

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY FOOD SERVICES (NACUFS)

Spokane, Washington July 2022

CONSUMERS' EXPECTATIONS

Year Round Sustainable Produce is in demand for veg-centric menus and suppliers are responding with vertical farming installations to deliver fresh and local produce throughout the country.

On Demand Experiences are expected anywhere on campus. Operators are experimenting with robot deliveries when campus terrain and circumstances allow. Food locker installations are making it easier to offer national brands and specialty items prepared in ghost kitchens.

Global Dining has become a normal expectation on campuses. Although delivering an authentic international

experience may be a challenge, globally inspired menu items that use existing kitchen equipment can deliver the experience in a bowl or a wrap with ease.

Allergen Sensitivity is more than a special need for a small number of students. Some campuses have dedicated and branded service areas and kitchens to offer up a wide range of items that do not include any of the top 8 to 10 allergens. Surprisingly, operators are reporting remarkably high volumes at these stations from a diverse range of students desiring healthful, flavorful options.

COMPETITORS HAVE BECOME COLLABORATORS

In the constantly evolving business environment unlikely partnerships have emerged. For example, campus meal plans formerly meant to keep students on campus now include local eateries, supermarkets and even the campus bookstore to make the plan more appealing to students on campus.

CAMPUS LIFE

- Financial recovery from recent years is vitally important, yet visionary leaders understand the importance of creating a culture of innovation and readiness for the future. An important aspect of community building – coming together over a shared meal experience – has been missed and students are hungry for a community with personal interaction.
- Tech-driven efficiencies allowed for survival, and students now have high expectations for technology that enables their experiences. Young adult consumers expect the world at their fingertips, especially when it comes to food.
- Campus communities require integration and collaboration among campus departments that nurture student development from physical and mental health to workforce readiness. The support and understanding of administration is crucial to the success of all programs. The dining program can be a learning lab for students and campus partners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOD MARKETERS

Use “Shrinkflation” Strategically – offering stable consumer pricing requires adjustments in portion sizes and composition of some dishes. Adding value with seasonal ingredients makes it possible to provide an affordable option that delivers delight rather than disappointment to customers.

Upgrade Merchandising to Highlight Value – supply chain issues and labor shortages have meant reduced menus in many operations. Yet, mindful merchandising can highlight aspects of menu items that communicate value to customers. Converting fixed stations to rotating pop-up experiences can feed the desire for culinary exploration and menu variety.

Be Ready for Gen Alpha – although this next generation of consumers is under 10 years old, it is important to understand that they have spent much time during their formative years in a pandemic centric culture. Expect them to be more tech-savvy than today's Gen Z and ready to create their own story.