



What **Students** Want

How Students' Views on Food Can Shape How You Run Your Operation

By Anna Diehl, Global Consumer Insights Senior Associate; General Mills

The current student body coming up through the ranks of colleges and universities has a distinct philosophy when it comes to food, and it is driving big changes in today's dining halls.

Today, college students see food as a way to express themselves, have fun, and connect with others — not just fuel their bodies. Last June, General Mills Foodservice partnered with Spoon University, an online community that connects leaders, influencers, and adventurers at college campuses through food. Together we surveyed more than 650 high school and college students, ages 18 to 22, to learn more about their perspectives, values, and actions in regards to food.

One of the most telling findings includes how students describe what food means to them. The most common words they used were love, life, and people — indicating today's students have a new set of expectations when it comes to food.

These evolving expectations carry over to campus dining operations as it's no longer about just getting students in the cafeteria door to eat. College and university foodservice programs are taking note of students' increased appetite for more communication and engagement around food and using these insights to guide their own programs—from shaping menus, to how food is served and promoted, to the type of staff they recruit and train.

"Today's college students are more food savvy, they are willing to explore their culinary horizons, and they appreciate locally grown foods," said Mark LoParco, director of dining services at the University of Montana, where staff has done a number of things—from amping up social media efforts to adding a full-time gardener and an executive chef—to deliver on what students want from their food and campus dining.

What Does Food Mean to Students?

The study done with Spoon University reports taste and quality are key drivers in determining where students choose to eat and what they purchase. However, it is students' broader attitudes toward food that shed new light that may guide your own operations. Some of the key takeaways include:

FOOD AS COMMUNITY

"A delicious way of bonding and connecting with other people."

"When we celebrate, we eat, when we mourn, we eat. We go on dinner dates to get to know one another."

College students connect with one another through a shared food culture. Often they build community on campus with other students who share religious and cultural food traditions in clubs and campus events. They also use food to explore and learn about other people and cultures. A universal love of food has the power to build community and provides one of the easiest ways to connect with people with different backgrounds and learn from one another.

FOOD AS FUEL

"I always wonder if I should eat a late lunch or just a granola bar before the gym so I am not too hungry."

"I literally needed to leave work because I was so hungry."

Food also plays a very practical role for students—it needs to fit their lives! Students report worrying about how to organize meals when they have busy, irregular schedules that don't allow for normal eating patterns. They acknowledge the role of food as fuel for satiation, but they also see it as fuel for performance—for optimal physical and mental function. Ultimately, they want healthful, energizing foods to get them through the day and they want convenient access to these foods across different areas of campus.

FOOD AS HEALTH

"It's a source of nutrients that is both tasty and healthy and makes you feel good afterwards rather than heavy and bloated."

"I'm not going to be the one person who doesn't eat dessert."

While college students recognize the importance of health and nutrition, they are more apt to eat unhealthy foods when they are among friends who eat unhealthily. Students are also developing health and food opinions as they learn to make food choices for themselves. Many are confused about what constitutes "healthy" and want to understand more. They are looking for ways for "good choices" to be socially acceptable and add value to their lives. They are eager to learn more about the inherent health benefits of food and sustainability so they can better express their food values.

FOOD AS COMMUNICATION

"A way of enjoying and expressing yourself."

"Creating memories through food."

"The food you eat tells so much about who you are and what you value in life."

Today's students use social media more than any other generation to share what they are eating and to connect with others around the topic of food. They use different social platforms in distinct ways. For instance, Instagram is often used for bragging rights or to discover new foods and restaurants, while Snapchat is more about small, everyday celebrations such as sharing what they're eating in the moment with close friends. Outside of social, food is also gifted to show gratitude, acknowledgement, and celebration. Food has become a personal expression for this generation.

FOOD AS FUN

"Food means expression and art as well as a way to feel good inside."

"Food is a source of happiness."

"Food means new adventures and trying different things."

Students find food to be a release from the stresses of everyday life and appreciate the freedom to be creative and not take food too seriously. They express this by exploring new cultures, personalizing menu items, and sharing the beauty of what they eat on social media. The principle of food as art and fun makes it clear that food needs to be more than just functional—it means that there are powerful opportunities to connect with students in new ways.



Putting Insights into Action

Students' evolving food values influence more than the products and menu items offered on campus. Most schools already offer a varied and diverse menu of options. But the Spoon University research points to operational areas that campus foodservice programs can better leverage to please and delight their college customers. Following are a few of these areas along with how this may shape staffing needs and training.

DISPLAY DINING

More and more campus dining facilities are making their kitchen staff more visible with action stations and cooking demos. They are bringing forward the people who make food to encourage dialogue and build trust.

For instance, the University of Connecticut (UConn) recently added a smoothie/juice station — a round kiosk where students grab a bowl and fill it with fruit, vegetables, etc. to hand to a staff member who blends the ingredients in a Vitamix.

Arthur Korandanis, director of auxiliary services at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., added that they are turning operations inside out so that students can watch their foods being prepared.



"Whether it's pulling a pizza from the oven or letting the students choose their noodles and ingredients for a stir fry, we want our production people out front," said Korandanis. "If staff is out front carving and serving rotisserie chicken, they can engage with students."

Students today want a connection with their food and the people who make it, so that means hiring practices need to screen for ability to engage.

"During the hiring process, we may be more in tune to interpersonal skills to ensure staff will be good at working with and engaging with students," said Korandanis.

CREATE CONNECTIONS

Whether it's asking staff to share personal recipes or ensuring that frontline employees have a friendly, welcoming demeanor, it's important to show you care. Creating an environment where students know they and their ideas are welcome will make for a stronger program overall.



"Students are often pleased to learn about what we are doing," said Korandanis. "We have a shared responsibility for learning."

At the College of Holy Cross, the staff hosts frequent tastings with students to encourage engagement.

Korandanis noted they also have a unique opportunity for connection with first-year students and an innovative program where the curriculum includes learning about the foodservice operations on campus and sharing ideas to plan for the future.

"Students are often pleased to learn about what we are doing," said Korandanis. "We have a shared responsibility for learning."

He added that student feedback led to the creation of a digital app, "HC on the Go," which includes a dining app listing every menu item at the various campus locations along with all of the nutritional information and helpful icons that indicate if items contain allergens or are vegetarian, gluten-free, etc.

ROUND-THE-CLOCK OPTIONS

To meet demand for more flexibility with meal plans and more options throughout the day, campus dining operations are expanding hours as well as locations across campus.

"Where we used to have a more standardized approach that gave students a set number of meals per week, today we offer a cornucopia of food that is available at all hours," said Dennis Pierce, director of dining services at UConn.

He added that the "open refrigerator" approach can be a key driver in the need for labor, but it doesn't necessarily mean they have had to hire more staff. "For us, it was more about reassigning tasks to make the most of staff that was already there."



CONTINUING EDUCATION

Beyond educating students about healthy foods and choices, campus foodservice department often educate students on topics such as locally grown food, sustainable practices and food waste.

Hosting events has been particularly impactful in terms of education at UConn. Staff recently partnered with the agricultural department on campus for "Tasty Waste" to raise awareness of food waste and how to reduce it. The team used foods that otherwise would have gone to waste to create a robust menu of entrees, soups and desserts for 1,400 people.

PARTICIPATE IN THE CONVERSATION

Don't overlook the very tools that students rely on as their primary forms of communication. If your team is using social media, ensure you are using it to not only promote your program and menus, but to actively engage with students and have a conversation.

For instance, Sam Belanger, marketing director at the University of Montana, pays close attention to what students are saying about food in social media and is quick to respond. By tracking key words, he receives alerts when there is a post about the campus' dining program and can immediately comment on or "like" a post.

"Students are more likely to post about us if they know we are watching, responding and engaging with them," said Belanger. "It is so much more meaningful when students post about our menus than if we were to share a post." Belanger likes to keep it fun. For instance, when a student tweeted about the dining hall running out of chocolate milk, he was quick to post "the cows weren't cooperating," while the problem was remedied. Or when a student recently tweeted about clam chowder making her Friday, Belanger shared her post with the hashtag, #TGICCF (Thank God It's Clam Chowder Friday) and it became a top trending topic on campus.



While social media can be intimidating, student workers can be a big help in this capacity to share ideas and even help manage social posts as long as there is a protocol in place for when issues such as negative feedback arise.

KEEP IT FUN!

Coach staff on fun and how to make dining an experience.

Look to contests, special events and more to break the monotony. The right event can serve a dual purpose: to get students excited about eating with you and to serve as a morale booster for staff since everyone can get in on the fun.

The University of Montana realized this when its dining services staff did a complete transformation of its dining hall and planned a "Game of Thrones" dinner, decking out the space with elaborate props such as the "iron throne," creating a special menu and even participating in jousting.

In closing, while campus dining operations may find they have to make changes to adapt to students' ever-evolving food habits, ultimately it can make for a more rewarding workplace environment. As employees, from chefs to the frontline, take on a greater role in campus dining operations with more interaction and responsibility, they will likely feel more fulfilled. With happier employees and satisfied customers whose expectations are being met, it's can be a "win win" for everyone! ♦

About the Author:

Anna Diehl is a Global Consumer Insights Senior Associate at General Mills. Anna works closely with operators, distributors and food management companies in the college & university and healthcare space to understand their needs and develop better solutions for their business. She began her work with General Mills in 2007.

