Part II. Laying the Groundwork
II. Laying the Groundwork

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Meal Ideas
Thank you for your commitment to improving the lives of the people you serve. Like you, we understand the intimate connection between food and health, and we recognize that food environments heavily influence customers’ dietary choices. In an era of widespread diet-related disease, we believe that everyone deserves access to healthy food, no matter the circumstance. Moreover, we believe that the healthiest choices should be easy and convenient to make, which is only possible in a food environment that values, encourages, and supports a more balanced way of eating.

At Balanced, we understand the challenges of today's modern food system, and like you, we're determined to overcome them for the sake of improving public health. In providing food for large numbers of people every day, you and your team have an incredible opportunity to prevent and reverse the leading causes of disease, disability, and premature death in the United States. We know this is not an opportunity or responsibility you take lightly. This is why we're so grateful to collaborate with visionary leaders like you as we work together to change menus and save lives.
Setting Goals for Balanced Menus

To ensure your efforts have the biggest impact, it’s important to articulate the overall mission and principles that will guide your goal-setting.

By engaging with these tools it's clear you have a deep commitment to balancing your institution’s menus. You know how urgent it is to combat the rising rates of overweight, obesity, and chronic disease among children and adolescents within your community. You are a leader in the fight to address the decline in children’s health for what it is—a serious national public health emergency.

The following pages are intended to serve as a guide for your goal-setting process. These resources are intended to be used similarly to a workbook or journal, which is to say written on, used to capture brainstorming ideas, to take notes, etc.
MEAL OFFERING
GOALS WORKSHEET

**Overall Goal**

Example: *Increase nutrient density by replacing processed meats and a portion of conventional animal protein-based entrées with plant protein-based alternatives.*

**RECOMMENDED GOAL BREAKDOWN**

*Replace _____% of conventional entrées with plant-rich alternatives within _____ months. (recommended 15-20%, 12 months)*

*Eliminate processed meats (smoked, cured, and/or contain nitrates) within _____ months. (recommended 6 months)*

*Offer 100% whole grains on a daily basis at breakfast and lunch within _____ months.*

*Offer a plant protein-based entrée ____ times each week in the form of warm, substantive, varied meals within _____ months. (recommended 2-3, 6 months)*

*Offer plant-derived milks alongside cow’s milks, and restrict cow’s milk varieties to lowest-fat, unflavored varieties within _____ months.*
NUTRIENTS
GOALS WORKSHEET

Overall Goal

Example: Decrease weekly intake of saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added and refined sugars.

Increase weekly intake of fiber, plant-based proteins—especially legumes, fruits, vegetables, and 100% whole grains.

RECOMMENDED GOAL BREAKDOWN

Reduce meal saturated fat content by _____% based on daily averages. (recommended 15-20%)

Reduce meal cholesterol content by _____% based on daily averages. (recommended 25-30%)

Reduce meal sodium content by _____% based on daily averages. (recommended 15%)

Reduce refined sugar content by _____% based on daily averages. (recommended 10%)

Increase overall weekly fiber content in entrees by _____g each week. (recommended 6-12 grams)

Short-term: Increase meal fiber content by _____% based on daily averages. (recommended 50%)

Long-term: Offer as many plant-protein meals as animal-protein meals by year _______. (e.g., 2024-2025)
**Overall Goal**

Example: Reduce or maintain operational expenses. Improve meal satisfaction and preference.

**Recommended Goal Breakdown**

- Save _____% per average meal. (recommended 1-3%)
- Save _____ cents per plant-based meal. (recommended 10-15 cents)
- Increase purchases of fruits and vegetables by _____%. (recommended 5-15%)
- Increase purchases of 100% whole grains by _____%. (recommended 30%)
- Increase purchases of legumes by _____%. (recommended 20%)
- Increase self-rated meal satisfaction scores using a pre/post survey.
TAILORED ACTION PLAN AND TIMELINE

The action plan, which entails the process of reaching your team’s goals, will be tailored based on two main inputs (outlined below). These inputs will help us generate together a list of prospective menu changes, which will be categorized and prioritized based on (1) ease of implementation, (2) potential health impact, and (3) urgency. Based on this sorted list, we will create a feasible, tentative timeline, which will include scheduled due dates and action items. The action items are the concrete steps we will take together to reach the goals your team decides upon. Balanced will provide tailored, non-monetary resources where and when they are needed in order to successfully execute these action items.

Please remember that there is no contract to sign and no formal or legal obligations to follow through with all or part of the action plan, nor are there any expenses for the services Balanced provides. You can withdraw from the program at any time for any reason.
Balanced will help you audit the following:

**Barriers and obstacles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Plant-forward recipe development  
• Marketing savvy | • Kitchen staff training needs | • Customers’ preferences and openness to change  
• Concerns from other stakeholders (e.g., parents)  
• Institution’s internal politics |

**Access to resources:**

• Financial constraints  
• Logistical barriers  
• Operational barriers

**A comprehensive menu analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component analysis</th>
<th>Meal analysis</th>
<th>Nutrient analysis (optional, or where feasible)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Percentage of animal vs. plant proteins  
• Red and processed meat frequency  
• Vegetable diversity  
• Grains (% whole)  
• Dairy options and alternatives  
• Fresh fruit  
• Prevalence of refined items  
• MyPlate ratios | • Identify healthiest current menu options  
• Identify easily modifiable menu options (single ingredient swaps)  
• Identify the least healthy menu options  
• Select and/or develop plant protein-based recipes for replacing least healthy options | • Based on nutrient content averages of complete meals  
• Saturated fat (% of kcal)  
• Total fat (% of kcal)  
• Cholesterol  
• Sodium  
• Fiber |
Planning & Capacity Building

At this stage, we will provide the tailored resources your institution needs to confidently and successfully execute each action item.

Menu design tools
- Recipe ideas and templates, example menus, protein and ingredient swaps

Menu promotion materials
- How-to guide and examples

Tailored promotional materials, created jointly
- Materials for staff buy-in
- Resources for communicating the upcoming changes and expectations
The following menu provides an idea of what our vision of balance looks like in practice. Menus that are objectively healthfully balanced can be taken in many different directions, feature many diverse cuisines, and come in all levels of sophistication. Whether you want to keep it simple or impress your customer base with food cultures from around the globe, the variability of plant-rich menus is only as limited as your imagination and degree of financial flexibility.

**Example Menus**

The following menu provides an idea of what our vision of balance looks like in practice. Menus that are objectively healthfully balanced can be taken in many different directions, feature many diverse cuisines, and come in all levels of sophistication. Whether you want to keep it simple or impress your customer base with food cultures from around the globe, the variability of plant-rich menus is only as limited as your imagination and degree of financial flexibility.

**Example 1: Menu for public institutions (meets USDA regulations for schools)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entree 1</th>
<th>Entree 2</th>
<th>Entree 3</th>
<th>Entree 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WG veggie pizza w/ or w/o mozzarella</td>
<td>Black bean tamales w/ brown spanish rice and tomatillo salsa</td>
<td>Butternut squash and chickpea WG mac ‘n “cheese” (nondairy)</td>
<td>Lentil, eggplant, and potato moussaka w/ WG pita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken (2 oz.), brown rice, &amp; veggie soup with WG bread</td>
<td>WG pasta salad with tomato, green onion, olives, spinach, &amp; chickpeas</td>
<td>WG veggie and beef (2 oz.) lasagna w/ or w/o mozzarella</td>
<td>WG veggie pizza w/ or w/o mozzarella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Italian herbed white bean salad</td>
<td>-Garlicky green beans with lemon</td>
<td>-Greek tomato salad</td>
<td>-Spinach and citrus salad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Seasoned, roasted cauliflower</td>
<td>-Sautéed collard greens</td>
<td>-Fresh salad</td>
<td>-Fresh strawberries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Fresh orange slices</td>
<td>-Fresh grapes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Example Menus

**Example 2: Meatless menu with additional daily options**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chana masala w/ brown rice or WG pita</th>
<th>Bean chili with WG cornbread or brown rice</th>
<th>Spinach &amp; basil pesto WG pasta w/ creamy herbed white beans</th>
<th>General Tso’s tofu &amp; mixed roasted veggies w/ brown rice</th>
<th>Sweet potato &amp; lentil korma w/ brown rice or WG pita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed veggie &amp; hummus WG wrap w/ or w/o mozzarella</td>
<td>Falafel gyro with tomato, onion, spinach, and cucumber w/ or w/o tzatziki</td>
<td>Mixed veggie fajitas w/ refried beans on WG corn tortillas w/ or w/o cheese</td>
<td>Lentil, mushroom, and sweet potato shepherd’s pie</td>
<td>Refried pinto, spinach, and cheese enchiladas with brown spanish rice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Salad bar: whole grains, legumes, nuts, fresh & cooked vegetables, choice of vinaigrettes | Pizza station: classic Margherita, veggie supreme, with cheeseless options | Smoothie station: your choice of fruit, greens, & milks or yogurts | Deli station: made-to-order wraps - choice of protein, greens, vegetables, spreads & dressings | Hummus bar: classic, roasted red pepper, avocado, edamame, w/ pita & fresh & roasted veggies |
Example 3: Menu for private institutions
(private schools, worksites, etc.)

- Sweet potato gnocchi pasta salad with chickpeas, radish, mint, basil, tomato, cucumber, chives, and a lemon-olive oil vinaigrette; goat cheese optional
- Dairy-free tikka masala containing red lentils, broccoli, and sweet potato
- Harissa roasted root vegetable medley with cannellini beans and bulgar
- Sauteed mustard greens
- Green pea hummus
- WG couscous, brown rice, WG bread and pita
- Salad bar with mixed greens, legumes, fresh veggies, and fresh fruit

- Saag tofu “paneer” offered with dal makhani and vegetable biryani (WG)
- Eggless chiles rellenos stuffed with pinto bean purée, braised kale, caramelized onions, and queso fresco, baked in a light mole sauce
- Ajo blanco
- Tomatillo salsa
- Gujarati cabbage salad
- Baked vegetable samosas and mint chutney
- Brown Spanish rice, baked tortilla strips
- Salad bar with mixed greens, legumes, fresh veggies, and fresh fruit

- WG pasta alla Norma, containing marina, sun-dried tomatoes, baked eggplant, and basil; ricotta salata optional
- Boeuf bourguignon (1.5 oz) with pearl onions, lima beans, carrots, potatoes, parsnips, and fennel
- Sicilian caponata
- Potato & summer squash dauphinoise made with cashew cream
- Arugula, avocado & grapefruit salad with toasted pine nuts and a balsamic reduction
- Fresh WG baguette
- Baked vegetable and brown rice arancini
- Salad bar with mixed greens, legumes, fresh veggies, and fresh fruit

- Bangan bartha with lemony steamed potatoes, peas and broccoli
- Mung bean stew with acorn squash, garlic, spinach, and okra, in a subtle fish sauce broth
- Beyond Burger on WG sesame buns, with choice of tomato, lettuce, red onion, caramelized onion, and avocado
- WG roti, Steamed brown sticky rice
- Mango, papaya, and banana salad
- Baked russet and sweet potato fries
- Coconut cardamom rice pudding
- Salad bar with mixed greens, legumes, fresh veggies, and fresh fruit

- Briam (mixed roasted vegetables in a tomato, basil, and oregano sauce) with gigante beans and WG pita
- Braised mackerel (1 oz) tacos containing baked sweet potato, refried black beans, pickled onions, cilantro, avocado, and red cabbage on fresh corn tortillas
- Fattoush salad with chickpeas
- Fat-free tzatziki
- Muhammara
- Classic guacamole
- WG pita, baked tortilla strips
- Salad bar with mixed greens, legumes, fresh veggies, and fresh fruit
Meal Ideas

Healthful plant-rich recipes follow a straightforward formula yet allow for endless possibilities in taste and texture. The most nutritionally well-rounded entrées contain 100% whole grains, legumes, vegetables (and/or fruits), and a source of unsaturated fats, such as nuts, seeds, and oils.

Animal products, where they are suitable in a recipe, can be used more sparingly as condiments or toppings.

On the following pages you’ll find a few examples demonstrating the wide variety of plant-rich recipes for your menu inspiration.
Bean and Veggie Wraps
This meal format can take on varying flavor profiles. Use falafel or hummus and classic gyro vegetables for a Mediterranean spin. Southwestern-style ingredients are great from lunch and breakfast wraps and burritos. Add baked tofu, vegetables, and savory soy and sesame flavors for an Eastern-inspired version.

Pastas
Pasta is one of the most versatile ingredients to work with. With a simple sauce, such as marinara or pesto, and endless combinations of vegetables, greens, beans, and nuts to add, it’s easy to serve pasta on a regular basis while still maintaining a sense of variety in flavor and texture.

Bowls
Pair whole grains, like brown rice, legumes and fresh and cooked vegetables, then dress with a vinaigrette or a creamy tahini-based dressing. Top with toasted seeds or nuts for texture and extra nutrition, or serve with a dollop of hummus. Take the flavor profile anywhere by adding different regional spices and ingredients that suit your customers’ palates.
Mexican and Tex-mex
Most conventional Tex-mex or Mexican-inspired dishes in food service follow the combination of "beef + cheese + salsa + tortilla." With so many plant-based swaps to choose from, it’s easy to **reformulate your current Tex-mex dishes with beans in place of beef and additional vegetables in place of cheese.** Try caramelized onions, roasted veggies, or even a drizzle of cashew cream. Add more herbs like cilantro and oregano and more spices like cumin and chili powder.

Casseroles
Casseroles are both convenient and filling, but they often contain red and processed meats—think shepherd’s pie, Greek moussaka, or sausage and egg breakfast casseroles. The meat in these dishes can easily be replaced with **lentils, beans, soy crumbles, additional servings of vegetables,** or other meat substitutes.

South Asian
Curries centered around legumes and vegetables are some of the most **savory and satisfying dishes,** and they’re also some of the **easiest and cheapest to prepare and adapt.** Chana (chickpea) masala, aloo gobi, and dal makhani are just a few of the delicious plant-rich South Asian dishes to choose from. Or try a plant-based saag paneer by replacing paneer cheese with slices of firm tofu. Serve up these dishes with **brown rice or a whole-grain flatbread.**
Breakfast

Hearty American breakfasts tend to center around some of the least healthy foods in our diets, namely refined grains, processed meats, and eggs. Adding plant-rich alternatives might seem impossible, but it’s easier than you think. In place of scrambled eggs, try *scrambling tofu or chickpea flour batter*. Breakfast burritos are popular hot items that can be made with beans and veggies. Try refried *pinto beans, potatoes or sweet potatoes, onion, garlic, bell pepper, and salsa*. Serve up a quintessential English breakfast with hearty whole-grain toast and baked beans. Try smearing hummus or another bean spread on bagels instead of cream cheese, or use *nut-based spreads and top with fresh fruit*. Try overnight oats or baked oatmeal with fruit. Whole-grain baked goods, pancakes, and waffles can easily be prepared with healthier alternatives to eggs, butter, and cow’s milk. These breakfast alternatives to the standard American breakfast are sure to please any time of day.

American

Burgers with fries, pizza, mac ‘n cheese, meatloaf, ice cream, loaded baked potatoes, chicken sandwiches, sloppy joes, mashed potatoes and gravy, cole slaw. Incredibly, all of these American favorites and more can be reformulated around plant-based proteins that are rich in nutrients, high in fiber, and low in saturated fat. Clever usage of *legumes, whole grains, nuts, mushrooms*, vegetables, fruits, and seasonings can turn bland, heavy American fare into satisfying, filling, and health-promoting dishes that taste just as good, if not better, than the originals.
Entrée Salad

Similar to bowls, entrée salads can be mixtures of whole grains, legumes, and greens, but each of those components on its own makes a great base for salads. A diverse combination of nuts, vegetables, fruits (fresh or dried), and vinaigrettes create unique flavors that will keep a rotation of daily salads interesting and appealing. Or, in place of nuts, add crunchy roasted chickpeas or a variety of seeds.
Protein Swaps

CHICKEN
- Chickpeas, hummus, falafel
- Other bean spreads
- White beans (cannellini, navy, butter, etc.)
- Tofu, tempeh, edamame
- Seitan

DAIRY
- Hummus and other bean spreads (cheese)
- Plant-derived milks and creams, e.g. soy
- Blended cashews or other nuts (cheese, cream)
- Reduced fat coconut milk (milk, cream)
- Tahini (cheese, cream)
- Avocado (cheese)

EGGS
- Applesauce (baked goods)
- Aquafaba (baked goods, merinques)
- Banana (baked goods)
- Chia seeds (baked goods)
- Chickpea flour (scramble, quiche, baked goods)
- Ground flaxseed (baked goods)
- Pumpkin purée (baked goods)
- Tofu (scramble, quiche)

MAYO
- Egg-free aioli
- Hummus
- Muhammara or romesco sauce
- Baba ganoush
- Tahini

GROUND BEEF OR PORK
- Black beans
- Chickpeas, falafel
- Crumbled tofu or tempeh (seasoned, baked)
- Jackfruit
- Kidney beans
- Lentils (all colors)
- Seitan
- Textured vegetable protein (TVP)
In the next part of the guide, we'll dive into the goal-setting process, then cover capacity-building and planning. With menu design tools and inspiration for meal development, you'll be well on your way toward laying the groundwork for successful menu updates.

For any additional support, get in touch with us at menus@balanced.org.