

Rahma Rekik



INpyOozy

Entry details

Entry Name: Eat to Thrive: How Food Supports Cognition, Immunity, and Stress

Institution Name: University of Virginia

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Rahma Rekik - Registered Dietitian - Health & Wellness Manager

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Essay:

Every year, thousands of students arrive at UVA excited, driven, and ready to succeed—yet many are quietly overwhelmed. For the first time, they are managing everything themselves: sleep, schedules, stress, and food. As the Registered Dietitian for UVA Dine, I meet students every day who want to feel better and perform better but don't always know how.

I asked myself a simple question: If we could focus on just one thing that truly matters to college students, what would it be?

The answer wasn't calories or macros. It was thriving—academically, mentally, and physically.

That question became the foundation of Eat to Thrive, a wellness and nutrition program designed specifically for the realities of college life. Instead of teaching students everything about nutrition, we focused on what supports them most right now. Three pillars naturally emerged:

1. Cognitive health, because UVA students strive for excellence
2. Stress management, because that pursuit often comes with pressure
3. Immune support, because students are sharing dorm rooms and that demands a resilient immune system

Eat to Thrive is rooted in the belief that food is more than fuel—it is one of the most accessible and effective tools students have to support their wellbeing. When students understand how nutrients work in the body, they are empowered to make choices that help them not just get through the semester, but truly to thrive during it. They become more intentional about their food choices.

During a Student Dining Advisory Board meeting in the Teaching Kitchen, we introduced a thoughtfully designed three-course menu. Each dish aligned with one pillar and told a story about how nutrients work in the body. As students cooked, ate, and asked questions, something shifted. They shared that they had never thought about food this way before. From that moment, we brought the concept into dining halls through tabling events, station takeovers, and direct student conversations, beginning with a smoothie station featuring three functional smoothies, each representing a pillar and engaging hundreds of students during peak dining hours.

The enthusiasm didn't stop with students. After presenting Eat to Thrive during our Client Business Review meeting, the program received full support, with expansion underway into station activations, featured dishes, and the catering department.

Eat to Thrive stands out for its student-centered design, practical application of evidence-based nutrition, and scalable integration across dining platforms. By helping students understand how food supports their minds and bodies, the program turns everyday dining moments into opportunities for thriving, not just surviving.

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PDF 2025 Fall SDAB... 1.4 MiB	PDF Eat To Thrive M... 38 KiB	PDF 2025 Fall Smoo... 1.7 MiB
PDF Immune Suppo... 481 KiB	PDF Brain Boost Sm... 488 KiB	PDF Stress Less Smo... 471 KiB
PDF Eat To Thrive S... 1.1 MiB	PDF Eat to Thrive S... 876 KiB	

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