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## Students' Discretionary Money Supports the Local Economy

By *Sophie Braccini*

Matt Carroll is a generous man. The General Manager of Sodexo Dining Services on the St. Mary's College campus, he is sharing the money students spend on food with local restaurants. He may lose some of his revenue, but he says that the program, called 'Off Campus Solution' is a way to give students more variety in their food choices. "It also strengthens ties with the community," adds Carroll, "it gives everybody a share of the pie."

How does it work? When they enroll at Saint Mary's College (SMC), students choose a meal plan. These plans include a certain amount of 'Flex-Dollars' that are recorded on their meal card. Students can now use their cards off-campus in the establishments that have signed an agreement with SMC. The program is managed by a branch of Sodexo called Off Campus Solution (OCS).

"This is our first year for OCS at Saint Mary's," says Carroll, "so we started with five or six places to see how the program goes." OCS manages such plans in many college towns all over the country, and, according to Carroll, some 1500 establishments are participating.

To choose the first restaurants, Carroll met with student focus groups and made sure that the partners in the program were already supporters of the SMC athletic program.

As of today, five businesses are part of the program - Pennini's Ristorante Italiano, Terzetto Cuisine, Loard's Ice Cream and Mountain Mike's Pizza in Moraga; and Chipotle Mexican Grill in Walnut Creek. Subway in Moraga had been contacted but declined to participate.

"We pay a 10% fee to the program," explains Patrick Vahey, owner of Pennini's, "I usually give a 10% discount to SMC students, so for those who use the card we just transfer the 10%." Vahey reports about \$1000 in extra income from the program since it began two months ago.

Roos Pal, of Terzetto, says she has seen more students coming in and she hopes it will become more consistent.

"It's not hard for my employees to manage," she adds, "Off Campus Solution gave us a credit card machine that's dedicated to that program, that costs us \$30 a month."

"It has been working for us," states Denise Manz, manager of the Loard's store that recently moved from Rheem to the Moraga Center, "we've had more students coming in and using their card since the beginning of the school year." Manz was not able to confirm if the increased business was due solely to the card and/or to their new location.

SMC student Lindsay Verber thinks her fellow students are interested in the program. "Sometimes students like to off campus and get a different type of food," she says, "it's fun to go to Pennini's and order a calzone or treat yourself to ice cream at Loard's."

"This is a win-win operation, we're glad Saint Mary's could make it happen," says Moraga Chamber President Edy Schwartz. Carroll will wait a year to see the outcome of the program and then consider its extension. He was the one going door to door to recruit the first business participants; he expects to be contacted by others as the program grows.

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