

## DEPAUW STUDENT GOVERNMENT

### *A White Paper Concerning the DePauw Dining Experience*

#### *White Paper No. 1*

#### **Introduction:**

On March 20, 2015, DePauw students were notified of changes that would be made to their dining experience for the 2015-2016 school year. Whereas DePauw had previously offered students a set of “declining balance” meal plan options, the university stated that it would be transitioning to an “all-you-care-to-eat” swipe system. According to Jason Rose, General Manager of Bon Appetit, and Kevin Kessinger, Associate Vice President for Finance, these changes are a “result of feedback from students, parents, and faculty who found tracking the appropriate dollars available during the semester difficult and from a number of students who exhausted their dining funds before the semester ended. Another primary reason for the change is the new plans provide more meals per week than are available under the declining balance meal plan” (DePauw University Dining Webpage).

In response to the administration’s announcement, a group of students developed a petition. This petition, launched on April 10, 2015, sought “immediate action from the University Administration to repeal the new meal plan and restore the former declining balance system.” The petition gathered 350 signatures from concerned students, parents, alumni, and prospective students within the first five days, and amassed over 400 signatures by the end of this semester. While Kevin Kessinger and Jason Rose did host two open student-forums, the charges in the petition went mostly unanswered. The petition resurfaced in early September and currently stands at 681 signatures. Given that most upperclassmen who reside in Greek houses do not purchase a university meal plan, the 681 signatures represent a large percentage of our first-year and independent upperclassmen.

As DePauw Student Government, we recognize the efforts made by the administration, in particular the Office of Finance and Financial Aid, to improve student access to proper nutrition and to enhance the overall welfare of our student body. Additionally, we would like to thank Jason Rose, Kevin Kessinger, and Brad Kelsheimer for meeting with representatives of DePauw Student Government. This white paper outlines lingering student concerns with the DePauw dining experience and provides a comprehensive set of opportunities for growth and improvement. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of improvements, nor do we ask that all suggestions be implemented. Instead, we hope that the Office of Finance and Financial Aid can identify the most practical and beneficial of our suggestions, and work with DePauw Student Government to further enhance the DePauw dining experience.

## **Critical Observations:**

The following section is designed to address student concerns that have been expressed in emails to DePauw Student Government, in direct conversations with our peers, and during our first DePauw Student Government assembly meeting. While we recognize that the current plan is designed to, in actuality, give students more value for their dining dollars, assist students with budgeting, and enhance the profitability of Bon Appetit by replicating meal systems in place with many of our peer institutions, the current system places many students at a disadvantage. We will be outlining student concerns with transparency, the swipe system, monopolization, and food quality, variety, and availability. While these concerns are not representative of all concerns, we believe they are the most salient.

### **Transparency:**

When the new meal plan structure was unveiled, the overhaul was met with immediate student concern and confusion. While DePauw Student Government had been approached with the changes in mid-February, the changes were presented only after they had already been approved by the Board of Trustees. Thus, no students were directly involved in the formation of the swipe system. Furthermore, the plans were unveiled on March 20--a week after returning students had been required to submit their housing preferences for the 2015-2016 school-year. While the university claims that the plans were made available on the DePauw website before housing preference forms were due, most students assumed that the plans would remain consistent with their current options. Thus, many students signed up for university housing uninformed of the changes that had taken place, resulting in suboptimal meal plans for many upperclassmen. If students and their parents are truly the customers, they should be included in any future conversations regarding such sweeping changes to the overall dining experience.

### **Swipe System:**

As stated in a previous DSG White Paper from 2013, "one attribute that is commonly characteristic of DePauw Students is a great ability to multitask. Students therefore optimize their dining time by eating lunch in professors' offices, attending presentations by alumni and local professionals, and by hosting meetings for a wide variety of student activities" (White Paper No. 1, 2013). This characterization of DePauw students as engaged individuals who contribute to their surrounding communities still resonates strongly in 2015. If we believe this assessment to be true, then students must be given more flexibility with their dining dollars. As far as the swipe system goes, students have lamented that the system results in wasted dollars and food. Much of this waste can be attributed to the plan's forfeiture of unused weekly swipes, inability to swipe twice in one meal period, and limit on guest swipes to five per semester. We will explore these concerns at length below.

Many students have lamented that the current system results in great waste as many students do not use their weekly allotted swipes. Such concerns have been expressed in *The DePauw*, garnering the headline, “Students Express Dissatisfaction with the New Meal Plan: Can’t Teach an Old Dog New Tricks, Students Say Swipes Need to Rollover,” as published on September 14, 2015. For some, students do not use all of their swipes because they are away traveling as varsity athletes and thus miss many of the available meal periods. For others, it is because their personal preference is not to eat two or three large meals a day, but four to six smaller meals. While the bundles available at Cafes Roy and Allegro are meant to assist students who prefer to eat more frequent, smaller meals, much of this food is fresh, and thus must be consumed immediately, completely undermining its purpose. While students are given “flex” dollars to assist in these consumption habits, the amount of “flex” dollars offered does not fully support these consumption habits, resulting in many purchases spent “out-of-pocket,” and large amounts of food waste, as students purchase a bundle and throw out perfectly good food that goes unconsumed.

Under the declining balance system, students had much greater flexibility in eating what they wanted, when they wanted. Additionally, if students found that their required minimum purchase plan was too large, they could use those additional dining dollars on their peers and other guests. They could also donate unused dollars at the end of the semester to charity. Now, students’ unused swipes are simply eliminated, resulting in hundreds of dollars of wasted funds over the course of the semester. Students should not be penalized for eating too few meals. At the end of the day, if students are required by the university to purchase a minimum number of swipes, students should be able to use their prepaid board amount however they see fit. For some students, this means using their dining dollars on other students. The current allotted five guest swipes does not ameliorate this problem.

Furthermore, students have expressed concerns over the current “one-swipe-per-period” guideline. While DePauw Student Government acknowledges that the current rule exists to provide *Bon Appetit* a baseline of how much food to set out per dining period, the current system does not provide students with the opportunity to plan efficiently and effectively for the rest of the day. Many students are dissatisfied with this current rule because they are unable to swipe in for lunch at 11am and then purchase a series of snacks for the rest of the day at 1:30pm. If a student knows that he or she will be unable to eat dinner between 5:00pm and 8:00pm because he or she has varsity athletic practice and a series of meetings afterwards, he or she will ultimately want to plan for his or her schedule by purchasing a bundle for dinner ahead of time. The current system discourages such practices--despite the fact that the student is trying to proactively work around his or her schedule. Students must be able to swipe twice in one period to alleviate hunger at later intervals in the day.

### **Monopolization of Campus Dining:**

Before the 2015-2016 school year, students were able to spend their meal plan dollars at The Hub, The Den, Cafe Roy, Cafe Allegro, The Duck, and Two West. These eateries offered students with a diverse array of dining options. For normal, everyday dining, students often went to the first four eateries, while saving the last two for special occasions. Under the new system, students are only able to purchase their meals at The Duck and Two West using their “flex” dollars. Because students meal plans are more heavily allocated towards swipes than “flex” dollars, many students are priced out from eating at The Duck and Two West.

This is problematic because The Duck and Two West previously served as viable competition to the campus food-service provider. While students should obviously consume more meals at the four locations serviced by our campus food-service provider, any increased consumption at The Duck and Two West could have previously signaled student dissatisfaction with the campus food-service provider, prompting the need to alter its offerings, price points, and service in order to enhance its profitability. If students have very limited dining dollars at these two eateries, then students are effectively only able to eat at four campus eateries serviced by one company. If The Den is to truly close starting with the 2016-2017 school year, then the number of available eateries will decrease to three. There will be no safeguards in place to protect students from any declines in food quality, service, or pricing. While we are not implying that our current provider, Bon Appetit, would capitalize on its monopolistic position, there are few safeguards in place to stop a future food-service provider from doing so.

### **Food Quality, Variety, & Availability:**

While many of the concerns expressed have been related to the new meal plan structure, many students have expressed concerns related to food quality, variety, and availability. As a student body, we commend Bon Appetit's commitment to using locally grown produce. Not only do these efforts help our local businesses, but use of local produce lessens our dependence on fossil fuels. We hope that Bon Appetit will continue to use local produce.

Regarding quality, many students have stated that their “hot” food is often cool or cold--especially during the later hours within a dining period. Furthermore, veggies are often slightly browned or soggy from being thoroughly washed, but not dried. Students who must eat later in a dining period because of athletics or class are usually stuck with pizza, fries, and burgers that have been sitting out for over an hour, while some students are afraid that their food is simply reheated leftovers from the dining period before. While we want to ensure that all food is being used, students do not want to pay the same price for leftovers. Last but not least, though all students appreciate the increased healthiness of the food available, many believe that Bon Appetit could make better use of spices, oils, and other flavorings as some dishes are often bland.

As to variety, we understand, recognize, and acknowledge that variety will be greatly enhanced once Hoover Hall Construction is completed. That being said, students believe that some variety concerns could be alleviated during this school year. While students like the very consistent meal schedule, others have expressed concerns that many meals are the same week-in and week-out. For example, the lunch schedule usually contains Pastabilities on Mondays, Tenders on Thursdays, and Quesadillas on Fridays. While many students like the routine nature of these meals, others do not. Other students would like to see more variety at the pizza station as offering four pizzas daily is a lot, and this space might be better served with two pizzas and two pasta dishes, etc. Again, we recognize that the current Hub provides many space limitations, making variety very difficult to improve upon.

Last but not least, we need to touch on availability. Many students have expressed concerns that Bon Appetit runs out of food more frequently than Sodexo did. Under Sodexo, the eateries typically only ran out of food and beverage offerings the weeks of midterms and finals as their supplies ran low for the time period. Unfortunately, it seems that this tends to happen on a more regular basis under Bon Appetit. Students have lamented that the Hub is regularly out of mozzarella sticks and french-fries during the late-night period and that the Den regularly runs out of fountain-drinks and french-fries. While some students like the “kettle chip” substitution, others do not. Furthermore, some students have claimed that they have waited twenty minutes during the lunch and dinner rushes for items like pizza or grilled chicken because not enough of these items were prepared immediately preceding the dining period. Others have claimed that the Cafes are regularly out of “to-go” bundles by Thursdays, making it difficult for students to use all of their swipes. Overall, a better inventory count needs to be taken so that students can actually get the most value out of their meal plans.

### **Proposals for Improvement:**

After conducting research on peer institutions, DePauw Student Government has several suggestions for our dining experience moving forward:

- **Reintroduction of a declining balance system for upperclassmen:** While many of our peer institutions no longer offer declining balance meal plans, several do- including universities who are serviced by Bon Appetit. Denison, for example, offers both declining balance meal plans and swipe plans giving students optimal flexibility and meeting the demands of all types of eaters. Wesleyan University, one of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges, is serviced by Bon Appetit and has also maintained a declining balance system. Colorado College similarly relies on dining dollars only. Furthermore, while Ohio Wesleyan is not serviced by Bon Appetit, they offer a declining balance plan, recognizing that, “declining balance plans provide maximum flexibility and freedom for you to choose what you want to eat, when, and where. You are not limited to

a certain facility or day. With that freedom comes responsibility. You are responsible for managing your food points throughout the semester and academic year.” While students at Ohio Wesleyan and DePauw are inherently different, we believe that adopting a similar philosophy would better mirror the true DePauw student.

- **Conversion of Swipes to Flex:** If bringing back the declining balance system as an option is unrealistic, then perhaps one way to maintain the full value of each student’s dining plan is to convert unused swipes to flex dollars at the end of each week. For example, if a student does not use three meal swipes, his or her three swipes can be converted into \$21 of flex money to be used at any time. Thus, a student would be able to use these dollars at all of our eateries while maintaining the full value of his or her plan. A student would not necessarily then use these dollars at The Duck or Two West, but rather, could use these swipes at The Hub and The Den at another time.
- **Introduction of “Block” plans for upperclassmen:** If returning to a declining balance system is unrealistic, then another way to ameliorate student concerns would be to offer upperclassmen a “block” meal plan. In a block plan, students purchase a block of swipes for the semester. With a block plan, students only need worry about unused swipes at the end of the semester, and not at the end of each week. For students who are frequently traveling or under ever-changing schedules, this plan gives students the flexibility to eat meals that better align with their weekly schedule. For example, once a soccer player is out of season, and thus done with traveling, he has the ability to reclaim lost swipes by eating more frequently in the latter half of the semester. The same logic applies for students who may eat more or less during exam periods.

Many peer institutions offer block purchase plans for upperclassmen including Wittenberg and Wooster. Other premier liberal arts colleges offer block plans in addition to weekly swipe plans including Grinnell, Williams, Davidson, Colgate, Furman, Bard, and Tufts- to name a few. Macalester, a Bon Appetit university, also offers block plans for upperclassmen. Many of these plans come in blocks that are equivalent to our current 18, 14, 12, 10, 4, and 3 swipe offerings that are then multiplied by the number of weeks in a semester. These offerings simply give students more flexibility in when they eat by giving students an entire semester to utilize their swipes. If we are trying to prepare students for life upon graduation, transitioning students to a more “unscheduled” dining plan is in the best interest of our students.

- **Introduction of an “Unlimited” or “Premium” Plan:** To compensate for the relative unprofitability of upperclassmen block plans, many universities offer unlimited, premium plans. If a student or his family was concerned that a student would not have enough opportunities to eat, they could simply upgrade to a premium plan with unlimited swipes. Cost-wise, families traditionally bear the brunt of the additional cost because most students would not come close to eating the maximum number of available meal periods

per week. Colgate, Centre, Furman, and Tufts were four such institutions that offer unlimited plans.

- **Swipe Donation Program:** If none of the above solutions are viable, then something must be done to prevent students from losing money each week on university-mandated meal plans. Implementing a food swipe donation program for students who have extra swipes would give students the choice to donate their unused swipes to a good cause rather than be lost each week. UC Davis, Penn State, and many other college campuses already have a Food Swipe Donation program in place. Penn State also uses Bon Appetit for their food services, and one Penn student, Liza Lansing, said that “We found out that Bon Appétit is actually a very proactive company when it comes to caring about and working with students.”

Swipe Out Hunger is a program is a semester's end program at Penn State that students frequently donate their extra swipes to. Unfortunately, Swipe Out Hunger cannot directly be implemented on DePauw's campus because DePauw students lose their swipes at the end of each week, rather than at the end of the semester like most schools. There are many options for how a similar donation program could be implemented on campus. One option is for students to opt in at the beginning of the semester, agreeing to automatically count excess swipes toward the donation program. Another option would be to set up a station that students go to each Sunday in order to donate their weekly extra swipes. DePauw Student Government would be more than happy to work with the campus administration and Bon Appetit in order to develop an effective program for our campus.

- **Swipe Exchange Program:** As DePauw continues to increase its socioeconomic diversity, the university will face increasing pressures to accommodate the needs of our most disadvantaged students. While DePauw offers rather generous financial aid packages, we are not an institution that is currently able to meet 100% of student need. Therefore, there are several upperclassmen each semester, who, in order to return to DePauw, purchase a UOAH meal plan because it is least costly. This plan offers students approximately four meals a week. While these students try to gather funds for the rest of their meals through part-time jobs or work study, this is more easier said than done. As a result, we have several students each week who are food insecure and are unable to meet their dietary needs. This is alarming problem for an institution of our prestige and wealth. No student at DePauw should go hungry while others are literally throwing out unused items from their swipe bundle.

Given the number of students who have too many swipes, these unique circumstances provide a market opportunity. DePauw should have a swipe-exchange program. In such a program, students with excess swipes are allowed to donate unused swipes to the exchange program. Students in need of swipes, in return, would be allowed to redeem swipes as a voucher. Thus, if a student was in need, she could approach the

appropriate office with no questions asked, and redeem a food swipe voucher. The program would ensure the anonymity of each student to the best of its ability and would not emphasize a reliance on the voucher system. The voucher system would be a system of last resort. Columbia University has such a program in place, where students can donate a maximum of six swipes and students can claim a maximum of six swipes. To participate in the program, both students would have to purchase a university meal plan. Again, this exchange is not meant to subsidize those students who choose not to upgrade to a larger meal plan, but rather, it is meant to help those, who for unforeseen circumstances, are unable to make the income necessary in a week to purchase enough food to meet their dietary restrictions. While we ideally want students to purchase plans that meet their individual needs, such desires are wishful thinking.

- **Guest Swipes & Multiple Swipes Per-Period:** We believe that students should be able to swipe twice in one period. Our students are diverse individuals who are constantly on the go- we must aid in their success by giving them more flexibility in how and when they eat. If a student must purchase lunch at 11am, and a bundle at 1:30pm for his or her dinner to be later consumed, he or she should not be penalized. Students should be able to plan ahead for their day to prevent going hungry. Not all students are able to grab dinner between the hours of 5pm and 8pm nor should we suggest that they give up their extracurricular activities in order to do so. Additionally, students should receive more than five guest swipes a semester. Students whose siblings, friends, and other family members visit more frequently should be able to share our great dining experience with all.
- **Addressing Quality, Variety, and Availability Concerns:** If Bon Appetit is going to be DePauw's main food service provider, then several improvements will have to be made in order to ensure that students are receiving the full value of their meal plans. As for quality, we hope that Bon Appetit staff will be more conscientious of the produce that is placed out for consumption--food that is past its prime should be composted--not served. Furthermore, we hope that greater care will be given to food temperature, especially for items that should be hot or cold. Additionally, we hope that unused food will be composted and not put out for later dining periods. As to variety, we hope that Bon Appetit will heavily consider the results from The Hub's "design your own menu" day. While the current layout of The Hub is suboptimal for additionally menu variety, we believe that simple fixes such as substituting the four available pizzas for calzones, pastas, and hot subs would be a great way to add variety, as well as changing up the menu more frequently so that regular items such as pastabilities, quesadillas, and tenders are perhaps only offered every every other week or at dinner instead of lunch one week, etc. Last but not least, we ask that Bon Appetit try to keep better track of food inventory so that items do not run out before week's end and/or the end of dining periods.

- **Student Dining Advisory Committee:** In previous years, the university had a committee of students who regularly worked with the food-service provider to provide timely and important feedback on student dining concerns. This committee was also contacted for further dialogue when structural changes to the meal plans were made. While we are unsure of the committee's originating purpose or reasons for termination, we strongly believe that such a committee could only do the university good. Therefore, we propose, moving forward, that the DePauw Student Government Auxiliary Concerns Standing Senate Committee further include its purpose to communicating regularly with the food-service provider so as to provide timely feedback of student concerns. In turn, the food-service provider can rely on these individuals to address any misconceptions or misguided information held by the student body.

**Conclusion:**

DePauw Student Government would like to extend an additional thank-you to Jason Rose, Kevin Kessinger, and Brad Kelsheimer for working with us thus far. While there are other student concerns on the table, we have attempted to address only those that we believe most salient and solvable and will continue to educate our peers on some of the realities of dining in higher education moving forward. We are looking forward to continued collaboration and believe that by relying on one another as a resource, we can create a dining experience most envied by other institutions.

Motioned by: Erika Killion

Seconded by: Sarah Dela Cruz

Aye 19

Aye 6

Nay 0

Nay 0

Abstain 0

Abstain 2

Attested by (DSG Secretary):

Kate Porfilio

Approved by (DSG President):

Craig Carter