

Roots and Seeds: Plant Based at the University of Florida

University of Florida

Essay:

Florida Fresh Dining strives to encourage students to explore new cuisines while supporting their existing dietary needs and preferences. A 2023 survey revealed 14% of students wanted more plant-based dining options; we launched the Roots & Seeds Plant-Forward Trial. Beyond offering nutrient-dense meals, the program also educated attendees on the health and sustainability benefits of a colorful palette.

The two-week Plant-Forward Trial took place at the on-campus Arredondo Café in February and March 2024. Students ate from featured daily menus of plant-based dishes, ranging from Thai coconut carrot soup to Nopales street tacos to sweet potato pie.

Throughout the event, on-campus dietician Syd Watkins hosted educational tables on themes such as “Truth or Myth: Plant-Based Edition” and “Building a colorful plate.” The trial corresponded with National Nutrition Month, which the Academy of Nutrition and Dietitians celebrates each year. “Beyond the Table,” the 2024 theme, highlighted farm-to-fork nutrition habits. Accordingly, Watkins offered facts on the global food footprint; for example, that a vegetarian diet could reduce a single person’s water consumption by over one-half.

Diners learned health benefits, such as lower risk of cardiovascular disease and improved insulin sensitivity when not selecting animal-derived products. The “Truth or Myth” station discredited myths that plant-based diets lead to nutrient deficiencies or lack protein, instead highlighting protein-rich foods like lentils, tempeh and quinoa.

A mix of new and returning diners visited to taste Arredondo's special menu. Nearly 40% of respondents to an exit survey indicated that they had not previously dined at Arredondo Café, suggesting the trial appealed to a broader audience. Diners also said they appreciated the quality and variety of menu options offered; an overwhelming majority rated their meal four or five stars for taste. Over 75% said they would return if Arredondo continued with plant-based menu options long term.

Roots & Seeds, a newly implemented dining hall offer includes plant-based meals daily to students interested in diversifying their diet or reducing their carbon footprint. The Plant-Forward Trial served as a valuable opportunity to assess the demand for plant-based meals and gather insights to guide our future initiatives.

Each thoughtfully developed menu included a vegan entrée, vegetarian entrée, two vegan vegetables, vegan starch, vegan or vegetarian soup, and a vegan or vegetarian dessert.

Bringing education into nutrition — and making it fun is what we aimed to accomplish. Keeping our largely Gen Z student body in mind, we “game-ified” science-heavy elements of our dietary curriculum. Off putting terms like “phytonutrients” turned into engaging truth-or-myth puzzles or multiple-choice trivia questions. We encouraged students to “match the terms” to the definitions for phrases like “vegan,” “vegetarian” and “flexitarian” before writing their own favorite dish on a whiteboard for future diners to peruse. By inviting students to participate in their own learning — not just look at a static chart — we encouraged a deeper understanding of the facts and benefits of plant-based eating.

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