Understanding the Balanced Menu Scorecard
What is the Balanced Menu Scorecard?

The scorecard provides an assessment of the healthfulness of a given institutional food environment based on its menu. A survey tool is used to holistically evaluate the dietary quality of meal offerings. The quantity, diversity, and types of foods offered within major food groups (e.g., vegetables, dairy, etc.) are accounted for in the analysis, which becomes the basis for our recommendations to institutions. These recommendations are founded in a critical analysis of the best nutrition science research.

To achieve a high score on the assessment, a menu must:

- consistently offer as many plant-based proteins as animal-based proteins;
- emphasize 100% whole grains, legumes, vegetables, and fresh fruits daily;
- include a diversity of fruits and vegetables from all classes, including red-orange, dark-green, starchy, and all other vegetables;
- demonstrate a food environment that is at least 50% fruits and vegetables, with animal proteins and refined grains limited to less than 20% of the foods served;
- deemphasize high-cholesterol, high-saturated fat, high-sodium foods including meat, egg, and junk food products;
- include no processed meats (chicken nuggets, pepperoni, sausage, deli meat like turkey and ham, hot dogs, bacon, etc.);
- heavily restrict red meats (offered no more than two days per work/school week);
- advertise non-dairy fortified milks (where possible);
- restrict dairy to no-sugar-added and lowest-fat options;
- be transparent in all options offered and in portion sizes of meat offerings.
What is the purpose of the scorecard?

We created the scorecard to raise awareness about the epidemic of disease-promoting food environments that are produced and reproduced by the institutions that communities rely on for food. Such institutions include schools, worksites, hospitals, senior residential communities, and so on. Too many of these institutions of authority are shaping local food environments in ways that ultimately promote or facilitate unhealthy eating habits, and these same institutions, in large part, have the power to flip the script.

The scorecard functions as an evidence-based evaluation of institutional food environments in order to:

- hold institutions accountable for their role in abetting the expansion of unhealthy food environments and, subsequently, national health crises;
- provoke broader discussion around institutions’ responsibilities to create food environments that combat those health crises;
- provide an evidenced basis for public health advocacy in communities across the United States;
- demonstrate the urgent need for and timeliness of plant-centric menu reforms;
- provide a tool to measure progress as institutions undertake menu reforms.

The impetus for change will come from either internal pressure to meet higher standards of healthfulness or external pressure applied by individuals and groups that depend on these institutions.
What food groups does the survey evaluate?

The survey assesses the quantities and qualities of the following food groups:

- **Grains.** Offerings of 100% whole grains versus whole grain-rich and refined grains.
- **Vegetables.** Offerings of red-orange, dark-green, and starchy vegetables.
- **Fruits.** Offerings of fresh fruits versus fruit juice and other non-fresh varieties.
- **Legumes and Plant Proteins.** Offerings of legumes and other plant-based proteins.
- **Processed and Red Meats.** Offerings of red meat products and processed meat products (e.g., bacon, sausage).
- **Ultra-processed Foods.** Not explicitly measured through survey questions, but offerings are noted.
- **Dairy.** Offerings of milk varieties based on percent fat and flavoring/added sugar.

These food group classifications are fairly standard and are recognized by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and other nutrition and public health authorities. Certain food groups are dominating the American diet to the detriment of our health, while other groups are drastically underrepresented. Our recommendations help institutions' food environments reflect a more balanced way of eating by having food groups present in the right proportions.

Each of these food groups are evaluated individually and given a score based on how well the menu meets our evidence-based recommendations. The food groups will be scored in one of the following three categories:

- **Green:** meets recommendations
- **Yellow:** partially meets recommendations
- **Red:** runs counter to recommendations
**Why should consumers and institutions trust the scorecard?**

Consumers and institutions can place full trust in the scorecard because it is based on a rigorous analysis of the nutrition science literature and current federal dietary guidelines, and it thus holds institutions to a high standard of healthfulness. It was designed in partnership with expert nutritionists, leading lifestyle medicine practitioners, and institutional food service professionals.

The scorecard essentially reflects whether or not an institutional menu has successfully maximized healthy foods and minimized any unhealthy foods. Additionally, as an independent non-profit, Balanced's analysis and recommendations have not been watered down by industry influence or "junk" science.

**How is the Scorecard used?**

Menus are evaluated using a survey assessment tool. Anyone can use this survey tool to analyze a menu by following the scoring guidelines explained [here](#). Previously, a numeric score was generated to create rankings, however, we now simply use the output the from survey to gauge which food groups on the menus are over- or underrepresented. We translate the raw score into a series of constructive recommendations that will form the basis of menu reforms at the given institution.

The scorecard is used for consumer awareness and advocacy purposes. Parents, students, patients and their families, taxpayers, and even insurers should all be informed about the dietary quality of the meals and snacks served in critical institutions and the potential harms or benefits of those foods have on the health and wellness of those consuming them.
How are the results publicized?

Information regarding the scorecard is publicized through various social media platforms, on the Balanced website, by Balanced’s partner organizations, and via print media. The scorecard itself is published at the web address balanced.org/institutions and balanced.org/score.

Prior to the publication of the scorecard, Balanced’s outreach team connects with institutions to inform them of their composite scores and to propose partnership. If and when an institution agrees to improve the healthfulness of its menus, Balanced pauses future analysis and publication of the institutions menus until the reforms are completed. Additionally, Balanced provides a comprehensive toolkit institutions can use to implement changes immediately.

How is progress measured?

The process of progress begins when institutions express desire and willingness to change their menus—either by working directly with Balanced on menu reforms, or by responding independently to our campaign demands and to the voices of everyday consumers who are concerned with the unhealthy food environments institutions create.

Progress is measured through menu re-evaluations, which reveal how aggressive and meaningful the changes are to an institution’s menus. Rapport with concerned community members and with institutions themselves is crucial to corroborating any purported changes.

Questions?

For more information or to score a menu yourself, visit balanced.org/score. Feel free to contact us with any questions you have about the Balanced Menu Scorecard at menus@balanced.org.