

THE PRINCETON REVIEW®

2026 CAMPUS DINING SERVICES & STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEY REPORT

The Princeton Review in Partnership with Sodexo

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Princeton Review conducted the inaugural 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey in partnership with Sodexo. The institutional survey gathered information on dining operations, meal plans, workforce, culinary practices, dietary access, technology, sustainability, campus spaces, recruitment, food security, wellbeing partnerships, and assessment of student outcomes.

The final dataset contains completed submissions from 82 unique U.S. institutions. This report presents selected aggregate findings. It does not publish institution-specific responses, include a school-by-school ranking, or incorporate a separate student survey dataset.

**A Year-One Baseline of How Campus Dining Supports Access,
Community, Recruitment, and Student Wellbeing**

ABOUT THE 2026 CAMPUS DINING SERVICES & STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEY

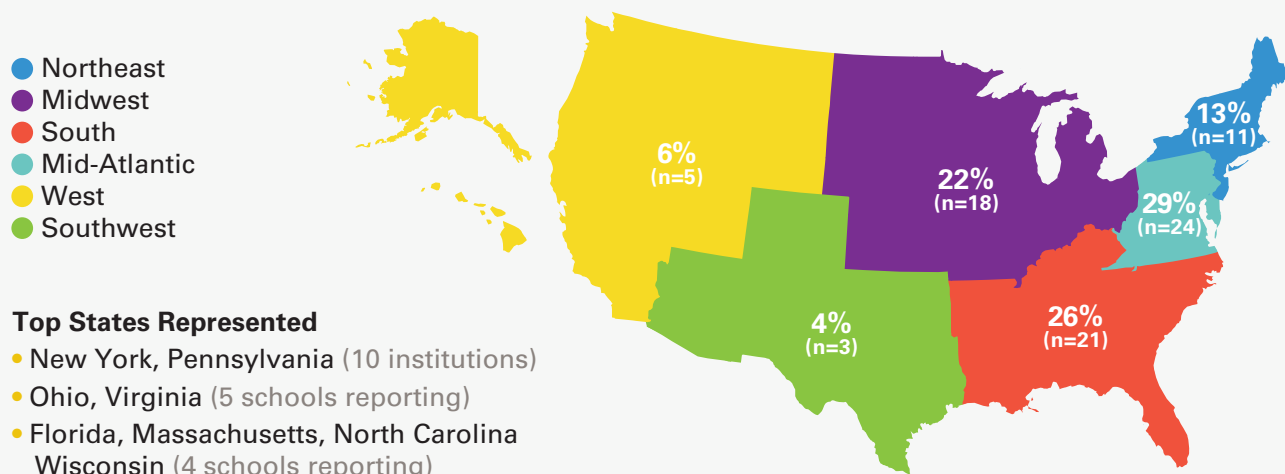
The inaugural survey was designed to establish a national descriptive baseline for campus dining and its connections to student experience. The 49-question institutional instrument was shaped through an advisory process and asked colleges to report on their operating structures, service formats, access models, student-support practices, sustainability efforts, campus partnerships, and assessment activities.

The final response file includes 82 completed records submitted from May 29 through August 15, 2026. Each institution appears once in the dataset. All respondents were U.S. institutions. Percentages in this report are unweighted and based on institutions responding to each item; the base therefore varies across findings.



WHERE THE COLLEGES ARE

Regional distribution of the 82 U.S. institutions in the final dataset



ABOUT THE PRINCETON REVIEW

The Princeton Review is a leading tutoring, test prep, and college admissions services company. Every year, it helps millions of college- and graduate school-bound students as well as working professionals achieve their education and career goals through its many education services and products. These include online and in-person courses delivered by a network of more than 4,000 teachers and tutors; online resources; a line of more than 150 print and digital books published by Penguin Random House; and dozens of categories of school rankings. Founded in 1981, the company is now in its 45th year. The company's Tutor.com brand, now in its 25th year, is one of the largest online tutoring services in the U.S. It comprises a community of thousands of tutors who have delivered more than 29 million tutoring sessions. The Princeton Review, headquartered in New York, NY, is not affiliated with Princeton University. For more information, visit PrincetonReview.com. Follow the company on Facebook (@ThePrincetonReviewSAT), Instagram (@theprincetonreview), LinkedIn (the-princeton-review), YouTube (@ThePrincetonReview), and TikTok (@princeton.review). Subscribe to The Princeton Review's twice-weekly newsletter, Brick & Mortarboard, [here](https://theprincetonreview.substack.com) (theprincetonreview.substack.com).

ABOUT SODEXO

Sodexo North America is a division of Sodexo Group, a global Fortune 500 company operating in 45 countries and a leading provider of sustainable food and integrated facilities management in all 50 U.S. states, Canada, Puerto Rico and Guam, at every moment in life: learn, work, heal and play. Across the U.S., the company employs over 100,000 people and indirectly supports tens of thousands of additional jobs by annually purchasing goods and services from a wide range of small to large businesses. Sodexo North America is committed to meeting the challenges of everyday life with a dual goal: to improve the quality of life of our employees and those we serve, and to contribute to the economic, social and environmental progress in the communities where we operate. Our purpose is to create a better every day for everyone to build a better life for all.

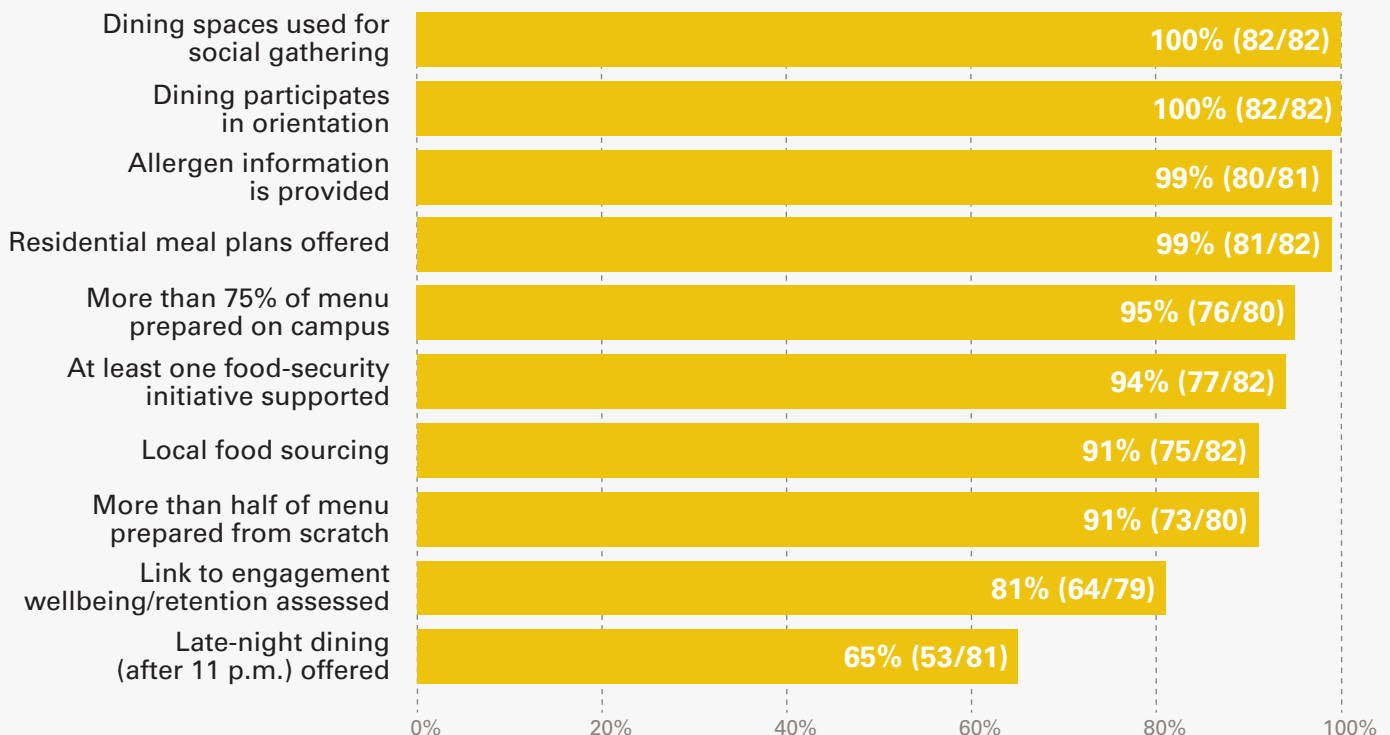
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The inaugural findings support a central conclusion: dining is no longer simply seen as a food service but rather as a highly visible part of the student experience. From the first campus visit on, it is a center for daily life, community building, and student satisfaction. Responding institutions commonly oversee multiple dining formats, integrate dining into recruitment and orientation, provide extensive dietary and nutrition support, and use dining spaces as social and academic commons.

Four patterns are especially visible in the year-one baseline. First, dining is embedded in community life: every institution reported that dining spaces are used for social gathering, and 95% reported use for studying or academic work. Second, access and inclusion are widespread, including near-universal allergen information and broad availability of dietary accommodations. Third, campuses report high levels of on-site preparation, programming, and sustainability activity. Fourth, outcome measurement is present but still developing: 81% reported some assessment of dining and student engagement, wellbeing, or retention, yet most rely on student surveys and feedback rather than linked institutional outcome analysis.

A NATIONAL BASELINE OF CAMPUS DINING AS STUDENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Select findings: bases vary by item



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. Percentages are rounded; bases vary by item.

DINING AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Dining spaces are used for social gathering at all 82 institutions, for studying at 78, and for events or programming at 73.

ACTIVE CULINARY PROGRAMMING

All 82 institutions host themed culinary events; among the 77 reporting a specific count, the median is 20 events in a typical academic year.

INCLUSIVE ACCESS

80 of 81 institutions provide allergen information; 70 of 81 provide access to a registered dietitian or nutrition consultation.

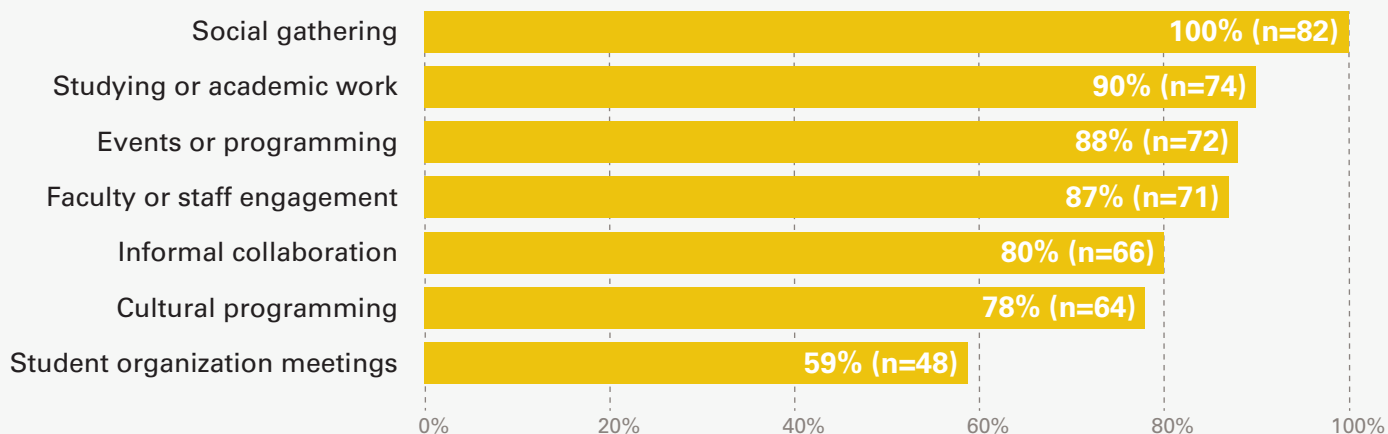
EVIDENCE-BUILDING OPPORTUNITY

All 82 institutions host themed culinary events; among the 77 reporting a specific count, the median is 20 events in a typical academic year.

SUMMARY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE CONNECTIONS

DINING SPACES FUNCTION AS CAMPUS COMMONS

How dining spaces are used (N=82; select all that apply)

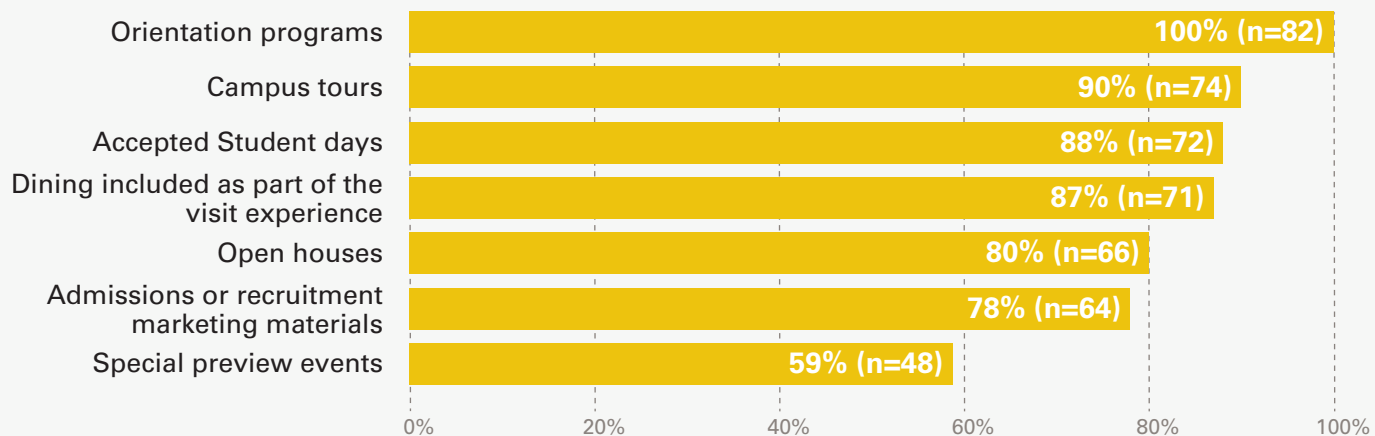


Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

Dining also appears throughout the student lifecycle. All responding institutions reported dining support for orientation programs; 90% reported involvement in campus tours, 88% in accepted-student days, and 87% included dining as part of the campus-visit experience. These findings position dining as both a daily community setting and a visible element of institutional recruitment and onboarding.

DINING IS EMBEDDED IN RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Admissions and recruitment activities supported by dining (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

CONCLUSION

Dining is no longer simply seen as a food service but rather as a highly visible part of the student experience. From the first campus visit on, it is a center for daily life, community building, and student satisfaction. These year-one findings establish a descriptive baseline for that role, not causal evidence that dining practices produce retention, belonging, engagement, or other student outcomes.

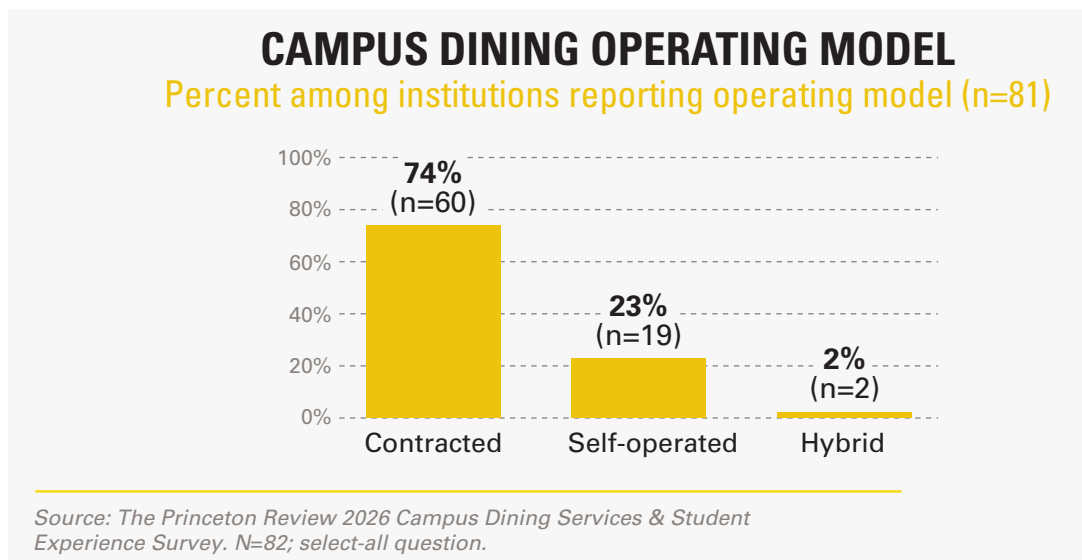
WHY PARTICIPATION MATTERS: KEY BENEFITS FOR SCHOOLS

Participation in the Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey gives colleges and universities a structured, evidence-based view of how dining programs are organized and where opportunities for growth may exist.

- **Benchmark program structure and access** Schools can compare service formats, meal-plan access, technology, dietary support, and sustainability practices against a national institutional baseline.
- **Inform campus planning and resource allocation** Toplines on locations, staffing, culinary programming, wait times, digital tools, and sustainability can support operational and capital planning.
- **Assess inclusion and basic-needs support** The survey measures dietary accommodations, nutrition services, religious and fasting support, food-security initiatives, and cross-campus wellbeing partnerships.
- **Connect dining to recruitment and student life** Findings show how dining participates in visits, orientation, events, studying, social gathering, and campus traditions.
- **Support longitudinal improvement** Annual collection can document change over time, improve definitions, and create more meaningful peer comparisons as the baseline matures.

SELECTED INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY FINDINGS

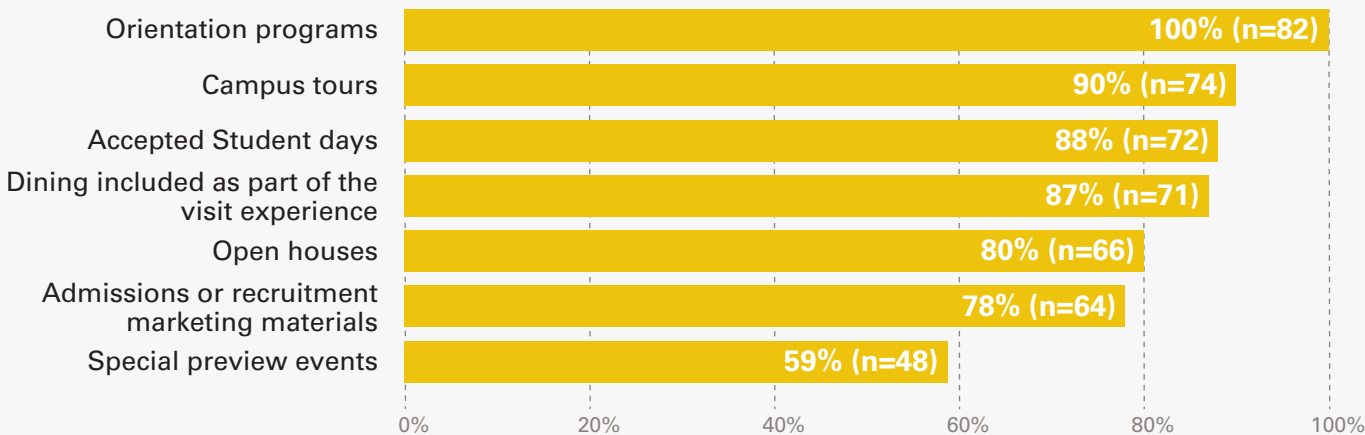
A selection of the survey questions, answer choices, and aggregate percentages is presented on the following pages. For select-all questions, percentages may total more than 100%. Bases exclude blank responses unless otherwise noted. Results are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal estimates or school rankings.



PROGRAM FOOTPRINT AND MEAL-PLAN ACCESS

DINING IS EMBEDDED IN RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Admissions and recruitment activities supported by dining (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

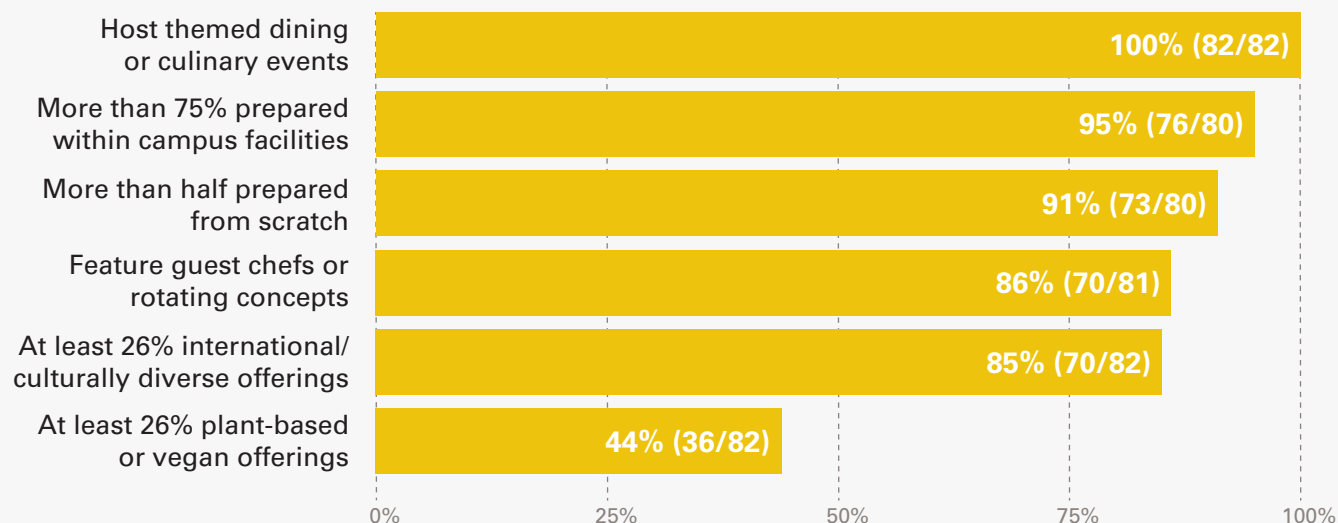
Indicator	Finding	Base
Total dining locations	Median 9; IQR 5–17	n=81
Retail dining venues	Median 9; IQR 4–13	n=81
External restaurant brands present	67% (54)	n=81
Distinct external brands, among institutions with brands	Median 3	n=54
Residential meal plans offered	99% (81)	n=82
Commuters eligible to purchase residential plans	98% (78)	n=80

Combination plans that pair meal swipes with dining dollars are the most common plan structure, reported by 78 institutions. Commuter plans are offered by 64 institutions, voluntary plans by 62, and both unlimited and declining-balance plans by 51.

CULINARY PRODUCTION AND PROGRAMMING

CULINARY PROGRAMMING IS ACTIVE AND HIGHLY ON-SITE

Selected menu and programming indicators



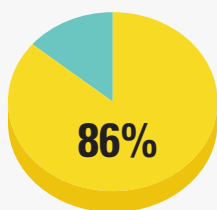
Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. Percentages are rounded; bases vary by item.



20

median themed
culinary events
per year

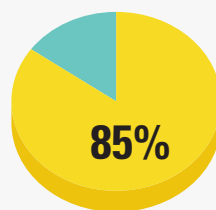
n=77; IQR 10-50



86%

feature guest
chefs or rotating
concepts

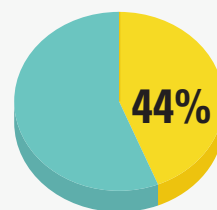
70 of 81 responding institutions



85%

report at least 26%
international or culturally
diverse offerings

70 of 82 institutions



44%

report at least 26%
plant-based or
vegan offerings

36 of 82 institutions

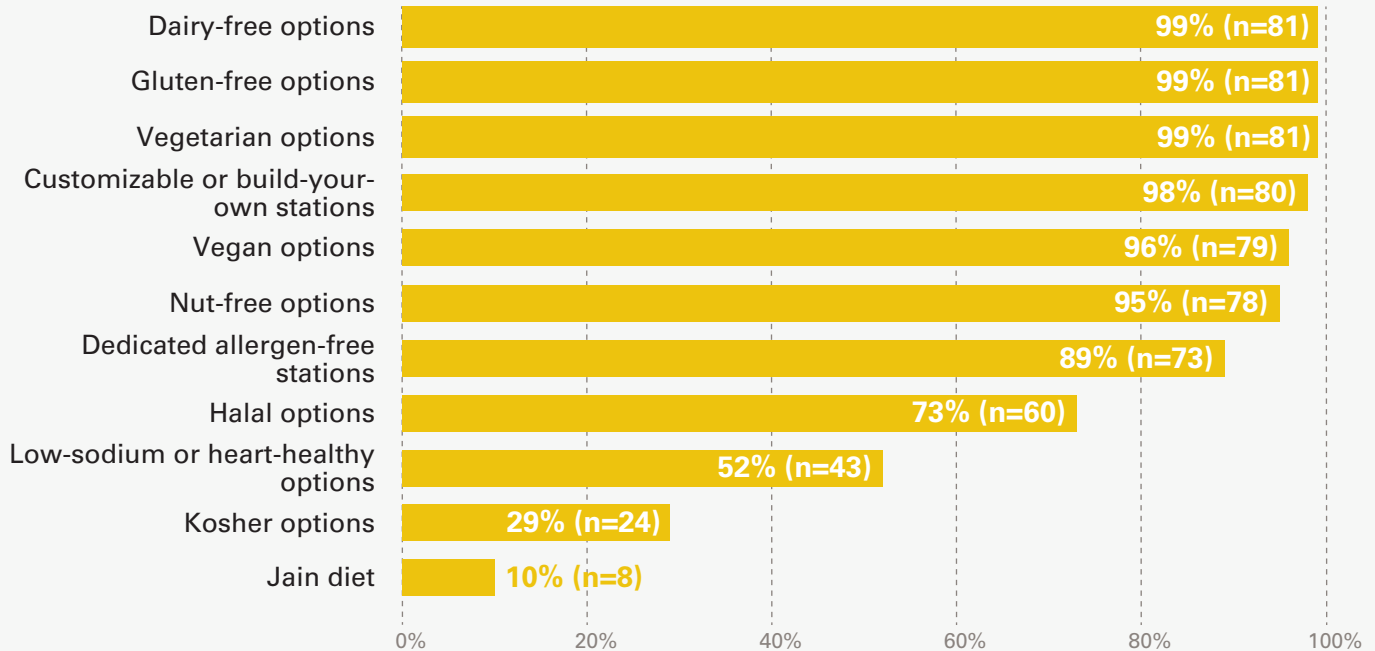
Core menu rotation is frequent: 62% of institutions report refreshing core offerings daily and another 21% weekly. Nearly half of institutions report seven or more distinct cuisines across dining locations, including 25% that report more than ten.

The results suggest a common model of high on-site production paired with regular event-based programming. They do not measure food quality directly or compare reported practices with student satisfaction in the current dataset.

DIETARY ACCESS, NUTRITION, AND SERVICE AVAILABILITY

DIETARY ACCESS IS BROAD, WITH GAPS IN SPECIALIZED ACCOMMODATIONS

Opinions offered through the dining program (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

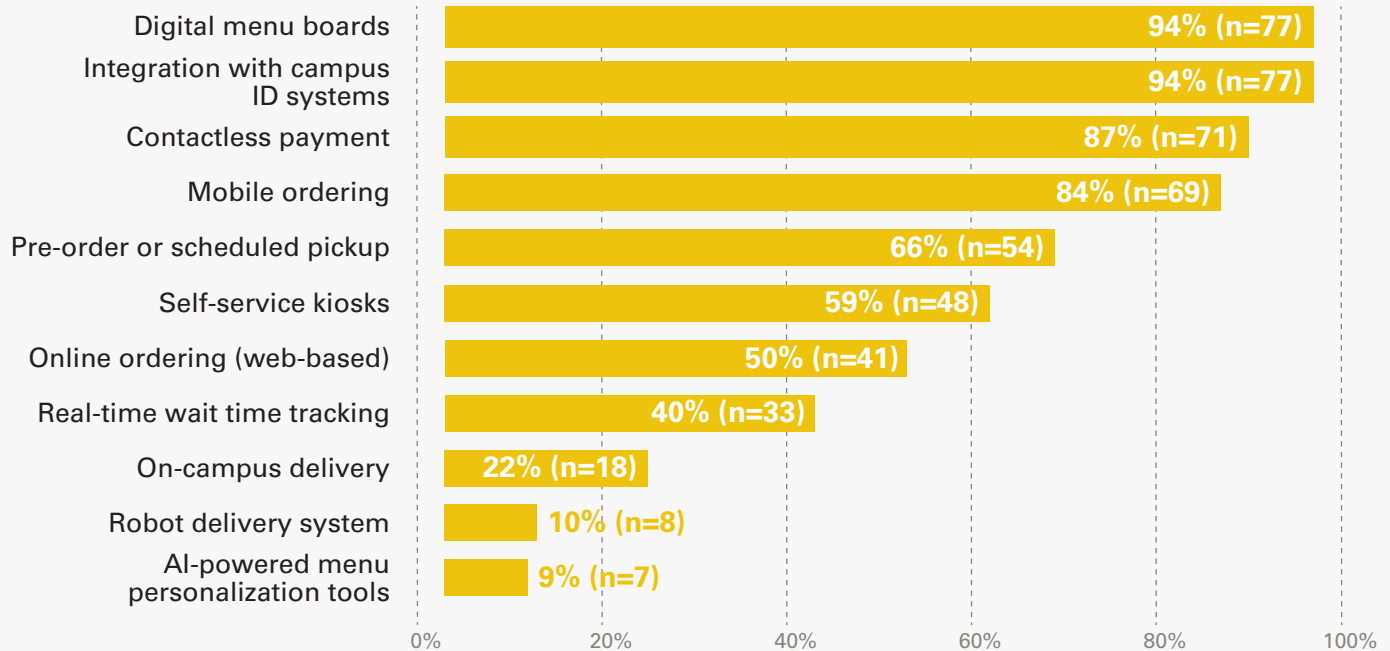
Access indicator	Yes / favorable finding	Base
Registered dietitian or nutrition consultation	86% (70)	n=81
Nutritional information available	95% (78)	n=82
Allergen labels or information available	99% (80)	n=81
Weekend dining available	99% (80)	n=81
Late-night dining after 11 p.m.	65% (53)	n=81
24-hour dining available	20% (15)	n=74
Peak wait time of 10 minutes or less	91% (74)	n=81
More than 75% of locations ADA accessible	98% (79)	n=81

Culturally specific dining programs are reported by 65 of 80 institutions (81%), and religious or fasting-related accommodations by 75 of 79 (95%). The availability of specialized options varies substantially: halal options are reported by 73% of institutions, kosher options by 29%, and Jain options by 10%.

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL SERVICE CAPABILITIES

DIGITAL ACCESS IS MAINSTREAM; EMERGING TOOLS REMAIN LIMITED

Technology and digital capabilities (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

Digital menu boards and campus-ID integration are each reported by 94% of institutions. Contactless payment (87%) and mobile ordering (84%) are also mainstream. More operationally advanced capabilities are less common: 40% report real-time wait tracking, 22% on-campus delivery, 10% robot delivery, and 9% AI-powered menu personalization.

CONVENIENCE LAYER

Preorder or scheduled pickup is available at 54 institutions, and self-service kiosks at 48.

SERVICE SPEED

91% of institutions reporting wait times say typical peak waits are 10 minutes or less.

EMERGING LAYER

Robot delivery and AI personalization remain limited in the current sample, suggesting a distinct early-adoption tier.

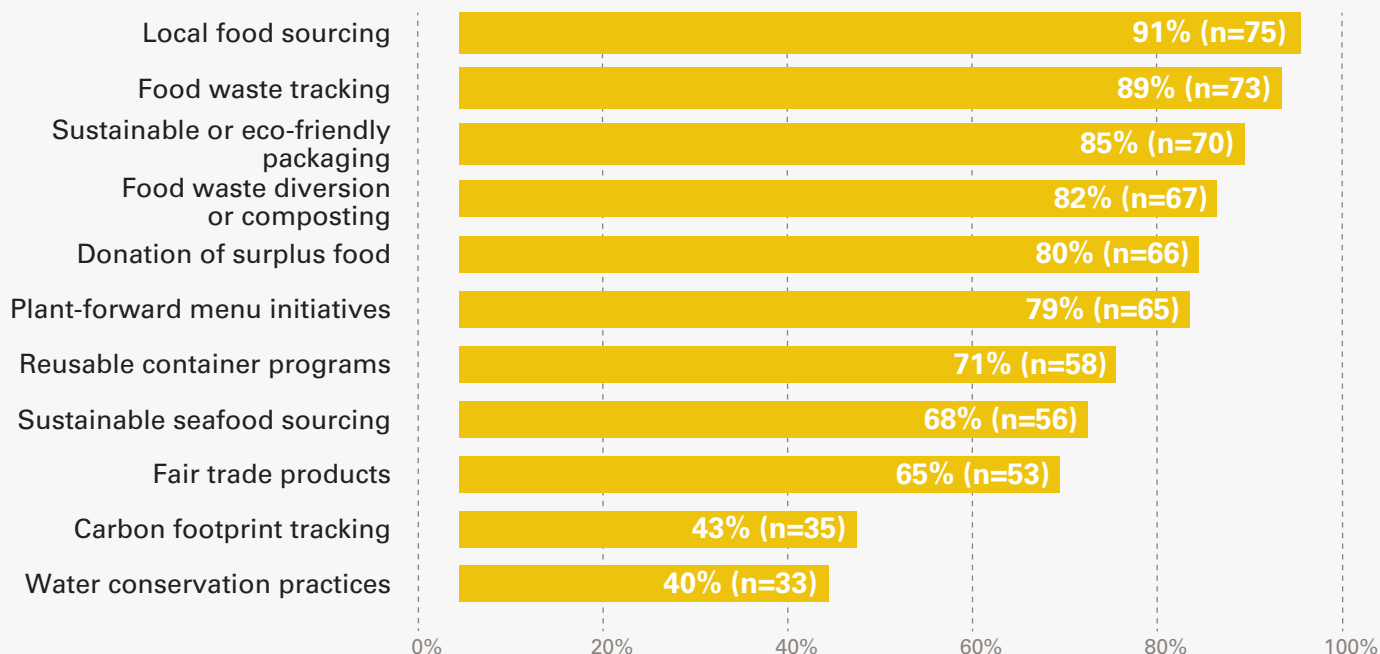
ACCESS HOURS

Weekend dining is nearly universal, while late-night dining is available at roughly two-thirds of reporting institutions.

SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES

SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES ARE WIDESPREAD

Practices implemented through the dining program (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

Local food sourcing, food-waste tracking, sustainable packaging, composting or diversion, and surplus-food donation are each reported by at least four in five institutions. Measurement-oriented practices are less common: 43% report carbon-footprint tracking and 40% water-conservation practices.

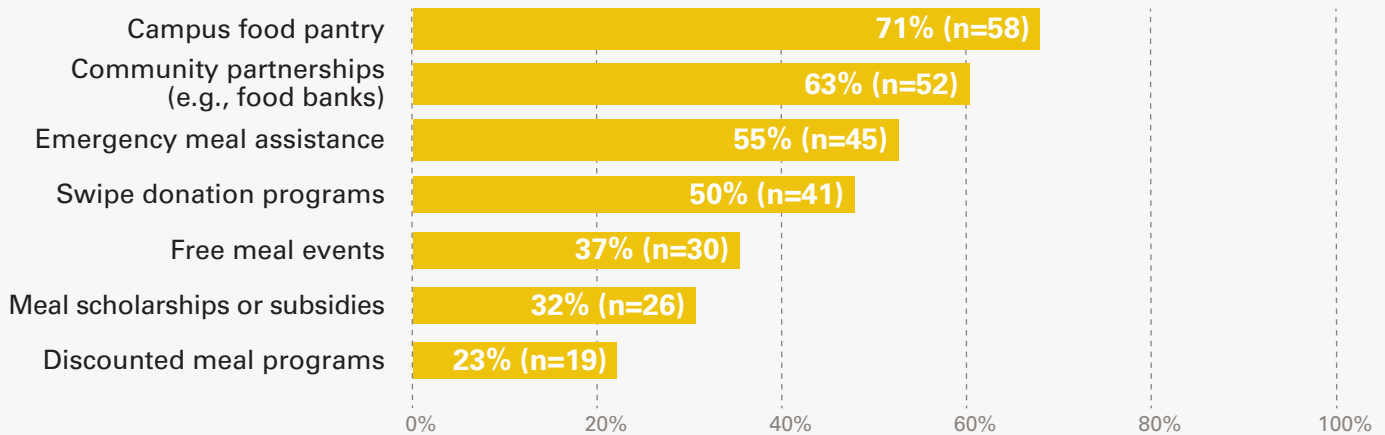
THEMES FROM OPEN-ENDED SUSTAINABILITY RESPONSES

Among 65 institutions providing narrative detail, the most common themes were reusable-container and packaging-reduction programs; food-waste tracking, composting, and diversion; local or regional sourcing and campus farms; student education and engagement; food recovery and donation; and measurement of carbon, water, or energy use. Responses often described several of these approaches as part of a coordinated strategy rather than as stand-alone initiatives.

FOOD SECURITY AND STUDENT WELLBEING PARTNERSHIPS

FOOD-SECURITY SUPPORT IS COMMON, BUT NOT UNIVERSAL

Initiatives supported through the dining program (N=82; select all that apply)

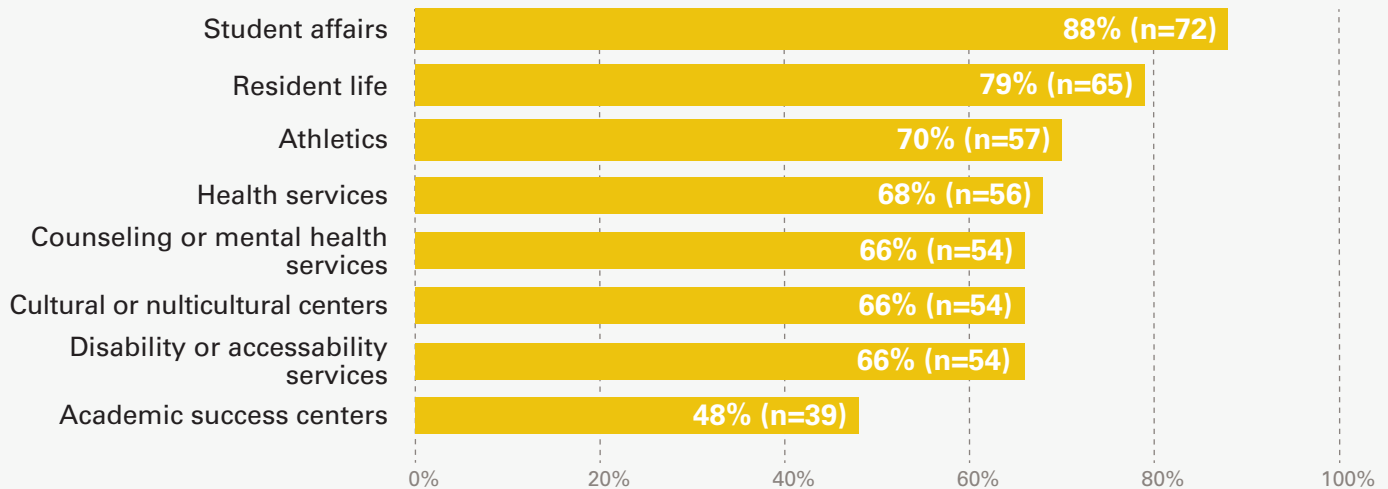


Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

Seventy-seven institutions (94%) reported at least one listed food-security or basic-needs initiative. Campus food pantries are the most common, followed by community partnerships, emergency meal assistance, and swipe-donation programs. Five institutions selected none of the listed supports.

WELLBEING WORK IS CROSS-FUNCTIONAL

Campus partnerships supporting student wellbeing through dining (N=82; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. N=82; select-all question.

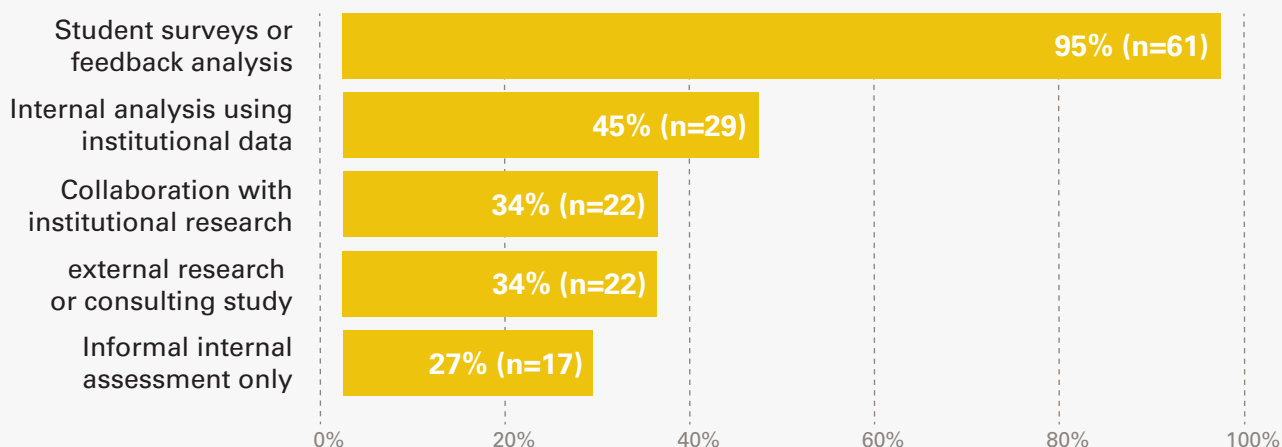
Wellbeing work is broadly cross-functional. Student affairs and residence life are the most frequently reported partners, while health services, counseling or mental health services, cultural centers, disability services, and athletics each appear in roughly two-thirds or more of programs.

ASSESSMENT OF DINING AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

64 of 79 institutions (81%) reported conducting a formal or informal assessment of the relationship between dining and student engagement, wellbeing, or retention. Among those institutions, student surveys and feedback analysis are by far the most common method.

ASSESSMENT RELIES MOST HEAVILY ON STUDENT FEEDBACK

Among institutions reporting an assessment of dining and student outcomes (n=64; select all that apply)



Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey. Percentages are rounded; bases vary by item.

WHAT INSTITUTIONS SAY DINING CONTRIBUTES

Seventy-four institutions described how dining contributes to belonging, community, or engagement. The most consistent themes were shared gathering spaces and everyday social connection; events, traditions, and cultural programming; inclusive menus and dietary representation; campus partnerships; hospitality and staff-student relationships; extended access and food-security support; student voice and co-creation; and student employment or leadership development.

Forty-five institutions described outcomes from prior assessments. Responses most often referenced student feedback informing menu or service changes, satisfaction improvement, operating-hour or location adjustments. Direct references to retention, academic success, or other linked institutional outcomes were comparatively limited, reinforcing the need for cautious, descriptive interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

Survey design and fielding. The Princeton Review created and administered the inaugural institutional survey in partnership with Sodexo. The production instrument contained 49 numbered questions plus respondent information, conditional subparts, certification, and an optional follow-up contact item. The final dataset includes 82 unique completed submissions received from May 29, 2026, through August 15, 2026.

Sample. The analysis is based on a voluntary institutional sample of U.S. colleges and universities. A verified invitation denominator was not included in the final response export, so this report does not calculate a response rate. The sample is not weighted to represent all U.S. institutions.

Data treatment. One record was retained per institution; no duplicate institution names were present. Blank responses were excluded from item bases. For select-all questions, unchecked options were treated as not selected, and percentages may total more than 100%. Numeric findings emphasize medians because institution size varies widely. Percentages are rounded to whole numbers in narrative and charts.

Geography. Regional coding used the state reported by the primary dining administrator. For three records with that field blank, the state captured elsewhere in the survey export was used. Regions follow the six-part structure used in The Princeton Review reporting: Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West.

Interpretation. Findings are institution-reported and descriptive. The attached dataset does not contain a separate student survey component or a prior-year comparison. Results may identify patterns and support future benchmarking, but they do not establish that any dining practice causes retention, belonging, engagement, or academic outcomes.

SURVEY FRAMEWORK

Domain	Measures included
Program structure	Operating model, operations overseen, location counts, external brands
Meal plans and access	Plan types, commuter eligibility, rollover, participation requirements
Workforce	Full-time and student employment, training, internships, labor representation
Culinary practices	Menu rotation, on-site and scratch preparation, global and plant-based offerings, events
Dietary support	Allergen, nutrition, dietitian access, cultural and religious accommodations
Technology and service	Ordering, payment, delivery, kiosks, wait times, extended hours, ADA access
Sustainability	Waste, sourcing, packaging, carbon, water, containers, donations
Student experience	Dining-space uses, recruitment, food security, wellbeing partnerships, assessment

CAMPUS DINING SURVEY ADVISORY INPUT

The advisory process tested the survey for relevance, completeness, burden, definitions, and institutional reportability. Publicly announced higher-education advisory members included:

- James Dwyer Vice Chancellor for University Business Services, Washington University in St. Louis
- Jude Kiah Associate Vice Chancellor and CFO, Student Affairs, Texas Christian University
- Ken Toong Associate Vice Chancellor, Auxiliary Enterprises, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Advisory feedback broadened the instrument beyond residential dining to include auxiliary operations, concessions, food trucks, student employment, food security, global cuisine, sustainability, technology, and the role of dining in student life. The advisory board informed instrument design; it did not determine rankings or control individual-school reporting.

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE MEASUREMENT

- **Repeat the baseline** Use the same core indicators in future cycles so institutions can track adoption, expansion, and retrenchment over time.
- **Strengthen outcome measures** Develop common definitions for engagement, belonging, food security, utilization, and retention-related analysis.
- **Add student perspective** Pair institution-reported practices with clearly separated student awareness, access, and experience measures.
- **Build governed benchmarking** Consider peer comparisons by institution size, control, geography, or operating model while preserving respondent confidentiality.
- **Maintain causal discipline** Report associations and patterns without claiming that dining practices alone produce student outcomes.

APPENDIX

SUMMARY OF SELECTED INSTITUTIONAL FINDINGS

The tables below consolidate selected year-one findings. Percentages are based on institutions responding to each field unless the row specifies an all-institution denominator. Multi-select items may total more than 100%.

Table 1. Sample Profile

Indicator	Finding	Base
Completed unique institutions	82	82
Field period	May 29–Aug. 15, 2026	–
U.S. institutions	82	82
Contracted operating model	74.1%	60/82
Self-operated operating model	23.5%	19/81
Hybrid operating model	2.5%	2/81
Median total dining locations	9	n=81
Median retail dining venues	8	n=81

Program

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Catering overseen	98.8%	81/82
Residential dining halls overseen	95.1%	78/82
Retail cafes/restaurants overseen	95.1%	78/82
External restaurant brands present	66.7%	54/81

Meal plans

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Residential meal plans offered	98.8%	81/82
Combination plans offered	95.1%	78/82
Commuters eligible for residential plans	97.5%	78/80

Workforce

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Employ students and provide development opportunities	95.1%	78/82
Structured workforce/career programming among eligible programs	59.0%	46/78

Culinary

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
More than 75% of items prepared on campus	95.0%	76/80
More than half of items prepared from scratch	91.2%	73/80
Host themed culinary events	100.0%	82/82
Feature guest chefs or rotating concepts	86.4%	70/81
At least 26% international/culturally diverse offerings	85.4%	70/82
At least 26% plant-based or vegan offerings	43.9%	36/82

Dietary

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Registered dietitian or nutrition consultation	86.4%	70/81
Nutritional information available	95.1%	78/82
Allergen information available	98.8%	80/81
Dedicated allergen-free stations	89.0%	73/82
Halal options	73.2%	60/82
Kosher options	29.3%	24/82
Culturally specific dining programs	81.2%	65/80
Religious or fasting accommodations	94.9%	75/79

Access

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Peak wait time 10 minutes or less	91.4%	74/81
Late-night dining after 11 p.m.	65.4%	53/81
Weekend dining	98.8%	80/81
24-hour dining	20.3%	15/74
More than 75% of locations ADA accessible	97.5%	79/81

Technology

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Digital menu boards	93.9%	77/82
Campus ID integration	93.9%	77/82
Contactless payment	86.6%	71/82
Mobile ordering	84.1%	69/82
Real-time wait tracking	40.2%	33/82
On-campus delivery	22.0%	18/82
Robot delivery	9.8%	8/80
AI menu personalization	8.5%	7/79

Sustainability

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Local food sourcing	91.5%	75/82
Food-waste tracking	89.0%	73/82
Sustainable packaging	85.4%	70/82
Food-waste diversion or composting	81.7%	67/82
Donation of surplus food	80.5%	66/82
Reusable-container programs	70.7%	58/82
Carbon-footprint tracking	42.7%	35/82

Student experience

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Dining spaces used for social gathering	100.0%	82/82
Dining spaces used for studying/academic work	95.1%	78/82
Dining supports orientation programs	100.0%	82/82
Dining supports campus tours	90.2%	74/82
Dining included in visit experience	86.6%	71/82

Basic needs

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
At least one of the survey-provided food-security initiatives selected	93.9%	77/82
Campus food pantry	70.7%	58/82
Emergency meal assistance	54.9%	45/82

Wellbeing

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Student affairs partnership	87.8%	72/82
Residence life partnership	79.3%	65/82
Counseling/mental health partnership	65.9%	54/82

Assessment

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Assessed dining and engagement/wellbeing/retention	81.0%	64/79

Assessment Methods Among Institutions Reporting Assessment

Indicator	Percent	Count/Base
Internal analysis using institutional data	45.3%	29/64
Student surveys or feedback analysis	95.3%	61/64
Collaboration with institutional research	34.4%	22/64
External research or consulting study	34.4%	22/64
Informal internal assessment only	26.6%	17/64

APPENDIX NOTES

Rounding. Percentages may differ slightly from calculations using displayed whole-number percentages because results were calculated from counts before rounding.

Variable bases. Item bases vary because some institutions left questions blank or received conditional follow-up questions. The appendix shows the count and base for each percentage.

Select-all questions. A school may appear in more than one answer category; category percentages therefore should not be summed.

QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVES

SELECTED OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

The following pages present selected institutional responses from eight qualitative survey fields. Each section includes five to seven responses chosen for specificity, breadth, and relevance to the report's major findings.

Confidentiality and editing note. Institution names are replaced with broad descriptors such as “small liberal arts college” or “large state research university.” Excerpts are lightly edited for length, grammar, and de-identification while preserving the substance of the original response. They are illustrative and should not be interpreted as statistically representative.

Student Workforce Training and Career Development

Survey field: If yes, please comment on the structured workforce training or career development programming provided for student employees.

What stands out: Responses emphasize leadership pathways, mentoring, practical certifications, academic integration, and opportunities for students to assume real supervisory responsibility.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Small liberal arts college	Student employees can enter a leadership-development program focused on preparing them for campus leadership roles. The program also includes visits to other operations, one-on-one mentoring, and regular feedback.
Large private research university	Students gain applied experience across operations, marketing, sustainability, nutrition, and retail management. Some roles carry academic credit; student managers supervise peers and handle day-to-day staffing, while interns build portfolios through content creation, analytics, and project management.
Small private university	A student hospitality manager program provides hands-on experience in dining operations, leadership, guest service, and team supervision. Marketing interns support meal-plan promotion, guest engagement, and student outreach.
Large state university	A student entrepreneur coffee program provides supervisory and business experience, while a chef-led pop-up program builds culinary skills. Student employees also receive food-safety certification and on-the-job training in hospitality, customer service, and kitchen operations.
Midsized private university	A year-long food innovation course connects students with dining professionals to learn food science, product development, scaled production, marketing, and sales. Teams develop and pitch a product, and the winning concept receives support to move toward market.
Large public research university	Students can advance from entry-level positions into lead and head-student roles. Those roles provide active leadership and responsibility for scheduling, training, and limited employee-relations work.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Dietary Access and Personalized Accommodations

Survey field: Other dietary accommodations or specialized dining options offered through the dining program.

What stands out: The strongest responses describe individualized planning, dedicated preparation protocols, dietitian support, and digital ordering tools that allow students with complex needs to participate more fully in campus dining.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Small liberal arts college	We work one-on-one with students to develop specialized dining options based on their individual dietary needs.
Large urban private university	For students with multiple or severe food allergies, celiac disease, or specific religious observances, a customized meal program can be planned with the culinary team. A registered dietitian provides guidance and coordinates menu choices and logistics.
Large private research university	Students with multiple or airborne allergies can order custom meals online. Meals are prepared individually by chefs and picked up directly from the kitchen. The program also maintains kosher options and does not use nuts or nut oils in recipes.
Large public research university	Menus combine fresh, balanced choices and authentic global cuisines with comprehensive allergen support. Dedicated resources and trained staff help students with food allergies and dietary restrictions dine safely and confidently.
Large state research university	A pre-ordering app allows students with specific dietary restrictions to filter a menu according to their needs. Meals are prepared in a separate area of the kitchen to reduce the risk of cross-contact.
Midsize public university	A personalized text-based meal-ordering service is available for students with food allergies whose needs cannot be met directly at dining stations.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Technology and Digital Service Innovation

Survey field: Other dining technologies or digital service capabilities available through the dining program.

What stands out: Institutions most often use technology to expand access, improve wayfinding and transparency, collect real-time feedback, and support operational decisions.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Large urban private university	The program is launching on-campus delivery in response to demand for greater flexibility. It is also introducing an allergen-specific menu platform that allows students to filter by allergen and view detailed nutrition information.
Large private research university	Real-time crowding indicators and hours of operation are available online. Students can also submit feedback by text message using a location-specific code for the major dining venues.
Midsize private research university	Mobile ordering, web-based ordering, pre-order pickup, and self-service capabilities are being rolled out during the academic year.
Small liberal arts college	Fresh-food vending with salads, sandwiches, and similar items extends service to more remote campus locations.
Midsize public university	A 24-hour food kiosk expands access outside regular service periods, and contactless payment is available across campus eateries.
Large public research university	The program uses data and AI to monitor food waste and improve forecasting. Digital menus, mobile tools, QR-code feedback, and real-time dining information also keep students informed and give operators faster insight into student preferences.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Sustainability and Environmental Stewardship

Survey field: Sustainability initiatives, priorities, or practices that have had a meaningful impact on operations, student engagement, or environmental outcomes.

What stands out: The selected responses show sustainability moving from isolated practices to measurable operating systems that combine reuse, waste prevention, food recovery, local sourcing, and student education.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Small sustainability-focused college	A reusable to-go container program was introduced to eliminate single-use plastic from the dining halls, reinforcing the institution’s broader environmental mission.
Small liberal arts college	Takeout packaging has shifted to compostable alternatives, while pre- and post-consumer food-waste efforts have produced significant reductions. More than 35% of purchases are sourced locally, and more than 90% of seafood volume comes from the surrounding region.
Large private research university	A reusable-container program has reduced disposable packaging by more than 83%, maintained a 96% return rate, and engaged more than 25,000 participants. Student-led waste events and reduced-price sales of surplus food add education and food recovery to the reuse strategy.
Large urban private university	A reusable takeout program replaced more than 18,000 single-use containers in its first year. The next phase adds an environmental fee for guests who choose disposable packaging, further encouraging reuse.
Midsize public university	A stainless-steel takeout container program recorded more than 2,500 uses in a single month, demonstrating strong student adoption of a reusable alternative.
Large state research university	Food-waste tracking prevented more than 100,000 pounds of waste in one year, while unserved food was repackaged into about 6,400 free meals. A campus farm and an all-reusable takeout system connect sourcing, recovery, education, and waste prevention.
Midsize public university	Student sustainability interns expanded the composting network by installing 31 bins and helped divert more than 252,000 pounds of waste. Educational campaigns and tabling events reinforced proper sorting and food-waste awareness.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Food Security and Basic-Needs Support

Survey field: Other food-security or basic-needs initiatives supported through the dining program.

What stands out: Programs combine direct meal access, confidential assistance, recovery of unused food or meal value, and partnerships that address short-term emergencies as well as recurring need.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Large private university	At the end of the academic year, students can donate unused meal-plan funds to a charitable cause. Eligible students also have access to a complimentary food closet, and student-athletes can use a separate fueling station for snacks and recovery drinks.
Large private research university	The program subsidizes halal meals during Ramadan and kosher dining so students can observe religious practices without added financial burden. It also provides emergency meal assistance, reduced-price surplus food, free-food alerts, and close coordination with the campus pantry.
Large urban private university	Each Thanksgiving, dining partners with community organizations and a food distributor to provide turkeys to local food pantries and grocery bags with complete holiday meals for nearby residents.
Midsized private university	A meal-share program allows students to donate meal swipes to peers in need. Requests are submitted confidentially through an online portal and reviewed by an approval committee; the program has provided more than 1,200 meals per semester.
Large state research university	Unserved food is recovered, repackaged into reheatable meals, and delivered to satellite pickup locations for people in need. Student volunteers help package the meals.
Midsized public university	An app-based recovery program offers surplus meals at reduced prices, while an illness-support program allows a designated student to pick up meals for a peer who cannot visit the dining hall.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Survey field: Notable findings, insights, or outcomes identified through assessments of dining and student engagement, wellbeing, or retention.

What stands out: Assessment responses are most useful when they show a visible feedback-to-action cycle: identifying drivers of satisfaction, changing menus and hours, redesigning meal plans, and adapting to evolving student demographics.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Small liberal arts college	A senior survey found that 97% of graduating students were satisfied with food services, while a separate social survey found that 80% viewed sharing a meal as an important part of their college experience. Students also cited signature dining events as major community-building traditions.
Urban public university	Each year, the dining team tries to implement at least two ideas raised through student surveys or feedback so students can see that their suggestions are taken seriously.
Large public research university	A student focus group and food-logging initiative identified areas for food-quality improvement, but the strongest finding was the impact of proactive hospitality. High ratings for staff friendliness showed that active personal engagement can elevate the experience across locations.
Regional state university	Changing student demographics created a need for more frequent menu adaptation. Assessment also identified significant food insecurity during academic breaks, leading the institution to move to a 10-month meal plan.
Midsize private university	Students increasingly chose dining locations based on convenience and proximity rather than the main dining hall. The university responded with more flexible meal equivalents and dining dollars, and its campus plan calls for moving the main dining hall to a more central location.
Midsize private university	Students want cleaner ingredients, full ingredient transparency, and more protein-forward choices. They are also increasingly attentive to how food supports physical and academic performance and are open to more adventurous cuisines.
Large state research university	Statistical analysis identified taste, value, operating hours, healthy variety, and environmentally responsible practices as the strongest drivers of overall dining satisfaction. Speed of service and staff customer service performed above students' stated expectations.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Belonging, Community, and Campus Engagement

Survey field: Aspects of the dining program that contribute to student belonging, community, or campus engagement.

What stands out: Across institution types, respondents frame dining as social infrastructure: a place where routines, traditions, cultural representation, personal relationships, and student ownership reinforce connection to campus.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Small liberal arts college	More than 90% of meals are consumed in the dining halls rather than taken to go. Students, faculty, staff, and community members regularly share meals, making the shared table a defining feature of campus life.
Small sustainability-focused college	The dining program is deeply integrated with student employment, so many of the people preparing food are students. That structure makes the experience personal and community-oriented and gives students pride and ownership in the food they serve.
Private technology-focused university	A network of local family-run operators provides authentic cuisines, including halal and kosher options. The program’s vendor model helps students see cultural traditions reflected in everyday dining rather than only at special events.
Midsize private university	Food can signal “home,” so the program intentionally includes foods from diverse cultures and solicits family recipes from students. Nutrition counseling, clear allergen labeling, and special meals help students with dietary needs participate fully in shared dining experiences.
Regional state university	Signature traditions such as supper club nights and late-night breakfast create memorable shared moments. A campus conversation series uses food to draw people together, while monthly cultural celebrations help students see their identities reflected and invite cross-cultural connection.
Midsize private faith-based university	The institution maintains one central dining hall by design. Bringing students into the same shared space supports engagement, strengthens community, and reinforces the institution’s values.
Large private research university	Cultural representation, large-scale events, late-night dining, and sustainability programming position dining as a social experience. Student employment adds another layer of connection by giving students meaningful responsibility and a stake in the community they help create.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.

Distinguishing Program Features

Survey field: Features respondents consider distinguishing aspects of their campus dining program.

What stands out: Distinctive programs tend to combine operational scale or specialization with a clear student-experience proposition, such as experiential learning, local partnerships, unusually broad access, or an intentionally intimate model.

Broad institution descriptor	Selected response excerpt
Large private university	The dining program manages multiple layers of food production, including meat, bakery, dairy, and produce operations, then distributes those ingredients across campus menus. It also operates a full grocery and floral department.
Private technology-focused university	The program includes several independent local vendors and a student-designed, student-run restaurant connected to a business-school course. Students help develop the concept and operate it in a real market environment.
Large urban private research university	Strong retention among students who are no longer required to hold a meal plan is treated as evidence of dining’s central role in campus life. The program has expanded service locations and added mobile ordering to meet continued voluntary demand.
Small sustainability-focused college	The program deliberately remains small and intimate, allowing meals to be prepared fresh in modest batches and supporting high sustainability standards. The result is described as closer to a home-cooked meal shared within a close community than institutional dining.
Large private research university	A teaching kitchen gives students hands-on instruction in cooking, nutrition, and meal planning. A separate residential station excludes the nine major allergens, strengthening both student confidence and family trust in the dining program.
Large private research university	Partnerships with locally owned restaurants support economic growth, provide training and educational opportunities, and bring authentic, culturally diverse cuisine to campus.
Midsized private university	Smart grab-and-go vending provides 24-hour access, while faster checkout technology improves convenience. The program pairs those tools with advanced hospitality training to strengthen service and engagement across operations.

Source: The Princeton Review 2026 Campus Dining Services & Student Experience Survey, institutional open-ended responses. Selected excerpts are illustrative; field bases vary.