



David Porter's 6 Secret Killers of Self-Operated Dining Services

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Everyone involved in dining services wants to have a smooth and effective program. But when it comes to actually delivering on this, the results can vary. The truth is that self-operated dining services can be even more successful than those run by big companies, but they often end up losing the communication and performance battles, and ultimately self-destructing. Here are David's six secret killers of self-operated dining service programs.

While you may not be in a position to avoid these mistakes, if you're willing and able to lean into learning – and make a commitment of day-to-day personal and professional improvement – the success you'll achieve will be far beyond what you've imagined.

Being a Great General Manager

The scenario often goes that someone who started in the dish room ends up decades later as the GM. This person is likely a phenomenal general manager; a foodie who is dialed into students and understands what they want, as well as someone his team respects and enjoys being around. But if being relatable and knowing food are your primary strengths, you're probably extremely vulnerable. This vulnerability is especially present if you are unable to speak at least two languages fluently – one of finance and one of food.

In addition to being bilingual in this way, the leader of a self-operated dining service must be able to communicate to her team just as well as she communicates to the director of auxiliary service, director of business services and the CFO of the university. The CFO, for example, needs to receive weekly financial statements (whether he/she asks for them or not) including empirical data that shows your department's performance and financial contribution to your school. If you're not able to deliver this, you're essentially permitting your competition (a food service contractor) to gain the higher ground with key decision makers on campus. So a great leader requires the ability to speak fluent "foodie" and "finance," as well as the ability to proactively develop political consensus with key senior administration stakeholders. Lean into learning and improve yourself accordingly.

Spoiled Students

Assumptions in the dining services industry often reach far and wide. Two of the most toxic beliefs to hold are that students are going to complain no matter what they're served or when you serve it, and that meal plans are too expensive. If you don't evolve your program to meet the unique needs of your students (like in responding to how the "student clock" influences demand), the cunning forces of the status quo will keep you stuck. And if that happens, your competition (both on and off campus) that *is* dialed into

your target market(s) and respects their needs will leave you in the dust. You need to cater – literally – to your students in order to survive and thrive.

Intuition versus Empirical Data

Professional intuition can prove valuable, but relying upon it and nothing else can be catastrophic when you're operating a multi-million dollar food service program with hundreds of employees and up to 30 separate dining locations on a campus. This is akin to flying a plane in the clouds when you're not instrument rated. What you need (in addition to that intuition) is a comprehensive business system that produces reliable empirical data in real time. This system should cover procurement of food and non-food purchases, inventory management, standardized recipes, production forecasting, financial reporting, labor forecasting and scheduling. Be sure to select a system that can communicate with a front of house point of sale system in order to collect and process data in real time.

Having the technological capability to access data and make adjustments wherever you see red flags every seven days will make all the difference in the longevity of your program. This in-depth information allows you to stand eye to eye with financial officers and communicate your performance succinctly – and, as a result, make your department bulletproof.

Professional Glaucoma

Glaucoma is the decline and eventual loss of one's vision, which unfortunately happens a lot in self-operated dining services across the country. This often manifests as a leader who gets mired in minutiae, rather than seeing the bigger picture. An ideal leader of your self-op program would be able to see down the road, anticipate obstacles and opportunities, and position your organization to meet both. The ability to develop a long-term and short-term strategic plan for your department is crucial. And instead of getting bogged down in details, you need someone at the helm who knows how to garner the much-needed political support on campus that gets programmatic and facility improvements approved and funded. Sound like a tall order? It is, but leaders with these skillsets *are* out there if you know what you're seeking.

Hobbling Student Success

The majority of college and university administrators and dining service programs only see a small part of what they offer (namely, the food itself) and limit themselves. Dining is more than doling out sustenance; it's an experience. It can play a central and transformational role in students' social development and "The College Experience" that is so highly sought after. There is no other program on campus that has as much

influence to contribute to (or detract from) socially rich student engagement on a day-to-day basis.

A well-designed program can encourage collaboration, quell the pangs of homesickness and offer students a sense of emotional security. It can even give them a compelling reason to spend more time on campus throughout the week and on weekends. Studies have shown that thoughtfully created dining services contribute to improved GPAs, higher student retention and increased graduation rates. They can also be used as a powerful marketing tool for universities, as a way to improve your acceptance yield rates and to strengthen alumni relations. Don't continue to underestimate what your dining program can do to transform the lives and success of your students while they attend your school – and after they graduate.

Failing to be David when up against Goliath

All too often, wonderful self-op programs shrink away when they fear their program may be contracted out to a big company. Stand up and realize you can – and should – compete instead. The only upper hand these contractors can have is the ability to write really big checks to your university (i.e. a hostage fee). But your self-operated department can produce even higher levels of financial remuneration to your school. Again, this requires that you as a leader must have (or source) the planning, financial and political skills in order to effectively communicate your value to your school and gain the political support needed to implement your vision. There is nothing a self-operated department cannot do better than a food service contractor, except maybe acting as a loan shark

If you can lean into learning and work on continuous personal and professional improvement, your self-operated dining program will become your school's primary driving force of student success on a day-to-day basis. And your dining department? You'll enjoy watching as it achieves unprecedented levels of success.