

Serving Up Plants By Default Case Study

Food for Climate League



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Challenges and Objectives

Challenge

Shifting people to more sustainable, plant-based diets can reduce carbon emissions, improve nutrition, improve calorie availability on a global scale, reduce ocean acidification, and improve animal welfare, among many other benefits. Yet, sustainable eating remains niche instead of the norm. **How do we bridge this gap by making these options appealing to the masses?**

Objectives

Test the ease and environmental impact of shifting a university foodservice station to default plant-based.

- Research and assess quantitatively the impact of changing to plant-based defaults on emissions, take rate, and volume of plant-based and animal-based meals
- Research and assess qualitatively how a shift to default plant-based dishes affects student attitudes and day-to-day operations for foodservice staff



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Process



In the fall of 2022, FCL—in partnership with Sodexo and Dr. Gregg Sparkman—conducted a randomized controlled trial in three university dining halls, over five weeks.

01

Develop intervention design.

The study design was based on existing default menu research and successfully piloted experiments at events and conferences.

02

Implement intervention.

We partnered with three universities to test the intervention within all-you-care-to-eat settings.

03

Analyze impact.

Did converting a dining hall station to default plant-based reduce animal protein consumption and GHG emissions? How did it impact staff and student satisfaction?

Study Design



Each study lunch period was randomly assigned to serve one of eight pairs of dishes—each pair contained a plant-based dish and a meat dish—and was randomly assigned a dish serving approach:

Plant Default Day

Only a plant-based dish was presented, but a sign informed students they could ask serving staff for the meat version of the dish, if desired.

Control Day

Both the meat and plant-based dishes were presented side-by-side at the station.

Study Design: Plant Default Day



At Tulane University



At Lehigh University



At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute



The day's dish, a plant-based dish, is the only visible option at the station.
The small signs inform students that the meat version of that dish, hidden behind the counter, is available upon request.



Key Study Findings

The results from our study validate the efficacy and applicability of default strategies in all-you-care-to-eat university settings.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

On days when the **plant-based dish** was served as the **default option**, we observed a

23.6% reduction

in food-related **greenhouse gas emissions.**

BEHAVIORAL IMPACT

When defaults are implemented consistently, **average take rate** of plant-based dishes increased—

30.8%
CONTROL

81.5%
INTERVENTION

—without any other changes to the dining experience.

Top Takeaways



01

When implemented consistently, plant-based defaults increase the selection of plant-based dishes, decrease the selection of meat dishes, and result in reductions in food-related greenhouse gas emissions.

02

With incorrect implementation, the impact of the default on dish choice vanishes.

03

Students—including meat eaters—are open to plant-based options.

04

Dining hall staff found a plant-based default easy—and enjoyable—to implement.

05

Eating and serving meat continues to be the social norm in campus dining, despite openness by students and staff to shift toward plant-forward choices. This indicates a considerable untapped opportunity for effective interventions, like defaults, to change consumption behavior.

Impact on Sodexo's Operations



As a result of this study, Sodexo has already begun to implement a massive shift to plant-based defaults in their universities. Starting in the Fall 2023 semester, they built the Plants-by-Default model into the core Showcase (Exhibition) station's pre-selected menus that are provided to the more than 400 Sodexo university dining operations.

"We undertook this study to help nudge Sodexo's own operations to adopt plant-based defaults more widely across our operations, and we are already seeing the direct large-scale impact on institutional dining that we set out to achieve."

- Lisa Feldman,
Director of Recipe
Management

Media Coverage



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AltMeat

vegconomist
- the vegan business magazine -

FSD FOODSERVICE
DIRECTOR

VegNews



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LIFESTYLE

When Vegan Food Is Default, 81% Of Uni Students Choose It, New Study Finds

When presented as the norm, vegan options were readily accepted

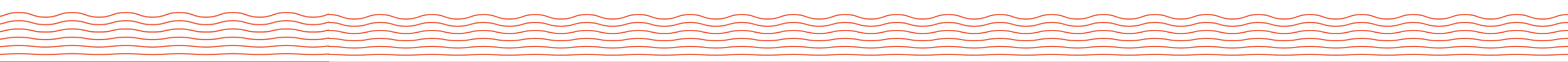
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Study: Plant-Based Attains Popularity with Gen Z



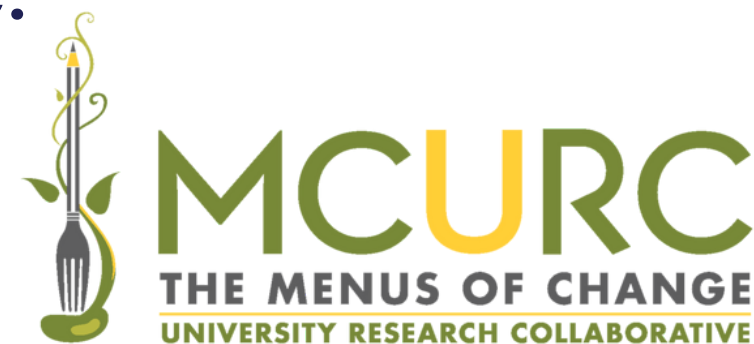
Future Work in Defaults



To build on this work, we plan to partner with Menus of Change University Research Collaborative and Greener by Default to **develop vetted guidance on how to catalyze a plant-forward food future in all-you-care-to-eat and a la carte dining hall settings.**

Please reach out to support this initiative:

Eve@FoodforClimateLeague.org



With support from



Thank you!

We are grateful to all of our collaborators and supporters who made this study possible. We are excited to push forward with plant-based initiatives in all-you-can-eat settings.

To get involved in future projects, please contact us below.



Info@FoodforClimateLeague.Org