



The John C. Stalker Institute  
*of Food and Nutrition*  
AT FRAMINGHAM STATE UNIVERSITY

## Student Menu Preference Survey

The Student Menu Preference Survey was developed to gather data regarding student preferences related to the revised National School Lunch Program (NSLP) menu planning standards to form a basis for the menu planning phase of the project. The research questions that were investigated included: which menu entrée items do students like; which vegetable items (including legumes) do students like; why do students not purchase their lunch; why do students not purchase their lunch more frequently?

The development of the survey involved several steps. A poll of multiple School Nutrition Directors in Massachusetts provided an informal listing of popular entrees and accompaniments to form the basis of the preference survey. Participation questions were developed based on the “High School Student Satisfaction and Participation Survey” developed by the National Food Service Management Institute.<sup>1</sup>

The survey was created in Survey Monkey with the first screen containing an informed consent agreement to which students had to agree in order to proceed with the survey. All students answered the first few questions regarding demographics (grade, gender, school district and school) and a question regarding the frequency of purchasing lunch. The remaining questions presented to the student were based on his/her response to the frequency question. Students who responded as “never” purchased lunch were asked to rate reasons why this might be. Students who responded as “once in a while” or “once a week” were asked to rate scenarios that would increase their likelihood of purchasing. Students who responded as purchasing twice a week or more frequently were asked questions regarding preference of entrees, green vegetables, legumes, red/orange vegetables, and fruits.

An email blast invited all School Nutrition Directors in Massachusetts to participate in this research by distributing the survey to students within their district. The method for distributing the survey to the students was left to the discretion of each Director. From prior analysis of a similar project completed in Massachusetts it was assumed that there were no differences in preferences based on type of community (urban, suburban, or rural). However, multiple Directors were recruited for assistance given that collectively their districts were representative of the state’s demographics.

The survey was open for response for two weeks. A total of 4,782 students in grades K-12 responded. Of this number, 572 responded as “never” purchasing lunch; 1,281 responded as “once in a while” or “once a week;” and 2,929 responded as “twice a week” or more. Given the number of students in Massachusetts, 384 responses were necessary for statistical significance.

School Nutrition Directors can utilize the data from this survey in several ways. The food preference data coupled with the included cycle menus can be used by Directors to individualize recipes and menus taking into consideration the production and labor capabilities of their District. The survey questions regarding non-participation can provide insight as to why

students do not purchase lunch. The reasons included in the survey can be grouped into categories regarding food quality, food access, staff, school work, and food from home. Understanding the barriers to purchasing lunch can enable Directors to develop strategies to improve student's perceptions of these concerns.

<sup>1</sup> Asperin AE, Carr D. High school student satisfaction and non-participation survey guide, internal benchmarking for school nutrition programs. Technical Report Item No. R-147-09. University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute. 2009.