

Getting to “WOW” With Creative Dining Hall Solutions

Is there a more easily measured improvement than upgrading a dining service venue on campus?

by Eric Brown

From the moment a new or newly renovated facility is opened, the degree of success or failure is easy to spot. The difference between creating an instant hit and opening just another cafeteria space is often decided long before the first blueprint is drawn. Knowing well in advance what specific needs you can meet — and being creative about how you meet them — is the challenge.

In a campus environment, those needs are as varied as the unique student cultures of each college. In our work, we see a number of needs that eventually lead to greater investment in food service operations. These include:

- ▶ fulfilling a desired campus master plan;
- ▶ fostering community by providing safe and attractive gathering places;
- ▶ increasing nontuition revenue;
- ▶ recruiting and retaining students and faculty;
- ▶ keeping students on campus to dine; and
- ▶ improving the overall quality of the campus environment.

Dining facilities need to be exciting in both vision and function. Revenue generation alone, while essential, is not enough of a rationale for executing a successful vision. Food service projects must also make a long-term, positive contribution to the quality of residential life on campus. They need to be perceived as destinations.

Thanks to big-picture thinking by college administrators, dining and food service projects are solving a number of past problems while becoming a vital part of nearly every student life facility.

At Northeastern University, for example, many students were choosing the fast-food alternatives available a few steps off campus on the adjacent Huntington Avenue strip. The on-campus eating venues were uninviting and impersonal, lit by overhead fluorescent lighting and outfitted with battered cafeteria furniture.

Maureen Timmons, director of Dining Services for Northeastern, explains just how far they needed to go. “When we began the upgrade of our dining areas, we were looking at cafeterias basically untouched for 30 years,” she recalls. “Our goal was to get participation way up, since students were accustomed to dining off campus as soon as they got off the meal plan in their sophomore year.”

There were similar problems across the river at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. University administrators were hoping to foster a greater sense of community and encourage social interaction among students.

Next House and other residence halls offered antiquated and underutilized cafeterias that made local Cambridge pizza parlors and fast-food outlets seem like four-star restaurants. According to MIT’s Director of Campus Dining Richard Berlin, the Next House Dining Hall project was also part of a long-term objective of MIT to attract current and future students to campus residence halls and out of neighborhood apartments in Boston and Cambridge.

Cornell University’s need in reconfiguring the design and layout of its Trillium Dining Hall was to correct logistical deficiencies in Cornell’s retail dining operations and to increase the college’s ability to meet projected business revenue. They also wanted a space that could double as a catering and meeting venue.

Based on the lessons learned from these and other college initiatives, here are eight proven steps to advance a dining or food service initiative to WOW status.

1. Define Overall Objectives. Going beyond the stated needs to reach a consensus on desired outcomes will help inform the programming and make design decisions much easier to make. Often, strategic objectives come from leadership: the college president or board of trustees. Fulfilling the vision of an institution means taking every opportunity presented within the physical campus to reflect that vision.

We find that the best starting point for clarifying objectives is to ask the hard questions: what role does this project have in advancing the school’s future vision and image? Who is the customer, and how can this dining hall project best meet that customer’s changing needs? The process can be time-consuming and difficult. But a thorough examination of all the opportunities, constraints, ideas and desired outcomes for a new dining facility should be completed and its results documented. This document



Photo © Steve Rosenthal.

Here, at Stetson East Marketplace at Northeastern University, the big idea was to tempt students to come inside. A highly visible restaurant concept featuring an inviting glass atrium design with seating and performance areas brought that idea to life. The dining area also connects two older residence halls for a fresh, new look.

then benefits the entire team throughout the decision-making to come.

2. Analyze Existing Conditions. By investigating the infrastructure and existing conditions of a dining area, the possibilities and limitations of an upgrade come into view. If the desire is to expand capacity, the analysis can review the structural, mechanical and electrical systems which may need to be expanded or replaced.

Other essential issues are important to review up front, as well. These include a point-by-point building envelope analysis, a thorough check for code compliance and an audit of potential safety problems. We recommend making an informed projection of the expected lifespan for the building, as well.

3. Involve Students and Other Customers. Richard Berlin, director of Campus Dining for MIT, is a proponent of proactive outreach. "First off, select an architect that knows how to listen and to prioritize what they hear." He suggests that the team planning a food service project "be as inclusive as possible, involving students and other stakeholders. At MIT," he states, "we have program staff, operating staff, faculty residents and housemasters that are all either using or managing a dining hall. You need to listen from ground up."

We are constantly reminded of the value of seeking out

customer input for restaurant, hotel and hospitality spaces. In the case of campus dining service projects, the benefits of asking students and other users about their needs, preferences, and likes and dislikes goes a long way towards shaping the final vision of the new space.

Kelly Brown, a senior project manager for MIT on the Next House project, talked about all the eye-opening ideas gained when students, operations staff and housemasters were taken on a tour of area restaurants and other college dining facilities as part of the planning process. "It gave the students a chance to really see what was possible and to be inspired by ideas that worked so well in other places."

4. Create the Big Idea. The most successful and dynamic gathering spaces on a college campus are built on someone's (or some group's) great idea. Find a shared idea that excites and inspires, and the rest of the planning and design process will unfold.

As architects working with clients to develop the big idea, we ask a lot of questions. We introduce multiple images and examples relating to emerging themes and ideas. Through a collaborative process, we look to adopt a central idea — and a clearly defined project vision — that becomes a significant contributor to success.

For Stetson East Marketplace, a 15,000-sq.-ft. dining hall and social center at Northeastern University, the big idea was to simultaneously create a highly visible restaurant concept and to re-energize two 40 year-old residence hall buildings (which Stetson East connects). The team wanted a "magnet" venue that would draw students once they saw the inside. A glass atrium design, with highly visible seating and performance areas, brought that idea to life.

Another successful expression of the magnet venue was used at Stetson West, a dining hall that opened in 2004. Among the features is the use of a giant display kitchen, and flat-panel widescreen video displays to showcase the chefs. "We truly hit the 'WOW' factor," reports Northeastern's Timmons. "There's a lot of excitement in the way the space works, and we've used it to host celebrity chefs doing broadcast cooking shows from the space."

5. Align Budget, Logistics, Cost Estimates and Schedule. With the complexity and high-cost realities of modern construction, universities can do several things to achieve the best ROI for new dining halls. It's essential to understand the true and total costs of what is planned and to align those costs with the program early on. Actions that will help avoid cost surprises and schedule delays are:

- ▶ retain an experienced construction manager early on to help with cost estimates, schedule and potential construction challenges;

Top 10 Trends in Dining

Compiled by Prellwitz Chilinski Associates, Cambridge Mass.

- 1. More Food in More Places:** coffee bars in libraries, bagel counters in the bookstore;
- 2. Display Kitchens:** visible food prep adds visual excitement;
- 3. Marketplace Concept:** see food choices quickly and graze among colorful displays;
- 4. Locally Grown Foods:** offer native dishes and seasonal vegetables and fruits;
- 5. Freshness:** from bread to sushi, make sure it's delivered daily and cooked right away;
- 6. Grab N' Go:** have kiosks and stand-alone venues placed for fast pay and take away;
- 7. Sustainable Materials:** use local and green materials, and follow new recycle/reuse practices;
- 8. Seating Choice:** offer distinct seating areas: intimate deuces, large community tables and booths;
- 9. Ethnic Food Choices:** Indian, Asian, Mexican and Italian menus; and
- 10. Healthy Options:** offer heart-healthy choices, low-fat bakeries, low-carb dinners.



- understand what needs to be in the complete budget. Does it include FF&E, computer, A/V, security, alarms/life safety, etc?;
- identify and order long lead-time items as early as possible — kitchen equipment, special finishes, custom stone or wood treatments and specialty lighting;
- build in a “break-in” time for new equipment and food operations; consider a “soft” opening ahead of September or January semester starts; and
- identify potential “hidden” resources for funds that may help pay for the project.

Patrick Hogan, a project executive for Shawmut Design and Construction, points out the importance of logistics planning that a construction manager offers. “Many times, the project is located in an area where it is difficult to move equipment and construction crews in and out of,” he explains. “We look at all the issues in play in an occupied building, and develop a workable plan that avoids disruption. On the MIT Next House, we had to plan construction activity around things like final exam periods, to be cognizant of student needs at all times.”

According to MIT’s Kelly Brown, “Planning a project is time-consuming and unpredictable, especially with a renovation. Taking the time to consider a wide range of options pays off in a more efficient design and construction.”

6. Consider Contingencies and Creative Funding Sources. A good project estimate should always include a contingency percentage as part of the budgeting. Especially with renovations, there are many unforeseen conditions that can bubble up during construction. These conditions, such as structural deficiencies or spikes in the cost of materials, can derail even the most thorough schedule and budget. A good rule of thumb is to carry five to 10 percent contingency funds during the design phase, then gradually reduce the percentage as you advance through the construction phases.

There are often creative ways to fund projects, as well. We frequently see situations where upgrade dollars are available for things such as campus Internet wiring, handicap accessibility renovation, HVAC and energy saving retrofits, and other earmarked construction activities. Assuming one or more of these upgrades are part of the dining hall project, a college can stretch the budget by rolling some of those dollars into the project.

7. Insist on Dynamic, but Practical, Features. Design can be both inspired and functional. On the practical side, university environments can be harsh due to heavy use and sometimes abuse. Make certain to select fixtures and

furniture that will be both long lasting and easy to maintain. Investigate the type of cleaning materials and special maintenance issues required by the furniture and fixtures under consideration.

The flow of people through the space is crucial. The last thing students want to do is stand in another line, so offering multiple entry points that get them choosing their food selections quickly is key. More scattered stations and food types, more choices and a wide open marketplace feel are some of the biggest trends in new dining halls (see TRENDS sidebar on the previous page).

MIT’s Berlin also says to avoid trying to be too flashy and cool. This leads to obsolescence. “Sometimes it’s best to keep the design understated. We don’t want to be seen as merchandisers,” he adds. At Next House, the new dining hall was planned to provide “a welcome escape from the metal, concrete, glass and stone of the city streets outside,” recalls Berlin. To reach this goal, the college selected natural materials and colors that contrast with the outside elements.

8. Measure the Results. “Participation in our meal plan program went up 30 percent after we opened Stetson East,” reports Maureen Timmons. The two old adjacent residence halls have a waiting list, and the restaurant-style dining rooms are drawing large crowds. Stetson and other recent dining halls also help keep students on the Northeastern campus in the evening hours, Timmons points out, a welcome change from the recent past.

Measuring how well a new dining hall is meeting needs can be accomplished by asking the customers what works and what might be better. A small adjustment, like adding lighting to a seating area or shortening the line at lunch time, can make a noticeable difference during the break-in phase. Sometimes the success is visible beyond the revenue numbers. At MIT, Kelly and Berlin observe that students are using the dining halls to gather and study in, well after food service has closed.

Perhaps the fastest sign of success was noticed opening day at Next House by Rick Berlin and his MIT colleagues “It was quite remarkable, and the scene told us a lot” he recalls “Kids were coming in the door, sizing up the new dining hall, then pulling out their cell phones to call their friends to come over and check it out.”

With careful planning, the right team dynamic, and some big idea thinking, dining and food service venues can become the WOW experience that keeps students coming back. 

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