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Dave Harmon '11 (left) and Dave Jenkins '11 reached for trays at Verney-Wooley Dining Hall yesterday.

No-tray policies cut meals down to size

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Look down at your tray. Do you think you're going to finish the burger and seasoned fries, the plate heaped with eggplant parmesan and spinach strudel and that monstrous salad drowned in dressing? Dining services at universities across the country are tired of watching students stack away food without even taking a bite, and they consider the cafeteria tray a cloaked conspirator in this wasteful behavior.

In an effort to reduce waste, universities from Maine to North Carolina are partially or completely eliminating trays in their cafeterias. The grounds for tray abolition? Dining services employees say students will consider what they are really planning to eat when they must carry food with their hands. While a tray-toting diner may absentmindedly add dish upon dish to his plastic cornucopia, the patron who must transport his goods back to the table without a tray thinks about what is actually going to end up in his mouth.

In order to size up the idea, the University of Connecticut conducted a three-week experiment in one of its cafeterias: Week one supplied the usual abundance of trays, week two was a combination of trays and no trays with posters informing students about waste savings, and week three was completely trayless. The test was completed early this month, said Denise Beal, assistant director of dining services at UConn.

Beal said the "difference in waste was significant." Compared to 3.23 ounces of food wasted per person during week one, week three showed only 2.23 ounces per person, Beal said. In addition, the dining hall in the trial program ran 166 fewer dishwasher cycles when it eliminated trays.

As far as student reaction to the changes, "it is a mixed bag, with some totally for it and an adamant minority against it," Beal said. To facilitate the transition, UConn's dining services plans to officially introduce a trayless cafeteria to incoming freshmen during orientation this summer so that students

"won't know any different."

Crayton Garrell, food services director for Fountain Dining Hall at North Carolina State University, said since trays were put away about a month ago, the school's facilities management staff has found a "major decrease in water usage."

Eliminating trays in cafeterias is part of the university's plan to reduce water consumption in light of the ongoing drought in the region, he added.

In a school of 28,000, with 7,200 students on meal plan, Garrell said "less than 1 percent" of diners complained about the changes. Though trayless meals are an "inconvenience to some extent, we are doing our part," he said. At North Carolina State, he said, "trays won't be coming back because there is no need for them."

Varun Avasthi, director of dining services at Colby College, which has been experimenting with trayless dining halls, said there is "definitely something happening across the country." Colby is pushing the trayless idea gradually in an effort to "include students in this decision," Avasthi said.

"Some don't like the inconvenience since we don't have the capacity to carry multiple items at a time," Colby freshman Charles Wulff said. "Some groups were actively campaigning against the trays, and other groups have been complaining about taking them away."

In February, dining halls participated in a week with trays out of circulation. Now, Colby Dining Services is working to educate students about the amount of food wasted and the environmental impact, Avasthi said.

Avasthi said the point is not to discourage eating, emphasizing that students are free to take as much food as they desire in the all-you-can-eat setting. Eliminating the trays reduces situations where diners are "loading a bunch of stuff on their plates, finding they can't eat it, and throwing it out," he said. The one-week trayless trial reduced food waste by 250 pounds in one dining hall, and Avasthi projected that a 34-week school year without trays could save 21,000 gallons of water.

When Alfred University in New York went trayless in January, it found that students wasted 30 to 50 percent less food and drink - reducing solid waste by about 1,000 pounds and liquid waste by over 100 gallons, according to Alfred's dining services Web site. The trayless endeavor, which was recommended by a student advisory board and Green Alfred, a student group promoting sustainability, is "going great," said John Dietrich, the school's dining services director. As far as student response, Dietrich said there is "a portion of students that understand and are in favor of helping the environment, but most are in the middle with this."

But even students who don't care about the environmental effects of removing trays may see other benefits. If the new policy saves money, Alfred dining services may be able to provide more "specialty items," including seafood dishes, steak sandwiches and roast lamb, according to its Web site.

Ann Hoffman, director of administration for Brown Dining Services wrote in an e-mail that BUDS is

"intrigued by the concept" of trayless cafeterias and is investigating the experiences of other schools. But though some schools have reported success, she added, "the overall reviews - including the reaction of customers - appear mixed."

In addition, Hoffman noted that since the dish room is one level below the main dining hall at the Sharpe Refectory, some Dining Services officials have pointed out that transporting dishware could be another challenge. However, BUDS is "looking at operations other than the Ratty" and is talking with students in the Sustainable Food Initiative about the possibility of a trial run, possibly coinciding with Earth Day, she wrote.

Students had mixed feelings when it came to giving up their Ratty trays.

"It would be a drag," Herald Cartoonist Zachary McCune '10 said. "If you wanted to eat on a tighter schedule, you would be strapped since it is not feasible to get an entree, dessert and two drinks without a tray."

Diners who currently don't use trays proposed that because of the number of trips involved in getting more food, they eat less. Gerardo Tejada '09 said the idea "sounds more inconvenient." But he did say, looking down at his tray, "I don't know if I'm going to eat all this."

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