

Kirsten Anderson



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Entry details

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Essay:

Duke Dining's Connected Plates program is a 2025 innovative wellness and nutrition initiative designed to meet students where they are by linking nutrition, personal well-being, and sustainability. The program's central theme—connection—is reflected in its name and purpose: connecting students' health, nutrition, and wellness with environmentally responsible dining choices. This approach ensures strong relevance to today's students, who are increasingly interested in both personal health and the impact of their food decisions.

At the core of the program are Nourish Meals-featured menu items that are nutritious, well-balanced, and environmentally mindful. These meals provide students with clear, actionable, science-based examples of how to build a balanced plate while considering sustainability. Each week, a different dining location is highlighted, creating a dynamic and engaging experience that encourages exploration across campus. Three Nourish Meals are visually displayed to enhance understanding through color, variety, and composition, while tastings of select items allow students to directly experience the flavors and quality of these offerings.

A variety of methods support program engagement and learning. Connected Plates collaborates with Duke Wellness to help connect students with programmatic offerings and reinforce key wellness messaging across campus. Tabling events provide opportunities for direct interaction with Duke Dining Nutritionist Megan Hawley, RDN, and Sustainability Manager Kaitlyn Welzen, who guide students in understanding how simple, everyday food choices can


positively impact both personal wellness and the environment. These conversations make nutrition education approachable, practical, and tailored to student needs.


The marketing campaign reinforces the Connected Plates message through clear, consistent, and student-centered communication. Messaging focuses on balance, flexibility, and informed choice, delivered through a variety of platforms including signage at each tabling event, individual take-away postcards for easy reference, digital screens throughout campus, a dedicated page on the Duke Dining website, newsletters, social media channels, and printed brochures. Program identification is integrated directly into Duke Dining's NetNutrition platform, allowing students to apply what they learn in real time. Custom branding further strengthened the campaign, with distinct logos developed for Nourish Meals and sustainability components, alongside an overarching Connected Plates logo that visually "connects" both elements. This multi-channel approach ensures strong visibility and accessibility, while a cohesive, modern visual identity makes the program both recognizable and engaging across all touchpoints.

Feedback and evaluation demonstrate strong program success. Goals focused on increasing awareness of balanced, nutritious meals and sustainable food choices. High engagement at tabling events, continuous participation across dining locations, and positive feedback from students confirm the program effectively reached its target audience. Digital survey responses indicated meaningful engagement, while social media interactions and direct email feedback reflected high levels of student interest and satisfaction. Collectively, these data points demonstrate the program's clarity, impact, and real-world relevance, showing that it empowered students to make healthy and sustainable choices with confidence.

Overall, Connected Plates delivers a cohesive, innovative program that successfully integrates wellness and sustainability into everyday dining. By combining interactive education, visually engaging experiences, and clear messaging, the program creates a meaningful and lasting impact on student health, awareness, and dining satisfaction.

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