

LOCAL SEAFOOD
TOOLKIT FOR COLLEGE
DINING SERVICES:

How to Increase Local Seafood Consumption on Campus



Gulf of Maine
Research Institute

Science. Education. Community.

Background

With funding from the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI) led a year-long project with ten college students from five campuses around New England during the 2021-22 school year. Working in pairs and in partnership with their dining services staff, these student seafood ambassadors aimed to increase awareness and consumption of local seafood on their campuses.

Students learned about local seafood and sustainability through a full-day workshop at GMRI, which included tours and visits with local fishermen and seafood businesses. Equipped with this knowledge they developed rigorous surveys to gather data about seafood consumption habits and knowledge on their campuses and used those results to inform the design of activities to build awareness. Students implemented activities like taste test events, social media campaigns, special dinners, print signage and handouts, and more. Student ambassadors then conducted a follow-up survey to understand the impact of their activities on campus.

Overall, the ambassadors were extremely successful in raising awareness and interest in local seafood on their campuses. While replicating the full student ambassador program is not feasible on every campus without funding and staff support, the following are replicable components of this project that individual campuses and dining staff can implement to increase awareness and consumption of local seafood.

Start small! Don't feel like you need to tackle all the components of this guide at once. Pick one or two that would work best for your school and dining hall and build on them. Alone or in combination - these recommendations can help build awareness and demand for local seafood.

If you would like to read the full report detailing our student ambassador project, head to our website: gmri.org/projects/local-seafood-student-ambassadors/

Collect Data

Surveys are a powerful tool to learn about the preferences of your student body. However, conducting surveys requires extra time and labor. Here are some ways to lessen the burden.

- **Create partnerships:** Since dining staff typically lack the time to conduct a seafood-specific survey, try to find a faculty member who can guide students as they design and implement a survey in partnership and with input from dining staff.
- **Look for natural connections to seafood:** Identify faculty members in environmental studies, food studies, nutrition, marine biology/policy, marketing, economics, survey design, or other subjects where faculty are interested in engaging students in hands-on, real-world projects.
- **Understand the commitment:** Set clear expectations for all involved. Effective survey design is hard to do and requires guidance. Ensure faculty are willing and interested in guiding students through the process of designing and implementing a survey. Faculty are also instrumental in assisting students as they analyze the survey results.

- **Survey strategies:**

- **Cover all bases:** It is easiest to conduct surveys online, but students can use both digital and in-person strategies to encourage participation. In GMRI's project, students used QR codes in materials and signage to link to the survey. Students leveraged mass emails, listservs,



social media, posters, and sharing via classes/clubs. They also tabled in the dining halls and walked around the dining halls to share the QR code table-to-table.

- **Sweeten the pot:** Incentives were helpful in getting students to take the survey – GMRI student ambassadors offered the chance to win a \$50 Visa gift card. Some campuses used an immediate incentive by offering candy bars to all who participated in the survey.
- **Piggyback onto a larger survey:** If you're not able to do an in-depth survey, add a couple of questions about seafood to a broader dining survey whenever those happen.

Sample Survey Questions

- When seafood is available in our dining hall, do you choose it? (Never, rarely, sometimes, usually, always)
- I don't eat seafood in the dining hall because...
 - I prefer another meal option
 - It is more expensive
 - I don't like seafood
 - I don't think it's cooked properly
 - I don't like how it is prepared
 - I don't trust the quality of the seafood
- Rank favorite seafood preparations (baked, pan-seared, grilled, fried, etc.)
- What impacts your decision to eat seafood?
 - If it's local
 - If it's sustainable
 - How it's harvested
 - Ocean pollution
 - Health/nutrition
- What would influence you to try more seafood?
 - A favorite recipe
 - Knowing health benefits
 - Knowing seafood is local
 - Knowing seafood is sustainable
 - Peers (what friends are eating)
 - Free samples

Bring the Flavor

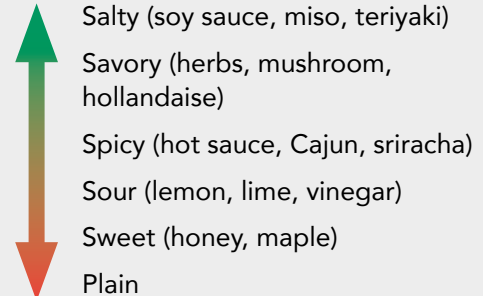
Don't shy away from bold flavors and spice. Students are more likely to choose familiar favorites and more flavorful seafood preparations.

Preparation and flavor insights:

- Across all five campuses, the top three preferred preparation methods were **pan-searing**, **grilling**, and **baking**.
- Preferred flavor profiles for seafood dishes were **salty** (ranked top by 56-70% of students), **savory** (32-42%), and **spicy** (29-38%).

Many students cited dissatisfaction with the way seafood was prepared in their dining hall as a reason they do not choose it. These preparation and flavor results point to opportunities to cook seafood using different methods and recipes to engage students with appealing seafood dishes.

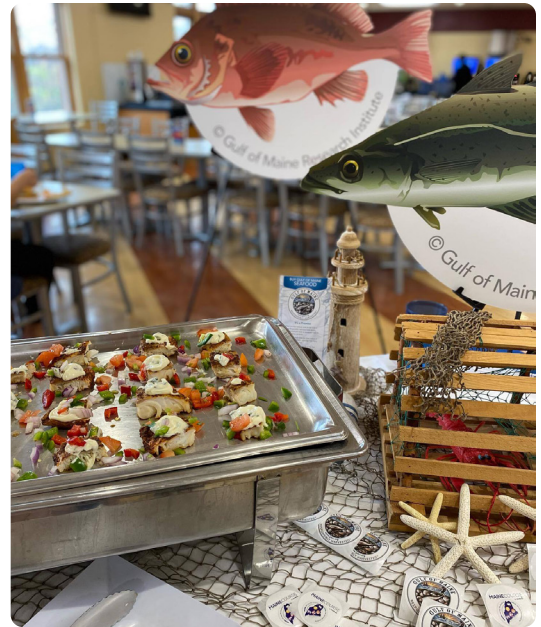
Top Flavor Profiles from Most to Least Preferred



Give Out Free Samples!

Opportunities to taste test and sample seafood are a powerful way to increase meal participation. While taste tests require some capacity from your staff, they can be done in a way that is a relatively low lift and that provides a high return.

- **Set up in the dining hall:** Taste tests or sampling events in the dining hall are the most productive, efficient way to build trust and support for serving seafood.
- **Spread the word:** Put signage announcing the taste in high visibility/traffic areas. Post on social media and in the school newsletter. If your capacity is limited, you do not have to do major promotion of a taste test in advance – just make sure to do it during a busy mealtime to target a broad range of students.
- **Get in the way:** Position the taste test table in a place where students have to pass by the table, ideally before they enter the line or perhaps while they are walking through the line, depending on your layout. If the table is unavoidable, more students will be likely to take a sample.
- **Get some help:** Recruit some student volunteers to be at the table to hand out samples and to talk to their peers about the local and sustainable seafood you are serving. Students are much more likely to stop and participate when other students are behind the table.





Collect feedback from students after they taste the sample.

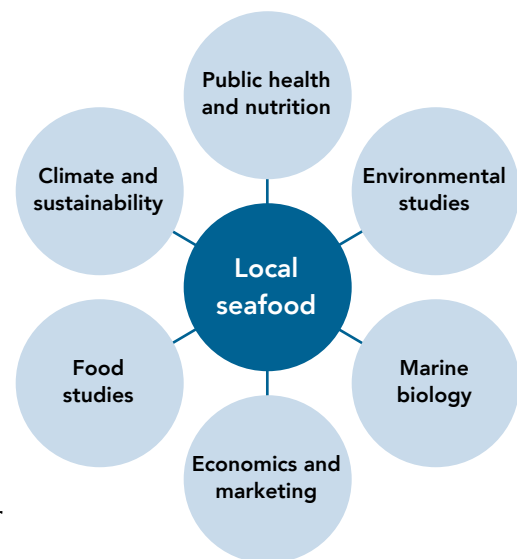
- **Put it on the line:** Reinforce sampling success by having the dish available on the line for students who like the sample and are excited to have more.
- **Get some feedback:** Sampling or taste test events are also a way to receive feedback on different preparations or flavor profiles before fully introducing a new dish. Put up a survey board where students can immediately give their feedback on the sample.
- **Partner up:** Engage with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute for signage and other materials around regional, responsibly harvested seafood.
- **Break down barriers:** Use taste tests as opportunities to clear up misconceptions or introduce a new species:
 - **Students question seafood quality:** At several campuses, roughly a third of students reported a lack of trust in the seafood quality or a belief that the seafood was not cooked properly as two key reasons why they do not eat seafood in the dining hall. A great way to combat these opinions and build trust is to provide taste tests or sampling events.
 - **Students shy away from less-familiar fish:** Between 60-75% of students had never tried hake, monkfish, redfish, skate, and dogfish. Haddock has the greatest familiarity (typically more than 80% of students have tried it and liked it). Taste tests give students a chance to try seafood they haven't had before. People are less likely to choose something for a meal that they've never eaten before, so it is especially critical to provide opportunities for students to try unfamiliar local species.



Partner with Students

Students listen to their peers – engage students to help with events and other promotions.

- **Double dip:** Consider where students are already involved. If you have dining interns or student employees, engage them in developing or hosting taste test events and/or sharing on social media about the local seafood you're serving.
- **Side up to sustainability:** Engage through your sustainability office and any students that might work for/with them and have an interest in sustainable food on campus.
- **Lean on faculty:** Talk to faculty in relevant departments about opportunities to engage with students interested in real-world projects (local and sustainable seafood can be relevant to a range of subjects including environmental studies, marine biology, food studies, sustainability, nutrition and public health, economics, marketing and communications, and more).
- **Target key groups:** Engage with student-run clubs that have an interest in sustainable and local food, the environment, climate change, or health/nutrition.
- **Show them the money:** Ideally, find a way to pay students for their time on any project of significance or ensure they can receive credit for their work through an academic course. Make sure to promote the work students have done and give them an opportunity to add something concrete to their resume.



Prioritize health and nutrition

Promote the health and nutrition benefits of local seafood and share this information where students will see it. GMRI student ambassadors learned from their peers that health and nutrition were primary reasons students chose seafood.

- **Don't rely on the fish fry:** A common way to serve seafood to students is to fry it. This has certainly been successful and receives a positive response from students on various campuses. However, students cited the health and nutrition benefits as their top reason to eat seafood.
- **Keep it healthy, but don't skimp on the spice:** Seafood is a lean, healthy protein that provides a variety of nutrients. Focus on preparations that are flavorful and preserve the nutritional value of seafood for students.
- **Aim for athletes:** Student athletes are a group that may be particularly interested in seafood for its nutritional benefits. Engage with athletic staff and encourage them to talk about nutrition with their teams to build awareness of the availability of a local source of healthy protein in your dining halls.
- **Highlight nutrition on the line:** Signage is not a silver bullet, and it can be challenging to catch the attention of students moving quickly through a dining hall. However, we heard that students want information about the health benefits of specific fish or shellfish on signage right on the line or on digital menu boards.

Join the Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested Program

Students are interested in more information about seafood, and there is an opportunity to use ecolabels on the line.

- **Boost seafood choice by using ecolabels:** At four out of five schools, ~60-65% of students were more likely to choose seafood if it had the Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested label.
- **Put sustainability information front and center:** To best communicate about certified or verified seafood use the labels on the line signage or on menus, directly connected to a particular dish.
- **Highlight your good work:** If you are already purchasing Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested seafood on your campus, there might be opportunities to build more awareness of what you are doing. If your campus is not purchasing Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested seafood but would like to, please reach out to GMRI staff (contact Sophie Scott at sscott@gmri.org).



Any of these recommendations, implemented alone or in combination, will be helpful in building awareness and demand for local seafood on campuses. Gulf of Maine Research Institute seafood staff members are also available to discuss what might work best on your campus and can connect you to local seafood suppliers that participate in the Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested program. Please feel free to reach out to Sophie Scott, seafood project manager, at sscott@gmri.org.