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From: Zachary Malter, WSA Dining Committee  
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Date: Wednesday, February 3, 2010

Subject: The University's Meal Plan

## **Part 1: The Process**

In order to formulate this analysis, we met with Dean Rick Culliton and Michelle Myers-Brown, Director of Usdan, to get a broad overview of how the meal plan works. Additionally, we requested specific meal plan data to help us better understand student dining habits. We also did research on the meal plan's history and spoke with countless students who helped inform this analysis. Most recently, on January 26, 2010 we met with Michelle Myers-Brown, who provided us with limited information which we used to extrapolate the aggregate usage and waste in the meal plan, all of which is presented later in the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

We believe that information regarding the meal plan and its effects on student life should be easily accessible and transparent to the student body. The current system erases all meal plan usage figures after each semester and the erased data has not been archived before its deletion. No historical data points up to and including Fall 2009 currently exist. We believe that this technical flaw begs much closer examination. We have requested that data points which elucidate utilization be captured and recorded in the future in order to ensure that we have exact figures with which to design the best possible meal plan for students.

## **Part 2: The Problems**

Through emails, survey responses, student guests to WSA meetings, and conversations during WSA outreach activities, many students have expressed a wide array of concerns regarding the university's meal plan. At the core of most of these concerns are the plans' **inflexibility and restrictiveness**. These concerns are not isolated and anecdotal problems, but are instead universal problems, demonstrated by the utilization analysis and extrapolation presented later in this document.

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the administration were unable to provide us with basic statistical information regarding the utilization of the meal plan. We were most interested in raw numbers showing specific average and aggregate utilization of meals and points broken down by semester, class year, and plan. In a meeting on December 11, 2009 with Rick Culliton and Michelle Myers-Brown, we were informed that some information would be easy to provide. Immediately after that meeting, we followed up via email with a more specific list of information we would be interested in seeing. On December 14, 2009, we were informed by Rick Culliton that some of the information we requested in writing was not discussed during the meeting, and that due to end of semester responsibilities for administrators, there may be a delay until after the end of break to collect all of the data we requested. Later that same day, Michelle Myers-Brown informed us that the University doesn't currently have access to the archived data from previous years, but the Fall 2009 meal block data and point report data we requested would be available after January 1, 2010. On December 30, 2009, we submitted a more detailed information request of average and aggregate utilization of meals and points broken down by semester, class year, and plan. On January 15, 2010, we were informed by Michelle Myers-Brown that she was not able to answer any of our specific information requests because the system overwrites itself and erases all data each semester. Michelle Myers-Brown instead provided us with aggregated percentages showing meal usage for each plan and distribution of students among plans. Had they been available, raw numbers showing specific average and aggregate utilization of meals and points, broken down by semester, class year, and plan would have been more helpful. We based our analysis in part on the data Michelle Myers-Brown was able to provide.

At the beginning of each semester, the university requires freshmen and sophomores to purchase many more meals than the average student actually uses. Under the current meal plan, the minimum number of meals (135 Block - 9 meals per week for freshmen, 105 Block – 7 meals per week for sophomores) is much higher than students' realistic dining habits. In Fall 2009, each student on Block 135 plan had an average of 26 unused meals and each student on Block 105 had an average of 23 unused meals. What's more, these meals do not carry over from semester to semester. Every single year, the average freshman purchases **\$568.80 in meals which are never used.**<sup>2</sup>

An additional common complaint came from sophomores who live in program houses with access to kitchens. This semester, Spring 2010, 253 sophomores who live in program houses with kitchens were required to purchase at least 105 meals for use at Usdan or Summerfields over the course of the semester when they would prefer to cook or dine in their houses. For students whose financial situation requires them to utilize all their meals rather than adding points or purchasing food off campus, this diminishes their program house experience because they are less able to take advantage of their kitchens and eat with their house communities; everyone else is forced to buy meals they have no intention of using. The fact that sophomores in program houses are expected to use the same number of meals as sophomores in regular dorms is another example of how the current plan lacks flexibility in accommodating the diverse Wesleyan student body.

Juniors and seniors are required to purchase a fixed number of points. For some, this number is more than what is necessary for their dining habits; for others, it is not enough. There is also a lack of recognition in the current plan that some students, especially upperclassmen, would like to buy some meals off campus. The universal complaint from all parties is the fundamental lack of flexibility in the plan. Unfortunately, all of our requests for data on utilization of points were denied due to the aforementioned problem of overwritten data; therefore, more detailed analysis of point utilization is not currently possible.

Yet another common complaint is the inability to swipe more than once in a meal period after the four guest meals are used. Allowing students to swipe more than once during a meal period might reduce the burden of having many meals left over at the end of a semester.

In sum, the meal plan is restrictive and does not line up with the preferred eating habits of many Wesleyan students. Students spend money on meals and points that they will never use, and for the vast majority, **students will find no meal plan suitable for their dining habits.**

Unrelated to the problems of meal plan flexibility, students have observed that while the Residential Comprehensive Fee (RCF) increases every year, the number of points provided under given plans do not similarly increase every year. Concurrently, due to inflation, prices at some campus venues such as Weshop increase year after year, thus decreasing the purchasing power of individual points. Effectively, each year students pay a little bit more and receive a little bit less. Additionally, our RCF for freshmen and sophomores (\$11,040) is more expensive than most of our peers (Williams, Vassar, Trinity, Grinnell, Hamilton), and our RCF for juniors and seniors (\$12,548) is more expensive than our most expensive peers (Swarthmore, Haverford, Northwestern).<sup>3</sup> Although we do not currently have data to elucidate the severity of this problem, due to the appearance of reduced purchasing power over the long term and Wesleyan's outlier status in overall charges, the issue begs further study.

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<sup>2</sup> Calculated by summing the total cost of unused meals by the freshman class (\$211,879) and dividing that figure by the number of students in the freshman class (745).

<sup>3</sup> All data from peer universities and colleges were obtained from the websites of those institutions. Some institutions had separate charges for room and board; for those schools, the charges were combined for the purpose of comparison.

**Block Meal Plan Projections, Fall 2009: REPRESENTS UTILIZATION & COST OF MEALS FOR ONE (1) SEMESTER**

| Meal Plan <sup>4</sup>  | Class Year <sup>5</sup> | Percentage of Meals Used <sup>6</sup> | Average # of meals used per student <sup>7</sup> | Average # of unused meals per student <sup>8</sup> | % of students in class year on plan <sup>9</sup> | # of students on plan <sup>10</sup> | Aggregate # of unused meals <sup>11</sup> | Students' total cost of unused meals <sup>12</sup> |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 135 Block   | 2013                    | 80.40%                                | 109  | 26   | 68.40%   | 510                                 | 13,483                                    | \$ 116,228   |
| 165 Block   |                         | 80.50%                                | 133  | 32   | 18.20%   | 136                                 | 4,363                                     | \$ 37,606  |
| 210 Block   |                         | 69.30%                                | 146  | 64   | 11.30%   | 84                                  | 5,427                                     | \$ 46,784  |
| 285 Block   |                         | 70.70%                                | 201  | 84   | 2.10%  | 16                                  | 1,306                                     | \$ 11,261  |
| 105 Block   | 2012                    | 78.20%                                | 82   | 23   | 81.30%   | 576                                 | 13,176                                    | \$ 113,573   |
| 135 Block   |                         | 80.40%                                | 109  | 26   | 10.40%   | 74                                  | 1,948                                     | \$ 16,794  |
| 165 Block   |                         | 80.50%                                | 133  | 32   | 8.30%  | 59                                  | 1,891                                     | \$ 16,298  |
| 210 Block   |                         | 69.30%                                | 146  | 64   | 0.10%  | 1                                   | 46  | \$ 393   |
| 285 Block   |                         | 70.70%                                | 201  | 84   | 0.10%  | 1                                   | 59  | \$ 510   |
| Total number of unused meals in one semester:   |                         |                                       |  |  |  |                                     | 41,699                                    |  |
| Total value of unused meals paid for by freshman and sophomores combined in one semester: |                         |                                       |  |  |  |                                     |   | \$ 359,448 <sup>13</sup>                           |

<sup>4</sup> Each number corresponds to a particular meal plan; for example, "105 Block" refers to the 105 Block Plan.

<sup>5</sup> Denotes class year of corresponding row's data.

<sup>6</sup> Reflects the percentage of meals used by students in the plan, as stated by Michelle Myers-Brown's memo to Zachary Malter on January 26, 2010. The plan utilization information as provided was not broken down by class year, therefore for the purpose of this analysis we are assuming it to be equivalent for both the freshman and sophomore classes.

<sup>7</sup> Computed by multiplying the percentage of meals used with the total number of meals in plan.

<sup>8</sup> Computed by subtracting the average # of meals used from the total number of meals in plan.

<sup>9</sup> Data provided by Michelle Myers-Brown's memo to Zachary Malter on January 26, 2010. The memo did not include specific data for the 210 and 285 plans in the class of 2012 and 285 plan in the class of 2013. These figures were approximated based on the data available; they are marginal factors and do not have a statistically significant effect on the aggregate figures.

<sup>10</sup> Computed by multiplying the total number of students in class (708 in 2012, 745 in 2013) with the percentage of students in that class year on each plan.

<sup>11</sup> Computed by multiplying the number of students on that plan with the number of average number of unused meals per student.

<sup>12</sup> Computed by multiplying the average cost of lunch & dinner (\$9.25 for dinner, \$7.99 for brunch & lunch, equaling \$8.62) with the total number of unused meals. We were not provided data on the breakdown between breakfast, lunch, brunch, and dinner utilization; therefore, these results are approximate since they were computed assuming a relatively equal breakdown between lunch and dinner utilization. We suspect that these figures are on the conservative side since we believe dinner utilization would be higher.

<sup>13</sup> Computed by summing the total cost of unused meals as broken down by meal plan and class year. *Computational Note: It is important to note that these conclusions are approximate. We asked for exact figures on meal plan usage over the last several semesters, but we were not provided the data we requested due to the obstacle of all meal plan data being erased at the end of each semester. The only data we were provided with was the utilization percentage broken down by plan and the percentage of students on each plan in each year. Variables which would throw off this figure include the number of freshman and sophomores on all points due to dietary restrictions, exact figures on freshman block 285 plan, sophomore block 210 plan, and sophomore block 285 plan, variances in class size due to students who resign or transfer, and specific breakdown of usage between breakfast, lunch, dinner, and brunch. That being said, all of these marginal variables would have a minimal impact; additionally, some of these marginal variables would increase the projection and some would decrease the projection; therefore, the overall magnitude of the aggregate figures would remain unchanged.*

## Interpretation of Data

Our findings reveal that the overall amount of combined money that freshmen and sophomores spend on unused meals is roughly \$359,448 per semester. If we were to annualize that figure and include the aggregate number of unused points, we project that **students spend at least \$1 million every year for meals and points they never use.**<sup>14</sup>

As a side-note, for all meal plans in both years, the average student uses fewer meals than the next lowest meal plan. For example, sophomores on the 165 Block Plan only use an average of 133 meals – which is still **fewer** meals than they would have had if they had chosen the more flexible 135 Block Plan. This trend of the average student choosing the wrong plan carries through universally for every meal plan option. The meal plan is constructed in such a way that it systemically causes students to choose the wrong meal plan for their dining habits. Concurrently, the vast majority of both freshman and sophomores do end up choosing the most flexible plan, but find it is not flexible enough – freshmen who chose the most flexible plan open to them (the one with the fewest meals) had a total 13,483 unused meals at the end of one semester, and sophomores who chose the most flexible plan open to them had 13,176 unused meals at the end of one semester. This waste underscores the flaws of the current system – students are forced to buy meals they will never use.

## Part 3: Possible Solutions

We are not specifically endorsing any of the subsequent solutions, but we are suggesting they be considered in future discussions of the meal plan as possible remedies to the problems outlined above. It is important to note that some of these reforms would only fix certain components of the problems that have been outlined. We also recognize that some of these solutions would cause additional problems with both financial and student life impacts, which is why we are not endorsing any of these proposals at this time.

- a. Reduce the minimum number of mandatory meals for Sophomores and Freshmen to reflect realistic utilization expectations

Reducing the number of mandatory meals for underclassmen and simultaneously increasing the corresponding number of points would give students greater flexibility to use a range of on-campus dining facilities. Also, it would decrease the number of unused meals that remain at the end of the semester. If students chose to go to more meals than the number allotted, they would be able to use points.

- b. Create additional meal equivalencies/swipe opportunities across campus

The ability to use a meal to purchase items equivalent to \$9.25 at Pi, Usdan Café, Late Night, or Weshop would greatly increase meal plan flexibility.

- c. Allow students to roll-over meals to subsequent semesters

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<sup>14</sup> Annualizing the value of unspent meals ( $\$359,448 \times$  two semesters) would yield a total of \$718,896. Specific data on the utilization patterns of points are not available to us. On the basis of anecdotal accounts given to the WSA by students, we can make a very conservative estimate that the average student has at least 55 unused points as they approach the end of each semester. Therefore, we can conclude that students purchase an aggregate of at least \$308,000 each year on points they have no intention of using. Given these conservative estimates, we can project that the total amount of money students spend on meals and points they never use is over \$1 million every year.

If meals operated like points and students could roll over meals from the fall semester to the spring, it would increase flexibility in spending meals.

d. Implement an unused meal point refund program

If a student had unused meals in their account on the final day of a semester, under this system they would receive a refund in points that would roll over to the next semester. Wesleyan could calculate the cash value of each unused meal and automatically deposit the points into each students' WesCard account. These points would be the same as regular points, valid at any campus location that accepted them.

e. Increase university's financial resources for dining

In order to fund a more flexible meal plan, the university may have to increase its financial resources for dining. Students may be in favor of cutbacks in other areas if they would allow for improvements in the meal plan.

f. Permit double meal swipes and/or expand or eliminate the cap on guest meals

g. Reevaluate the Junior and Senior point requirement

h. Reduce the RCF for students who want fewer meals/points

i. Enable complete dining flexibility and eliminate all waste by replacing prepaid meal plan system with point-of-sale cash purchasing. It is unclear whether the university dining cost structure would support such a change.

#### **Part 4: Recommendation**

**We recommend that a Meal Plan Task Force be established to carefully examine the strengths and weaknesses of our current meal plan and to develop specific proposals to improve the quality and flexibility of the meal plan for students.** The task force should be composed of both students and administrators and should make recommendations to be implemented in the 2010-2011 academic year.