



Planning a Successful Student Union

If you are planning to open a new student union foodservice, here are five key factors to consider.

Today's college students are savvy, sophisticated customers who bring high expectations to school with them. As a result, many college FSDs have taken steps to provide them with a wider variety of services and concepts, such as marketplace-style serveries, convenience options and upscale facilities.

That trend is also having an impact on the design and programming at student unions. Our firm has worked extensively with clients nationwide to plan, design and create programming for many such projects and we have identified some common challenges facing FSDs and their staffs as they bring these facilities on line. Here are five critical factors to keep in mind:

Make sure you are on the student union planning team. First, get "plugged" into the campus loop. Be aware of projects your college or university has on the drawing board and what, if any, foodservice elements will be part of them. Make sure campus decision makers know who you are and why you need to be included in any planning meetings. Touch base with these decision makers regularly so that you don't miss your opportunity to be part of the planning team.

Some FSDs may prefer to hire an independent consultant to represent their interests or to partner with them in these types of projects. If you choose that route, be sure to select a consultant who will objectively work on your behalf.

Use market research to find out what foodservice concepts and services your customers want in the new union. Never assume that food will be the main draw for a new or renovated student center. Also, never assume you know what type of concepts and services will most appeal to students who will use the new or renovated student center. Use market research to validate your hunches.

The best approach: Use an independent source to conduct focus groups with a balanced mix of on- and off-campus students, faculty and staff. Ask about eating habits and preferences and which factors are important when they eat on campus. Talk to administrators about how they expect the new student union to fit into campus life.

Consider what impact the new foodservices will have on your current dining program. A student union project provides an ideal opportunity to review your existing operations and plans. The last thing you want to do is negatively affect other successful food venues on campus. Points to ponder include:

- Will the student union operations negatively affect other nearby foodservice operations on campus?
- Will they provide an opportunity to consolidate services and realize labor and cost savings?
- Can dining use the new facility for production of food and for catering and conference services?
- How can meal plans be designed to encourage the use of the student union venue without eating into projected board plan revenues?
- What opportunities are there to bring branded concepts to campus? If there are, what type of licensing and leasing agreements make sense for your department?
- How can the new operation be distinguished from other on- or off-campus food service?

"Operationalize" the venue during the planning stages. To avoid ending up with a venue that is not operationally and fiscally sound, address critical issues early on to ensure it will support itself from the day it opens. Pay particular attention to issues like the hours of operation, policies that may affect revenue generation, and staffing plans in relation to expected traffic patterns.

As a member of a planning team,

it's your responsibility to not only provide guidance and critical information regarding the foodservice operations (necessary server square footage, seating requirements, etc.), but also to provide leadership on how the new union's activities and programming (e-mail, computer labs, etc.) will best complement the other foodservice programs on campus.

For example, if current meal plans will be accepted at the new venue, it can dramatically limit cash paying customers and your ability to generate new revenue. Also, it is vital to find out what other services will be in the building (classes, student organizations, bookstore, mailboxes, etc.) and to suggest a food service location that is centrally located to take advantage of this traffic.

Prepare for a successful grand opening. The lesson here is to practice, then practice some more.

Two weeks before the grand opening, start dress rehearsals or "mock service" by inviting employees to eat at the venue. Next, invite university/college "friends of dining" to sample the service and food. The last mock service customers should be the administrative assistants who work for campus administrators. Each group should be given evaluation forms to score the venue. These forms can be used by managers to make adjustments before opening day.

A new dining venue is an opportunity for your department to shine and the first impression customers get when they walk through the door will last a long time. Remember—you'll never get a second chance to make a first impression.

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