

REQUIRED READING

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Washington University in St. Louis **Innovates** to **Serve Students** During Pandemic

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on behalf of Washington University
in St. Louis Dining Services



WashU Dining Services assembling salads for our quarantine students. Even to-go items were handled with care and love!

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Washington University in St. Louis Dining Services (WUSTL Dining) and Bon Appétit Management Company (WUSTL Dining's food service partner on campus) had to move quickly to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

Like food service operators across the country, the team found themselves shifting service styles and implementing new health precautions—in some cases overnight. While working to keep staff and students safe when visiting dining locations, the team used the disruption as an opportunity, kick-starting a wave of innovative practices on campus that resulted in new and improved systems and exciting programming. While the physical distancing stanchions and wayfinding signage may now be gone, many of the forward-thinking improvements made to WUSTL Dining programs have been preserved, providing a better and more convenient experience for students and the wider campus community.

CONVENIENT AND CONTACTLESS OFFERINGS

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was apparent that students needed flexible, quick, and safe dining options. Grab-and-go meals were an immediate focus, with the team ramping up the quantity and variety of grab-and-go entrées available at two of WashU's convenience stores: Paws & Go and Millbrook Market. Meanwhile, the team transitioned to cashless payments across campus to make check-out contactless, while implementing a fee-less version of Grubhub. Service at Ibby's Café and Parkside Café¹, (which won a 2020 NACUFS Loyal E. Horton Grand Prize for Retail Sales Single Concept/Multiple Concepts/Marketplace), were adjusted to facilitate contactless ordering and pick-up throughout the pandemic.

MAKING STUDENTS FEEL AT HOME

When students returned to campus for the first time during the pandemic, they were immediately met with unfamiliar rules and procedures, including a quarantine program for students who tested positive for COVID-19. The WUSTL Dining team recognized that students were going through a time of uncertainty and adjustment and realized that they could provide comfort and support through the familiar and comforting

routine of dining on campus. The team strategically shifted their tone on social media and in their digital and print collateral to exude a sense of support. While students always considered WUSTL Dining to be a treasured part of their experience on campus, the team framed the cafés and dining halls as students’ home away from home. This communications strategy was complemented by a quarantine dining plan, which entailed the WUSTL Dining catering team putting together customized meals which accommodated dietary preferences and restrictions; and then, delivering them to students who were isolated due to COVID-19.

WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS TO STAFFING AND PRODUCT SHORTAGES

As operators across the country are acutely aware, the food service industry has been plagued by the dual problems of staffing shortages and supply chain issues. In order to combat these challenges, WUSTL Dining developed solutions that bring local restaurants and food trucks onto campus. The aptly named Food Truck Program brings five food trucks onto campus three nights a week during peak business days, giving students a convenient and safe outdoor food option while easing pressure on the dining team.

With new and exciting food truck options outside, WUSTL Dining’s Bite of St. Louis program brings local restaurants into

the dining halls to serve signature dishes at specific stations. The program helps to introduce students to St. Louis’ acclaimed culinary scene while providing restaurants with an opportunity to make up for revenue lost during the pandemic. “The Bite of St. Louis program embodies the spirit of WUSTL Dining Services and the desire to reach well beyond the walls of the Danforth Campus,” said executive chef Patrick McElroy. “It is an amazing extension of community, culture, and cuisine under one roof. This past year presented many dark nights filled with obstacles and distractions, but our local partners mended many open holes with staffing challenges, supported supply chain issues and helped battle COVID-19 head on.” For Andrew Watling, the associate director of dining services, the extent to which the program helped students explore the city during a time of limited mobility cannot be understated. “The best way to know a city is through its food,” said Watling. “Sure, you can visit the Arch or go to the museums, but I can’t think of a better introduction to St. Louis than a hot pastrami from Gioia’s Deli or some barbecue from Pappy’s.”

For the WUSTL Dining team, the challenges of the pandemic proved to be an opportunity to improve service for students, resulting in lasting positive improvements to the dining program.

¹ https://issuu.com/washudiningservices/docs/introducing_parkside



Quarantine Collaboration

at the UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

Romney Beebe
Marketing Assistant
University of Richmond
Dining Services

When leaders at the University of Richmond (UR) first began planning for students to return to campus in the fall of 2020, Terry Baker, executive director of dining services, was at the table. “We collaborated with everyone from health services to housing to ensure our students in quarantine or isolation had everything they needed,” Baker said. “Our focus on culinary excellence and exemplary customer service did not waiver during the pandemic.”

QUARANTINE & ISOLATION ENDEAVORS

As an example of their innovation, UR was the first university in Virginia to use modular housing for students in Quarantine & Isolation (Q&I). In doing so, approximately 21 percent of the student population spent time in one of 100 private bedroom and bathroom units from September 2020-April 2022.

Upon arriving at their temporary living spaces, which contained a microwave and minifridge, students received a personal phone call from UR’s catering team to discuss their dietary preferences and allergy restrictions. Dining Services also coordinated with University Recreation and Wellness to provide welcome bags that included calming goodies like Sudoku puzzles and scalp massagers along with non-perishable snacks.

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WITH



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