

How to plan successful food services in your college union

by H. David Porter

As colleges and universities across the country build or redesign college unions to meet today's sophisticated college students' needs, union directors and their planning teams are increasingly looking at which activities and services, including dining outlets and concepts, will most appeal to this important customer group as well as to the entire campus community as a whole.

One common thread in many of these projects is the college's or university's desire to activate the union 24 hours a day, especially during the early evening and late night. Food service can play an important role in drawing students, faculty, staff, visitors, and others into this building but in no way should it be considered the only draw. A customer-friendly mix of services, including dining venues, is crucial to the success of any new or renovated college union project.

Regardless of the size of the campus or its geographical location, there are several common food service-related challenges union planners and their teams face as they prepare to create new college unions and as they reevaluate the food service in existing unions.

Among these challenges might be: What food concepts (marchés, food courts, convenience stores, coffee bars, etc.) should be available, who should operate them, and how should these spaces be financed? What methods of service (all-you-care-to-eat or a la carte) and payment methods will most appeal to customers? How will conference and catering services be used in this building? To maximize participation, when should the building and the venues/services inside it

be open? Finally, how will the food venues and services available in the union compliment or conflict with the residential, catering, and/or other retail food offerings elsewhere on campus?

Answering these questions can be challenging, but failing to spend the time necessary to do so can lead to long-term (and expensive) problems that may be difficult or impossible to correct/change after the union is open.

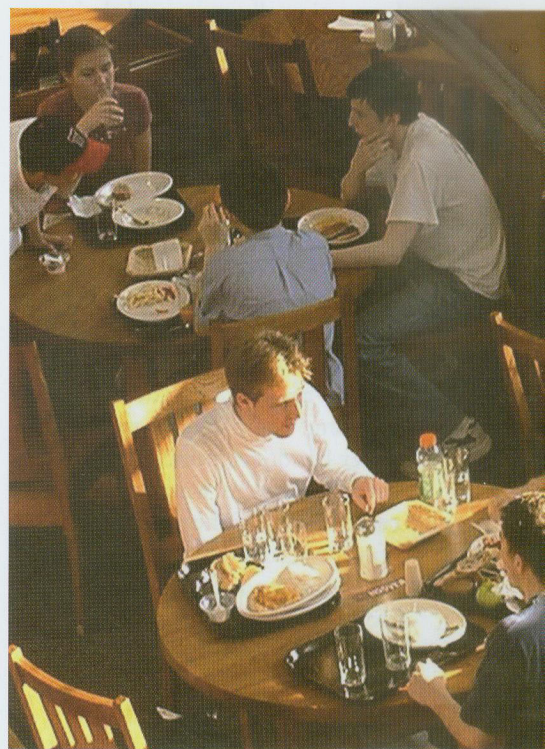
How can union planners avoid this pitfall? Here is some useful advice.

Include the campus dining services/auxiliary director in the planning process

Doing so can help planning teams make informed decisions that can ultimately enhance campus-wide food service options, boost customer satisfaction and maximize meal plan participation.

Conduct market research

Never assume to know what type of concepts and services will most appeal to students who will use the new or renovated union. Also, never assume that the food services offered in the union are mutually exclusive from the campus-wide dining program. They are not. Be conscious of how decisions will affect meal plan privileges. From the customers' perspective, the two are seamlessly related. The campus community has a choice of where to eat, and where they can spend their meal points plays into their decision. The best way to determine what food service concepts and services customers want in the new union is through market research.



Some campuses may prefer to use their own resources, but planning teams are likely to get more comprehensive data by hiring an independent, objective, fee-based company to conduct qualitative and quantitative market research on campus.

Qualitative research includes personal interviews, intercept interviews, and focus groups with a balanced mix of on- and off-campus students, faculty and staff, and other customers.

During these sessions, the focus should be on asking probing questions to find out what customers' eating habits and preferences are and what factors are important to them when they eat on and off campus. Once the qualitative research is complete, it is wise to follow that up with quantitative research, such as a Web-based survey distributed campus-wide to the same customer groups, to challenge or confirm the issues that were identified during the qualitative market research phase.

Discuss the research data

Once the market research phase is complete, union directors and their planning teams must discuss at the results. The goal? To understand the critical issues that must be addressed during the planning process.

Questions to be answered include:

- **What is the best mix of dining venues?** The answer depends on the target audience and its needs. If meal plan holders will be using this facility, consider including an all-you-care-to-eat venue in the new building. Food courts, on the other hand, are popular with those customers who prefer a la carte dining. Other options to consider are: c-stores, coffee bars, grab-and-go food kiosks, etc.
- **If branded concepts are warranted, what should the mix include?** National brands are popular, but there may be more economically attractive regional or manufacturer brands that offer the type of menu items and services that appeal to your campus community. When evaluating branding options, planners need to explore the implications of contractual agreements and how they may limit or create opportunities with on-campus and off-campus students.
- **As for space allocation in the new building, what are the optimum locations for the food service venues?** (The answer: high-traffic areas.) Is there an opportunity to site these venues so that they can share common back-of-the-house space, or does each venue need its own kitchen and storage area?
- **How will the new college union food service options affect the campus's current dining program?** One of the most common mistakes union

directors and planning teams make is failing to evaluate in advance how this building, and specifically the dining service outlets in it, will affect the current dining program and vice versa. If this advice goes unheeded, there can be serious, wide-reaching implications such as driving customer traffic away from the college union or a drop in meal plan participation.

- **Should meal plan options be enhanced, reinvented, or eliminated to ensure maximum usage of the union's dining facilities and a seamless integration with the campus-wide dining program?** In many cases, a meal plan program must be designed to ensure customer satisfaction and maximum participation.
- **What are the financial implications of the proposed food venues in the new union?** It is critical that the planning team develop financial models including a 10-year projection of revenues and expenses, taking into consideration meal plan, cash, declining balance, credit card, and interdepartmental revenues and the associated indirect and direct operating costs, especially labor associated with the proposed concepts and space program. Other useful financial tools that can lead to fiscally sound decisions are a 10-year annuity analysis and the return-on-investment calculation. When creating these financial models, be sure to provide scenarios regarding how the food services venues will pay for the space. For example, should dining/auxiliary services own the space and cover the debt service associated with the proposed food venues, or does a landlord-tenant arrangement make better sense?

Consider and re-evaluate if possible the location of the soon-to-be-built college union

Often, planning teams have no control or say over where this building is erected, but if that option is available, they should make sure that all possible locations on campus are evaluated with an eye toward convenience.

The adage in the real estate market is "location, location, location," and that same adage holds true when it comes to building college unions. These unions should be natural gathering places, and therefore they should be as centrally located as possible on campus. Most students (whether they live on or off campus) tend to meet with each other during the day as they come and go from classroom buildings. Therefore, it makes sense that, if possible, a union should be located in or near the academic core of the campus or on a heavily traveled route used by students and other members of the campus community.

On some campuses the college unions were built on beautiful pieces of land, on the far end of the campuses. As a result, few people go to them or use the services in them because the buildings are not conveniently located. Campus planners must not fall into this trap. Nor should they count on fabulous food service venues or programming activities to draw customers into these inconvenient locations. These elements are seldom attractive enough drawing cards to lure students and others to out-of-the-way, poorly located unions.

Unions will continue to evolve as students' tastes and expectations change. Smart planners will continue to track the trends and be prepared to respond so that their unions remain attractive gathering places for campus community members.