

Natural Observation Form (Dining Hall)

Type: Naturalistic observation

Target: Dining hall and students

Duration: 10–20 minutes per session

Observation Context

Location: New College Dining Hall, 40 Willcocks St, Toronto, ON M5S 1C6 (St. George Campus)

Date / time: Feb 3, 12:00–12:20

Estimated crowd level: High

Peak period: Yes

Approx. wait time: 2–3 minutes per food station (each section had ~3–5 students waiting)

What to Observe

1. **Number of students waiting**
Each food station had approximately 3–5 students waiting.
2. **Students checking phones**
Many students checked their phones while waiting.
3. **Students checking menus/signage**
Menu visibility was limited before entering specific stations. Some students leaned forward or approached counters to see available options.
4. **Students asking staff / peers**
Several students asked staff about ingredients or portions; others discussed choices with friends.
5. **Visible confusion (menu/process)**
Some students walked between stations before deciding. A few appeared unsure where to go first due to limited preview of options.
6. **Students switching lines / leaving**
Two students switched to shorter lines. No students left the dining hall entirely.
7. **Payment delays/issues**
No technical payment issues were observed. However, students were required to enter and commit to the dining hall experience before seeing full menu options.
8. **Seating search behavior**
After receiving food, many students looked around the dining area to find available seating. While it was not extremely crowded, students often had to walk around briefly before finding a place to sit.
9. **Staff answering repeated questions**
Staff repeatedly answered questions about menu items and ingredients.

Short Descriptions

What happened overall?

Students entered the dining hall, queued at different stations, made food choices after approaching counters, and then searched for seating. The flow was steady but crowded during lunch peak.

When did frustration peak?

After receiving food, when students needed to walk around to locate seating.

Repeated patterns:

1. Students often decided only after reaching the station (menu/signage was not always visible).
2. Students moved between stations before making a final choice.
3. Students used their phones while waiting in line.
4. Students searched around the dining area for available seating after ordering.

Initial Insights

Possible breakdowns:

1. Students must commit to entering the dining hall before seeing full menu options or crowd conditions.
2. Limited visibility of menus and station busyness increases uncertainty during decision-making.
3. Seating availability adds friction after ordering.
4. Because dining hall pricing is relatively high, making the “wrong” choice carries a higher perceived cost for students.

Additional contextual observations:

1. Most students appeared to be on campus already (casual clothing such as light jackets or slippers), suggesting limited willingness to leave campus once inside.
2. This increases pressure to make quick decisions despite incomplete information.

Design opportunities:

1. Show crowd levels and station busyness before entry.
2. Provide digital menus with photos accessible in advance.
3. Indicate seating availability.
4. Help students compare stations prior to lining up to reduce decision friction.

Links to survey/interview data:

Consistent with student interviews showing strong needs for crowd visibility, seating information, visual menus, and reduced uncertainty before committing to dining choices.