



NACAS Plant-Rich Program Champion Stories

Vanderbilt University Campus Dining is Proving That Great Food is the Most Powerful Plant-Rich Strategy

At Vanderbilt University, plant-rich dining is not a campaign, it is the design of the plate itself. Across seven dining outlets serving roughly 7,000 undergraduates, **Director of Culinary Operations Brian Cochrane** has spent the past two and a half years reimagining campus dining around authenticity, global culinary traditions, and whole-ingredient cooking.



Vanderbilt University Campus Dining serves delicious plant-rich food across its residential dining halls – Rothschild Servery.

In doing so, [Vanderbilt University Campus Dining](https://nacas.org/nextgendingining) has successfully **normalized plant-rich dining**, without taking choice away or strictly relying on individual behavior change. Its holistic approach to dining, which perfectly blends technological innovation, staff development, and a deep commitment to strategic, research-driven collaboration¹, is working in every sense:

diner satisfaction rose roughly 26%, and by shifting to a more plant-rich protein portfolio, Campus Dining **reduced food costs by over \$4 million** compared to what the same volume of food would have cost under its previous dietary mix – a result that makes the business case for plant-rich dining impossible to ignore.

Campus Dining's commitment to plant-rich food is most visible in their E. Bronson Ingram Dining hall, a top-nine-free and halal dining hall built around five platforms – from composed global dishes and ancient grains to a cook-to-order sauté bowl station – all centered on whole vegetables, greens, and grains. It is now the busiest residential hall on campus, turning its 130 seats six times in a single dinner shift (812 covers). Following its conversion from a conventional culinary profile, the hall saw a 30% reduction in animal protein consumption per student, translating to a **70% increase in plant, grain, and vegetable intake**.



The popular E. Bronson Ingram Dining Hall.

In Fall 2025, Vanderbilt University Campus Dining partnered with Greener By Default on a **three-month pilot** that strengthened Campus Dining's menu architecture for plant-rich dining.



NACAS Plant-Rich Program Champion Stories

The results demonstrate just how much is possible through **smart design**.

- Every lunch and dinner station now maintains a minimum 1:1 plant-to-animal entrée ratio, and the Fresh Mex station at Rand Dining Hall shifted from a 1:2 baseline to that same ratio.

- Oat milk became the default at campus coffee shops, driving plant-based milk purchasing from 23% to 32% of total milk volume.

- Taste-focused, provenance-based menu labeling — replacing identity labels like "vegan" — increased plant-forward take-rates.

- The entire ground beef program moved to SPARE's 70/30 meat-to-plant blend, making Vanderbilt the first campus in the nation to do so for all ground beef, **averting over 1,600 kg of beef** in the pilot alone.



Burger with 70/30 meat-to-plant blend.



A colorful sauté bowl from the E. Bronson Ingram Dining Hall cook-to-order station.

At Vanderbilt University Campus Dining, **the most powerful marketing tool is the plate**. As Brian puts it: "*We don't make a campaign out of it. We just make it delicious.*" Flavorful, colorful, chef-driven food — sourced with intention and presented through thoughtful choice architecture — does the persuading quietly. The result is a dining program where students eat healthier, more diverse, and more sustainable meals, not because they were told to, but because the food in front of them is simply too good to pass up.

¹ Vanderbilt is a member of the Menus of Change University Research Collaborative, through which it shares insights from pilots like these and receives support for measuring their broader impact — ensuring that what works at Vanderbilt University Campus Dining can inform the field.