

Bulking Up Products and Customer Service to Satisfy Students

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Foodservice

The past year challenged campus operations to seek new ways to serve students, keep everyone safe from COVID-19, maximize labor, and account for supply chain issues—all the while, trying to provide an enjoyable and satisfying dining experience.

Steve Mangan, senior director of Michigan Dining (University of Michigan), can attest that the last year has been a wild ride and this school year is shaping up to be an interesting season as well. While the campus' nine dining halls are open and students are flowing in, ongoing struggles with staffing have required his team to scale back menus.

"The first thought is often, 'how do we do more with less,' but doing more is not an option right now," said Mangan. "We need to stick to things we can do well. Everything has to be fabulous."

This includes a constant balancing act to meet student demand for different types of cuisine (familiar favorites to global cuisine as well as plant-based, vegan, and gluten-free options) with fewer choices on the limited menu. To compensate, his team has doubled down on customer service.

"We are doing more made-to-order items for students who want something particular," said Mangan, adding his staff aims to have individual interactions with students and connect with them to ensure they get what they need.

Mangan is thankful the University of Michigan's dining halls have been able to offer salad bars, cereal dispensers, and other self-serve areas (e.g., soups, desserts) even in the age of COVID. He says these self-service areas that stock student favorites and allow for customization with minimal labor beyond stocking and cleaning have helped "keep them alive" during a challenging period.

These areas also free up staff so they can focus on other back-of-house needs as well as all-important guest interactions that make a big difference.

"Our staff performs at heroic levels every day to serve the students as well as they do," said Mangan. "From learning to serve guests in new ways to showing each other grace and appreciation—we are all in this together and will have a stronger program in the end because of it!"



Michigan Dining staff showcasing their culinary creations.