

Reducing Sodium and Added Sugars at a Leading Academic Institution

To learn more about how food service management companies (FSMCs) are improving the nutritional quality of food served and sold across a variety of settings, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) interviewed national and regional FSMCs across the United States. ASTHO then developed company snapshots that highlight different approaches food service operators are using to reduce sodium and added sugar in their offerings. These snapshots can help public health leaders and practitioners learn more about the range of FSMC nutrition initiatives, identify common goals across public health entities and the private sector, and consider opportunities for aligning efforts.

Harvard University Dining Services: An Institutional Snapshot

A “Better for You” Menu Guides Choices

Harvard is implementing changes across its campus to improve the healthfulness of food and beverage offerings. From the 14 residential dining halls and 15 cafes to off-campus catering, [Harvard University Dining Services \(HUDS\)](#) is a nearly \$68 million business that serves an average of [25,000 meals each day](#).

The food service staff is committed to these changes, and university leadership is looking for ways to offer more nutritious fare and help consumers make healthier food choices. The resources available at academic institutions help drive this work. The Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health Nutrition RoundTable spearheads many of the nutrition science initiatives that then get rolled out into other areas of the university, including dining services. For example, the public health school developed a [“How Sweet Is it?”](#) chart on sugar, which is now posted across dining operations.

HUDS Managing Director David Davidson said: "This work will never be done. There will always be improvements to make based on the latest research findings. But programs such as ours help shape lifelong eating habits, so it's incumbent on us to continuously innovate and press the boundaries of best practices.



Harvard Provides Healthier Options

Although Harvard doesn't have required nutrition standards for its foods, staff is seeking ways to improve nutritional quality and offer healthful alternatives side-by-side with sometimes less nutritious options.

The dining program started working in 2010 with the university's purchasing department and food manufacturers to address sodium levels in its food. Now the program works directly with companies to lower the amount of sodium in products, and has increased the amount of food it makes in-house. Lasagnas, deli sandwiches, and salads—all of which have high sodium contents when purchased from outside the university—are now made by the HUDS' Culinary Support Group with less sodium and fewer ingredients.



The program has also reduced the sodium content in some items that are made centrally and shipped out across dining operations, such as soups, sauces, and whole-grain dishes. Breads, however, remain a challenge given sodium's role in increasing shelf life, texture, and taste. Reducing sugar tends to be more difficult. Aside from sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), the program has tried to find "where it's tucked away" by considering the less obvious sources of sweetness in our food, such as its use in many dressings and sauces.

Overall, there have been a number of improvements resulting in lower sodium and less added sugar among the university's offerings. The following are a few examples of how Harvard has reduced sodium and sugar across its menu.

- Juice. The university now offers a lower-sugar orange juice (made with stevia). Additionally, flavored water machines in residential dining halls have no more than 1 gram of sugar.
- Water. The university offers filtered water in all locations, leading to a significant decline in SSB consumption (including an almost 50% reduction in fountain soda consumption over the last decade).
- Chicken. Harvard uses a non-salt-water-infused chicken breast, reducing the sodium content by roughly 400 mg per breast. It also offers plain-roasted chicken alongside BBQ chicken.
- Cereals. Harvard limits the number of options available, down to eight choices from 21. Of the eight available, five must be "better for you" reduced-sugar options. This includes foods that are higher in fiber, lower in sugar, or sugar from natural sources, such as dried fruits.
- Vegetables. The university offers steamed vegetables every day and makes spice racks readily accessible.
- Bacon. The university's bacon now has less sodium, down to 12mg from 20mg per gram.
- Soups. The university's soups now have less sodium, down to 140mg from 600mg per 6 oz portion.

Training and Technical Assistance Are Needed to Implement New, Healthier Recipes

Chef training and awareness are critical to improving the nutritional quality of food throughout the university. Harvard dining leadership holds workshops with managers and food service staff to talk about the benefits of reducing sodium and conducting taste tests, cooking competitions, and seasonal menu reviews.



Training is the key element to creating change, which is why HUDS trains its staff on the Culinary Institute of America’s (CIA) [Menus of Change principles](#). The training helps staff understand the principles and consider steps they can take to achieve address them, such as featuring plant-based proteins in menu selections, using alternate herbs and spices instead of salt to season food, and more. As one HUDS staff member remarked: “At the end of the day, it’s the cooks in the operations that have to deliver on what we are trying to do.”

Maintaining a Strong Partnership with the Culinary Institute of America

Harvard has been working with CIA for several years, including as host of the Menus of Change University Research Collaborative in 2016. The university also participates in the Healthy Menus Collaborative and the sodium work group. Leaders from the Dining team serve on

advisory councils, participate in programming, and help connect theory to practice.

Key Takeaways

- **Academic institutions can foster change.** Public health schools can use their presence and resources to help inform changes made in the cafeteria and other food settings.
- **Scratch cooking can lead to healthier alternatives.** Preparing and cooking foods in-house helps reduce sodium levels.
- **SSBs can be a target for added-sugar reduction.** SSBs are frequent targets to help institutions reduce overall added sugar among offerings.
- **Nutrition enhancements can occur in many different food groups.** Both sodium and added-sugar reduction can happen across food groups, from meats to cereals and more.
- **Staff development is critical to healthy offerings.** Chef training and CIA’s Menus of Change principles are key drivers for effectively implementing healthier food options.

For more information:

Katie Potestio
 Senior Analyst, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
 Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)
 Phone: (202) 371-9090
 Email: kpotestio@astho.org

This publication was supported by the Grant or Cooperative Agreement Number, 5U38OT000161-04, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.