



> BY LORI MORTIMER

TAKING a BEST BITE OUT OF LIFE

Ever walk in to the cafeteria and become overwhelmed by the array of choices before you? Ever wonder how to choose a halfway healthy meal from all the decadent foods on display?

Well, at schools across the country, help is becoming available. Many food service providers now post the nutritional information with each entrée; others are offering a designated healthy choice entrée each day.

In April, College of the Canyons (COC), nestled in the rolling hills of Santa Clara, CA, began offering such a meal choice program. What makes the COC program special, though, is that students have helped design it from the ground up. Members of Student Nutrition & Wellness Advocates at COC (SNAC) put together a semester's menu of healthy meal choices, called "Best Bite" meals.

The cafeteria now integrates those meals into each weekly menu, offering one Best Bite meal per day. Each semester going forward, the SNAC team will create another set of five meals to add to the rotation.

WHAT'S A SNAC?

Students who join SNAC tend to be health conscious but not necessarily headed for a health-related career. They're "committed to promoting health and wellness on campus and in the community (with a particular focus on promoting healthy eating, physical activity, stress management, and body image)," according to the SNAC Web site. "I've always been really interested in nutrition and well being," said second-

year nutrition major Maryashley Whitaker. "When I started school, I wanted to get involved on campus. I got involved with student government first. And then the [student government] president told me about the health club."

SNAC members help promote healthy lifestyles by planning and implementing educational, outreach, and environmental action activities. They sponsor workshops by local health and fitness experts and distribute literature at campus and community health fairs, for instance.

The Best Bite program fits under the environmental action umbrella because it affects the campus environment itself, making it easier for students to eat well, be active, and feel good.

HEALTHIER CHOICES

SNAC program founder, faculty advisor, and registered dietician Sheri Barke says that the goals of the Best Bite program are to "increase the availability of healthy choices in the cafeteria and teach students how to balance choices to make an overall healthy meal."

Two obstacles stand in Barke's way: the extra cost of healthier options and the disproportionately large variety of less healthy options. When you have only one healthy meal to choose from and a literal buffet of less healthy choices, what are the odds that you'll pick the healthiest choice most of the time?

But Barke thinks she's figured out a way to overcome those obstacles. Her secret sauce: a partnership with her school's food service provider, Integrated Support Solutions, Inc. (ISSI).

Barke and her SNAC team help the food service provider by promoting the Best Bite program through outreach and advertising on campus, "bringing more

consumers to them," Barke said.

"And they're working to make those healthier choices not be more expensive than other choices," she said.

WHAT'S A BEST BITE?

A Best Bite meal has three characteristics:

Balanced. Has a vegetable, a starch, and a protein-rich food.

Healthy. Meets the USDA criteria for being labeled "healthy." Criteria include being low in saturated and trans fats, low in sodium, etc.

Calorie Conscious. An average of 400 calories per meal, making up 25% of the average daily calorie intake for a woman. For men, the average meal is usually higher in calories, so they can eat larger portions.

When students enter the cafeteria at COC, they now see Best Bite promotions and literature.

"Right outside the cafeteria we have a huge bulletin board," said Whitaker. It includes that day's Best Bite meal, all the Best Bite criteria, the USDA food pyramid, and handouts students can take with them.

As an extra incentive to choose the Best Bite meal, students will receive a punch card to track their Best Bite purchases. For every ten Best Bite meals they buy, they get one free meal.

"Best bite is a very good program," Whitaker said, "because it is hard to make choices really fast at the cafeteria." 🍌

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