

Food Quality

Students' Perceptions of Dining Hall Food

BY KYLE MASSEY AND
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Introduction

As colleges and universities throughout North America provide food services for a student population that is increasingly diverse, demanding and sophisticated in culinary preferences, food service providers are making great efforts to keep their customers happy (Krehbiel & Meabon, 2006). The constantly changing tastes of university students have pushed many institutions to overhaul their food service operations in order to keep revenue stable and students satisfied. Over the past few decades, innovative dining hall designs have helped to transform the culinary and social experience of university students. Drab eateries with limited hours and sparse menus have given way to new trends in higher-education food service:

- fresh food and custom orders
- chefs preparing meals before your eyes
- multiple cooking platforms
- dining spaces that encourage a variety of social interactions

Administrators across North America are augmenting students' dining experience for a variety of reasons— including recruitment, retention, and meeting student expectations.

Queen's University has acknowledged that dining halls are an integral aspect of student life. Time spent in university dining halls can serve multiple functions including refuelling and nourishment, rest and relaxation, reflection, and social interaction, which is why student satisfaction with their dining experience is increasingly important to Queen's.

As a university where over 90% of first-year students live on campus, the dining hall resources at Queen's are in high demand, and, as Massey, Sutherland, and Brooks (2010) point out, they are ideally situated as one of the best places for Student Affairs to foster the development of community. Past assessment projects and satisfaction surveys have been conducted in order to inform planning and decision making with respect to dining halls, and subsequently implementing recommendations from these studies has already enhanced the dining experience of Queen's students. One of the things

that these investigative measures have highlighted, in addition to a wealth of anecdotal feedback, is that food quality is a central factor to dining hall satisfaction.

Purpose

While it is clear that food quality in the dining halls is important to students, what is less clear is what the term "food quality" means to them. This study aimed to provide an enriched sense of how first year Queen's students living in residence perceive food quality in the campus dining halls, and how administrators and staff can work to improve perceptions of quality.

Methodology

Data was collected on campus using two primary methodologies. In the first phase, photovoice focus groups (Wang & Burris, 1997) were conducted to gather qualitative data that allowed first year students to share their interpretations of food quality within residence dining halls at Queen's. The second phase involved a quantitative online survey based partly on the findings of the photovoice focus groups.

Photovoice Focus Groups

Participants took photographs in the dining halls during their regular visits of food, spaces, objects, items, or anything at all that represented in some way their conception of food quality. These photographs were shared and discussed within the focus group setting. This methodology was selected so that the researchers could gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ways in which students experience food and food quality within their university residences. Throughout the focus group sessions, the use of photographs to convey feelings, thoughts, insights, and perceptions was an effective way for students to share ideas that might otherwise have not been accessible to others. To protect the identity and confidentiality of participants, all are identified by a pseudonym.

Online Survey

Using the themes generated from the focus groups, an online survey was developed in order to identify how a large sample of students' perceive food quality in the campus dining halls and to see the extent to which the findings from the focus group sessions can be generalized. The survey was administered to first year students living in residence halls at Queen's University using StudentVoice. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to a random sample of 1946 students, and 518 responded, giving a response rate of 27%. Given the size of the population of interest and the sample size, the survey results are

considered accurate within 4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Findings

While it is not possible to share the full results of this study in this paper, the findings most relevant to other colleges and universities are presented in brief.

Three central themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group interviews. These themes include:

1. health and nutrition
2. control and ownership
3. variety and diversity

Health and Nutrition

The desire for balanced meals was mentioned by many participants. For example, one student commented, "You know, I like the balance on



the plate on the right (above) because you don't often see that, where you have vegetables, carbs, and protein" (Rebecca). Similar comment were made by other students, for example, "*I really like meals with meat, and vegetables, like a balanced meal because that's something I would have at home*" (Mark). Focus group participants were in agreement that eating a balanced meal makes them feel better about the food because they perceive that it is healthier for them. Also, a common observation was that a balanced plate of food (meat, vegetables, and potatoes, for example) was comforting because, for some, it is the type of meal they might eat at home with their families.

Participants indicated that one of the major obstacles to eating healthy food was convenience, stating that sometimes "you actually have to go out of your way to eat healthy" and that "at some cafs, if you want the healthier thing you have to wait in line for a long time". With respect to the accessibility of healthy food, one student pointed out that,

...this goes more under a quality of empowering people. Because you can't force people to like to eat healthier or eat

better but you can change things around a little bit and make it easier to empower people to make better choices to eat healthier. And I think that contributes to an overall better quality of food (Jason).

Participants noted that the less healthy food choices are often the most accessible to students. Some students pointed to the prominent placement of less healthy items, or the fact that healthier meal options usually had longer waiting times. While not strictly issues of food quality, students asserted that these issues do contribute to their overall level of satisfaction with the food.

Freshness was also a significant factor in the overall quality of the food for the participants. The availability of a variety of fresh fruits, for example, and the preference for food cooked in front of them rather than sitting in serving containers were all discussed at various times as positive characteristics of the food.

The importance of nutritious and fresh food was also evident in the results of the online survey. When asked which characteristics of food are most important for food quality, nutritional value and freshness were among the three most selected responses (taste was number one). This indicates that the importance of healthy and fresh food options is true not only for the focus group participants, but also for the wider population of first-year students in residence.

Awareness of caloric intake and sodium levels were important to the participants, though focus group participants were pleased that signs were posted with caloric and other nutritional information, as were survey respondents. When asked of their level of satisfaction with the availability of nutritional information, 59% indicated they were satisfied compared to just 20% who indicated dissatisfaction. Many focus group participants noted the clarity of nutritional information available on the Housing website, and while they applauded this resource as useful, they also said that the format presented in the dining halls should match the nutrition labels that they are used to seeing on store-bought products.

During the focus group sessions it was suggested by many participants that the dining halls offer too many “fast food” options such as pizza, burgers, and fries instead of healthier meals. For example, one participant remarked that “good healthy food is kind of rare... but you can get pizza and hamburgers every single meal” (Jennifer). This statement was echoed further by others, and survey responses verified that the majority of students (59%) agree there are too many fast food options available. An even larger majority of students

surveyed (70%) agreed with the statement that there are not enough healthy options available in the dining halls.

In order to further define students’ nutrition preferences, the survey included a question asking participants to select the top three items related to nutrition they most consider when making food choices. According to the survey results, the three most important nutritional characteristics of food for first-year students in residence are calories, total fat, and sodium.

Control and Ownership

Almost every interview participant indicated that having some control over the ingredients in the food, or how the food is prepared was extremely important in their overall impression of food quality. In general, the participants noted that the quality of “hot meals” was higher when the food was prepared in front of them, and when they were able to personalize the meal by selecting the ingredients; in pastas, stir-fries, and omelettes, for example. Survey respondents also agreed (74%) that the food quality is generally better when the food is prepared in front of them while they wait.

Participants also indicated that they found the quality of the food higher when they were able to make their meals themselves, using a salad or sandwich bar (below) for example, or by having



control over the portion sizes. Overall, participants indicated they found food quality to improve anytime they could make the food themselves. One participant noted, “I’d say anything you can make your own [is better]. So, when you can choose what’s in it, like the sauce, the vegetables, whatever” (Will).

Another topic of discussion during focus group sessions was the control of food in terms of portion sizes. Participants agreed that their eating experience would be improved if they had more opportunities to control the portion sizes of food on their plate.

Variety and Diversity

Overall, the perceived diversity of the food options was high and participants were positive about the kinds of food that were offered. Participants were particularly satisfied with the

variety of options available at the sandwich bars stating that “variety is a big thing in food quality. I like how I can have five different grains in a day and lots of protein options” (Xiang).

Some participants appreciated that the dining halls offered opportunities to try new foods that they had “never seen before” or not experienced prior to attending the university. One participant explained that

... for me the university experience is about trying and learning new things and if the cafe manages to provide new meals, I love trying that, so personally I think variety too is important. I don’t want to eat the same thing every meal. (Mabeen)

The overall satisfaction with food variety that the focus group participants conveyed was also evident in the survey results. The survey revealed a slight majority of respondents (52%) were satisfied with the overall variety of food available.

A much talked about issue during the focus group sessions was the lack of a variety of meat options. Participants acknowledged that processed selections such as meatloaf, hamburgers, and pepperoni pizza are common, however noted the scarcity of pieces of chicken and other cuts of meats. One participant observed, “a lot of [the meat options] are meatloaf that don’t look too great... they rarely have meat on its own” (Kaamil). The availability of meat options was addressed on the survey as well. Approximately 48% agreed that there are not enough meat options available. Only 16% disagreed with this statement, while about 28% indicated a neutral response.

Conclusion

The general lack of research on university and college student experiences of food quality in residence dining halls is pronounced. As food quality has grown increasingly important to students, it is imperative that colleges and universities listen to the voices of students and work to meet their needs in terms of food quality.

Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study has met its goal of providing an enriched sense of how first year Queen’s students living in residence perceive food quality in the campus dining halls. Participant contributions to this research have shown that overall, students are generally satisfied with both the quality and diversity of food available in the dining halls. Despite their general satisfaction, students have pointed to specific areas in which they would like to see improvement, which would improve food quality as well as their overall dining experience.

Among the results, a notable finding was that students want their food to be more like the food they eat at home with their families. This is true not only with regards to the actual food itself (in their desire for more balanced meals, for example), but also in terms of how they experience the food. Students want increased opportunity for control of ingredients in their prepared meals, greater control of portion sizes, and a stronger focus on the nutritional value of the food.

Through the provision of recommendations relating to the three salient themes which emerged from the data—health and nutrition, control and ownership, and variety and diversity—this study has highlighted some of the key gaps in meeting the increasing demands for food quality in university dining halls. Student priorities and perceptions may be quite different at other institutions, but by addressing the concerns highlighted in this study, Queen's has the opportunity to further its reputation for meeting student needs and can gain valuable ground in students' perception of food quality.

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Queen's & Kingston

Working creatively together to connect students and local employers

BY JENNIFER MASSEY

Employment opportunities and preferences for university graduates in the post-industrial North American economy differ significantly from those of the 1960s and 1970s. A shift in the landscape of dominant industries, spurred by the decline in the manufacturing sector, has prompted a growth in the 'creative' or 'knowledge' sector. Our complex modern world demands more engineers, applied mathematicians, technologists, system analysts, and skilled trades while our aging population demands more health care professionals including doctors, dentists, nurses, and long term care workers. Shortages in both have the potential to cripple not only our economy, but also the social fabric of our society.

This shift in the economy is resulting in a significant restructuring of higher education, and an increasing inter-connectivity between industry and educational institutions. The focus on the role of universities in preparing students for their transition into the workforce has intensified in recent years, and government performance indicators are increasingly tied to graduate placement rates. In Ontario for example, the Multi-Year Accountability Agreement (MYAA) specifically includes the employment rate of graduates 6-months and the 2-years after graduation. In addition, it requires examples of 'promising practices' the university is using related to the achievement of the graduate employment rate. Parents are also requiring universities to demonstrate how they are preparing students to transition into viable careers following convocation, and recent studies have reported a significant shift in students' motivations for entering university with career-goals emerging as the principal factor. Yet according to the OECD "Education at a Glance 2010" report - some 38% of Canadian graduates between ages 25-29 are "working at a low skill level". This raises an important question: How can universities help students translate the knowledge and skills they learned in the classroom to a career of their choice? The growth in place-based, experiential, and work-integrated learning is, in part, a response to this challenge. These approaches to learning certainly reflect the growing need for effectiveness and efficiency in the education systems' response to the skill needs of a fast-changing labour market, and the political pressure to generate 'greater value' from 'educational investments'. But does this pedagogical transformation reflect more than the neoliberalization

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