

OU scales back Dining Dollars, some business owners still upset

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Ohio University is giving all incoming freshmen who are on the meal plan an extra \$50 each to spend on food in the dining halls or at Baker Center.

While OU officials consider this a reasonable way to give students a little bonus and promote the food-service operations in Baker Center, two local business owners consider it another way that the university is giving its Baker Center businesses an unfair advantage.

Christine Sheets, assistant vice president for auxiliary services at OU, explained Tuesday that the university is giving freshmen an extra \$50 in Dining Dollars for fall quarter only. Last year, the university gave all students on the meal plan \$100 in Dining Dollars during winter and spring quarters after Baker Center opened.

Sheets explained that the free Dining Dollars are part of the freshman students' meal plans this quarter. The extra money gives them the opportunity to experience the new facilities in Baker Center or use the Dining Dollars in the dining halls, she said.

The Dining Dollars are just part of the meal plan, and were valuable to students who came to campus early this fall and moved in before the official meal plan began on Monday, Sheets said.

"Technically, it's just a promotional thing for us as part of their meal plan," Sheets said.

Asked about the reaction from local businesses to the Dining Dollars, Sheets said that it was her impression from past media accounts that most business owners said the Dining Dollars did not hurt them when they were given to all students on the meal plan. She added that the Dining Dollars just give the students a choice and a chance to experience the different facilities on campus.

TWO ATHENS business owners said this week that they're upset about the Dining Dollars, and feel that the program is unfair to the local companies.

"I feel like OU is not a business corporation, and I don't think that small-town businesses can compete with a state-run school that is going to hand out free money, especially free money that can only be used at their cof-



Students wait in line in the food court area in Baker Center in this file photo from the 2006-2007 school year.

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fee shop," said Chris Pyle, co-owner of Donkey Coffee and Espresso on West Washington. He questions the legality of the university giving away money to be used at on-campus businesses, and said the program hurt his business last year.

"We felt a huge impact from it," Pyle said, adding that several other business owners also told him they were damaged by it.

"We experienced an incredible loss in business," Pyle said.

Some of his regular customers told him they felt bad about going to OU's Front Room (in Baker Center) for coffee instead of his business, but they couldn't turn down the \$100 in free money they could use at the Front Room and other Baker Center businesses, he said. OU has scaled the program back to \$50 just for freshmen this year, but it still hurts his business, Pyle said.

"I feel like there's just no way to compete with that kind of thing," he said.

John Gutenkanst, owner of Avalanche Pizza, agrees.

"It's totally unfair," Gutenkanst said. "I don't think that they teach that in their school of business."

Gutenkanst said he pays taxes to the state and then the state gives the tax money to the university, but then the university encourages students to use its on-campus food venues and not local businesses.

"All I'm looking for is a level playing field," he said. If OU allowed Dining Dollars to be used at any local business, that would be much more fair, he said.

The university won't even let him put up fliers for his business in the residence halls, he added.

"They have a great facility there (at Baker Center). It should sink or swim on its own merits. That's what we do, we sink or swim on our own merits," Gutenkanst said. He added that he worries that with OU taking these actions now that hurt local businesses, they might make steps in the future that hurt businesses even more.

"It's those little steps that the large organizations make, one step after another," he said.

Josh Thomas, owner of Brenen's Coffee Café in uptown Athens and on Columbus Road and president of the Athens Uptown Business Association, said the Dining Dollars program definitely hurt uptown businesses last year.

"Obviously, that's a lot of money that... went away from Court Street," Thomas said. He met with OU officials about the program and informed them of the concerns that uptown business owners had about the Dining Dollars.

He is happy OU scaled back the program this year, and said that the change will help local businesses.

"We were pleased with the decision," Thomas said.

Baker Center is still like a new business that everyone has to compete with, and the Dining Dollars will still steer some students away from uptown businesses, Thomas said. But because the program was changed, he is not expecting that it will hurt the businesses very much.

"We're definitely anticipating that the impact won't be that great," Thomas said.