QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY
HOUSING & HOSPITALITY SERVICES

Feeding Engagement:
The dining hall as a new environment for student experiences

Summary
In 2007, Queen’s Housing and Hospitality was seeking ways to disseminate a range of information to students while creating a more dynamic environment in our dining halls. The department decided to embark on a number of experimental initiatives designed with the goal of developing an engaging and dynamic environment that:
- offers opportunities for education beyond the classroom
- builds on social and service learning goals
- builds on health and wellness endeavours
- optimizes collaborative efforts between Hospitality Services and University students, staff and faculty
- builds a positive social environment for dining hall guests

A number of processes, activities and events were introduced to the dining hall program, including:
- Enhanced opportunities for student clubs and departments to interact with students through events, displays and contests
• The ability for students to participate more fully on issues that affect dining hall operations (e.g. fair trade, food waste, local food, sustainability)
• Activities that promote health and well-being for students and that provide easy to access information about healthy eating, exercise and campus resources for dealing with health issues
• Events and celebrations designed to promote a social environment and celebrate various holidays/seasons
• Opportunities to reach beyond campus with initiatives that provide social and service learning opportunities, while having a positive impact on our broader community

The results of this initiative have been overwhelmingly positive. Some students have responded favourably to programming that enhances their understanding of issues such as fair trade, local food, homelessness and sustainability, while others have become active participants in a number of events designed to facilitate friendships and combat dining hall fatigue. The response has been invaluable as a guide for future activities and will also form part of the RFP process for the food contract, as two of the three current food contracts will expire in June 2010.

FEEDING ENGAGEMENT IN OUR DINING HALLS
Students are naturally interested in understanding more about the world around them – whether it’s in the classroom, during club activities or right in their own home. At Queen’s, a highly residential university, students are encouraged to understand issues that affect their new home – and to participate in social and service learning opportunities for the betterment of all.

Dining hall programming can blend into classroom learning, students from the Commerce 341 class, for example, use the dining halls and our Hospitality practices to develop projects and conduct research. Other initiatives stretch past our campus borders to reach out to our broader community.
**Soul Food** – feeding our community’s homeless

When Queen’s Hillel (Jewish Students Association) was seeking a way to build ties between the campus and the community, they turned to Queen’s Hospitality Services (a division of Queen’s Housing & Hospitality) to help them create Soul Food, a coalition of Queen’s students working to raise awareness about Canadians living in poverty.

Soul Food volunteers (students from a number of clubs) pick up wrapped and temperature-checked leftover food from the residence dining halls each and deliver it to local street shelters six nights a week during the school year – providing healthy food to those who need it most, while reducing the amount of waste going to the landfill. In the 2007/08 school year, Soul Food delivered approximately 600 meals per week to shelters in Kingston. Sodexo (contractor for Queen’s Hospitality Services) provides the labour to prepare the food, and has recently donated $1,000 towards transportation costs.

> “What we find amazing is how similar our values are to the other groups involved. In the face of the racism and intolerance, it is important to celebrate the values that we all share as Canadians and human beings – Soul Food is just one example of this convergence of humanity that we wish to cultivate.” Tyler Peikes, Queen’s Hillel and co-chair of Soul Food

**Fair Trade**

Queen’s Hospitality Services is a strong supporter of fair trade practices, with fair trade coffee, tea, cocoa and sugar available in all dining halls and most retail outlets on campus. In 2007 and in 2008, the department partnered with Queen’s Oxfam to present Fair Trade Week in the dining halls – providing space for displays and interaction with students. In a survey conducted during 2008, 49% of respondents noted that Fair Trade Week initiated conversation amongst friends in the dining hall.

**Going Local**

Queen’s Housing & Hospitality is proud to have initiated or contributed to a number of local projects on campus:

**Farmer’s Market**

Now in its 3rd year, The Farmers’ Market at Queen’s brings local, high quality and fresh tasting food to the Queen’s community through regular markets on campus. The market, which runs once a month from September to April, typically showcases approximately 20 local vendors.

Queen’s Housing and Hospitality provides financial and logistical support for this initiative and often participates in the event – for example, in 2007, one of the dining hall chefs prepared and served a soup to shoppers made entirely from products found at the market. The soup was sold for $1 a bowl (all proceeds going to the local food bank), and included a recipe so that students could
purchase items at the market and prepare the soup at home.

The Farmer’s Market has also fostered some unexpected collaborations as well – a group of students have been working with one farmer vendor who has expertise in vermi-composting, with the goal of studying the viability of vermi-composting in residence. This fall, the farmer invited the student group to help prepare the farm for winter – and also invited a number of students who couldn’t return home to join him for Thanksgiving dinner.

Field to Fork
The inaugural Field to Fork event demonstrated the value of extending dining hall programs beyond campus. Local farmers, vendors and musicians joined forces with Queen’s Hospitality Services to present an outdoor fall harvest celebration on one of the residence fields in the week leading up to Thanksgiving. The event was free to all students on a meal plan, and available to all campus and community members for a small fee.

Food tents, featuring food produced from local products, offered enticing fall tastes such as corn, chili and beef stew, while a local band entertained the crowd. A local gourd and pumpkin vendor sold products from a hay truck, donating a portion of proceeds to children in Africa, and the National Farmer’s Union presented information on seed saving and issues affecting the modern day farmer. The Four Directions Aboriginal Centre also participated, presenting a “spirit plate” and a blessing upon the event.
My Farm
In 2008, Queen’s Hospitality Services (through Sodexo) arranged to lease farm land with the goal of developing a learning centre for staff, students and faculty. Along with growing foods for the dining halls and retail food outlets, the farm will feature sustainable building practices, livestock management and crop methods. Students within the Faculty of Geology are also currently planning to use the site for research.

Sustainable by Design
We are dedicated to finding sustainable ways to operate, and to helping our students learn more about how they can contribute. In many cases, their enthusiasm and participation have helped us further our cause:

• Waste displays in the dining halls remind students to take only what they need (dining halls are all-you-care-to-eat)
• A Facebook Group (“I will not waste food in the dining hall” – Queen’s Students Against Wasting Food) communicates with students and with Hospitality Services to reduce food wastage. A recent dining hall event resulted in over 1,000 students pledging to reduce the waste on their trays, and efforts by the group have resulted in smaller platings of entrees
• The Housing and Hospitality Food Committee (a consortium of students, faculty, student government and staff members) meets regularly to discuss dining hall and retail operations on campus, including decisions on sustainability practices
• bamboo and sugarcane- based, biodegradable packaging is used for all take-out sandwiches and salads
  • compostable plates have replaced claim-shell containers in the retail outlets, unless they are specifically requested by the customer
  • A composting partnership with Corrections Canada to compost organic waste from Leonard Dining Hall diverts 90% of organic waste from landfill

A Healthy U
Queen’s Housing & Hospitality has collaborated with a number of campus groups to educate students about healthy eating choices, the importance of exercise, and the resources available to help students cope with health concerns such as stress, weight gain and sleep issues.

Peer Health Educators from Health, Counselling and Disability Services have used the dining halls to connect with students in a different way – from displays and interactive games to events that include offering trays of
healthy snack choices during dinner. This group has also paired with Athletics and Recreation to create events that demonstrate the benefits of eating well and exercise for students who want to be at their best in school.

Queen’s Hospitality Services has developed a number of processes to help students understand portion sizes and the nutritional value of the food they are eating. Easy to understand nutrition labels are also available for all menu items, both on the website and at each serving station.

**Learning more about ourselves**
Culture and diversity are celebrated through themed events within the dining halls, offering a ‘soft’ approach to learning that’s both fun and educational. For example:

- **Chinese New Year celebrations** – a themed dinner and facts posted at various areas in the dining halls was augmented by displays from the Chinese Students Association
- **Sultan’s Tent** – this Morroccan-themed evening featured cultural food ideas, music, displays and belly dancing lessons.
- **Taste of the Maritimes** – a fiddler and peel and eat shrimp complemented a traditional east coast menu and displays
- **Festival of Lights** – An Indian Chef interacted with both dining hall chefs and students over a two day period to prepare and present authentic meals from South Asia. Students from the East Indian, Tamil, Pakistani and Muslim Student Associations also participated in this event.

Student comments about these events were exceptionally positive:

“Food was sick (in a good way) and the facial artist rocked my face off!”

**Collaborating for Success**
Queen’s Housing and Hospitality is dedicated to collaborating with student groups, faculty and university departments to provide awareness. Events, activities and displays have included active partnerships with a number of groups. A particularly successful and ongoing collaboration with Athletics and Recreation has provided a number of benefits, including the opportunity to raise school spirit, encourage first year students to attend games, and raise awareness of recreational programs for students.
A “Hockey Showdown”, for example, featured the opportunity to take shots on the men’s hockey team goalie, with the winners receiving VIP seats at the next game, complete with pizza and pop for 10 people delivered during intermission. Hockey team members circulated through the dining hall, interacting with students, handing out information about the team and encouraging them to come out to the game. Attendance at the game following this event jumped significantly, and subsequent dining hall surveys indicated that 40% of the surveyed students who attended were encouraged to attend because of the event.

Measuring our progress
We used a range of tools and resources to measure the impact of our programming changes, including:

- Response cards
- Focus groups and interviews
- Event participation observation
- Surveys
- National poll ratings

These tools provided us with meaningful results that demonstrated a true impact on our students, with a particular social benefit in the areas of campus networking, school spirit, cultural understanding and civic leadership.
One survey revealed that 67% of students engaged in reflective conversations with their friends about something they had learned in the dining halls. A full 25% of respondents actually changed their purchasing practices following educational programming about Fair Trade. And 90% of students remember reading tent cards (containing a range of educational and social information) placed on dining hall tables.

“I remember reading that 67% of students think that other students drink more than they do.”

Dining hall programming has created many opportunities:

1. **Educational programming**
   Along with sustainability issues and purchasing practices, the dining halls have been used by a number of departments across campus as a way of disseminating information in a non-threatening environment. Health, Counselling and Disability Services, for example uses dining hall events and tent cards to inform students on issues ranging from alcohol consumption to sexual health and diet. Students are responsive to this approach to learning:
   “It was easy to pick up information as I walked past … I didn’t feel uncomfortable because it wasn’t as if I had to go into a particular building to seek it out. It was just there and everyone else was picking stuff up too.”

2. **School spirit**
   Event programming in the dining halls has provided the University’s Athletics & Recreation department with a new method for attracting students to games. A ‘hockey shootout’ in the dining hall (students could take a shot on one of the team’s goales) increased audience numbers significantly at a game held later that week. Surveys revealed that 40% of students who attended the dining hall event later attended the game based on that event.

3. **Social and service learning**
   The dining halls have offered new ways for students to become involved with their broader community, with programs such as Soul Food and Oxfam’s Fair Trade displays. Additionally, many social events include various student clubs on campus, providing them with valuable opportunities to deliver information about recruit new members.

And, of course – students are having fun! Dining hall programming offers a new way to participate in activities with floor mates and with others in residence, while breaking up the potential monotony of “always eating the same food in the same place”. Students
appreciate the pace changers and the effort being made to add something extra to the dining experience.

“The live music was really refreshing! It added a sense of excitement, change, and made having dinner today more fun!”

“Thank you for doing this for us.”

*photos courtesy of Greg Black, University Photographer