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Harvard University

Entry details

Entry Name:	Harvard University Dining Services' Residential Dining Program
Institution Name:	Harvard University Dining Services
Entry Completed By (<i>name and position</i>):	Crista Martin, Director for Strategic Initiatives & Communications

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Harvard College's residential philosophy centers on creating intimate, diverse "living-learning" communities that integrate academic, social, and personal life. At the heart of those communities is Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS), with dining halls in Harvard Yard and at all 12 residential Houses. The single, unlimited dining program for residential students creates a platform for community engagement, curiosity, culinary exploration and comfort. In an era when students are relentlessly overscheduled and stressed, HUDS provides for convenience during busy class schedules while also reminding them to slow down and find joy and well-being in community.

Essay:

Harvard undergraduates are wildly diverse: culturally, ethnically, spiritually and socioeconomically, to say nothing of their limitless academic and personal interests.

Through a 4-year, 98% on-campus residential system, Harvard College creates "living-learning" communities where students, mentors, academic advisors, residential staff and faculty all come together. In these settings, students forge a vibrant, curious and close-knit community, initially as first-year students in historic Harvard Yard and its associated dining hall, Annenberg; and then as upperclassmen in one of Harvard's 12 Houses.

At the heart of these residential communities is dining. Harvard has a single, unlimited meal plan to ensure that all undergraduates can participate in residential activities on an equal footing with their peers.

Within this embrace, HUDS features services and menus which are as far-ranging as our student interests. We feed students and their curiosity – about food, sustainability, nutrition, science, engineering, and more.

In an era when so much about dining centers on speed of service, individual customization and squeezing in a meal to sustain a highly scheduled life, HUDS is innovative by creating a program that invites students to slow down and connect over a great meal or conversation.

Introduction:

HUDS uses a range of tools to communicate with our community. Our website was refreshed for the 2025-26 school year. We share content on social media, adding a Tik Tok channel in this academic year. Students and staff are featured prominently in social content, and even develop some of it! In the dining halls, we use posters, digital screens and table tents to communicate. Feedback comes through annual surveys as well as a text messaging platform.

Essay:

Because HUDS features a mandatory meal plan, the challenge in marketing is not to convince students to buy something, but rather to make sure they know all the nuances of the program at their disposal. Marketing features students and staff regularly, includes fun and engaging design that plays on current trends, and invites engagement through multiple channels.

HUDS has a parent “brand” for their residential dining program that, through iconography, emphasizes personal and planetary health, and uses the tagline “Nourishing U” to reflect the role of caring for the institution (the University), as well as the individual.

Introduction:

Prior to this fall, HUDS offered a four week cycle menu in its dining halls. Over the summer, the team reviewed the menu and eliminated low performing items and meals to consolidate down to a three week cycle. This change simultaneously increases guest satisfaction while reducing inventory and food costs. The menu centers around a daily entrée station, themed by cuisine styles. Other stations provide daily staples that complement or provide an alternative to the entrée. HUDS also includes options for keeping kosher or halal, dining on the run, accommodating special dietary needs, or celebrating as a community.

Essay:

HUDS’ menu is broad, featuring a variety of cuisines and highlighting a range of cultures or eating preferences. We theme the entrée station to a global cuisine or style of food, and then surround it with staples including Greens & Grains (modeled on popular restaurant bowl concepts); a lunchtime MYO deli station; hot soups, stews and chilis; a dinnertime Gut Goodness station; and a traditional American Grill.

Menus include daily provisions for students who are vegan or vegetarian, as well as who keep halal. Students who keep kosher have packaged provisions in their home dining hall, but can also have hot meals at Harvard Hillel or one of two dining-hall based satellite stations. HUDS’ registered dietitian works one-on-one with students who require an accommodation to support them with personally prepared dishes that allow them to stay in the dining hall with their House community.

Fun events and pop-ups keep things lively, including a Recipes from Home program for first-years.

The menu is continuously refreshed, with weekly chef production meetings reviewing text feedback and swapping out less popular dishes for new ideas. Recipe ideation work is done with the chefs, but also with partners such as vendors or commodity boards.

Introduction:

HUDS is relentlessly innovating, driven by the need to support every student given the mandatory meal plan. This leads to a continuous evolution of the food and menu; our ingredient sourcing; program services and campus partnerships to meet changing campus use patterns; and technology to support those goals.

We also have to be innovative with staffing. With 13 small locations, staffing costs make up more than 50% of our expenses. But those staff are the heart of student connectedness to the program, and so we center their stories and contributions to daily life in dining.

Essay:

Every HUDS visit begins with a warm greeting from the card-checker and continues with a team that quickly feels like family. It's common to hear staff and students chatting in shared languages, and culinarians and customer-service staff prepare menus in small batches, ready to customize for dietary needs. These personal connections make each House a home.

Menus are consistent across locations, but new concepts appear often. Recent additions include a make-your-own breakfast sandwich bar for students on the go and a Gut Goodness station with probiotic pickled vegetables and yogurts. HUDS also partnered with suppliers, commodity boards and our own team to introduce dozens of new recipes and to feature more local breads, coffees, and other ingredients.

HUDS collaborates closely with campus groups such as Harvard Hillel, the Harvard Islamic Society, the University Disability Access Office, the Office for Sustainability, and student organizations. One such example: Measure Mather and the Harvard Undergraduate Food Security Initiative tag-teamed with us to add a new food donation program. Technology helps HUDS save money. Library lending technology supports a reusable container program to replace disposables. Winnow food waste tracking technology helps reduce overproduction.

Data from surveys, feedback forums and production records guides change weekly.

Introduction:

HUDS' undergraduate dining halls are the heart of every residential community, with students popping in and out all day long for meals, snacks, to chat with a friend, or to attend an event. HUDS operates the Food Literacy Project, employing student fellows to host events and programs around food topics. We also open our doors to academic exploration, whether it be the Science & Cooking class or the Food Lab exploring sustainable models. Finally, HUDS is the heart of House life with a weekly Community Dinner hosted by the House faculty deans, and annual events such as Student Faculty dinners.

Essay:

When asked "To what degree do everyday dining hall meals in the House facilitate relationship-building and enhance your overall college experience?" 60% of students said it was extremely important and 31% said it was somewhat important. Students regularly share cards and complements about how the food and people of HUDS indelibly mark their Harvard experience.

In addition to the everyday dining experience, HUDS engages with students to expand their understanding of the food system. Programming from the Food Literacy Project, which employs students, brings to campus talks, hands-on cooking experiences, tours, and student recipes. In the spring, we paired students with researcher Micah Kaats to develop a fall study at Harvard of shared meals and happiness.

Finally, food is a universal language, and often a means to understand the world. We bring our expertise to the classroom, using food to discuss scientific principles like emulsification, or demonstrate the impact of strategically reimagining traditional business paradigms, such as the procurement of fish in the GSD Food Lab. We also turn students' gaze on the world outside our gates, as with our multiple food donation programs, which invite students to volunteer, connect with our community, and consider life beyond the classroom.

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1_HUDS_INNOV... 2.1 MiB

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2_HUDS_CAMP... 2.3 MiB

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3_HUDS_MENU... 2.9 MiB

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4.1_HUDS_MAR... 3.2 MiB

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4.2_HUDS_MAR... 3.4 MiB

Attachment name
New Menu Development

<https://hu-my.sharepoi...>

Attachment name
Recipes from Home

<https://hu-my.sharepoi...>

Attachment name
Thanksgiving Day

<https://hu-my.sharepoi...>