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The Multipurpose Café

EVOLUTION OF CAMPUS DINING SPACES

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Innovative Design Concepts Transform Dining Spaces into Dynamic Campus Hubs Higher education institutions are evolving rapidly, driven by changing student expectations, advancements in technology, and the need for flexible, collaborative spaces. Campus dining areas are no longer just about serving meals; they have become essential social, academic, and recreational hubs.

According to a recent study by the **National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS)**, campus dining spaces are increasingly being designed as multipurpose environments that foster community, learning, and wellness. Students expect dining halls to provide not just food but also areas for study, collaboration, relaxation, and social engagement (NACUFS, 2023).

The Role of Multipurpose Dining Spaces

TODAY’S CAMPUS DINING FACILITIES MUST ACCOMMODATE A WIDE RANGE OF STUDENT NEEDS. TO MAXIMIZE EFFECTIVENESS, UNIVERSITIES SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING CORE FUNCTIONS:

1. Community Hub

“The traditional cafeteria as a single-purpose space is becoming obsolete,” says **Dr. Stephanie Robson, a senior lecturer at Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration.** “Modern students expect a space that blends food service with opportunities for academic and social engagement.”

This means integrating self-service kiosks, mobile ordering systems, and tech-enabled seating areas that facilitate both solo and group activities. Some campuses have even incorporated **co-working-style spaces**, such as The Ohio State University’s **Curl Market**, where students can collaborate over coffee while accessing online resources.



MODERN STUDENTS EXPECT A SPACE THAT BLENDS FOOD SERVICE WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT



2. Classroom Extension

Dining spaces are increasingly seen as natural extensions of the classroom. According to research by **Educause Review (2023)**, flexible learning environments that integrate food service with technology-enhanced seating improve student retention and engagement.

Key elements that support this transformation include:

- **Wireless connectivity and charging stations** for uninterrupted work sessions.
- **Interactive whiteboards and digital screens** for group collaboration.
- **Modular furniture** that can easily be rearranged for study groups or meetings.

3. Living Room Extension

Campus dining areas are also becoming informal gathering spaces where students can relax between classes. “Students don’t just come to eat; they come to hang out,” says **John Fabelo, AIA, partner at LWC Inc.**

At institutions like **Arizona State University**, dining halls have been reimagined with ergonomic seating, communal tables, and entertainment zones that create a welcoming, home-like environment. This aligns with **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**, where a sense of belonging plays a crucial role in student success.

Zoning for Maximum Impact

TO DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE MULTIPURPOSE SPACE, UNIVERSITIES SHOULD ESTABLISH DISTINCT ZONES BASED ON STUDENT BEHAVIORS AND NEEDS. HERE'S HOW MODERN ZONING WORKS:



1. Deceleration Zone

Upon entering a dining venue, students should encounter an entry area where they can assess their options and choose their destination. According to Dr. Stephanie Robson, this mimics the layout of successful retail environments where customers need a moment to orient themselves.



Loyola University Center for Innovation and Collaboration.
Photo by Anton Grassl.

2. Product or Service Zone

This is where students select their food or beverage. Innovations such as AI-powered ordering kiosks and mobile pickup stations—as seen at Duke University’s Marketplace Dining Hall—streamline the process and reduce wait times.

3. Seating Zones

Different seating areas should cater to various student activities:

- **Collaborative Zone:** Communal tables and standing desks encourage group work and informal meetings.
- **Quiet Study Zone:** Individual booths and noise-reducing partitions provide focused study environments.
- **Dining Zone:** Traditional seating arrangements prioritize comfortable eating experiences.
- **Lounge Zone:** Soft seating and casual arrangements support socialization and relaxation.



Sustainability & Well-Being in Campus Dining

ACCORDING TO THE SUSTAINABLE CAMPUS DINING REPORT (2024), UNIVERSITIES ARE PRIORITIZING INITIATIVES SUCH AS:

- **Plant-based** menu options to promote healthier eating habits.
- **Biophilic design** elements, such as indoor greenery and natural lighting, which have been shown to improve student well-being.
- **Waste reduction programs**, including composting and reusable dishware.

At the **University of California, Berkeley**, their dining halls have introduced low-carbon menus that reduce environmental impact.



Technology Integration: The Future of Campus Dining

ADVANCEMENTS IN SMART DINING TECHNOLOGY ARE RESHAPING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE. TRENDS INCLUDE:

- **App-based meal ordering and reservations** (as seen at **MIT's Tech Dining**)
- **Automated food lockers for pickup**
- **Augmented reality (AR) menus** providing detailed nutrition and ingredient information



Grubhub robots dominate campus delivering food to the **Baylor University** community

The Future of Campus Dining Spaces



AS STUDENT NEEDS CONTINUE TO EVOLVE, SO MUST CAMPUS DINING SPACES. BY EMBRACING MULTIPURPOSE DESIGN, TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES CAN CREATE DINING ENVIRONMENTS THAT SERVE AS VIBRANT SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC HUBS.

Institutions that prioritize **flexibility, inclusivity, and engagement** in their campus dining designs will not only enhance student satisfaction but also foster a more connected and thriving campus community.



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ABOUT FALCON

For over 65 years, Falcon has been the trusted partner for facility managers seeking high-quality table and seating products for learning, dining, and meeting spaces. Falcon's innovative furniture solutions empower libraries to adapt to changing needs while maintaining a welcoming and functional environment.

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