Editors' Note

Eileen Wu's rhetoric essay begins by asking questions and providing facts about Cal Poly's meal plan; she leaves her thesis unstated until the second paragraph. How does this choice draw readers in? Research is one of the most important components in a rhetoric essay, and finding research for a local issue can be difficult. Examine Wu's use of sources and quotations. What are her strongest sources, and how does she use them? Are there any sources you might add for support? What are the changes Wu proposes to the dining plan? How does offering multiple changes keep you interested as a reader—and how does it develop her essay? Who might be in opposition to Wu's argument, and how does Wu address her opposition in her essay?

Much Needed Improvements to Cal Poly Dining

Eileen Wu

What would you do if you found $1,446 in your pocket? Would you go on a shopping spree? Would you donate it to charity? Or would you use it to fund your college tuition? With that amount of money, you could almost pay a whole quarter's worth of tuition at many universities. At Cal Poly, students pay from $1,996 to $2,066 (depending on their college) per quarter for their education, while they spend $1,446 for the campus dining. That is only $560 to $620 less! While most would hope if they were paying almost the equivalent amount of their tuition on their meal plan, they would be receiving a quality dining plan; however at Cal Poly, that is not the case.

Before arriving at Cal Poly, I expected quality college dining. Nutritious and balanced meals to help me avoid the freshman 15, an all-you-can-eat buffet at the swipe of a card, and a variety of dining halls I could eat at. I was rather disappointed. While those are common dining-hall ways of any other university, Cal Poly dining decided to be different. From the fixed-priced meal plans to the unhealthy choices students barely have to choose from, something must change.

At Cal Poly, students are required to immediately choose a dining plan after accepting their offer. If first-year students are to live on campus, they must eat on campus. Freshmen are given two main options: dining plans for the residence halls or dining plans for the on-campus apartments. Depending on each student's living situation, they must choose accordingly. If students live in the residence halls, they have three plans to choose from: Freedom, Flexibility, and Value, which vary between the amount of given meals per week and Plu$ dollars per quarter. However, if the freshmen live in the Cerro Vista apartments, they are required to buy the Apartment Life dining plan, which gives students only 8 meals per week and 200 Plu$ dollars per quarter. With these dining plans, freshmen are limited to only a certain number of meals per week and if they buy an amount over the fixed price, the remaining money is charged to their Plu$ dollars account. Plu$ dollars are pre-paid money equivalent to their worth, which are only useable on campus. However, a main issue with the Apartment Life dining plan is the limited amount of Plu$ dollars involved. How are students expected to buy groceries for their apartments with their Plu$ dollars when there are barely enough to buy meals for the week? Are students expected to starve if they run out of meal credits and Plu$ dollars towards the end of the quarter?

The dining plan at Cal Poly is the first issue that must be changed. From the fixed-priced meals, to the expensive costs, and the lack of rollover meals between weeks, the dining system is flawed. First, there are too many expensive entrees amongst campus dining. The majority of the time, students fail to realize that they are being cheated of their money because they use their meal plans to pay for it. However, with the overpricing of certain a la carte items on each menu at eateries that do not accept the meal plan, students are forced to spend more than necessary Plu$ dollars on simple foods. Jeff Lewis, a columnist for the Mustang Daily gives examples of overpriced items, such as "bananas at The Avenue are sold at over four times the price of the same banana at Trader Joe's. A pre-made peanut butter and jelly sandwich from The Avenue costs over $5, more than a freshly-made footlong sub at Subway" proving to readers that not only do students have to use their Plu$ dollars for a simple snack, but they are also overcharged along the process (Lewis). Also, Darin Grandfield, a guest columnist for the Mustang Daily expresses his feelings about the pricing, "the real winner is that [students are] not even done being ripped off yet, they then proceed to charge two of the Plus Dollars they forced [students] to buy for a yogurt, which is greater than 200 percent of the retail price," claiming that campus dining's methods of expensive prices is unnecessary (Grandfield). Next, while Cal Poly is proud of their "Learn by Doing" motto, is that also expected from the students when they are trying to eat? Having to do calculations to make sure they do not overcharge their PolyCard, or constantly worrying about how many meals they have left for the week is not the way to teach the school's infamous slogan. However, the ultimate solution to all of these problems would be a buffet-style meal plan with a certain amount of meals per quarter, instead of per week. In comparison to the majority of the California State University (CSU) and the University of California (UC) dining systems, Cal Poly is one of the only California public universities that uses the system. While each campus has a different dining plan, they all have a version of buffet-style for every meal. Students are not limited to what they eat. According to the University of California, Berkeley's dining website, the "residential meal plans offer the flexibility and freedom that students need to dine with at [Cal] however they want, whenever they want" allowing students to choose when and how they want to eat on their own schedule (Dining at Cal). Benefits are also available with a simple meal plan. CSU Channel Islands has "bonuses received when adding dollars to [the] card and tax savings" giving students the opportunity to save money and actually want to use their meal plan (Dining Services). There are a various amount of solutions possible for the Cal Poly dining system. Through an assortment of different benefits solely from the swipe of a card for a buffet-style meal, the school and students can both benefit.

Although the dining on-campus is suggested to be healthy and nutritious, it is actually worse than fast food. Reading through the Cal Poly Dining's Campus Dining webpage, incoming students are told the benefits of having a dining plan such as, taking "pleasure in a wide variety of healthy meals and ethnic cuisines" (Dining Plan). To preface, healthy means at least better than fast food. A comparison between Metro Station's Beef & Broccoli a la carte and a Chinese fast food restaurant, Panda Express' Beef & Broccoli shows that the fast food has healthier portions than campus' Metro Station. According to my calculations from Metro Station's nutritional facts, every serving has 37.0 calories per one ounce serving (19 Metro Station Nutrition Information). While at Panda Express, there are 26.78 calories per one ounce serving (Nutritional Information). That is a 10.22 calorie per one ounce difference; the regular portion at Metro is approximately double the size of Panda Express'. Proving that Metro Station serves larger portions with more calories counteracts Cal Poly Dining's main objective of serving healthy and ethnic meals.

Last, by convincing incoming students about the variety of restaurants and markets on campus, freshmen are told they have an assortment of dining halls to eat at, but in reality are restricted to three main spots. The campus dining website states that Cal Poly "offers over 18 restaurants and food venues on campus with at least one food operation open every day" including the two grocery stores, two coffee shops, and two smoothie shops, which account for one-third of the facilities (Campus Dining). However, freshmen are mainly designated to eat at three of the eateries (Vista Grande, Metro Station, and Sandwich Factory) because of the lack of acceptance of the meal plan anywhere else. If students are expected to spend a certain amount of meal credits per week, there should be more dining facilities open that take meals, instead of forcing freshmen to use their Plu$ dollars. The school's lack of open venues limits students to constantly eat at the same places. Also, over the weekend, only one restaurant, Vista Grande, is open, although it closes early. This restricts students to eat at the same place, even when Vista Grande barely changes their menu. There should be either more restaurants open during the weekend that accompany meal credits, or more variety at the one eatery open on weekends.

As a freshman who is required to eat on campus because of the dining plan, I propose changes. Us students need to take a stand. We can boycott the campus dining. We can write letters to Cal Poly Corporation, the non-profit organization in charge of the food, and insist on better food, cheaper prices, and a better meal plan overall. We should not have to be afraid of the food that we eat and how it affects us. By making small changes with the food, Cal Poly's dining facilities could be more respected throughout the school.

Eileen Wu is a social sciences major.

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