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Strategic planning can be a daunting undertaking but now more than ever it can provide a solid foundation for your campus dining program.

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Viewpoint: It's a Brave New World for Campus Dining

Strategic planning, an important tool used by successful leaders who can adapt and find the courage to change the way they do business, is a critical tool to manage a changing campus dining environment.

H. David Porter | Oct 04, 2021

As demand returns and, in some cases even roars back, for dining on college campuses, campus dining directors are faced with a new reality that includes a wide variety of unexpected changes in customer preferences and unexpected operational challenges. These include, but are not limited to:

- a labor market that has dramatically shifted and shrunk.

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- supply-chain disruptions and shortages of disposables, cleaning supplies, food and more.
- changing student demographics, with the Wall Street Journal reporting that from spring 2019 to spring 2021, the number of collegiate male students fell by more than 535,000, well over triple the modest 154,000 decline observed for women, according to National Student Clearinghouse data.

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- the omnipresent use of mobile food ordering apps and the expansion of “ghost kitchens,” with Wendy’s recently announcing that it will be opening more than 700 ghost kitchens across the United State.
- changing methods of service forced over the last 18 months, by which students, faculty and staff can now order food from their phone and have it delivered by robot to any point on campus and/or pay for it online and pick it up in a designated area.

As a result, many campus dining directors are asking, “Will traditional residential and retail dining continue to exist on my campus? How will I need to modify my meal plan programs and pricing in order to meet the ‘new normal’ needs of students? In what ways will we need to reimagine catering services in a post-Covid era?”

The best place for campus dining directors to begin finding answers to these questions specific to their own campuses is by employing a strategic planning process that can transform the disruption and uncertainty of the pandemic into growth and profitability.

A successful strategic plan starts by focusing on establishing customer preferences and demand for each demographic group being targeted and served. In many cases what appears to be a legitimate problem is nothing more than a symptom of a very different core issue that a well-executed process of discovery will bring to light.

Once customer preferences and demand have been established, the next step is to define expected (and where possible unexpected) challenges and limitations that may obstruct strategies identified to successfully meet those demands.

With that information in hand, the next step in a successful strategic planning process is to identify how you and your team can deliver the goods and services to each demographic group, in each business segment to meet the short- and long-term milestones of the strategic plan. These could include reimagining the construct and delivery of residential and retail dining and elements of catering. It could require a major investment in the redesign and renovation of residential and retail dining venues to create capacity for mobile ordering pick up or ghost kitchens, innovative and cutting-edge kitchens designed to leverage a smaller work force that can produce more food for each business segment including catering.

Of course, any strategic planning process worth completing must include detailed financial proformas to project expected revenues, direct and indirect operating expenses and detailed staffing matrices for each business unit in each business segment. These proformas must factor in all aspects of the identified strategies outlined in the strategic planning process including optimum number of residential and retail locations, meal plan options and pricing (and projected participation), capital costs associated with any facility changes required as a result of the planning process and more. Return on investment is calculated in order to provide, in many

cases, a compelling argument to justify what might seem like a large and unreasonable capital investment otherwise.

Senior administration and decision makers will pay attention and most likely be moved to approve a new strategic plan and associated capital expenditures when you can demonstrate that in addition to achieving the dramatic improvements with campus dining, expected outcomes include improvements in...

- student retention (fall freshman to fall sophomore)
- housing occupancy for underclassmen and upper classmen
- your school's competitive edge to attract and enroll students versus cross-applicant schools
- student participation in residential and retail on-campus dining
- elimination or mitigation of food and nutrition insecurity
- student safety, mental health and emotional intelligence
- student success (measured in average GPAs)
- four to six year graduation rates

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