

# Flexible Meal Plans That Meet Students' Evolving Needs



## Beyond the Traditional Meal Plan

Today's higher education students value flexibility and the ability to make individualized choices more than ever. While a traditional meal plan and room-and-board style experience appeal to some students, others balk at the cost. Instead, they forge a different path – moving off campus, choosing a different type of residential education or discontinuing their studies altogether.

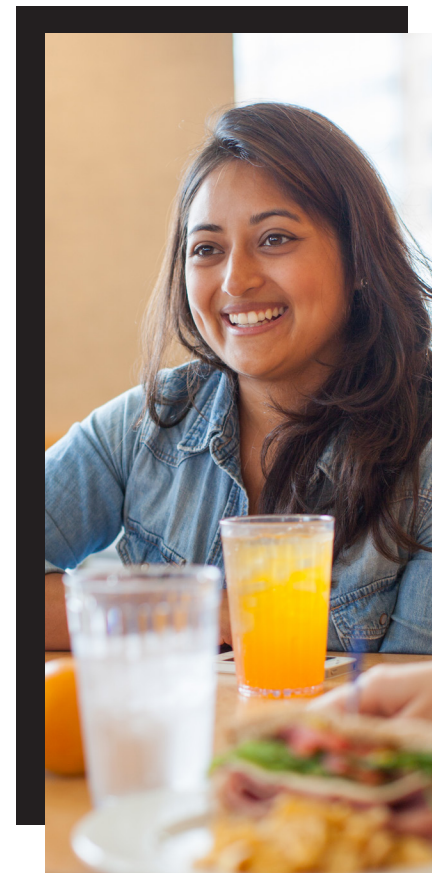
With a predicted enrollment cliff rapidly approaching, finding new ways to attract and engage students is paramount for higher education institutions. Offering dining options beyond the traditional meal plans plays an important role in recruitment and retention efforts. An approach like Commuter Declining Balance gives students the personalization and flexibility they need.

## The New Generation of Students: **Gen Z**

Current and incoming college students, a cohort increasingly made up of Generation Z-ers, have distinct characteristics and unique values that set them apart from previous generations.

With the advance of technology, particularly following the shift towards remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, students have unprecedented options for higher education. They also, on the whole, are more socially engaged, environmentally focused and value conscious. Campus dining options must address these factors to meet students' evolving needs, both in terms of options and variety.

Declining balance plans allow students to dine anywhere on campus where food is served, from dining halls to on-campus cafes to vending machines. For Gen Z students, the appeal of making decisions based on individual preferences and needs cannot be overstated.



## Higher Education Enrollment Trends

36%

of students do not return to the same institution after the first year

72%

of students eliminated a college due to cost

4.2% ↓

in undergraduate enrollment since 2020

4.3% ↓

in enrollment for public four-year schools since 2022

50%

of Gen Z students say their school's dining program was a factor in deciding which school to attend

78%

of Gen Zers are willing to spend the majority of their budget on food

44%

of students living on campus purchase food/ beverage on campus

76%

like to hang out with their friends at a restaurant

77%

report snacking at least once a day

## Commuter Declining Balance Program Overview

A Commuter Declining Balance program is a debit-style meal plan. A set amount of Declining Balance funds, automatically billed at the beginning of each semester, are loaded to the student's ID. Each time a food purchase is made, the cost is subtracted from the balance on the student's account.

Refund policies vary by campus but, in most cases, students can be refunded or rollover unused dollars to subsequent terms. Some institutions choose to grandfather the program in for incoming freshmen and then expand it to each class during the consecutive years. The funds can typically be used at all locations on campus that serve meals, beverages or snacks.

### Student Benefits

- Support student success through food security while on campus
- Easy way to budget for food and beverage
- Automatic purchasing process for faster service
- Financial aid and scholarships can be put towards the balance
- No need to carry cash or credit cards, the balance is linked to the student's ID
- Flexibility to purchase items across campus locations
- On-campus dining and meal-time socialization is more convenient

### University or College Benefits

- Attracts and engages students through a flexible, easy-to-use dining experience
- Creates a sense of community that further supports retention by encouraging on-campus dining and seamlessly includes commuter students
- Supports expanded dining options and brands
- Spreads dining program cost among a larger population





Today, the lines between retail and residential experiences are no longer defined—they have blurred based on the needs of students.”

## Program Examples



### Auburn University

Auburn, AL

Total Full-Time Undergraduate Enrollment:

**22,286**

Mandatory requirement:

**\$425 Dining Dollars\***

\*All sophomores and above who reside off campus



### Palm Beach Atlantic University

West Palm Beach, FL

Total Full-Time Undergraduate Enrollment:

**2,136**

Mandatory requirement:

**\$250 Flex\***

\*All PBAU commuter students, not including online students



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