

# Creating Flexible Campus Dining Facilities

Three Examples of Innovative  
Approaches to Upgrading  
Campus Dining

by

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Intimate dining spaces, 24/7 laptop hosting, cook-to-order formats and fast-changing palettes are just a few of the trends creating constant change for campus dining services. Students want variety, speed, amenities and the cool factor of a place they can claim as their own.

These trends ultimately require changing the physical layout and functionality of the campus servery. Dining renovations are costly and complex, sometimes requiring a shutdown of revenue-producing facilities during reconstruction.

College administrators can avoid much of this expense and disruption by creating more flexible and timeless dining destinations. A servery designed for change makes it easy to adapt to change.

## Where to Begin

Flexibility starts with kitchen equipment choices. There are two ways of creating flexibility and adaptability of equipment. First, choose equipment with multiple uses. Look for proven and versatile equipment, which can be cross-functional.

Equipment planned and selected properly will function in several ways for several types of menu groups. By providing the most flexible conditions able to accommodate a variety of equipment, even unforeseen changes can be made quickly.

Trillium Seating Balcony Area – A variety of flexible seating options including this balcony area at Cornell University’s Trillium Dining Hall encourages off-hours use as a lounge area and social space for students. “The warm colors of the dining room appeal to our students and the flexibility of the servery gives us the operational control we were looking for,” said Cornell’s Director of Dining Services Colleen Wright-Riva. Photography: PCA



Choices to strengthen future flexibility include installing a versatile conveyor oven instead of specialty ovens. This allows a servery to cook pizza, calzones, paninis and other foods in the same place, reducing square foot demands for ovens and concentrating high volume food types into one accessible area.

Cornell University’s Trillium Dining Hall was able to change 75 percent of their menu offerings without adding new equipment. The decision to make the change followed the lackluster response to a menu concept introduced when the Trillium Hall was expanded and renovated.

Because Cornell had selected adaptable equipment, and since the Trillium design was flexible, the menu change could be quickly implemented. At Cornell, another contributor to flexibility is a center island with large wok tables for cooking Asian, Indian and Mexican foods. This versatile and fast cooking station gives the kitchen the ultimate flexibility to offer a variety of menus simultaneously. New items can be routinely added to the menu mix.

A second strategy with equipment is to provide an environment where switching out the equipment components can be done quickly and easily. This allows key public spaces to have different uses throughout the day. Modular walls, wheeled tables and lightweight displays are frequently used to increase adaptability and make the most use of a smaller space.

At a busy Boston campus, an area used for grab and go lunch items gets converted to a more relaxed coffee and dessert bar by replacing tabletop warmers with pastry displays. By adjusting light levels, the space converts from the busy lunch pace to a more formal evening setting.

During the design stage of a new or renovated dining facility, carefully planning the type, location, visual appeal and adaptability of equipment is essential. We recommend that school

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Stetson Main Dining Area – Main dining area of Northeastern University. Stetson West features adaptable lighting systems and flexible furniture setups. “We truly hit the WOW factor,” stated Northeastern’s Director of Dining Service Maureen Timmons.  
Photography: Anton Grassl



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Materials and furniture are key contributors to this environment, and to achieving a flexible outcome. We emphasize using quality materials and strong color schemes to create a timeless look and feel.

At Northeastern University, the team planning the new Stetson West facility chose a colorful combination of finish materials including ceramic tiles with a hand crafted look. The tiles, which have the added benefit of being low maintenance, have a classic aesthetic appeal and will last for decades as installed.

administrators and their design partners analyze every decision through the lens of increased future flexibility.

#### **Timeless Places – Rich Colors & Variety of Palettes**

Life is full of rapid change, yet people seek out destinations offering a timeless look and feel.

Ceiling panels, flooring, millwork and other finish materials present opportunities to contribute to the timelessness of the space. Millwork choices should have durable detailing, able to withstand the cumulative effects of frequent contact. Avoiding trendy color schemes and staying with solid, functional and proven products will allow for a long lifecycle for these important visual elements.

Furniture selections need to project an ageless appearance as well. The goal is to buy it once. The right furniture system in a dining room should project a classic look. Avoid styles which can age quickly, and select lines which are known to still look brand new long after purchase. If the furniture looks worn, it changes the entire experience of dining and relaxing.

Another way of thinking about furniture is to plan to switch seating more often to keep a timeless space more contemporary. This approach is most often used when a servery is looking to refresh its image without a wholesale renovation, or when introducing new furniture complements other new developments such as a new menu or theme.

## Lighting & Signage Standards

Lighting and signage decisions contribute immensely to achieving a flexible and inviting space. We prefer a low tech, high impact approach to graphics and signage. Some of the new technologies available - flat panels and touch screens for example - boast a high "cool" factor. But technology changes quickly, and obsolescence is an expensive luxury.

The goal is to design a flexible signage system, visually appealing, which can easily be changed when menus or food themes change. Traditional materials with a standard set of easily-changed parts will help avoid the cost of replacing electronic or custom signage.

The right lighting significantly elevates the atmosphere and magnetism of a public dining space. Research on successful restaurant and retail spaces consistently proves the importance of lighting in shaping customer perceptions. The lighting design should invite students into a space visibly different than the rest of the campus, and offer a calm respite from the daily routine.

In order to promote flexibility, while creating this appeal, we like to use warm, functional, and easy-to-update lighting

fixtures. Pendant lighting, for example, offers infinite flexibility. The shades on these attractive fixtures can be changed easily to metal, fabric or glass without changing the fixture itself.

## Message & Identity

Successful dining facilities communicate a distinct identity to customers. These spaces create customer appeal and loyalty by integrating food and the server menu to be a big part of the message. Take a cue from the Food Channel and Whole Foods Market. Display the food - and let the sights, aromas and sounds of great cooking become an integral part of the customer experience.

At Northeastern University, an exhibition kitchen was built as part of the Stetson West dining hall. This space, popular on campus because it hosts cooking demonstrations, visits by local celebrity chefs and Friday tastings of new menu items, helped turn a dining hall into a destination.

*Entertainment and delivering a memorable customer experience are crucial to building a following for any food outlet.*

*Exhibition Kitchen at Stetson West – An exhibition kitchen entertains students and customers of Northeastern University's Stetson West Dining Facility. Stetson West hosts celebrity chef demonstrations, cooking classes and tastings. Chef Michael Schlow is shown in action.*

Photography: PCA



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Naming the servery, and using the name identity to create a level of excitement and fun, is a great way to build an image and a positive customer connection. After all, dining should be an enjoyable and rejuvenating experience, whether the experience involves a four-course dinner or a slice of pizza and an iced tea.

The Café at Children's was the name chosen for the busy servery at Children's Hospital in Boston. The new name helped achieve a more intimate identity for the space. The servery theme and entertainment element was the kitchen. The design elements emphasized the universal images of a kitchen... from pot racks to iconic hoods to glossy tiles and chrome shelving, food was cooked or finished right on the front line.

### **Balancing Cost & Flexibility**

One of the questions we hear from clients is whether building in a high degree of flexibility adds to the design and construction budget. When the project is approached the right way, a flexible and adaptable dining facility should not require additional time or cost to create.

In my view, it takes the same amount of effort to get the design right as it does to get it wrong! It does require more careful foresight on the part of the university client and the design team. Exploring all the available options for equipment and furnishings, for example, produces a payoff in time saved later on.

Examine the ancillary costs of furniture and fixture choices. Are there special cleaning materials or special maintenance issues required by the furniture and fixtures in the design? Are there some trade-offs you can make by selecting less expensive tile, countertops or casework while not sacrificing flexibility? In short, every decision needs to be made through the lens of adaptability and lifespan.

Achieving flexibility and future cost protection is everyone's goal. Start with a strategic vision - the big idea of what you want the new dining space to communicate to customers. Once you and your architect identify this ideal, each of the tactical and logistical decisions will come more easily. Your reward: a flexible dining facility and a loyal customer base. ♦

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