Which Do I Pick?

As a freshman at UCA, living in one of the on-campus residential halls is required. It is supposed to help make transition into college life a little easier since students have easier access to their classes and professors. It is also easier for freshmen to become involved with campus activities. I know it helped me. And since every student needs to eat, it is UCA policy for anyone who resides on campus to purchase a meal plan. All of the meal plans allow for students to eat the appetizing food in the Christian Cafeteria. This is a good deal since UCA has one of the best college cafeterias. But if the student doesn’t want to eat in the café every day, there are meal plan options that allow the student to purchase awesome food from the student center and still allow them to have a wonderful café experience when they want to. UCA has developed many choices for students living on campus, but they may be a little confusing to incoming freshman. Also, when I say many plans, I mean many plans. UCA has an overwhelming number of plans that freshman have to choose from. I think UCA should enhance their meal plans by explaining them better on the web site, and in person, to the incoming freshmen and by lowering the number of plans to choose from.

Meal plans are a necessity for the students who live in the residence hall since microwaves are illegal in the rooms unless the student chooses to rent a micro-fridge. A micro-
fridge allows the fridge to shut off when the student uses the microwave, and vice versa. The whole hall or floor shares a stove, and some have microwaves for the students who choose not to rent a micro-fridge. UCA has come up with a wide variety of choices for students to choose from when picking a plan. There is an unlimited option, so many meals per week option, and a block option. According to UCA Dinning Services,

“[The unlimited] plan allows you to eat unlimited meals in the Christian Cafeteria. [One so many meals per week] plan allows you 15 meals in the Christian Cafeteria a week and $80 Dining Dollars a semester. [One block] plan allows you 140 block meals a semester in the Christian Cafeteria or in any retail location that accepts meals equivalency and $160 DDs a semester.”

These and four other plans give students a wide variety of choices, but the incoming freshmen are often confused by which to pick.

As an incoming freshman myself, I had no idea which meal plan to purchase. I just knew I had to have one. I thought the unlimited meals in the Christian Cafeteria would be best, but my parents thought only the 15 meals a week with $80 DD would do fine. My mom didn’t want to choose a block plan because she wasn’t exactly sure how they worked. The descriptions on the website were kind of confusing. However, when I came in the summer to register for my fall classes, I went to the housing department. One of the student workers went into detail more about the plans. She clearly explained to me that the block plans could be used in the Christian Cafeteria and the Student Center. She also told me she chose the 140 block plan and never worried about running out of meals. With her help, I chose the 140 block plan and I don’t regret it.
My friend Haley, who was also an incoming freshman this year, was not so lucky with her choice. Haley chose the 15 meals a week with $80 DD. When Haley and I would eat in the Student Center, Haley’s meals would not work. She had to use her DD. Between Starbucks runs, C-Store pick-ups, and then a meal purchase in the food court, Haley’s DD did not last very long. By midterm Haley had no DD left. We stopped eating in the Student Center. On the occasion that we would grab lunch there, I would use one of my meals for her. Haley ended up changing her meal plans at semester. I asked Haley why she changed her plan and she said, “I liked your plan last semester. You were able to eat just about anywhere. You never seemed to worry running out of money like I did since you could use meals.” I then went on to ask her why she chose that plan in the first place. Haley responded, “I didn’t know which was the best plan to choose. It just had plenty of meals during the week, but it also had a few DD. I knew I would want some usable money like that. It was the second cheapest one, too. Plus, the block plans just confused me; I had no idea what they were.”

I, also, wanted to see if any other freshmen had problems when they chose a meal plan. I decided to survey my writing class that was completely freshman. One student responded, “I did not switch plans at semester because I had enough trouble understanding them the first time.” 7 out of the 14 surveyed said that they ended up changing meal plans at semester. Most of them changed because they thought they didn’t have enough meals or DD to use in the Student Center and café. Many of them also said they chose their plan because they had to pick one and there were too many to choose from. Their first choice seemed to be a bad random pick from numerous choices.

To help incoming freshmen, like Haley and my classmates, UCA should want to change the way the website describes the meal plans. Henderson State University (HSU) also uses
Aramark as the food service provider. On HSU's website, they describe what would be best for the student on how much they plan to stay at school. A few examples are,

“Any 10 meals per week meal plan is ideal for the student who will probably go home most weekends. This meal plan can also be purchased with a declining cash balance of $175. Any 19 meals per week is good for every meal served at Caddo. This meal plan is ideal for out-of-state students who aren't going to be able to go home very often. This meal plan can also be purchased with a declining cash balance of $50.”

A little rewording and more detail could help UCA’s incoming freshmen. The university could also have the student tours and recruitment staffs explain the meal plan option before or after the tour they give to perspective students. SOAR would also be a good place to talk to incoming freshmen about the plans. UCA may even want to have a session during orientation and Welcome Week that explains the meal plans to the incoming freshmen. It would help the students not feel overwhelmed by all the different choices they have.

Also, UCA may be overwhelming its students by the number of meal plans there are to choose from. HSU offers four basic meal plans that have an option of buying DD with it. There are not a ton of choices that can bombard students. UCA even has more meal plans than the University of Arkansas, which has a larger student population (Meal Plan FAQs). According to Jim Nabors, Senior Food Service Director at UCA, “We look at the cost of food and CPI each year to determine increases for rate negotiations with the university. Also meal plans are based on attrition, or meals not eaten. Then the university decides the different meal plans.” So it’s up to UCA to make it easier on incoming freshmen by lowering the number of choices. As I said, HSU has four basic meal plans. Then they have an option to purchase DD with each plan. UCA
may consider keeping the unlimited plan, the 15 meals per week plan, and maybe create a 180 block plan, since it would be right in the middle of the two block plans already offered. Then give the students an option to purchase so many DD. The plan would be more personal to the student, allowing them to better understand which plan to purchase.

With losing some of these meal plan options, UCA may fear that they will lose money. There are three basic prices of the meal plans now, so I do not see how UCA could lose much money. According to the Campus Dinning page, the unlimited meal plan cost $1,120 or $1,170 with $50 DD added. The two so many meals per week plans cost $1,160, while the block plans cost $1,260 with DD or $1,210 without. The more DD the student chooses to add would raise the price. UCA could keep the price of the unlimited without DD and the 15 meals per week plan the same. Then UCA could figure in a price for the 180 block plan. I figured one meal in the cafeteria to be about $6.65, and knowing that UCA could set the price for the 180 block plan at $1,200. If the student chooses to add DD to their plan, their price would go up. These all seem fair, and really show how UCA could make just about the same amount of money.

Dinning at UCA is good. The buffet style in the Christian Cafeteria offers many choices of food. In fact, it is better than most college cafeterias. The Café Court in the Student Center offers great fast food choices for when students want something different or just crave fast food. But the descriptions and number of choices of meal plans can bombard incoming freshman. So since the students must eat, UCA should want to reconsider their meal plans. Rewording the website description and having someone personally explain to the freshman what the meal plans are may help to relieve the incoming freshmen for worries about which choice is the best for them. Also, lowering the number of choices that students have to choose from will help them easily see which plan is better for them. Since every student living on campus must chose a plan,
these suggestions could help in the choosing process. UCA should not want anyone else to end up like Haley and some of my classmates when they just picked a plan because they had to.
Works Cited


Nabors, Jim. Email Interview. 7 Feb. 2012

O’Brien, Haley. Personal Interview. 1 March 2012