

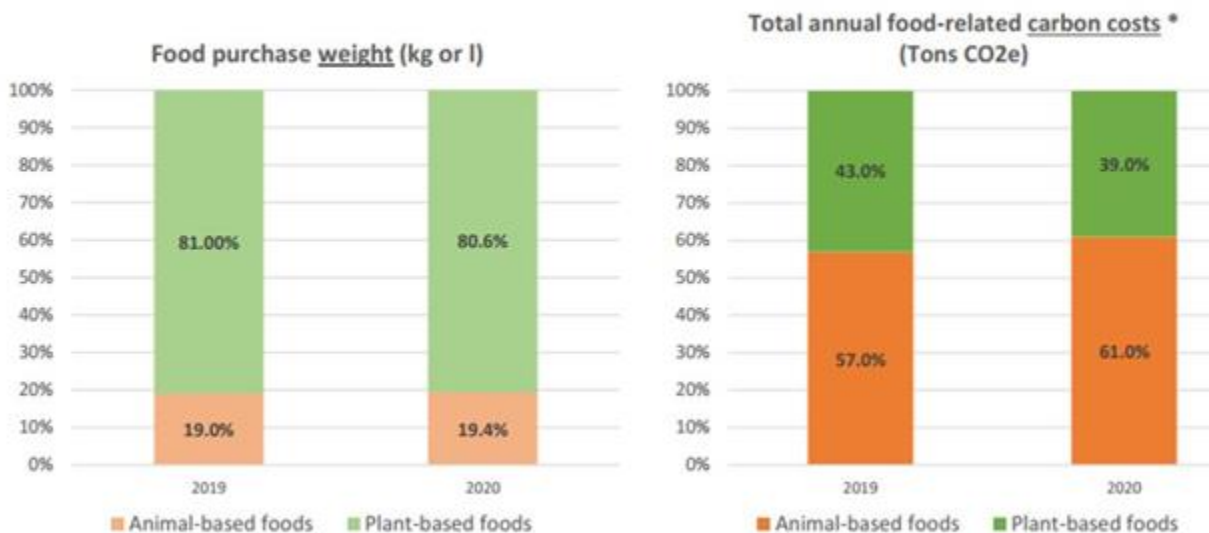
# Encouraging Plant-Based Dining at HBS

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Few know that the food industry is responsible for approximately 25% of all GHG emissions worldwide. Within the food industry, animal products contribute approximately 60% of these emissions, with larger livestock, such as beef and lamb, contributing half of these emissions from animal products (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). Our food choices are thus extremely pivotal to the health of our planet, and making a change in what we eat can have a big impact.

In addition, even when some know that eating animals and their byproducts is harmful to the environment, many assume that their day-to-day choices would not make any impact on global GHG emissions. Yet, a 2020 analysis of [Harvard Business School](#) (HBS) food purchasing data using the [Cool Food Pledge](#) calculator found that 1) while animal-based foods make up only 20% of total weight of food purchased, they make up 60% of total food-related carbon costs (i.e., societal costs of GHG emissions) and 2) a 0.4% increase in purchase of animal-based foods from 2019 to 2020 led to a 4% increase in carbon costs by animal-based foods. These results signify that as compared to plant-based foods, animal-based foods account for a larger proportion of food-related carbon costs. Shifting the allocation of purchases from animal-based to plant-based foods will thus help reduce the total annual food-related carbon costs at HBS.

Comparing 2019 and 2020 food-related carbon cost breakdowns  
**Animal-based foods vs. plant-based foods**

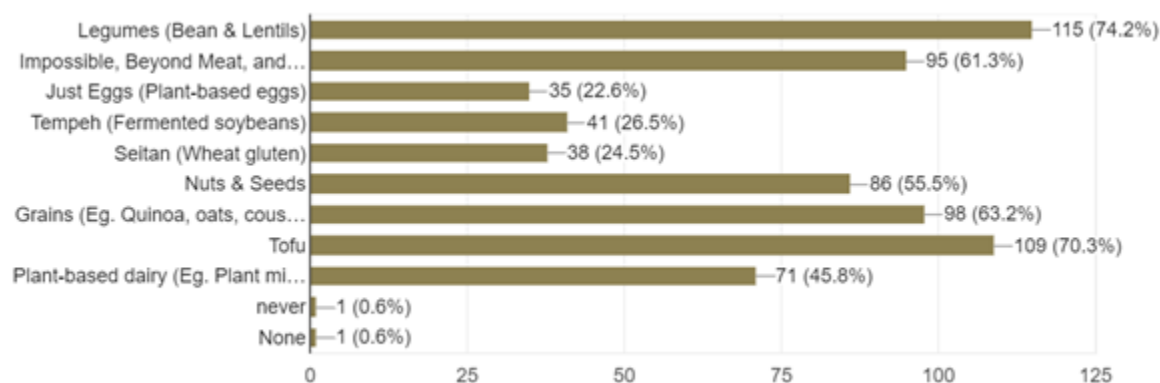


\*Metric 2 (Supply chain emissions) + Metric 4 (Carbon opportunity cost)

With this problem, our mission is to nudge the HBS community towards more sustainable food and dining choices on campus. Initially, we aimed to achieve our goal by increasing students' demand for plant-based food, and increasing supply by working together with Restaurant Associates (RA) to shift towards more plant-based offerings. After conducting several interviews and research, we learned that RA has in fact done a lot of programming and changes over the past few years to offer more plant-based options. Where they struggled was communicating these changes to students, understanding the impact of these changes, and identifying areas of opportunities. Thus, we decided to shift our project to focus on 1) understanding student demand and perception of plant-based foods, and 2) communicating changes and availability of plant-based options in dining halls, along with key environmental and nutritional information of the product.

## Initiative 1: Understanding student demand and perception of plant-based foods

Our survey, which was completed by 155 students, mostly across the RC, revealed several insights. Most popular plant-based protein choices were predominantly whole foods, such as legumes (74%), tofu (70%) and grain (63%), followed by plant-based substitutes, such as plant-based meat (61%) and plant-based dairy (46%). This is interesting because these basic whole foods are often forgotten when the question of "where do you get your protein from" arises, in favor of larger, more "produced" protein products such as patties, thus we believe this insight will be useful when crafting a desirable daily menu for students.



Next, our survey revealed that over two-thirds of our respondents indicated taste and completeness (entrée instead of just sides) as being the most important factors when choosing to consume plant-based options. Many students not only suggested plant-based ingredients with different cooking techniques, flavors and tastes, they also suggested greater variety and more complete plant-based

options overall, especially at the Grab & Go section and at breakfast. Yet, noting the initiatives RA has already taken, we realized that there was a gap between students' perception of options and the variety of options already available. This is where providing samples is an excellent way of getting immediate direct feedback on the taste and overall liking to a new dish or product served at the dining hall. It is also encouraging to learn that majority of students are open to trying plant-based foods and given the right offerings, would gladly consume them.



Further, interestingly, while RA has predominantly communicated many changes to dining hall offerings via Instagram and myHBS, only 9% of our respondents like social media as a vehicle of communication for this purpose, whereas 73% like signages in the dining hall and 58% like dedicated emails from HBS dining. In fact, only 18% like hearing from section representatives directly! This information was good for us to capture as it will inform how we recommend next steps and interact with students on future dining hall changes, discussed further below.

## Initiative 2: Communicating changes and availability of plant-based foods, along with key environmental and nutritional information

When we first started this project, our initial reaction was to focus on helping RA understand what future plant-based changes or actions to take. After meeting with RA, we realized a lot of progress had already been made and jointly decided to put a focus on communication channels. For example, how could RA increase awareness of plant-based options with students? How would students want to receive new information or give feedback?

As mentioned above, we learned that students prefer to hear communication updates via signage or dedicated emails. Separately, the SSA team identified an opportunity to increase student demand for plant-based options by targeting student-organized events. On one hand, RA catering can continue to work with large events such as conferences, catered lunches for classes, etc. On the other hand, we know that a significant number of student-hosted events, such as section gatherings, where student organizers are informally ordering large quantities of food multiple times a week. From the

SSA team's observations, student organizers tend to opt toward perceived crowd favorites like pepperoni pizza, chicken wings, etc. The key decision criteria for student organizers are convenience, price, and perceived popularity. Convenience means both the ease of ordering (e.g., Is it available on Uber Eats? Do you have to call in ahead of time?), as well as the mental energy of deciding what to order – which makes it less likely for students to invest time and energy into researching new options.

As such, the SSA team would recommend future efforts around creating a simple ordering guide for SSAs that propose plant-based options that meet their purchasing criteria. This guide is another way for student organizers to increase inclusivity, for example helping them consider the needs of students with dietary, religious, or other restrictions.

Another promotion strategy the SSA team recommends is to include an overview of plant-based dining options in the START week and pre-matriculation programming for new admits and students. Like how students learn about life on campus and housing services, nudging them early on and sharing the exciting plant-based meals and offerings would ensure that students are made aware and know that plant-based sustainable dining is a priority at HBS. This can be complemented with visual placards on the dining hall tables informing students about new dishes to try for that week, like the Beyond Sausage at the breakfast bar, or new additions to Thrive, like the vegan cream cheese, which can be rotated on a weekly basis to showcase all the new options that RA is piloting.