

With these tough economic times, how are you explaining to students about cutbacks you may have to implement? How are you working with them to lessen the impact of these cuts?

Submitted by Gail Finan - Director of Dining & Retail Services at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.



Patti Lee Klos
Director of Dining & Business
Services
Tufts University
Medford/Somerville, Mass.
4,500 undergraduates
10,000 meals served daily

We have a long-standing, vital and productive relationship with the Tufts Community Union (TCU) Senate, and the chair of the Services Committee heads up the Dining Committee. We meet regularly to discuss topics ranging from enhancing our vegetarian selection to offering food items with lower price points for students with lesser means. Students from the TCU Senate have participated in the design of all of our renovation projects and were involved in the most recent iterations of our meal plans. Two years ago we began to work together to separate Dining Dollars from the core meal plan offerings to provide students with more control over their debit dollars, and to lower the price point of the individual meal plans. The result has been an 8 percent increase in meal plan sales and a 10 percent increase in voluntary debit card deposits. While sales in our retail outlets are actually down 5-7 percent across the department, we know it is a result of the current economy. Cash sales are actually up 2 percent. Our timing could not have been more perfect,

—Continued, Klos



Rich Turnbull
Associate Director, University
Housing And Dining Services
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Ore.
20,500 total students
13,500 meals served daily

During challenging financial times an organization can either retrench by cutting programs, hours or staff, and reducing the frequency of premium menu choices; look for those market niches that aren't filled and work to capture a market that we may have overlooked in the past, or some combination of both.

While we may need to reduce some of our hours of operation, we will do so while in conversation with our Residence Hall Association. We will work with our student groups to find out what hours in which locations are most important, and hold on to those hours as long as possible.

We are currently working with manufacturers and our suppliers to ensure that we are receiving the best product at the best possible price, and are capturing any marketing rebates or incentives that may exist.

We are revising our menus and bringing back \$1.99 lunch specials to attract more cash customers, as well as

—Continued, Turnbull



Zia Ahmed
Director, Dining Services and
Administration
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio
25,000 total students
Approximately 10,000 meals served
daily

This is certainly a timely question. Communication with students is critical regardless of the economic conditions. We try to stay in touch with our students by using various methods. Our major challenge is not to get the information out, but using various media and multiple times to get their attention. Also, our students like interactive communication. They just don't want to hear what we have to say; they want a way to respond and get more information. In order to interact more effectively, one of my general managers and I engage in biweekly conversations with our students.

We personally prepare food at an action station and try to engage students to discuss their comments. This method not only provides us with an opportunity to get direct feedback, but also shows them our commitment towards transparency and open dialogue. However, this is only one way to reach out to our students. We should also use other meth-

—Continued, Ahmed

Mind your Business

—Continued, Klos

given the current economy and tightening personal resources. We're trending to serve 100,000 more meals this year than last year (an increase of 8 percent).

After reviewing current participation levels in our retail operations, we identified areas where we might need to make service reductions. The main change we made at the start of the fall semester (before the economic crisis became widespread) was the reduction of hours at the popular Brown & Brew Coffee house. We now close two hours early each night and are not open on weekends. Students were not pleased, but understood the rationale.

We're starting to talk to students about going trayless next fall — no real opposition has been voiced yet, but then again, we haven't implemented yet. Given that we're only going to raise the board rates 2 percent next year, students seem to have a more open mind about steps we may have to take to control costs, given the limited resources. Thus far the dialogue has been very cordial.

—Continued, Turnbull

offering our residents a great value meal.

I think we need to take a multi-faceted approach to respond to the financial crisis: market growth with campus groups we may not be currently serving, sound purchasing initiatives, creative menu engineering, daily specials and possibly some reduction in hours to close at, say, 11 p.m. or midnight, instead of 1 a.m. We will be communicating our decisions to students via face-to-face meetings, Web surveys, Web page, e-messages and table tents.

—Continued, Ahmed

ods such as food committees, newsletters, news boards, etc. Some colleges are also utilizing social electronic networking to increase the level of communication, such as Facebook and MySpace. Also, we have to continue to market our products and services.

Moreover, we must learn to be more creative during these tough economic times. Answers don't always lie on easy cuts, such as reduction of theme meals or student programs. We can maintain those programs by providing creative menu solutions — creating flavorful food that includes cost-effective ingredients. We should also unleash the power of inclusive decision making. We have to view our students as not only customers, but also as partners who may help us make decisions. The more they are involved and informed the better we can serve them.