

**FINAL REPORT**

# Task Force on Campus Food Services

A look at food accessibility and affordability in Ontario.



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*Ce document est disponible en français.*

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# Introduction

Students in Ontario pay the highest tuition fees in the country. With an average of \$7,200 a year going towards education, spending money on food day to day can be a daunting task. For international and graduate students, the price of going to school is even higher, and access to affordable food is just as important. According to the World Health Organization, Food Security is a “complex sustainable development issue, linked to health through malnutrition, but also to sustainable economic development, environment, and trade.” Food security is built on three pillars: availability, access and usage.<sup>1</sup> All three of these pillars play out in students’ lives every day.

**Food availability:** sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis.

**Food access:** having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.

**Food use:** nutritious and safe food preparation based on knowledge of basic nutrition and food care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

Students access food in a variety of ways on campuses across Ontario. One of the most telling examples of why food security is important to students is food bank usage on campus. In March 2012, 412,998 individuals accessed Ontario food banks across the province. Of these, 38.7 per cent were children and 44.6 per cent were women. Over the course of 2012 so far, the Greater Toronto Area food banks alone have seen more than 1,123,500 people come through their doors.<sup>2</sup> Campus food banks have also seen spikes in recent years, which can be linked to the rising cost of attending college or university.

At the University of Ottawa, over 50,000 pounds of food were distributed to students in the 2011-2012 year.

On campuses, there is a food service monopoly, making food banks and similar services increasingly popular, and in some cases, the only option for many students.

When a handful of companies operate the vast majority of the food delivery across the province for profit, it makes it difficult to advocate for greater access to fresh, nutritional, affordable, accessible and diverse food options. Companies like Sodexo, Aramark and Chartwells, which are primarily focused on increasing profits over serving students, are found on almost every post-secondary campus in Ontario, which is why many of the questions in the survey are familiar issues to so many students.

The survey and taskforce process is in no way meant to disregard the work of food service employees at these institutions, but to pressure college and university administrations to rethink food service delivery and to invest in quality food, to be served by workers who are supported in secure, safe and healthy work conditions.

## Survey Purpose & Methods

At a general meeting of the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, member locals resolved to launch a “Task Force on Campus Food Services.” The directive was passed as an acknowledgement of the importance of food services and access to food on campuses across

**412,998**

- number of people who accessed Ontario food banks in March, 2012.

**1,123,500**

- number of people who accessed Greater Toronto Area food banks in 2012

Ontario. The Executive Committee of the Federation worked on questions for the survey and other resources to go along with the survey for the participating students' unions. Executive Committee members identified important themes and areas of food services including: affordability, quality, variety, dietary needs and food services for students living on campus. Room for comments was included to ensure that students had space to voice their concerns and opinions, no matter how unique. Paper copies of the survey were sent out and an online version was launched through [cfsontario.ca](http://cfsontario.ca) to encourage participation and feedback.

Students from over 18 member locals responded to the survey and voiced concerns and suggestions for food service delivery. Students at Algonquin University, Carleton University, La Cité Collégiale, Lakehead University, Laurentian University, Queen's University, Ryerson University, University of Toronto-St. George & Scarborough campuses, University of Western Ontario and York University responded. Over 7,000 students took the time to fill out the survey and make comments on specific concerns that affect their daily access to food on campus. Their responses and comments are reflected throughout this report.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization "food security" <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Association of Food Banks <http://www.food-bankscanada.ca/getmedia/335e9c34-11cc-4822-ab3c-2038fc72bf08/HungerCount-Ontario-2012-Report--FINAL.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>

# Affordability

With rising tuition fees and increasing living expenses, affording food becomes a major obstacle for many students. The average undergraduate student in Ontario pays over \$7,200 in tuition fees and based on a 3 per cent increase per year this number is expected to rise to \$7,867 by 2015. As these numbers continue to rise at such alarming rates, it is not a surprise that food affordability is a concern for many students.

Although students many not find the food to be affordable, many students are still purchasing food on campus. In fact 81 per cent of students are purchasing food on campus ranging from one to two times a month to more than once a day.

Sixty-one per cent of respondents are going to cafeterias to purchase meals. This number indicates that students are spending a large amount of money on food. Of these respondents, 61 per cent disagree that price of food compared to

the portion they receive is fair. Sixty-three per cent of respondents agree that foods in cafeterias are not affordable.

Affordable food means not having to pay \$20 for a meal at an on-campus retailer (the average cost of a full meal at the University of Toronto-Scarborough). These percentages indicated the majority of students' dissatisfaction with food prices on campus, especially when compared to the portion they are receiving.

High prices can be attributed to the monopoly food companies have on campus. With many institutions being located in remote locations, food vendors have the ability to charge higher prices than usual due to the lack of alternative

**“ We are students! Living on a substantially lower income, it should be reflected.”**

**-respondent from Lakehead campus**

options. This 'food desert' environment allows current food vendors to exploit their presence on campuses. Students at many institutions are feeling the effects of food monopolies. A student from York University said: "As we are a captive audience, these food distributors feel they can charge us more for the same amount/ quality of food that outside distributors are selling for lower prices. Our Subway, Taco Bell and KFC (when we had them) and our Popeyes and Pizza Pizza either charge theatre prices for their food or they don't have daily specials that other franchises do".

The monopoly that current food vendors have on campus does not only grant them the ability to over charge for food, but also to deny access to certain discounts and deals that their off-campus counterparts may be offering. Many

students expressed that large food corporations on campus charge higher prices than their off-campus counterparts, specifically Subway and Pizza Pizza.

A student from the University of Western Ontario talks about the price differences from on campus to off campus retailers:

"Food on campus should be cheaper, not more expensive than off campus. The retailers are taking advantage of students. I did my undergrad overseas where the food on campus was always cheaper and better than off. No chains. There were always outlets like sandwich bars where you could make a sandwich or salad and pay by weight. I am disgusted that I have to pay close

**“ I only ever buy pizza because it is the only reasonably priced thing. Sometimes I'll just go hungry or go home early because I don't feel like pizza and I'm not willing to spend more than \$8 on a snack to get me through the last hour of the day.”**

**-respondent from York campus**

**“ I want to know that my campus food service is concerned with students’ best interests, not profit-driven.”**  
**-respondent from Queens U campus**

to \$10 to get lunch here. I feel as though it’s taking advantage of the fact that many undergrads have meal plans so they don’t care about the price. Why should parents of undergrads (if they are financing) and grad students be taken advantage like this?”

High prices not only result in students being unable to afford food, but also means they are resorting to unhealthy options because they are cheaper. Unhealthy food options typically cost less, leaving students with no choice but to indulge in poor eating habits.

**“ Everything is overpriced. And yet, eating healthy food is the hardest option because healthy food places on my campus are few and far between. Not to mention when you do find one, the prices have nearly doubled what we should be paying.”**

**-respondent from York campus**

When asked if the price of food versus the quality of food is fair, 62 per cent of respondents highly disagreed. A student from Carleton University spoke about the abundance of unhealthy food on campus:

“The university is promoting unhealthy food and encouraging the students to have access to cheap, health diminishing foods. For instance the healthiest food available on campus is a very small box of salad which actually costs twice as much as a sandwich or a slice of pizza, and three times as much as a hamburger. So the students have to eat bad food because of the price.”

## Meal Plans

Inflexibility of meal plans and a lack of food options is another issue that many students are facing. Meal plan structures vary from campus to campus, ranging in price and flexibility in terms

of options, variety and whether or not a student can opt-out of the plan if the food on campus does not adequately meet their dietary needs.

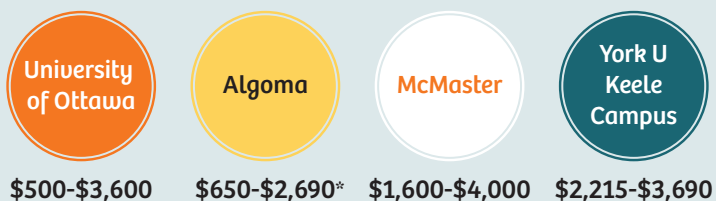
A student from Algoma University spoke on affordability and meal plans:

“Prices are far too high for the amount given and the overall quality. Money is forced to be spent on weekends for horrible food, if any is left. If we do not spend \$27 on the weekend they take it from us. This catering service should in no way be allowed to do the things they do here. It is robbery and unethical.”

Students who live on campus are almost always required to sign up for a meal plan. The restrictions on meal plans vary from campus to campus, from students being restricted to purchasing meals at certain times of the day, to students being restricted to a specific number of meals per month/semester. Additionally, institutions make it very difficult for students to prove how meal plans do not fit into their dietary needs, making it nearly impossible for students to opt out.

Below are examples of varying plan costs offered at a sampling of institutions.

### Different Meal Plan Average Costs (per year)



\* Plus guaranteed charge of \$13.50/day on weekends, mandatory for students living in residence.

Students want to eat healthier, but the price of healthy food compared to fast food is preventing them from making such choices.

# Quality and Access

Unfortunately in North America there has been a shift towards increasing the availability of cheap, fast food, which provides little to no nutritional value. These types of food are produced at a lower cost by using low quality ingredients and producing large quantities with preservatives. In many cases, fast food is often subsidized by government support for the production of certain ingredients (e.g. high fructose corn syrup) For low-income people especially students, these are often the only available options as they are on a limited budget. The pressures of a student's schedule coupled with unemployment and/or low wages create environments in which students feel as though there are limited

**A student from Queen's University discusses the unhealthy food options he/she is forced to make due to the price differences:**

**"The healthy items such as salads are sold at a premium. There is no reason a pre-packed salad should be \$6.50 - I could buy a week's worth of salad ingredients for that! This encourages (almost forces) students to make less-healthy choices such as muffins, bagels or pizza."**

options outside of fast food. Students may not have the time or resources to buy whole and fresh food and prepare meals at home. Lack of access to fresh food and an over abundance of unhealthy food options forces students to indulge in fast food options, which lack the nutrients necessary for a healthy diet. Malnutrition is referred to as a lack of proper vitamins, minerals and nutritional value in the food being consumed. When students are regularly eating unhealthy food, their performance in class suffers. With a lack of proper nutrients, students become lethargic, depressed and develop low immunity, therefore contributing to a lack of per-

formance in their studies. Colleges and universities are a place for students to learn and grow. How are they able to do so with poor nutritional food available to them?

More students want to purchase healthier food options; however healthier food tends to cost almost double the price. Eating healthier becomes even more difficult when french-fries cost around \$2.29 and a salad starts at \$3.99 (Aramark cafeteria at University of Toronto). Food quality is highly important for students, where 86 per cent of students believe that food quality is important when buying food on campus.

## Variety and Dietary Needs

**Students not only want affordable food, but the quality of locally sourced food is also important for many students;**

**"I think local food is important and something people value. Nutritional quality is important and there aren't a lot of options at this school"**

Across the province, students have numerous needs and requirements when it comes to food consumption. Unfortunately, many food service operators on campuses don't provide a wide enough variety of options to encompass these diverse requirements. Over 40 per cent of respondents indicated that the food options on campus do not adequately meet their dietary requirements.

Nutritional needs such as vegan (no meat or animal product), vegetarian (no meat products), gluten free and lactose free options are often overlooked within the mass production of food that takes place on our campuses. In addition, even if these needs are considered, many kitchens fail to distinguish cooking utensils and equipment when preparing foods that



meet these requirements. For example, far too often, the same tongs will be used to flip vegetarian burgers as to flip the meat burgers. This oversight can severely affect the nutrition and access to food for students, and often students will choose not to purchase food just in case these oversights exist. The lack of these options

**25%**

- percentage of students who indicated they are vegetarian.

vegetarians and 18 per cent required lactose free products. These are significant portions of the populations accessing the food services on campuses across the province.

Different but equally important concerns around diversity of food options come from students with particular religious and cultural backgrounds. For example, Halal meat, which is the only type of meat

that many students practicing Islam can eat, is rarely found across campuses across Ontario, even though 17 per cent of respon-

dents identified as requiring access to Halal food. These students are forced to choose non-meat options or to not eat on campus because of the lack of Halal options. The same applies to Kosher options, which is a part of the lives of those practicing Judaism.

When Halal and Kosher options are available, there is often incorrect or misleading signage. Many students have complained that a food out-

lets affects a wide sampling and variety of students. Of the students who responded to the question about dietary requirements, 25 per cent indicated they are

lets will promote Halal meat when only some of the meat is actually Halal. Many kitchens do not keep cooking utensils and equipment separate, which is required for Halal foods. Even in spaces where there is limited space and equipment provided, institutions could offer pre-packaged and pre-prepared options.

These concerns were made clear by many students who responded to the survey.

Diversity of food options in general, even when not directly linked to specific nutritional or dietary requirements, is a concern for students.

When full days are spent on campus in class or studying, a lack of diversity can severely affect the nutrition of the minds that are meant to be actively engaged in studies and campus activities.

Many institutions pride themselves on creating safe and welcoming environments for their students, spaces where creativity and innovation are meant to be fostered. The lack of diversity of food available makes this environment increasingly more difficult to create. One Lakehead student discusses the food quality on campus:

Other students commented on the lack of food

**Students from Carleton involved in student groups expressed concern with Halal meat preparation and lack of options for catering, stating:**

**“You shouldn’t cook the Halal meat on the same grill or oil of non-Halal meat, it defeats the purpose...there is almost nothing Halal (at Carleton), Aramark has no Halal options for student groups”**

**“Low food quality and lack of diversity can’t adequately support anyone’s dietary needs. I want eclectic, fresh, well-prepared food and I have never seen that on campus.”**

**-respondent from Lakehead campus**

representing other cultures and countries, which do little to create a space that is welcoming and comforting for students from a diverse set of identities. Several comments were also made about the overall lack of knowledge about food for specific diseases such as diabetes and the importance of institutions being conscious of the day to day realities that students experience. For a student living with diabetes, food is an extremely important aspect of their lives. One student even commented, "There is a need for foods which are conducive to the diet of First Nations students due to the high incidences of diabetes," which is an aspect of community and representation that most, if not all, institutions fail to consider when providing food services on campus.

### **Living on Campus**

There is a lack of late night food options on campuses. Seventy-one per cent of respondents feel there are not enough open late food options available. For students living on campus, this is a major concern. Considering many institutions are lacking cooking facilities for residences, many students are forced to go without food. The burden of "food deserts" is typically felt even more acutely by students living in residences and in the campus area as there are little to no food options outside the campus food operations. Many campuses with food deserts are also located in areas without grocery stores or stores with fresh produce. All of these things combined make it very difficult for students living on campus to eat healthily and to meet their own dietary and nutritional requirements.

# Fairness for Food Workers

While food quality includes elements like the taste and nutritional value of the food being served on campus, it also includes how food products are being produced and served. Students understand that food that is produced in a sustainable manner has an important ecological and environmental impact. Students also believe in fairness for the workers who are providing food services on campus. According to the survey, 69 per cent of students believe that food served on campus should be sourced from a sustainable and fair environment for both workers and producers.

69%

• **percentage of students who believe that food served on campus should be sourced from a sustainable and fair environment for both workers and producers.**

Food service workers on college and university campuses have different types of employers depending on the institution's food service model and practices. For example, some institutions contract out all of their food services to a single food service company like Aramark, Sodexo, Chartwells or Compass. In this case, the food service workers are likely employed by the company, as opposed to being employed directly by the college or university. Large food service companies like Aramark, Sodexo, Chartwells and Compass have a history of paying low wages and mistreating workers, especially when they are trying to form a union. Some institutions also have self-operated food services or mixed models. In this instance, the food service workers are likely employed directly by the college or university.

Fairness and equality for food workers on campus includes several things: respect, safe work-

ing conditions, suitable pay, job security and benefits. Students have a history of advocating for workers' rights and better working conditions on campuses. This is not only because many food service workers are also students working part-time, but also because students recognize the link between high quality food and good working conditions for food workers.

A significant number of food service workers on college and university campuses are organized in unions. A unionized workplace and collective agreement go a long way towards ensuring workers have not only a fair say in how their workplace operates but also protections and benefits. In the absence of those protections, workers still have minimum protections backed up by legislation like the *Employment Standards Act* and *Occupational Health and Safety Act*.

*Union locals representing food workers in Ontario post-secondary institutions:*

**Brock University**

- CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) Local 1295-03 & 1295-04

**Carleton University**

- HSTU (Hospitality & Service Trades Union) Local 261 (affiliate of UNITE HERE)

**Guelph University**

- UGFSEA (University of Guelph Food Service Employees Association)

**Laurentian University**

- CUPE Local 895-05

**Nipissing University**

- CUPE Local 1165-03

**University of Ottawa**

- HSTU Local 261 (affiliate of UNITE HERE)

**Queen's University**

- CUPE Local 229-01 & 229-02

**University of Toronto**

- CUPE Local 3261-05 (faculty club), UNITE HERE Local 75 (St. George & Scarborough), SEIU Local 2 (Trinity College)

**Trent University**

- CUPE Local 3205-01

**University of Waterloo**

- CUPE Local 793-00

**University of Western Ontario**

- CUPE Local 2692-00, SEIU Local 2 (King's College)

**Wilfred Laurier University**

- UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) Local 175

**University of Windsor**

- CUPE Local 1001-00

**York University**

- UNITE HERE Local 75

**Centennial College**

- SEIU (Service Employees International Union) Local 2

**Confederation College**

- SEIU Local 2

**Humber College**

- SEIU Local 2

**Niagara College**

- OPSEU (Ontario Public Service Employees Union) Local 214

**St. Clair College**

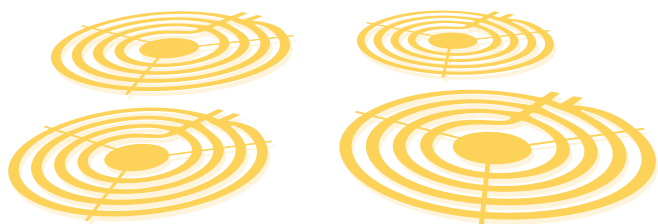
- OPSEU Local 137

# Alternatives

Many students are searching for better alternatives to campus food service options. Some of these include:

## Adequate cooking facilities for residences

Installing cooking facilities and communal kitchens where students would be able to cook meals for themselves according to their own dietary needs would help address some of students' concerns about food on campus. Considering there are very few late night options available on many campuses and many of them do not meet the quality and affordability needs of students, adequate cooking facilities would improve options for students. Cooking facilities could look differently from institution to institution, however the importance of being able to cook in residence remains consistent. Not only do facilities encourage students to be responsible in providing for themselves while attending school, but they also give students options to cook and eat the food that meets their dietary needs and preferences, whether that be nutritional, cultural, religious or simply what they enjoy eating.



## Implement cooperative cafes

More student-owned and operated cooperatives on campuses would solve many obstacles that students face regarding affordability, accessibility and dietary needs. Student-run cafés could lead to more locally sourced, healthier and sustainable food options, and to fewer corporate food vendors on campus, as well as buffet-style cafeterias with reusable dishes and cutlery that could be used as opposed to the large amounts

of disposable utensils that current food vendors offer. More cooperatives on campus would create a more inviting space for students.



A cooperative café model could be funded by requiring members to pay a small annual fee, allowing them to use the café and take advantage of affordable, locally-sourced healthy and nutritious food on campus. A member fee would help pay for the operating expenses of the cooperative.

Other cooperative structures may include volunteering. For example, at the University of Toronto, Harvest Noon Café and Co-op offers memberships for a \$5 suggested donation, or volunteering a minimum of two shifts at the café. Members also receive discounts on options at the café.

## Dish lending programs

A lot of garbage on campuses comes from disposable food and beverage containers. Having dish-lending programs would reduce waste on campuses while creating a more economically benefiting environment for the entire community. This program would allow students to borrow dishes to use and cook with and return after use. This creates a more community based, cleaner food environment and encourages students to cook for themselves while saving money. Dish lending can also be helpful for improving options for student clubs and campus groups.

## Install more microwaves on campus

Access to microwaves encourages students to bring home made lunches and save money while making healthier food choices. 46 per cent of respondents disagree that there are enough microwaves at their institution.

## Access to weekly/monthly Farmers Markets

At Ryerson University and McMaster University, for example, students can buy fresh food on campus at regularly occurring farmer's markets. 84 per cent of respondents want greater access to fresh produce on campus indicating that access to fresh, affordable produce is an important issue for many students. Institutions should make every effort to increase access through the expansion of "Good Food Box" programs (local produce offered on a bi-weekly basis at reduced cost) and introduction of farmers markets on campuses. When asked what is most important to students, respondents gave affordability and quality of food the highest priorities. Offering organic, fresh food helps students' improve learning and studying efforts as demonstrated by the 81 per cent of respondents who believe that eating healthier meals improves their studying habits.



## Food Banks

For institutions that do not currently have food banks on campus, this is a very important addition for students. Food banks on campus allow students who cannot afford food to get food at no cost on a monthly, bi-weekly or weekly basis. This bridges the gap for many students who cannot eat on campus, allowing them to cook for themselves at home or in residence in a much more affordable way.

## More late night food options on campus

A large number of students live on campus and after regular business hours there are very few if any options left for students to purchase food. It is very important that while away from home students feel comfortable living on campus. When food is not available at certain times, whether late nights or on the weekends, students are forced to go off campus.

For students who are taking night classes,

working part-time jobs into the night or up late studying, the limited food options at night and on the weekends leave many students without food.

A student from Algoma speaks on the lack of late night food options: "Algoma's cafeteria has horrible operating hours. open until 9pm every night, then after that if you want food, you're out of luck. On weekends, the cafeteria does not open until 11am and closes at 6pm. These are horrible operating hours because nobody wants to eat dinner at 4pm on weekends. Also there are no alternate food services/ opportunities on campus. If you live in a townhouse, you do have a kitchen within your house which does make it easier because you can cook for yourself. But if you are living in dorms and are on the 'MANDATORY' meal plan, there is no other food option available to you."



## Flexible Meal Plans

Offering students more flexible meal plans and easier ways of opting out would help make meal plans affordable for those who continue to enroll in them. Rigid restrictions as to where and when students can use their meal plan card limit students in what they can eat. Providing students with a variety of food vendors that accept meal plan cards helps improve access to food that meets their dietary needs. As well, allowing students flexible ways to opt in and out of meal plans gives them a chance to explore other venues that may meet their dietary needs and not be restricted by a meal plan that the institution is offering.

None of these alternatives are all encompassing; however, by implementing these alternatives, campuses will be taking a huge step towards increasing and bettering access to food for students.



**Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario**  
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