

Does Campus Food Stink?

Students must have a say in food service

By Morgana Cabrera-Bray

It's lunchtime. That growling noise isn't coming from an escaped zoo animal roaming campus but from your stomach. You've just enough time between classes to grab a quick bite from the school's cafeteria. You're either thrilled at the variety of mouth-watering foods or crossing your fingers, hoping it's not cold pizza—again.

On college campuses everywhere, students always complain about the quality of food service, yet they rarely take the initiative to change it. When problems arise, students should consider forming food-service committees. Although committees usually are composed of college administrators, faculty, and other staff, a growing number are putting students in pivotal decision-making roles. If student leaders wish to make changes in the quality of food on campus, they must serve on one of these committees where they can give suggestions on ways to improve service and variety, or even take drastic measures by changing food-service companies altogether.

The Good

"It's become common practice to have a committee and common practice to have students on the committee," says Keysa Minnifield, vice president of communications for Sodexho, a food-service provider at 800 colleges and universities including **St. Louis University** in Missouri, and the **University of Tampa** in Florida. Food-service providers such as Aramark, Bon Appétit Management Company, Fine Host Corporation, and Sodexho provide most of the food on students' plates, hire chefs and other cafeteria staff, plan menus, and decide food prices.

In most cases, students on the committee either are Student Government members or are appointed by SG. At **Fordham University** in New York, the food-service committee includes student leaders, as well as regular students. "We talk about every grill on campus, every cafeteria. We go one-by-one and talk about the 'pluses' and 'minuses,'" says Paul Casey, former United Student Government president.

Casey says the committee's input is the main reason why food service on campus has improved since he was a freshman. Students seem satisfied with Sodexho, Casey says.

What To Ask Your Provider

1. What's the length of the contract?
2. What role will students have in choosing the menu?
3. How will complaints be handled?
4. Will students/groups be forced to use the provider to cater campus functions?
5. Is the provider health- or cost-conscious?

The Bad

In 2000, administrators and students at **Notre Dame de Namur University** in California decided it was time to change food providers. Sodexho still was under contract, but the relationship between students and the company had soured. The committee was concerned about the high price of food, cleanliness of the facility, communication problems between Sodexho staff and students, and food failing to meet their standards. "We met and discussed what we wanted and how we wanted things to change," says Cristala Carter, Associated

Appétit Management Company, which also services **Stanford University** in California and **Wheaton College** in Illinois.

The Ugly

Contracts between providers and schools vary, but in most cases, they last between eight and 12 years. This means if students are dissatisfied, unless the contract is up for renewal, there isn't much a committee can do to change providers—unless the provider has broken part of its contract.

The light at the end of the tunnel? A committee still can be useful in changing how the provider serves the school. However, the committee must do some grunt work to insure everyone is being heard.

Surveying the student population, holding public forums, and making sure students know complaints will be heard are all important to the success of committees.

The provider also should be doing its fair



Instead of bellyaching about how terrible the food is, students should start or serve on food-service committees that monitor food providers such as Sodexho.

Students president.

When Sodexho's contract ended, the committee began accepting bids from others. Prior to accepting bids, the committee had several meetings with Sodexho to address grievances. "They understood that students really weren't satisfied," Carter says. "They gave us a lot of excuses as to why we should not fuss with them so much."

According to Carter, Sodexho finally did improve service. But for Carter and other members of the committee, it was too little, too late. "Most of the problems were just so extensive that we really didn't trust them anymore," Carter says.

Minnifield says that Sodexho has changed how it manages campus facilities since Notre Dame de Namur. "We've started taking more of a proactive approach, paying much closer attention to our surveys." Minnifield says that the vast majority of colleges and universities that deal with Sodexho are satisfied.

After extensive research and numerous meetings, Notre Dame de Namur chose Bon

share of the dirty work. Sodexho gathers student opinion through committees, focus groups, and bulletin boards where students can post comments or questions.

Bon Appétit holds focus groups and provides comment cards but also encourages chefs and on-site managers to meet face-to-face with students. "Our chefs are in the dining room, constantly talking to students. They have to circulate to make sure they're hearing the feedback," says Fedele Bauccio, CEO of Bon Appétit.

Food-service providers understand that if students aren't happy, their contracts are in danger. Food-service committees have become tools for students to hold the providers accountable. If you don't have one, start one and make sure that students have a voting voice. **SL**

Contact Minnifield at 800-707-4060 x5626, Casey at 718-817-4373, Carter at 650-508-3489, or Bauccio at 650-798-8000.



See expanded coverage and profiles on food-service providers at studentleader.com