

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Menu Project Includes In-Depth Cost Analysis

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

The restaurant menu item development project begins with engaging in a “make or buy” analysis activity, through which students try to determine if it will be more cost effective to make something from scratch or purchase it pre-made. One example could be tomato sauce: In addition to calculating the cost of ingredients and supplies needed to make tomato sauce, students also map out the steps needed to make the item, consider how much time it takes, and calculate cost for labor. The instructor usually demonstrates the process of making an item to help students see the process in action as they are writing out steps and calculating time. As homework, the instructor asks students to think about items in their own kitchen they use and determine if it would be more cost effective to make or buy them. In the next class session, students take their turn sharing their thoughts about the activity with the class until each student has had a chance to contribute.

The remainder of the project is group-based. The instructor forms the groups at the beginning of the term, usually based on students’ interest in restaurant type (fast food, fine dining, etc.). Students typically work with the same group on all group activities or projects for the rest of the term.

In the second part of the menu project, each group works to develop a single menu item, considering quantity and cost related to the item. After finding or developing a recipe, students must estimate how many servings of that item they will need per week and work through developing a cost for the item by calculating the supplies, ingredients, and labor required. Students also incorporate strategies learned through the “make or buy” analysis to determine which ingredients they will make and which ones they will purchase.

While completing this project, students must research and consider things like storage, delivery, waste management, and prep time. To ensure that each group is able to collaborate, class time is set aside for group work. Every time groups meet in class, the instructor meets with each group to offer guidance and check on progress.

Students work on the menu item activity for approximately two weeks and must do a class presentation for their new menu item. The presentation is rather informal and lasts approximately 10 minutes. During the presentation, students introduce their menu item, outline the cost, explain their choices about making or buying ingredients, and discuss any challenges they faced in developing their menu item. For example, students can talk about how they originally wanted to use frozen chicken but ran into a storage problem.