

The Future of College and University Foodservice Is Now

College and university foodservice rises to the challenge of feeding diverse student populations with very discerning palates.

Zeroed In on Z

Millennials may have been getting the lion's share of marketing attention the past several years, but for college and university foodservice operators, that paradigm-changing group has already moved through to make way for the new class of Gen Z students.

"Campus foodservice professionals are on the cutting edge of new trends, and they have a unique understanding of what's on the minds of next-generation consumers because they serve these young adults every day and they get new customers every year," notes **Sharon Olson, executive director of Y-Pulse, a Chicago-based research and consulting firm.**

In a survey of C&U foodservice operators conducted last summer, **Y-Pulse** found that the biggest change seen in student expectations over the prior year was an increased desire for healthful and fresh items. Operators were also asked to identify the biggest up-and-coming menu items on campus. The following rose to the top:

- Breakfast comfort foods reflecting a wide range of cultures, available all day
- More authentic and varied international offerings, especially Mediterranean, Southeast Asian, Korean and Middle Eastern
- Fresh, local and farm-to-table offerings
- Sustainable seafood
- Hot, spicy and more adventurous flavors
- Healthier grab-and-go and late-night options
- Plant-based menus

"We've been doing quite a bit of research regarding Generation Z, looking at what drives them, how they like to be communicated with, what their palate is, how they think, etc., to stay ahead of the curve," says Dawn Aubrey, associate director of housing and dining services at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and current president of the National Association of College & University Foodservice. "Of course, any time you try to define a generation, the real definition typically occurs much later, so it's a work in progress. And it also requires taking a look at what is occurring in hospitality in general, taking into consideration what is happening in K-12 and what the experiences are of these students who are coming to us."

So what specific characteristics do those college and university dining programs working hard to stay ahead of the curve share? Here are several attributes that together help to define the new paradigm in college and university foodservice.