



Kickstart a DefaultVeg Campaign on Your Campus:

A How-To Guide

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Who Is This Guide For?

You're reading this toolkit because you want to bring about a more sustainable food system, starting on your campus—and we at the Better Food Foundation are here for you along the way. Any student, faculty, or staff of any college or university can dive into this toolkit to find easy steps you can take right now to make clubs, departments, or events more plant-forward—no experience needed. And for those determined to make sweeping and lasting changes across campus, you'll also gain a more thorough understanding of planning and executing a DefaultVeg campaign for campus cafes, dining halls, and more. If you care about animals, sustainability, and inclusivity and want to make a difference, this guide is for you.

Why DefaultVeg?

DefaultVeg is a simple and inclusive strategy that you can use to serve more plant-based foods in any kind of setting!

We've all had that experience of sitting down to eat in a group and discovering that meat and dairy dominates the menu, while one or two plant-based options are relegated to a small section at the very bottom. Not only is this alienating for the millions who are choosing animal-free foods for their health, animals, or the environment or have religious or cultural restrictions—but it also sets a harmful standard: that a "normal" meal must include meat at the center of the plate.



DefaultVeg flips that!

Imagine a different world, or at least a different campus experience—one where it's easy for everyone to make the compassionate and sustainable choice because it's become normal. A DefaultVeg menu does just that: it features plant-based meals as the default option, while giving diners the choice to add or opt-in to meat and/or dairy options upon request. By simply being presented with a new default through this behavioral “nudge,” people are much more likely to choose a plant-based meal, even when meat and dairy options are available. Our [recent study](#) in collaboration with the Food for Climate League at three university campuses found that when plant-based defaults were consistently implemented, the uptake of plant-based foods increased dramatically—*without any other intervention or changes*. Food culture—what we see our community eating around us—impacts our everyday food choices without us even thinking about it.

KEY STUDY FINDING

On days when the **plant-based dish** was served as the **default option**, we observed a

23.6% reduction

in food-related **greenhouse gas emissions.**

KEY STUDY FINDING

When defaults are implemented consistently, average take rate of plant-based dishes increased—

30.8%
CONTROL



81.5%
INTERVENTION

—without any other changes to the dining experience

Asking people to change how they serve food can be scary, especially if you want them to *stop* serving foods that are popular. Because DefaultVeg does not take away choice—it simply flips which choices are offered as the default—we've found that students have a much easier time asking for this change, and getting others to enthusiastically say, “Yes!”

Even better, DefaultVeg can make help your school address multiple issues that it cares about:

- **Inclusivity:** DefaultVeg makes menus more inclusive to those with religious or cultural dietary restrictions.
- **Food Justice:** DefaultVeg menus are more accessible for those with dairy intolerance, who are disproportionately from communities of color, while increasing availability of healthy plant-centered meals for low-income students who may not have ready access to fresh fruits, vegetables and plant-based proteins in their homes.



- **Sustainability:** Institutions can expect food-related carbon savings of about 40 percent and water savings of 24 percent. For every million meals served, that's like saving over a million miles driven by a passenger car!

This guide will show you how, step by step, you can bring DefaultVeg to your campus and create a more resilient food future for your classmates and countless students to come.

Getting Started

Start with two fundamental steps: learn how decisions are made on your campus, and find key allies. As one of many students on your campus, drumming up support is important so that when you talk to those people in positions of power and propose a change, you can name clubs, faculty, and departments who agree with you. Plus, each time you recruit a new department or campus organization, you can ask them to make a commitment to using DefaultVeg for all food they order for their own meetings and events—achieving a win with every single new ally!

Start by exploring your school's website. See if your college has a faculty senate, a provost, or a chancellor, as well as an Office of Student Affairs, Office of Sustainability, and Office for Diversity and Inclusion. Each of these offices and departments can be asked to commit to using DefaultVeg for their own food procurement, and having high-ranking college leadership on your team of allies will also go far in influencing dining later. During this research, also look for any past commitments your school has made to sustainability, diversity, and equity, which will be helpful to cite in email conversations and meetings.

Getting your name out there—and DefaultVeg's name out there—is a big part of drumming up momentum. **Expand your outreach to include other potentially supportive departments and clubs** and see if you can get them to make all their events DefaultVeg. Harry S. Truman College's Environmental Club is DefaultVeg for all events, as is the University of Chester's department of religious studies. If you have any veg-aligned, animal-aligned, inclusivity-aligned, or sustainability-aligned clubs on campus, see if they might take diet change on as a platform issue. Once you explain how DefaultVeg is compatible with their values and can further their goals, they'll want to join your campaign for change. Identify any faculty who might sponsor/support your efforts, but remember, anyone can be a supporter, not just the obvious people: food service staff, students, TAs, professors, custodians, RAs, dietitians, administrative assistants, and more.

Many schools have a **student food advisory committee** that lets students provide direct feedback to administrators and foodservice staff, which helps with both quality control and accountability. Students on the committee provide feedback about the taste, quality, and variety of foods served, as well as helping dining services keep its thumb on the pulse of food culture. If you're aiming for larger change in your dining hall, this could be a great place to start to give feedback.

Finally, you can always table at campus events (or organize your own movie screening or party!) to **recruit student support**. Most people have never heard of DefaultVeg before, and may think of diet change as all or nothing. They expect cut-throat veganism instead of helpful plant-forward policies that nudge people toward plant-rich diets. Gain traction with the student body, and there will be less pushback from university leaders. Make yourself known—there is power in numbers when seeking bigger changes!

Oatmilk by Default at Your Campus Cafe



Now that you have a few wins under your belt and some strong allies at your school, one of the best ways to make change on a larger scale on campus is through your university's cafe(s). Oatmilk and other plantmilks are taking the world by storm, especially among Generation Z—and coffeeshops around the world are taking notice: chains like Blue Bottle and Stumptown are not only doing away with the unjust upcharge for nondairy milks, but are actually making them the default milk. Now, when a customer orders a drink, instead of cow's milk, they get oatmilk by default (unless they request dairy).

DefaultVeg cafes are making the coffee world more inclusive to those with dairy allergies and lactose intolerance, especially people of color, and more sustainable. For each latte switched from dairy to oat, they are saving two showers' worth of water—and for every three lattes, they save the same emissions as driving a mile in a car.

College campuses are the prime location for this simple but powerful shift. BFF analyzed data from University College London after it went oat-by-default and found that dairy purchases shrunk by about 20 percentage points, while oat increased from about 20 percent to over 40 percent of all milk purchased. We estimated that each year, just one of the university's four participating coffeeshops is saving 35,000 showers' worth of water through this switch. Students like you have worked with BFF and the New Roots Institute to run successful and popular oat-by-default pilots at the University of San Diego and Pomona College—and you could be next.

Start by collecting basic data and identifying decision-makers at your campus cafe to initiate a conversation about adopting DefaultVeg. You'll want to take note of the existing menu: is there an upcharge for plantmilk, and if so, how much? What brands of plantmilk are



served? This information can help you prepare for a meeting. Finding who the decision-maker is could be as easy as asking an employee or reviewing the shop's website. Share our [Oatmilk by Default](#) guide and [infographic](#) with the cafe manager, offering two simple ways they can go DefaultVeg, and try to set up a meeting—feel free to invite your most prominent campus allies you've already gathered along the way for added support.

After you've nailed down your meeting, get ready!

- Make a list of your goals, which should include: establishing a positive relationship, collecting information about current dairy and nondairy milk usage, addressing any of their questions or concerns, and determining next steps.
- Prepare a brief presentation, noting how DefaultVeg aligns with the university's existing sustainability and diversity/equity goals. Feel free to reach out to our Outreach Manager at info@betterfoodfoundation.org for more information and presentation templates.
- At the meeting, ask questions and take careful notes, especially around how they currently operate. Is the cafe able to make independent decisions, or are they run up a chain of decision-makers at your school or a foodservice provider? If there's an upcharge for plantmilk, why is it in place? How much plant-based vs. dairy milk are they already serving?
- Also note any barriers, such as cost concerns. You can present alternative ideas, like just trialing an oatmilk-by-default pilot for a month, as other campuses have done, to gauge its success. If worried about increased costs associated with serving more oatmilk, your cafe could try raising the price of dairy drinks to match that of plant-based drinks to offset potential losses. Another approach is to eliminate the default altogether, so that each customer is asked what milk they'd like—this approach, though not as effective as an oatmilk default, still effectively reduces the purchase of dairy drinks.
- If you're having trouble, reach out to us with questions or to troubleshoot!

Your coffeeshop is on board! Now what? Help make the process easier for them by offering to provide marketing materials, like flyers promoting the benefits of oatmilk. Be sure to ask for data about the proportion of dairy vs. oat drink sales before and after implementation so you can assess your impact. Also consider asking permission to survey students during busy hours to get their feedback on the change.

Don't forget to get in touch with us along the way—BFF staff can help make your campus cafe's oat-by-default program a success with resources and marketing templates.

Flipping the Default at Your Dining Hall

At this point, you might be thinking bigger. The most significant way to make changes on a larger scale is through the dining halls and restaurants on campus. These large-scale changes will probably need the support from decisionmakers high-up in the school's administration, so

we recommend that you [reach out to our team](#) for help along the way as you dive into these steps. We may even have connections at your school who can help!

If a college dining hall went DefaultVeg for weekly burger night:



Emissions would drop by 3,521 kg CO₂-eq, or 8,800 miles driven in a passenger car



1.6 million liters of water would be saved, or the equivalent of 24,000 showers



6,206 sq. m years of land would go unused

**Assuming 2,000 meals served. For more information, see this [One Green Planet article](#).*

Start by surveying the current state of your dining hall and the availability of plant-based options. Take note of the number and types of plant-based options, where they are placed (away from omnivorous choices or on separate menus, or mixed in), and the popularity of those items. Also, be sure to record where plant-based options are lacking or unavailable. Pay attention to what labels are placed on veg options (if any). These notes will help you in later stages, so keep them handy.

Identify decision-makers. Find out who your dining decision-makers are and whether the dining hall is run by foodservice providers or independently. This information may be found on the school's website or by asking dining staff. If a foodservice provider runs the dining hall, look into what sustainability efforts the company is currently working on (if any). For example, Sodexo has pledged to make half of its dishes plant-based by 2025 and has [worked with us at BFF](#) to trial DefaultVeg at three of its campus dining halls.



Request a meeting to discuss your vision for DefaultVeg at your university. We know that speaking with your dining staff about sustainable changes can be intimidating, but we're here to help! Here are some tips to walk you through preparing for your meeting:

- **Let them know about your shared interests in sustainability.** Providers often enjoy working with diners who are passionate and cooperative, and you want to make a good first impression!
- Before you share new ideas about improving dining, **show your support for the sustainability and inclusivity initiatives they have already undertaken** (based on your previous research). Otherwise, you may put your contact in the frustrating position of having their existing efforts left unacknowledged while suggesting they need to be more proactive.
- **Afterwards, introduce them to DefaultVeg!** Show them how DefaultVeg will help them meet sustainability and inclusivity goals they've already set—and how it will meet Gen Z's rapidly growing taste for plant-based foods. Check out this [helpful quick guide](#), print out the [results from our study at three Sodexo campuses](#), and [read up on why DefaultVeg is so inclusive](#) to many cultures, ethnicities, and religious groups. You can also reach out to us for more resources and presentation templates on DefaultVeg.
 - *Tip: If your institution has set a goal to reduce its emissions or become carbon-neutral, you can make a strong case for DefaultVeg—one of the most impactful changes they can make to reduce their food's footprint.*
- **Mentioning your allies** with peers, clubs, and staff who are also supportive of DefaultVeg can go a long way. Dining managers are hired to serve the students, so expressing the interests of a collective body can make a more considerable impact.
- **Share exciting stories of success from other campuses** so your dining director will feel excited about becoming part of a growing movement. Check out our "[Inspiration: DefaultVeg in Action](#)" section below for more info!
- Ask for their honest thoughts about going DefaultVeg. Listen carefully. You might discover that:
 - **They're convinced!** Dining staff want to make their students happy. You may have provided everything that they need to go DefaultVeg. Congratulations! Make sure to touch base with us at info@betterfoodfoundation.org to share the news. We can help you and your dining team prepare for implementation—and, importantly, collect before-and-after data to assess the impact of the changes they make.
 - **They love the concept, but aren't ready to commit to going fully DefaultVeg across the dining hall.** Instead, they'd love to start with small steps like switching to vegan baked goods by default or using vegan mayo by default in prepared foods. Check out the below section on "[Simple Ways to DefaultVeg Your Dining Hall](#)" for some ideas!
 - **They are not convinced that DefaultVeg has sufficient support.** If staff seem open to DefaultVeg, but wary about how it will go over with diners, find more allies who support DefaultVeg and can sign a letter, send emails, write an op-ed in your student paper, or, best of all, come to the next meeting.



- **They need more information about DefaultVeg or don't understand how it would work in their establishment.** In this case, reach out to us to troubleshoot, and schedule a follow-up meeting.

If you get pushback, don't give up hope! You may need to continue building momentum. These changes take time to be implemented. Your next steps could look like this:

- Ask the supportive clubs and groups you've recruited to become more active on your DefaultVeg campaign by contacting and requesting their own meetings with dining decision-makers, or submitting letters or op-eds to the student paper.
- Is your school hosting a big upcoming event or conference? Ask the organizers to use a DefaultVeg menu.
- Continue showcasing your campaign to the student body through fun and engaging events like movie nights and documentary screenings or vegan cooking demos. Be sure to bring a signup sheet to recruit new members to your efforts.
- Keep requesting meetings and communicating your determination to get changes made. Remember that you can encourage small steps like those outlined below even if your dining hall isn't ready to go all-in.

Simple Ways to DefaultVeg Your Dining Hall

You don't have to get your entire dining hall to flip to a plant-based default to start making a difference in how food is presented to diners. DefaultVeg uses "choice architecture"—the concept of how items are arranged on menus, serving lines, and food stations to nudge people toward certain choices. And there are countless small behavioral "nudges" that the dining team can implement one-by-one to significantly impact food choices before committing all the way. Below are six simple tips for dining halls looking to dip their toes into DefaultVeg:

- **Make simple substitutions.** Serve plant-based condiments, milks, breads, and desserts by default. Pasta salads can use vegan mayo by default; coffee and cereal stations can offer an array of plantmilks, with dairy available on request; and baked goods can make use of egg substitutes like flax or banana. The quality of plant-based products nowadays ensures diners won't even notice the difference.
- **Use climate-friendly ratios.** On buffet lines and other menus, the ratio of plant-based to animal-based options should be at least 2:1. Plant-based items should be placed front and center instead of separated into their own sections, and they should be accompanied by enticing labels (like "roasted butternut squash and sage risotto," instead of "low-fat vegan risotto") to nudge people to select them.
- **Merge the menus.** Dining stations that aren't quite ready for DefaultVeg should be encouraged to integrate the plant-based items—and increase them—into their main menu instead of putting them at the bottom in a separate section. Dining managers can also consider labeling the items that are not vegan, instead of the other way around, to help normalize plant-based meals.



- **Reverse the upcharge.** For menus with individually priced items, meat and dairy items can be priced slightly higher than plant-based items to incentivize orders of the latter. This works especially well with build-your-own bowl and pizza stations, where the base is already plant-based, and instead of paying extra for toppings like vegan cheese or meat, the upcharge is placed on the animal-based toppings.
- **Flip to-go and catering menus.** Special menus like those used for big catering orders or grab-and-go stations are sometimes easier to flip to a plant-based default as a first step than changing the infrastructure within the dining hall. This is also a great way for dining staff to experiment with different plant-based offerings and figure out what is most popular with these orders.
- **Try out DefaultVeg at a single station.** Our [research on three Sodexo campuses](#) showed that when implemented consistently, plant-based defaults shifted veg orders from under a third to over 80 percent of orders—at a single station in each dining hall. This is a perfect starting point for dining staff to get the hang of the strategy and then build upon it.

Inspiration: DefaultVeg in Action

If your decision-makers need inspiration for your campus' DefaultVeg journey, provide them with real-world examples of success! On campuses around the world, college students are already advocating for climate-friendly foods, starting dining hall initiatives, and launching pilot programs that help university administrators reimagine food norms and transform campus culture. **The possibilities are endless, but here are a handful of real-life examples.**

[Northwestern University](#) students established a DefaultVeg student chapter in 2020, and just two years later, the school's Associated Student Government passed acting legislation to pledge veg. The resolution includes a 70% plant-based requirement, and hinges on [behavioral nudges](#) such as opting *into* animal-based products at catered events and presenting animal-based products last at buffet-style events. New York University's student government adopted similar practices, which paved the way for DefaultVeg policies in NYU's Office of the Provost and Office of Sustainability.

Many students have found traction with a particular department, program, or think tank. At [Oxford](#) it was the Centre for Practical Ethics that first adopted DefaultVeg. In Copenhagen, it was the Globe Institute. Stateside, Stanford's Law and Policy program, school of Environment and Resources, and [Prevention Research Center](#) have all embraced plant-based defaults. Western Washington University's College of the Environment is DefaultVeg, as is the Center for Women and Gender Equity at St. Mary's College.

In Canada, the intercollegiate [Plant-BasedU campaign](#) is striving to reduce food-related GHG emissions. One participating school, the University of Victoria, has [committed to veg defaults](#): plant-based cheeses are the default option at food stations, all menus list plant-based options first, and vegan mayo is the default condiment. A similar movement is happening across the



Atlantic, with [an oatmilk default](#) at [four University College London](#) cafes, a month-long [oatmilk default pilot](#) at University of Birmingham, and a 100% plant-based student union at University of Stirling.

Special events are another perfect opportunity to trial DefaultVeg. University of Pennsylvania hosted a conference with plant-based defaults, and Johns Hopkins went veg for an event honoring rising stars in cell biology. Since plant-based diets have such huge potential for climate justice, racial justice, and public health, opportunities may arise in any number of unexpected places. The University of San Diego, for instance, hosts a “[Changemaker Challenge](#)” every year which invites students, faculty, and staff to brainstorm solutions to real-world issues. Winning ideas are then put into action; USD piloted [an oatmilk default in April 2023](#).



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Read up on even more success stories on our [Medium channel](#)!

Any campus in any country can go plant-powered in some way. Just as we all share the same planet, we all share the responsibility of eating sustainably, choosing kindness, and building a resilient future—together.

Wrap-Up: Making Lasting Change on Campus

As you wrap up your DefaultVeg campaign, you'll want to ensure that your changes lead to long-term shifts in food norms on campus long after you graduate. Here are a few key final steps you can take.

Make sure that for every victory, you're working with staff to gather implementation metrics. Once you reach this stage, [please reach out to us](#) for help, and we'll walk you through it, step by step. We'll help you collect the right sales or purchasing data from before, during, and after implementation to gauge how successful your efforts were. These numbers will be compelling to other decision-makers on campus and may even help other schools and institutions around the country follow in your footsteps! You'll also want to get real-time feedback both from staff and students through interviews and surveys—and don't forget plenty



of photos and videos! We can also help you calculate how much water, carbon emissions, land, and animals your success is sparing.

Promote your win! Changing food culture starts with what's on menus, but it doesn't end there. Every day, we all consume messages through the media, social media, entertainment, and even conversations with our friends and family that subtly influence our behavior—what we wear, buy, and eat. You have a powerful victory in your hands, and now is your chance to amplify its effect by shouting it out to your community! Here are some ways to spread the word about the change you've achieved:

- Pitch the story to your college newspaper as well as other local media in your town. You can also author an op-ed celebrating your win and the larger cultural shift that's happening among GenZ toward more compassionate foods, citing examples from schools around the world.
- Have your club and ally organizations and departments share the news on social media (and don't forget to tag @DefaultVeg). These posts could include strong quotes from dining staff or students, as well as numbers highlighting the impact you made.
- Help your dining hall create positive marketing materials and signs that tout the changes and encourage students to try the new options.
- Reach out to us at info@betterfoodfoundation.org to share your story and see it featured in our newsletters, social media, and Medium channel.

Ensure continuity. While you've made huge strides, changing food culture is an ongoing process, and future possibilities are limitless. Before you wind down your campaign or prepare to graduate, make sure you capture all of your contacts, data, progress, and other notes in writing for your successors. Identify among your closest allies some potential leaders who can carry on your work, such as an environmental or veg club or even a committed faculty member who can mentor future students. Make sure to share all your notes and data, which will give them crucial insights into your past initiatives, the challenges you faced, and where opportunities for progress remain.

Thank you for helping pave the way to a DefaultVeg world! One campus at a time, students, faculty, and staff like you are changing the way we eat for future generations to come. We are here to help with your journey at any step along the way, so please get in touch!

 info@betterfoodfoundation.org

