

THE *Current*

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[Nora Drake](#)

Gauchos give back: New program allows students to donate dining commons meals

'Tis the season of generosity, and now UC Santa Barbara students can give back to fellow classmates in need of a meal. Launched in fall quarter 2024, the [meal swipe donations program](#) allows any student with a meal plan to easily donate up to three meals per week. Meals can be donated from 7 a.m. Monday until noon Thursday every week. Donated meals are then tallied and converted into vouchers, which are distributed via the [Associated Students \(AS\) Food Bank](#).

The project came about through a partnership between a campus dining team—led by Danielle Sinclair, assistant director of nutrition, purchasing and systems in [Housing, Dining & Auxiliary Enterprises](#)—and Masha Aksenova, director of application development and collaboration systems in [Information Technology Services](#).

“A number of years ago, the dining services team worked with an outside organization to try out a student program where students could donate a number of meals per quarter, and those meals were then converted into meal vouchers that were provided to the AS Food Bank,” explained Sinclair. “We wanted to reinstate that idea, but with our own internal team in charge.”

“Students log in with their UCSB NetID and password,” said Aksenova, who oversaw the technical side of the project. “And then the program in the background checks

whether they actually have a meal plan from which they're able to donate. Then, dining staff process all of that on the back end so that the proper number of meals get deducted at the right time. The app allows them to easily export data and upload it to the system that tracks the meal swipes.”

“The meal swipe donations program is a wonderful example of how strong partnerships between ITS and other units can benefit our campus,” said Josh Bright, associate vice chancellor for IT and chief information officer. “We love to provide technical expertise to our partners with great ideas in order to deliver what our students need and want. I am grateful that ITS, through our recently integrated Administrative & Residential Information Technology team, could play a part in developing this app, and proud to be leading an organization that champions modernizing the student experience through innovative services like this one.”

Sinclair and Aksenova report that there have been almost 1,000 meal swipes donated just in the first quarter alone. “That's a pretty impressive number,” said Aksenova. “I would say that our students are quite generous.”

Because it is used by students, Aksenova prioritized the mobile user interface, one of many reasons that the pair wanted to create their own system internally.

“Involving an outside partner would have been very challenging,” said Aksenova. “My staff, the developers, understand that this is for the real benefit of the students and the community that we serve. And it makes our dining services colleagues' lives hopefully a little easier too. It's not a big app, but I feel like its impact is significant.”

Sinclair agreed.

“This emphasis on supporting the entire student is a part of who dining is,” she said. “We create opportunities for students to give back to other students. All of our facilities are all-you-care-to-eat, so they can choose whatever they want.”

Sinclair and Aksenova hope to see the program grow and believe it will, given the strength of community spirit at UCSB.

“The number of meals they have already donated is to be commended,” said Sinclair. “Because of this program, students who can't afford traditional meal plans are able to be in the dining commons and have a meal. And there is something about that connectivity of having thousands of students in the same building eating together. Even if you didn't plan to eat with friends, you end up being a part of this

amazing community.”

Media Contact

Nora Drake

Communications Manager

Information Technology Services

(805) 893-2206

noradrake@ucsb.edu

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