

## In Pursuit of a Kosher Campus

Dionna Dash (<https://newvoices.org/author/dionna-dash/>) • November 9, 2020 • Campus & Community (<https://newvoices.org/category/campus/>)



This fall, Alyssa Ardai led a mini-revolution. Ardai, a senior business administration major at Merrimack College in Massachusetts, single-handedly changed the structure of her college's dining hall after extensive meetings with the campus dietician. What began in August as unchangeable, pre-packaged COVID-safe options has now evolved into mix-and-match specifications allowing for flexibility and creativity in students' meals.

On many campuses, accessing kosher foods regularly proves difficult, a challenge which has only been exacerbated by the global

pandemic. Schools with larger populations of Jewish students tend to offer more choices, with some campuses even sporting all-kosher stations or restaurants, while students at schools with lower numbers of Jewish students are left to invent their meals from a melange of dairy and vegetarian sides at multiple stations. Many of these side dishes are still considered treyf for those who follow stricter codes of kashrut, preventing some students from utilizing dining halls at all.

Even for students who can eat at these facilities, minimal efforts to safely offer kosher options during the pandemic have revealed how little universities truly care about meeting Jewish students' needs, leaving some students to survive on microwavable macaroni and cheese packets while quarantined and expecting others to maintain their diets after closing major kosher eateries that they rely on.

Being one of only a handful of Jewish students at a Catholic college means that Ardai has had plenty of practice jumping through these hoops. In preparation for previous Passovers, Ardai has explained her dietary restrictions, mainly her avoidance of pork and shellfish, to the university dietician and made lists of foods she'll need to survive the eight days that the dining hall can provide as side dishes. So when the pandemic transformed Merrimack's dining options into pre-packaged takeout boxes, Ardai knew who to approach.

Before the pandemic, Ardai would order her favorite meals, like macaroni and cheese and vegetable omelettes, without their usual add-ins of shrimp and ham. Since pre-packaged meals prevent students from only selecting a certain side from a station or requesting their order be made without a specific ingredient, Ardai could no longer maintain her kosher diet.

"I was getting so annoyed," Ardai said. "One day, every meal they offered had something I couldn't eat on it. They added shellfish to the stir fry and pulled pork to the pizza."

Fed up with her lack of selections, Ardai reached out to the campus dietician, prepared with yet another list of foods she needed to survive.

"I said I didn't need full kosher meals, that I just wanted specific foods back that I could select as sides, like corn," Ardai said. "They used to have corn every day, and now they bring it in once every other week."

Besides the reintroduction of corn, the Merrimack dining hall now features customizable pasta, sandwiches, and side offerings. Everything is still packaged in individual takeout boxes to be COVID-safe, but Ardai can now request her sandwich be prepared without ham.

"I feel a lot better now," she said, "The nice thing is that it changed for everyone, not just me."

Despite Ardai leading her one-woman crusade specifically in pursuit of kosher options on Merrimack's campus, her dedication resulted in benefits for other religious and dietary-restricted students.

"There are some people who eat Halal on campus and others who are vegetarian or vegan," Ardai said. "I feel like I'm advocating on behalf of all three groups."

While Ardai was able to achieve a breakthrough in her pursuit of kosher campus food, students at other universities have been less successful. At Hofstra University in Long Island, the pandemic has ushered in the closure of a campus staple: Eli's Kosher Kitchen. This walk-in-closet-sized restaurant was the only kosher station in Hofstra's dining hall, despite the university's sizable Jewish population, which constitutes 13% of the student body and numbers about 850 students. In order to enforce social distancing practices compliant with COVID regulations, the university converted Eli's into a new salad bar station where dining hall workers compile salads.

"There was no warning, not even an email from the school telling me that Eli's would be shut down," said Max Coven, a sophomore studying journalism. "I don't even keep fully kosher, but I'm just so frustrated by this."

According to the Resident District Manager of Hofstra Dining Services, it is unlikely that Eli's will reopen this year. However, the university plans on completing an additional remodel in the Student Center over the next few years to incorporate more platforms to service kosher students and other communities on campus. Despite these future efforts, Eli's, a favorite hub of both Jewish and non-Jewish students, will surely be missed.

"I could get a whole meal for under five dollars that was more than I could finish in one sitting, and I can eat," Coven joked. "The men that worked there would have conversations with you while you were in line. Most dining hall workers just want to swipe your ID and move on, but these two guys were really friendly."

Because Hofstra has cut back on so many options in its dining halls during the pandemic, Coven said he's been eating the same meals every few days, and assumes it is worse for students who keep a stricter kashrut.

"It's one thing to take away self-service options because of COVID," Coven said, "but it's a whole other issue to take away dining options that address the needs of a specific religious group."

Hofstra has been connecting some kosher students with on-site chefs to create meals for them through a personal service, but the Resident District Manager predicts that this practice is unsustainable in coming years as more Jewish students arrive on campus and demand for kosher meals grows.

For Adam Maman, a freshman studying engineering at Pennsylvania State University, his troubles in accessing kosher food began when he was quarantined while awaiting his COVID test results.

"Normally the kosher food at Penn State is pretty good," Maman said. "There are less options, but everything tastes better than the regular meals."

After his friend tested positive for COVID, Maman took the same test and was quarantined for three days in an isolation facility on campus. His meals were delivered to him, and mostly consisted of packets of microwavable Kraft mac and cheese and cups of Campell's tomato soup.

“They asked me three times about my dietary needs – once over the phone before I moved from my dorm, once when I got to quarantine and once in a survey after I left quarantine,” said Maman, who doesn’t eat non-kosher meat and is allergic to tree nuts and sesame products. “Then when I got there, they gave me all this food I couldn’t eat.”

The food Maman was given included non-kosher jello cups, hummus wraps with tahini, made from sesame seeds, and pizza with sausage on it. He was able to send it back, but only received more macaroni and cheese and tomato soup in response. When contacted about this situation, Penn State Food Services declined to comment.

“I was hungry all the time,” Maman said. “I had to put up with so much nonsense. No one knew what they were doing.”

Luckily, Maman tested negative and was able to return to the kosher options at his regular dining hall.

For many students, this lack of kosher meals means they have to sacrifice part of their belief systems.

“I value kashrut and what it stands for, and I appreciate the health benefits it offers,” said Jason Spiegelman, a junior studying theater at West Chester University.

West Chester does not provide any kosher dining options for students. While the university went fully remote this semester, Spiegelman said the past few years on campus have seen him mostly eating a vegetarian diet to avoid the meat at the dining hall. Although he’s never spoken to the administration about introducing kosher options on campus, he has a few ideas for small, simple changes.

“I’d ask them to just change around the meat they buy to kosher brands, or get meat from local farms where the animals are killed humanely and not kept in cages their whole lives,” Spiegelman said.

For Jacob Brickman, a fifth year psychology major at Western University in Ontario, Canada, switching to a non-kosher lifestyle upon entering college meant giving up a family tradition.

“Growing up, I kept kosher at home but not outside the home, so it wasn’t a huge change, but it did feel a bit like giving up the way things have been,” Brickman said. “I think it was probably disappointing for my parents. It’s definitely something I want to revisit once I’m no longer a student.”

Brickman decided to stop following the rules of kashrut after he heard from upperclassmen at his university that it was difficult to access kosher options on and around campus. The Hillel rabbi at Western regularly drives two hours to Toronto to buy kosher meat for Shabbat dinners.

Leah Bessner, a junior also attending Western University, faced the same dilemma as Brickman but was determined to remain steadfast in her kashrut. As freshmen living in dorms without kitchens, all Western students are required to buy a meal plan. Since all of the options in the dining halls were treyf for Bessner, she decided to forgo the dormitory experience and avoid paying for a meal

plan she couldn't use by living in a house off-campus.

"Looking back, I wish I had the experience of living in a dorm, but I know it wouldn't have been worth it," Bessner said. "I feel like I did kind of miss out on some of the first-year experience by not being able to live in a dorm."

Despite living in a house and maintaining a kosher kitchen, Bessner still struggles to access the foods she needs sometimes as there are no kosher restaurants near her and few kosher options in grocery stores. When stores are well-stocked with kosher selections, they sell out quickly.

In spite of these hardships at many campuses, some schools have been going above and beyond to ensure that their students have access to the foods they need, both during a global pandemic and in regular semesters.

The College of Charleston in South Carolina has a dining hall specifically dedicated to kosher, vegetarian and vegan meals. Not only can students eat at this facility, but local Jewish families often frequent this venue since kosher food can be hard to access in downtown Charleston.

For Jenna Lief, a sophomore studying marketing, welcoming Jewish families into the dining hall makes mealtimes into warm, communal experiences.

"It brings the college community together with the local Jewish community and the larger Charleston community," Lief said. "Plenty of my non-Jewish friends love it just as much as my Jewish friends. Whenever I go, I always run into so many people and it's so nice."

While the College of Charleston stands out as an example of campus kashrut done correctly, the pandemic has complicated access to kosher food at many other universities across the nation. In these cautious times, many schools have found it easier to ignore students' dietary needs than put in the effort to accommodate them, leading to kosher restaurant closures, egregious quarantine conditions and bureaucratic hoops to jump through just to get simple staples in dining halls.

Even when not in a pandemic, some schools have entirely disregarded the presence of kosher students on campus, causing them to miss out on crucial college experiences, like living in freshmen dormitories. While some have been able to find creative means of upholding their kosher diets, with spring term nearing and no foreseeable decline in the prevalence of the virus, students may have to continue to sacrifice their kosher traditions and beliefs because of the negligence of their schools.

Bessner explained this dilemma succinctly when describing how she traded an easy kashrut practice for attendance at her top school.

"You have to make some sacrifices in order to benefit in other ways, but it doesn't mean it's not still frustrating." ♦

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## **Dionna Dash (<https://newvoices.org/author/dionna-dash/>)**

Dionna Dash, originally from Philadelphia, is currently a junior at the University of Pittsburgh studying communications and linguistics. Dionna loves learning languages, going for 10-mile walks, and reading and writing short stories. She writes for Hillel International and runs a blog for the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle, where she explores themes of Jewish mythology and her past struggles with disordered eating.

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