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Elena Chiu
Grand Valley State University

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Elena Chiu
Professor Fitzpatrick
HNR 401, 04
16 April 2024

Empty Coolers at Busy Dining Halls: Solutions to GVSU's Failure to Accommodate Students with Food Allergies

1. Introduction

The average person doesn't think about reading the ingredients every time they open a package of food. Nor are some of their first thoughts upon being accepted to college being that they need to know everything about Campus Dining, and they have to register with Disability Support Resources to ensure they have a kitchen in their dorm. That, however, is the reality for 6% of Americans (AACI n.d.), people like me, who have food allergies. At least one of the Top 9 most common allergens—peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, shellfish, fish, sesame, milk, wheat, and soy (FARE n.d.b)—are found in most dishes, forcing those with food allergies to always be on guard against meals with an ingredient that could trigger a reaction. Anaphylactic—severe—reactions have a multitude of symptoms that can lead to death. The most severe symptoms are unconsciousness and swelling in the throat, followed by vomiting, hives, and dizziness. More mild symptoms can include a runny nose, mildly itchy skin, and some nausea (FARE n.d.d).

Despite being assured I would have safe foods to eat, my first year at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) was a dietary nightmare. The west Michigan university serves over 19,000 undergraduate students (GVSU 2024a), meaning, statistically, over 1,000 of them are likely to have food allergies, and many of these students are required to have a meal plan (GVSU 2022a). The issue is, GVSU fails to provide safe options for students with allergies. From hidden ingredient information, to countless instances of potential cross-contact, to empty allergen-free stations, food in Campus Dining was nearly all but inaccessible for someone like me. Now, two years later, I am working to resolve the problems I faced. Through the course of this paper, I will discuss a peer's and my own experiences with dietary restrictions, Campus Dining, and Disability Support Resources (DSR), and then I will propose changes to GVSU's Campus Dining based on another university's dining structure.

2. Student Testimonies

Azalea was a freshman in 2021,¹ but did not know she had food allergies prior to arriving on campus. Her first couple weeks on campus were miserable. After going out to eat one night, she came down with what she thought was a bad stomach flu. However, when the pain continued and she experienced significant fatigue, she went to her doctor and was diagnosed with severe allergies to gluten, including wheat, and unbaked egg.

Suddenly, Azalea didn't have access to safe food. She lived in Holton-Hooker, a cluster-style (multiple beds in one room) dorm with communal kitchens only (GVSU 2024b). GVSU was at the beginning of the back-to-in-person learning after the wave of COVID-19, and Campus Dining locations were limited, with some not open on the weekends. Azalea struggled to find options at the two closest locations, Fresh and Kleiner (renamed later to The Dish), as common foods served, like pasta or sandwiches, contained allergens. She often had to settle on salads. But salads for three meals a day, seven days a week, is simply not enough. The options in Fresh's MyFresh Pantry, the allergen-free station (GVSU 2023), and Kleiner's Allergen Solutions cooler often did not have much substance. Tired, sick, and adjusting to a new school, with the help of her parents, she dropped her meal plan as low as she could and bought her own food, relying on frozen meals, rice, and veggies warmed in her room's microwave instead. She avoided Campus Dining as much as she could, and only got gluten-free pasta or a burrito in Kirkhof as a last resort.

Azalea never talked to the dietician because she simply did not have time, nor did she register with DSR because she was diagnosed after coming to campus. And with the dietician, she only knew there was one because she went digging on the GVSU website. She was not adequately prepared or informed of the options that existed for her to try and seek out help.

The situation made, and still makes, Azalea angry. In her own words, "We come here to go to school, and food and water are basic human rights, and it's not a thing you can just pass off... It's [GVSU]'s job to provide us with what we need to go to school. We can't go to class if we don't have food to eat." And this year, with GVSU's largest incoming class ever (West 2023), she worries that the problem is only going to be exacerbated. How many more students with food allergies will struggle the same way Azalea did? The same way I had?

Before school even started, I was in contact with GVSU's dietician and DSR. The dietician talked to me about the dining options on campus and assured me that I would be able to find food, be it the regular meals or in the special Allergen Station with options free of the top 8 allergens and gluten.² DSR allowed me to register for housing early, so that I would be able to obtain a dorm with only one roommate (to minimize chances of contact with allergens to one person) and have a kitchen (to cook my own food that I knew was safe).

I was excited the day I moved into my dorm as a freshman. I had my own room with a lofted bed and multicolored string lights I was excited to put up. I had a brand new backpack and a dry-erase calendar. Most importantly, I had a kitchenette, complete with a sink, minifridge, and stove. That kitchenette was about to become incredibly important, incredibly quickly.

Before my parents left, we went over to the north campus dining hall, Kleiner. In there was a cooler that was supposed to be stocked with allergy-friendly foods. It was what I had planned on eating from until I took my tour of the dining halls with the dietician. However, we found it completely empty, not even powered on, and it wouldn't be until weeks later. Throughout my first year, despite countless emails and meetings with the dietician and DSR, the cooler in Kleiner and the station in Fresh (the second closest dining hall) *never* had consistent, safe meals. Sometimes food in there would be safe for people with gluten allergies, but processed

with all the other allergens, which meant they were not safe for me to eat. Since Fresh is all-you-can-eat, meal swipes are required to get into the building, and often I would swipe my card only to find the station empty of any safe options.

Not only did this make it difficult to eat, but it also made it more difficult to socialize. So many clubs will meet at dining halls and bond over dinner. Classmates and friends go there to have something to do while they hang out. I'm used to it at this point, sitting with just a drink or nothing at all while the rest of the group I'm with eats, but it is still frustrating and awkward. For someone else, that could be a major deterrent. Not only is the dining hall unsafe for them, but it is preventing them from forming connections, joining a community, and feeling invested in their college experience.

Over the course of the year, I spent hours communicating with GVSU staff and was promised solutions, but nothing changed. My kitchenette saved me, because I ended up cooking nearly all my meals. As a scared freshman, away from home for the first time, this experience was terrifying and unnecessary. I wrote about it desperately in my freshman Honors class for our disability unit, just wanting someone to hear my story.³ I was angry, and I was tired. Now, as a junior, I've found my footing. I'm ready to take my anger and transform it into progress. What happened to me cannot happen to anyone else.

3. The Law

As a public university, GVSU is required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which states that a disability is a condition that “substantially limits one or more major life activities,” which includes eating, learning, and concentrating. The ADA requires public universities to “provide people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all of their programs, services, and activities” (U.S. Department of Civil Rights Division n.d.). The only reason I was able to register with DSR was because severe food allergies are classified as a disability. They affect students' ability to eat, because if there are no safe options, they will go hungry. This, in turn, affects their ability to learn and concentrate, leading to a decrease in academic performance (No Kid Hungry 2023).

DSR attempted to accommodate my allergies, and yet after multiple weeks of emailing and Zoom meetings, promises of safe food went unfulfilled. The cooler in Kleiner was not filled until two weeks into the semester. DSR promised in a Zoom meeting to get more food for MyFresh Pantry, but what they eventually stocked it with was not safe. Most of the options were gluten free, but processed with a host of other allergens like tree nuts, eggs, and milk, making them still unsafe for me (See Image 1 and 2 in the Appendix).

Despite GVSU's attempt at accommodation, it is simply not enough. Students like Azalea and I still went hungry. In failing to fulfill repeated requests for safe food, in forcing us to cook for ourselves instead of using the meal plans, GVSU has failed to properly serve the students left in its care. It has violated the ADA.⁴

4. Comparison

A. GVSU

GVSU has four main dining halls on campus. *The Dish* (formerly Kleiner) serves north campus, and is all-you-can-eat style (as Kleiner it had three stable food stations and one rotating) with an allergy-friendly station.⁵ *Fresh* is slightly south of The Dish, also all-you-can-eat, with an allergy-friendly station.⁶ *Kirkhof* is more in the center of campus, and features many chain restaurants like Panda Express and Subway. Finally, *Blue Connection* serves south campus, where the upper-level and Honors housing are located, with one stable sandwich station and a rotating lunch and dinner station.

The Dish's True Balance station is dedicated Top 9 free. That being said, it is not open during late night hours. Fresh's allergy-friendly station is always available, but a sign on the cooler informs students that they must ask a manager for safe meals, putting an extra barrier in front of students with allergies (see image 3 in the Appendix); the cooler itself only stores breakfast items like bagels, muffins, and milk.

GVSU's Campus Dining site has a section for food allergies with common questions, information about the allergen stations, and how to contact the dietician and DSR (GVSU 2023). Ingredient information is not available online.

Through DSR, students with food allergies are able to make requests for accommodations, but nothing is guaranteed. While for my freshman year, I was permitted to register for a single roommate living space with a kitchenette, my request for my sophomore year of a single roommate living space or single-person efficiency with a kitchen was denied. DSR promised a kitchen, but that was not really an accommodation, because all upperclassmen housing has kitchens, but apartments vary from single to four-person arrangements (GVSU 2024c). The reason I asked for only one roommate was because it reduces the risk of allergens in the apartment or accidents, compared to three roommates. Luckily, I had an earlier housing registration time, so I was able to secure a two-person apartment, but had I a later registration time and been forced into a four-person apartment, multiple problems could have arisen, namely a reaction, or I may have been more likely to drop out due to feeling unsafe.

A look at Food Allergy Research and Education (FARE)'s website, one of the largest allergy advocacy groups in the US, shows a college search page that rates each college's commitment to allergen safety (FARE n.d.c). Each college is rated out of 14 different criteria with *all*, *some* (partially fulfills the criteria), *none*, or *not answered* results. GVSU scores a 9/14, losing the most points in sections related to housing and emergency access to epinephrine (the life-saving drug in the case of a severe reaction) (FARE 2024). At only a 64% accommodation rate, GVSU is failing its students with allergies.

In addition to providing information on food allergies and advocating for people with them, FARE offers many resources for colleges, including the College Food Service Summit, which discusses allergy safety; FARECheck Instructor Training, a program for food service employees, who once certified can train their own staff as well on allergy safety; and a guide for

reviewing kitchen safety practices to avoid cross-contact, among others (FARE n.d.a). GVSU could participate in these programs in order to improve their allergen safety score and provide a safer experience for students with allergies.

B. MSU

By contrast, Michigan State University (MSU), another local university and the 2020 *Top Campus for Food Allergies* (FARE 2020), scores a 13/14. Unlike GVSU, MSU trains their RAs to deal with allergic reactions, has epinephrine in healthcare facilities, and posts ingredient information online (FARE 2019).

Much like GVSU's site, MSU has a dining page with information about allergies. Both have information on contacting the dietician, however MSU encourages people with food allergies to apply to their Disability support, while GVSU only encourages those with celiac disease to apply. Here, MSU also has information about *Thrive*, an entire dining hall free of the Top 9 allergens that is subjected to regular safety testing (MSU n.d.b).

In addition to this, MSU links to MSUtrition, a site that shows what meals are being served in each dining hall, along with detailed ingredient information for each meal.⁷ Students are able to filter out foods containing the Top 9 allergens, along with other common foods people avoid like meat and alcohol, and then select which dining hall, day, and meal time that they are interested in. From there, they are able to see the meal options available to them and can hover over each item to see nutrition information and ingredients (MSU n.d.a) (See Images 4 and 5 in the Appendix).

MSU's dining page also includes a Dietary Guide PDF that lists more detailed dining information, such as the fact that select dining halls are nut-free in the meals that they serve, and that all dining halls besides Thrive have an allergen-free cooler, much like GVSU's Fresh (MSU n.d.c:9-10).

On the whole, GVSU has relatively limited accessibility for students with food allergies, as not all of their locations have dedicated allergen-free options, and information is not freely available on their website. MSU, on the other hand, proves that proper accommodation is feasible through their commitment to allergen-free options in every dining hall and clear information on their dining site. Even if GVSU does not have an entire allergen-free dining hall, there are still plenty of other changes they can make to better serve students.

5. Solutions

Fixing Campus Dining *is* possible. MSU shows that a better dining setup is an attainable goal. Changing GVSU's setup requires a two-way approach: accessibility and accommodation. Accessibility, or the creation of an inclusive environment, means everyone has access to something without extra work (University of Minnesota n.d.). In this case, accessibility would

include putting epinephrine in the dining halls and training RAs to use them, providing allergy education in the freshman introductory training, having at least one or two stable meal options and allergen coolers in each location, putting major allergens in isolated containers, using disposable paper/trays when prepping food, and providing ingredients on the website. Improving accommodations, or “eliminating barriers for an individual upon request,” (University of Minnesota n.d.), would include guaranteeing kitchens and independent or single roommate housing options when requested, and working with students to create plans and procedures that allow them to feel safe and advocate for themselves.

Epinephrine, the lifesaving drug, is important to have easy access to. A 2018 study found that many students with allergies do not carry epinephrine with them (Duncan and Annunziato 2018:335). It should be available in all dining halls in case someone has a reaction, because the difference between having it and not could be someone’s life. An instructional sign can be placed next to it as well, so even people without training will be able to administer it. Furthermore, dining staff *and* RAs should be trained on how to use it. For many freshmen, RAs are their first line of communication in an emergency, and this includes allergic reactions. RAs should be prepared to recognize the signs of a reaction and be able to quickly administer medicine.

GVSU should include training and information about food allergies in their freshman introductory training. This should include overall information about registering with DSR, what options are available to students (such as where the allergen stations are located), and a brief overview of common allergy reaction symptoms and where the epinephrine is located in each dining hall. Not only will this give students with allergies information on how they can manage them, but it will also educate students without allergies and help them be more conscious about others.

In terms of actual access, GVSU needs to implement stable meal options and allergen stations in every dining hall. Students deserve access to safe food no matter where they are on campus. As of right now, Blue Connection on south campus does not have an allergen station and only has one stable meal option: sandwiches, the setup of which is ripe for cross-contact. The focus on allergen stations in the northern dining halls only makes some sense; all south apartments have kitchens, whereas most north apartments do not. Freshmen must rely on campus dining more than the self-sufficient upperclassmen. Despite this, stable meal options and allergen stations should still be implemented. In some cases, freshmen *are* allowed to live on south campus. Even with having a kitchen, students may find it better for their lifestyle to eat in the dining hall. Students of all years gather in Blue Connection for clubs and socialization. People with allergies deserve to socialize with their peers without feeling ostracized because they can’t eat.

Given the constraints of the current Blue Connection layout, an allergen cooler, compared to an entire station, would make more effective use of the space. This allergen cooler should contain at least two different, nutritious meals free of the top 9 allergens,⁸ similar to what is regularly offered, and restocked each day.⁹

In terms of stable meal options, each dining hall should have at least two meals that do not change. The problem with Fresh and parts of The Dish is that with the meals always rotating, there is more room for cross-contact and students can never be sure if the meal being served that day will be safe. Two stable meals will ensure that students always know there is a meal they can eat, and two stable options increases the likelihood of at least one meal being safe.

Isolating common allergens is another simple way to increase accessibility. For example, my staple meal from the dining hall was a salad from the salad bar. However, I could only get lettuce and chicken, because the other toppings were in open-air containers inset into the countertop and one of those toppings was egg. The issue with this is that, when the dining workers are adding toppings, there is a high chance for bits of food to fall off the spoon as they scoop and land in the other containers. Taking the most high-risk allergens out of the main counter and putting them in their own section last would reduce the chance of them mixing with other toppings. This applies to any customizable meal, including options like sandwiches.

Using disposable trays and liners not only provides easy takeout containers for students and increases cleanliness, it also reduces the chance of cross-contact. Especially for meals like sandwiches with multiple bread options, keeping them on separate liners, even in the oven, ensures that there is no cross-contact with any residue from other breads that may not be safe.

Perhaps most importantly on this list, following the example set by MSU, GVSU needs to implement ingredient lists on their Campus Dining website and post them in the dining halls. This should not be too difficult because GVSU already has ingredients available at request in the halls; it is simply a matter of making them more widely available. Not only will this increase transparency, but it will make it easier for people with food allergies to check that something is safe. The same study that found many students do not carry epinephrine also found they were more likely to check ingredients when they were online, compared to having to ask in-person (Duncan and Annunziato 2018:335). When students have to go up to a busy station and request an ingredient booklet, that wastes time they may not have if they need to get a quick meal before class. QR codes to the ingredients site in the dining halls can allow students easy access if they need to check something on the spot. Furthermore, if they have anxiety or the worker is not as knowledgeable, this can lead to confusion and embarrassment. With an online ingredient list, students will be able to double check meals they know to be safe and look beforehand at new options they want to try, all at their own convenience without having to rely on someone else.

No matter how hard people try, nothing can ever be fully accessible. That is where accommodations come in. DSR needs to be willing to work with students to create a safe environment for them, and that includes helping them get the right housing. Every disability is different, so all accommodations will be different, but DSR should be willing to offer students independent or single-roommate housing with kitchens upon request. Reducing the number of people in the home is an important part of managing allergies. Fewer roommates means fewer people a student with allergies needs to watch out for, and fewer people that need to agree on keeping certain allergens out of the apartment. Having a kitchen, as demonstrated by my own

experience, is a necessary part of being able to safely eat. Had Azalea been assigned a room with a kitchen, she may have been able to cook more nutritious and varied meals for herself.

DSR should also have options available to offer students, who, as incoming freshmen, will not have experience using dining halls, living on their own, and advocating for themselves. This will provide them with ideas about how they can manage their allergies and ensure that they are able to get the help they need. Options available to them could include things like special passes, to get into the all-you-can-eat dining halls to see what meals are being offered, check availability, and check ingredients. Since meal swipes are required to get into these dining halls, this pass would prevent students from wasting meal swipes when they aren't sure if they can even eat anything. Another could be offering, in addition to the passes, request cards that students can show to campus dining workers. These cards would state that the student has an allergy and request that the worker change their gloves and prepare their meal on a clean plate or wrapper, along with anything else the student wants the worker to know. Allergen alert stickers could be part of this as well, alerting the dining worker that the meal it is stuck to needs to be treated with care as it goes down the production line.

6. Conclusion

In an ideal world, all the solutions I have proposed would be implemented. However, actually *having* food in the coolers, and coolers in all dining halls, is the most important thing. It needs to be consistently stocked and clearly labeled. Food is a human right. When students come to college, they expect their university to provide them with the things they need to succeed. GVSU needs to provide safe food to all of its students with allergies.

I hope that this project will change things, but in the end it is not up to me. It is up to President Philomena Mantella and her office. It is up to Campus Dining and their company, Aramark (GVSU 2022b). It is up to DSR to fight for equal access for the students they serve. This problem *is* possible to solve. We only have to care enough to try.

Endnotes

¹ Azalea's name has been changed for privacy. She allowed me to conduct an interview fully aware of the contents of this paper.

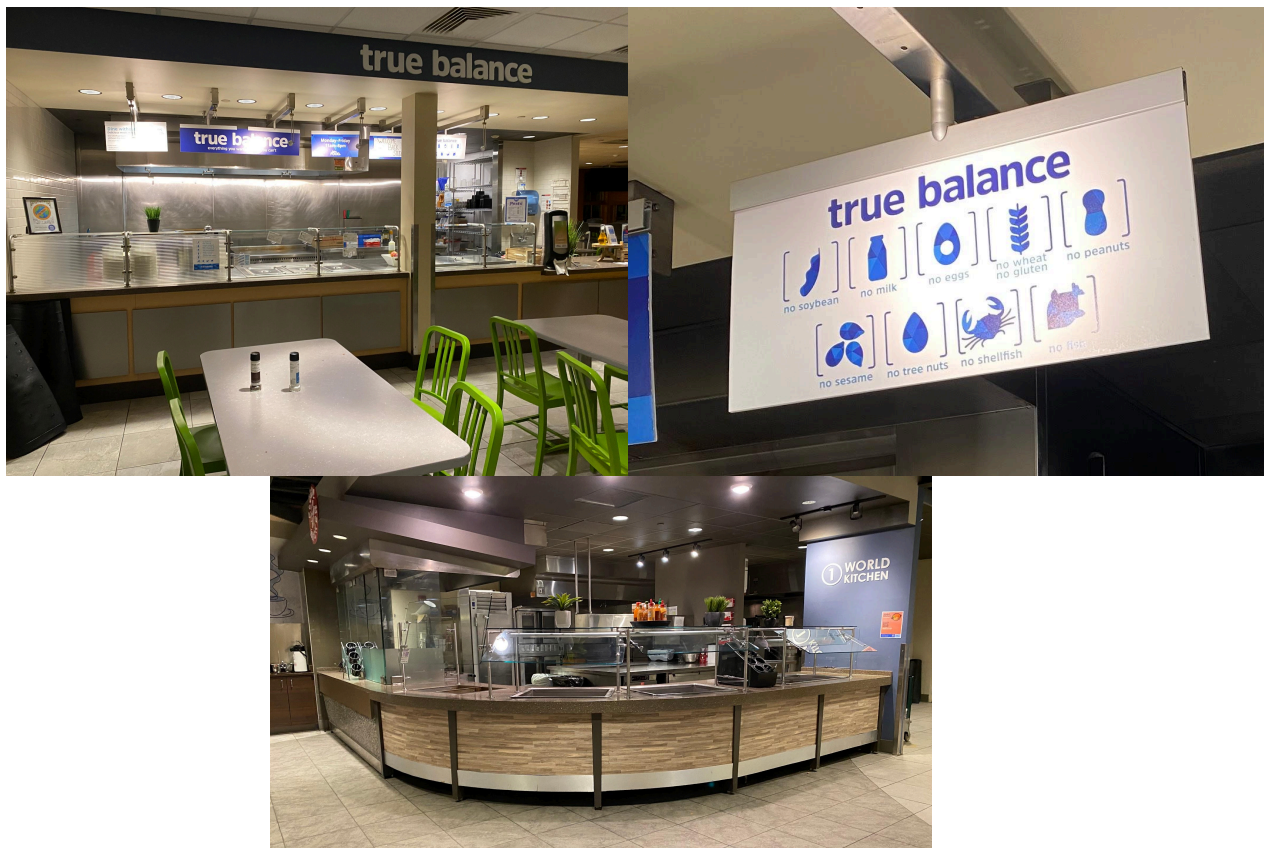
² This paper mentions both "Top 8" and "Top 9" allergens. This is due to the fact that sesame was only added into the most common allergens in 2023, joining the original 8 of eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, soy, and milk (FARE n.d.b), and so many places are still updating to account for the new addition.

³ This paper can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IVhOOgIzxO91AH3majR19EUwwpCPZXQP/edit>

⁴ Despite my firm belief that this occurrence was a violation of the ADA, actually taking the university to court over this has never been in my best interest. That is another issue outside of the scope of this paper, however.

⁵ Images of the Dish (Courtesy of JS). *True Balance* is the allergen-friendly station and displays the major allergens it avoids. *World Kitchen* is a rotating station.



⁶ Images of Fresh, showing the salad topping stations which contain hummus and egg, making them unsafe for students with allergies to them, and the allergen-friendly station.



⁷ When I first found this site while researching, along with the information about Thrive, I had to step away from my computer. Had I gone to a different school, I would not be writing this paper. I would not have gone through everything I did in my freshman year. The possibility of being able to eat in a dining hall without worrying was so overwhelming that it brought me to tears. Does that make you angry? It should.

⁸ The more nuanced version of Top 9 free would be to have multiple options catering to different allergies (for instance, breaded chicken free of egg but not gluten for someone who is only allergic to egg), all clearly labeled, separated, and prepared in ways that prevent cross-contact. Trying to avoid all allergens at once is unnecessarily difficult if it is not needed and often leads to meals that are less than thrilling to eat. That being said, there would need to be a way to ensure that one group is not being favored over another, as in my case with most options being gluten-free only, and still containing my allergens.

⁹ It's wild to me that I need to specify that the cooler should stay stocked, but I've learned my lesson. The cooler should *never* be empty. No one deserves to go home hungry.

Appendix



Image 1: The cooler in Fresh. Of all the items, only one (meatballs in the bottom-center of the top cooler section) were safe for me to eat.



Image 2: Another image of the cooler in Fresh on a different day. One item in this bottom section is safe for me to eat: the *Blake's* pot pie in the bottom left. *Amy's* foods are processed with tree nuts. *Udi's* contains egg.

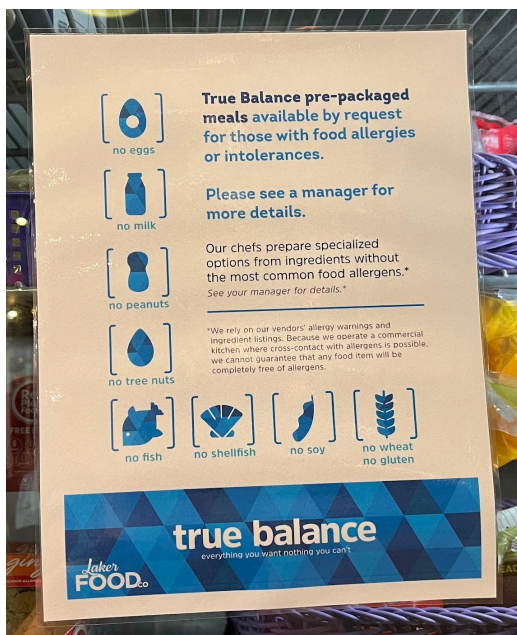


Image 3: The sign posted on Fresh's allergen-friendly cooler, stating that the safe meals for students with food allergies must be requested from the manager.

MSUtrition

ALLERGIES

- Alcohol
- Beef
- Coconut
- Eggs
- Fish
- Gelatin
- Milk
- Peanuts
- Pork
- Sesame
- Shellfish
- Soy
- Tree Nuts
- Wheat/Gluten

DINING FACILITIES

- Daily Breakfast Bar
- The State Room at Kellogg
- Daily Bakery & Desserts
- Heritage Commons
- Holden Dining
- Holmes Dining
- South Pointe
- Daily Deli

- Sparty's Market
- Brody Square
- The Edge
- The Gallery
- The Vista
- Thrive
- The Workshop
- Daily Salad Bar

MSU makes every effort to thoroughly train our staff and label food allergens in each dining hall and retail food venue. However, ingredients and nutritional content may change due to recipe substitutions, manufacturing changes or other outlying factors.

Please be aware that food items are prepared in a shared kitchen and do pose a risk for cross contact.

If you have allergies or specific ingredient concerns or require information on a menu item not listed on MSUtrition, please consult our registered dietitians (dietitians@rhrs.msu.edu), executive chefs or dining hall managers. Our chefs and dining managers are visible during service to answer your questions or address your needs.

PREFERENCES

- MSU Beef
- MSU Pork
- Vegan
- Vegetarian

Image 4: The MSUtrition homepage, where allergens to be avoided can be selected on the left side.

MSUtrition

ALLERGIES

- Alcohol
- Beef
- Coconut
- Eggs
- Fish
- Gelatin
- Milk
- Peanuts
- Pork
- Sesame
- Shellfish
- Soy
- Tree Nuts
- Wheat/Gluten

MENU FOR - HOLMES DINING - MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2024 - GRAB & GO DINNER

To see nutrition info for multiple items, checkmark your items, and press item

ITEM

- Breadcrumbs
- Soup
- Entrees
- Sides

Amount Per Serving	Calories from Fat 99	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 11g		18%
Saturated Fat 7g		14%
Cholesterol 35mg		12%
Sodium 400mg		17%
Potassium 67.5mg		2%
Total Carbohydrate 19g		6%
Dietary Fiber 1g		5%
Sugars 4g		
Protein 4g		7%
Vitamin A		4%
Vitamin C		15%
Calcium		8%
Iron		2%

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

Ingredients: 2% Milk(Dehydrated Fat, Milk, Vitamin A, Palmitate And Vitamin D3), Creamed Corn(Corn, Water, Sugar, Food Starch Modified, Salt), Heavy Whipping Cream(Cream, Stabilizer Mono And Diglycerides, Cellulose Gum, Polyacrylate B0 And Carageenan), Corn, Diced Peas(Potatoes, Dextrose, Disodium Dihydrogen Pyrophosphate, Potassium Sorbate), Water, All Purpose Flour, Unsalted Butter(Cream, Natural Flavors), Onion, Celery, Sautéed Vegetable Base(Sautéed Vegetable Puree Mix, Carrots, Onions, Celery), Salt, Sugar, Maltodextrin, Corn Oil, Chick Lens Of Yeast Extract, Water, Potato Starch, Xanthan Gum, Natural Flavors, Citric Acid Concentrate), Salt, Tobacco Sauce(Distilled Vinegar, Red Pepper, Salt), Thyme, Condensed Milk, Wheat/Gluten

PREFERENCES

- MSU Beef
- MSU Pork
- Vegan
- Vegetarian

Clear Filters

MY MEAL

Image 5: On the MSUtrition page, after selecting the date and dining hall, hovering over the available meals will show full nutrition and ingredient information.

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