of labeling vegan dishes as vegan, you could just change the labels so non-vegan ingredients are listed the same way as allergens.
- Defaults
  - Rearrange the meal selection by having the plant-based options out in the buffet and only offering animal products upon request.

- In the current system, a dining hall might typically have grilled cheese (with dairy cheese) in the buffet with a sign that says “vegan/dairy free option available upon request”. Instead, you can flip this by having the plant-based grilled cheese out on the buffet with a sign that says “dairy/meat option available upon request”.

#### Example universities

- Nudges
  - Cornell places plant-based options first in the buffet line.
- Defaults
  - Tulane, Lehigh, and RIT are among the universities where Sodexo have launched plant-based default pilot programs.

#### Organizations that can provide support

- [Better Food Foundation](#) and [Greener by Default](#) created the idea of DefaultVeg, which nudges individuals to choose plant-based options, while preserving individual choice. Both of these organizations can provide support, with Better Food Foundation advising students and Greener by Default working directly with dining services to determine the finances of the switch and assist them in choosing plant-based options.
- [Forward Food](#) has a large database of plant-based recipes designed for dining services (see Resources section).
- [Sodexo](#), one of the largest providers for university dining programs, has adopted the DefaultVeg framework as the default for its almost 400 universities, which all have the option to opt out.

### **Plant-based default events**

This campaign involves encouraging campus groups (student government, clubs, faculty groups, on-campus conferences) to offer plant-based defaults (or to have a certain percentage of their food be plant-based) at their events or meetings.

#### Why plant-based events?

- At some universities, campus events can make up a large proportion of the food that is served on campus (e.g. 50% at NYU), meaning changing the food offered at these events can be just as effective as changing the landscape of your dining hall(s).

#### What does this look like?

- The default meal option would be plant-based, and if people do not want a plant-based meal, they must indicate this preference in advance in their RSVP, sign up, or an email (just like vegetarians and vegans must do in the traditional set-up).
- This could also be done by having clubs commit to a certain percent (say 60%) of the food at their events be plant-based.
  - This works the best at schools that are located in areas with a lot of plant-based options, such as a big city like NYC or Boston, as campus groups often order catering from restaurants, so if restaurants don't have a lot of plant-based options, it would be difficult to influence other groups to make this commitment.
    - If you choose this campaign, it is helpful to make a spreadsheet with local plant-based options to give campus groups ideas on where they can order from, what options they can select, and how much it would cost.

### Example universities

- Students at NYU have convinced 15 campus groups to make plant-based pledges.
- UCLA's Model United Nations conference in fall 2023 was default plant-based, thanks to a student initiative. The defaults were tied to conference topics like deforestation, antibiotic resistance, and official statements from the UN.
- Students at Northwestern have influenced their Associated Student Government, Tour Guide Office, School of Education, and Social Policy Leadership Institute to sign pledges requiring 70% of the meals be plant-based, in addition to other behavioral nudging, such as opting into animal-based products at catered events.

### Organizations that can provide support

- [Better Food Foundation](#) and [Greener by Default](#) created the idea of DefaultVeg, which nudges individuals to choose plant-based options, while preserving individual choice. Both of these organizations can provide support, with Better Food Foundation advising students and Greener by Default working directly with dining services to determine the finances of the switch and assist them in choosing plant-based options.
- [Sodexo](#), one of the largest providers for university dining programs, has adopted the DefaultVeg framework as the default for its almost 400 universities, which all have the option to opt out.

### **Egg replacement campaigns**

This campaign involves replacing the eggs in desserts and pastries with plant-based alternatives.

#### Why replace eggs?

- Replacing eggs in desserts and pastries with plant-based alternatives can greatly decrease the environmental impacts and costs of these products, and likely won't result in any decrease in sales - if a (non-vegan) student wants a cookie, they will buy a cookie regardless of the ingredients. Egg replacements are also more allergen friendly, as eggs are one of the top allergens.

#### Examples universities

- Since this is a new campaign, no universities have done it yet, but it was successful at decreasing costs and emissions at Cherry Creek School District ([see case study](#)).

#### Organizations that can provide support

- [Better Food Foundation](#) has worked closely with students on default campaigns.
- [Greener by Default](#) will meet with dining staff to determine the finances of switching and run the numbers to ensure the university will not lose money by making this switch.



## Resources

### Student Resources

#### [It's All in a Name: How to Boost the Sales of Plant-based Menu Items](#)

- Guide on how to name plant-based dishes to sound more appealing

#### [The Food Service Industry Protein Sustainability Scorecard](#)

- Scorecard rating food service companies on the sustainability of the protein they offer, as well as the transparency and goals of these companies

#### [The Research on Nudges: DefaultVeg Works](#)

- Better Food Foundation's collections of research and reports demonstrating the power of plant-based defaults and how these campaigns work

### Resources to Assist Dining Program

#### [Balanced Plant-Based Product and Vendor directory](#)

- Plant-based alternative products (beef, chicken, cheese, etc.) and vendors
- Can find products distributed by some food service companies

#### [HSUS's Forward Food recipe database](#)

- Plant-based recipes designed for dining halls or high school cafeterias
- Includes meals, snacks, and desserts

#### [PCRM's Universal Meals recipe database](#)

- Plant-based recipes designed for dining halls or high school cafeterias
- All free of the top 9 allergens - inclusive
- Includes meals, snacks, and desserts

#### [How to Boost the Sales of Plant-based Menu Items](#)

- Guide on how to name plant-based dishes to sound more appealing

### Supporting Research

#### [The Research on Nudges: DefaultVeg Works](#)

- Better Food Foundation's collections of research and reports demonstrating the power of plant-based defaults and how these campaigns work

#### Environmental impacts of plant-based defaults

#### [Changing the default meal option at university events to reduce harmful environmental impacts](#)

- Study demonstrating that students are likely to stick to the default, and are more likely to choose plant-based options when they are the default
- Found implementing plant-based default interventions produced substantial environmental benefits

#### [Nudging healthy and sustainable food choices: three randomized controlled field experiments using a vegetarian lunch-default as a normative signal](#)

- Study saw vegetarian choice increase from 2% to 87%, 6% to 86%, and 12% to 89% when vegetarian was the default in each of three experiments
- Concluded changing the default to vegetarian is "an effective, generic, easy to scale and well-accepted nudge to promote healthy and sustainable food choices"

## Plant-based default nudges effectively increase the sustainability of catered meals on college campuses

- Found “participants assigned to the plant-based default were 3.52 times more likely to select plant-based meals than those assigned to the meat default”
- This correlated to “a reduction of up to 42.3% in GHGEs [greenhouse gas emissions] as well as similar reductions in land use (41.8%), nitrogen (38.9%), and phosphorus (42.7%)”

## Labels

### Increasing vegetable intake by emphasizing tasty and enjoyable attributes

- Study on interesting labeling to enhance the selection of plant-based food
- Provides examples for labels emphasizing tasty and enjoyable attributes
- Suggests attributes to use to name dishes

### Smart food policy for healthy food labeling

- Suggests leading with taste, not healthiness, to shift consumption and enjoyment of healthy foods



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