BYU has completely revamped its dining program over the last 12 years, establishing a strong retail portfolio, multiple service platforms and culinary sophistication.
When Dean Wright took over as dining services director at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT, in 1997, the university had a nice, conventional, well-run program that everyone seemed pretty content with.

“BYU Dining Services had always had a reputation for excellence,” recalls Wright, “but it was based mainly on service and cleanliness. The silverware and the glasses sparkled. However, the food was stuck in neutral. It was not a culinary driven operation. We were clean but institutional.”

Wright’s mandate was to change that and build a dining operation that would up the culinary quotient while encouraging community, what Wright calls “breaking bread together.”

That’s not easy to do on a campus with a student body not only somewhat older and more international than the norm, but one where only about six percent of the enrollment is required to buy a meal plan.

Nevertheless, Wright has set an ambitious goal to serve an average of 30,000 meals each day, which he figures is about one meal per student. He is very close to achieving that.

“When a successful dining operator on a commuter campus, you need to set goals,” he remarks. “You have to ask yourself, ‘What share of stomach do I want?’ I know we can’t get every meal, but I think we can get at least one a day per student.”

BYU’s track record matches this ambition. In his nearly dozen years in Provo, Wright has methodically stripped down and rebuilt BYU Dining into a multifaceted, customer-responsive—and culinary excellent—machine.

Today, the school’s $41 million program serves nearly 30,000 meals each day from a wide range of different service platforms, almost all of them bearing Wright’s imprint: a multi-concept dining hall and a traditional three-meals-a-day dining hall, a retail food court, a casual dining student hangout, a fine dining table service restaurant, several freestanding branded concepts, a trio of dairy bars, a couple of full-fledged grocery stores, a prototype deli/market, even a museum café. Beyond that, BYU dining also manages vending, catering and sports concessions for the university.

Mission Accomplished at BYU Dining

Brigham Young University’s dining program must satisfy the expectations of a unique customer base. BY MIKE BUZALKA

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Caffeine-Free Customer Base

To draw customers, Wright must tap into the needs of a fairly unique student population.

BYU is an institution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). Among other things, that means not just no alcohol, but no caffeine either (packaged beverages on campus are limited to caffeine-free selections or BYU works with bottlers to ensure there is a wide selection of caffeine-free alternatives).

It also means the campus has had to forego that high-margin bulwark of many campus dining programs, the coffee bar.

BYU’s enrollment is a little older than that of the average university because many students interrupt their academics for two years to complete church missions (up to 80 percent of BYU’s upperclassman males have served on missions). Since those missions often take place overseas, and since BYU draws thousands of LDS students from other countries, the student body is extremely well travelled, sophisticated and culturally diverse. A remarkable 75 percent of BYU students speak at least one foreign language fluently.

To get their business, the dining program must meet expectations for culinary variety and authenticity. (To illustrate this, Wright cites a dinner BYU Dining recently prepared for the Robert Burns Club, whose 80 members had spent their missions in Scotland: “I would challenge any school in...
the country to serve 140 pounds of haggis to students and have them knowledgeably critique it!” he says.

BYU Dining must also deal with the fact that a greater proportion of the school’s students are married, often with young children, than is typical at most universities because LDS culture encourages early marriage.

So, for instance, diapers and baby food are musts at campus retail stores, café locations all have to have high chairs available and BYU students tend to have less discretionary spending money than the typical unattached college student might.

**Friendly Neighborhood Grocer**

To “build community” in such an environment, Wright determined early on that he would have to de-emphasize the department’s existing cafeteria model and put new emphasis on retail at points of service where it would mesh with the habits of the student population.

When Wright took over, BYU Dining Services essentially had consisted of two large residential dining halls, plus the dining hall at the Missionary Training Center that exclusively served the staff and trainees there (see sidebar on last page). A food court in the student center was the only real retail outlet. Seventy percent of program revenues came from the cafeteria operations.

The two residential dining halls mostly fed younger students (primarily freshmen) living in singles dorms, while the older apartment dwellers—many already with young families—usually prepared their meals in their own kitchens. Of course, this pulled them away from the campus community

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**The Culinary Culture at BYU: Sustainable and Cost-Conscious**

When he was hired to oversee dining services at Brigham Young University in 1997, Dean Wright had a number of goals. One was to up the “culinary quotient” of the campus’s meal service.

That imperative has made its way through almost everything Wright has done in the past 12 years, but perhaps the most striking manifestation is the new Commons at Cannon Center dining venue, where five stations prepare and serve fresh, gourmet quality meals all day.

“Maybe the starkest sign of the new approach is that seemingly humdrum standby, the soup. “We would go through maybe two gallons a day in the old cafeteria,” remarks Executive Chef John McDonald, CEC (Cannon replaced an older, traditional dining hall when it opened last July). “Now, we go through 20 to 30 gallons. That may be the most popular area, in fact.”

Most days, five choices, rotating on a cycle, await students. There is usually an ethnic choice (Tuscan white bean, tortilla, spicy poblano corn chowder, etc.), as well as traditional favorites like noodle soups. One that has done extremely well is a tomato soup topped with Gorgonzola cheese, McDonald offers.

Currently, the department uses a premade frozen product but it will go to its own from-scratch recipes this summer when a planned central production center opens.

In addition to soups, Cannon offers a rotating series of international foods, grill favorites, salads, wraps and traditional fare such as meats baked in a rotisserie oven. One particular rotisserie favorite is a chicken with a blackberry barbecue glaze, McDonald says.

The opening of Cannon last summer was also fortuitous because it gave the department, struggling with rising food prices, an opportunity to control food costs in a venue from the get-go.

Rather than the self-serve model used in previous BYU dining halls, Cannon controls portions by pre-plating all dishes using smaller plates. “Students can come back for more as often as they want, but this lets us control waste better,” offers McDonald.

Another cost control strategy BYU Dining uses in its retail environments is merchandising only the higher-margin items. “We decided not to have photos on our menus of any items that did not give us the contribution margin we wanted,” Wright notes. “It doesn’t mean we don’t have lower-margin items, it just means they are not highlighted. Why advertise something you’re not making money on?”

A commitment to sustainability is another priority. “Our students expect us to be aware of our carbon footprint,” Wright says. “We try to be aware of what we purchase, and have reduce the amount of fruit, for example, that comes from long distances away.”

“We purchase as much locally grown produce during the growing season as possible,” adds McDonald, “but we are not in a prime growing area. On the other hand, the university has its own dairy, so almost all of our dairy and eggs are local, as is our beef.”

To reduce waste, pulpers have been installed in all dining locations, and used vegetable oil is collected and converted to biodiesel to run the campus grounds crew’s vehicles.

“We have no wet garbage going to a landfill from BYU,” Wright says proudly. “Our next initiative is to see to it that all of our equipment will be Energy Star certified or its equivalent, and that’s a commitment. Also, because we are located in a desert, we look closely at how we use water.”
at mealtimes.

“It’s impossible for dining services to come in and serve the meal around their dining room table,” Wright concedes, “but we figured if we could create a space where they could come to shop and congregate, it would bring them closer to ‘breaking bread together.’”

The need to bring cocooning apartment dwellers into communal settings led to Wright’s first true innovation at BYU, the Creamery on Ninth retail store, which is generally recognized as the country’s first real campus grocery store.

Wright says he got the idea from seeing how modern supermarkets, with their prepared foods and in-store cafés, become community gathering places in towns and cities. The same dynamic, he figured, could work on a college campus.

Opened in 2000, Creamery on Ninth somewhat controversially replaced a campus landmark, the original BYU Creamery that dates back to the school’s early years. For decades, the BYU Creamery had been famous, on and off campus, for the dairy products—especially ice cream—it produced using milk from the university’s own dairy herds.

When laying out the new Creamery on Ninth, Wright says he made sure to retain the dairy bar and its products (“the one thing you don’t want to mess with at BYU is the ice cream,” he laughs).

Creamery on Ninth offers not only a full range of competitively priced packaged groceries and sundries, just like a standard commercial supermarket, but also food-service from an in-store food outlet called Grill on Ninth.

At Grill on Ninth, shoppers can get not only burgers and other hot sandwiches but also salads, soups, sweets and of course BYU Creamery’s frozen desserts. Tables and chairs encourage shoppers to linger and mingle.

“It’s not just a c-store,” Wright says, “but a true grocery gathering place.”

More recently, a second grocery store—Wyview Creamery—opened in a residential tower that had been converted from family to single housing. What had been a spartan c-store in the building is now almost a full grocery store, and average daily sales have skyrocketed from $400-$500 a day to $3,800. It also encompasses a BYU Creamery dairy bar.

A third Creamery location, in the Wymount Terrace Office, incorporates a smaller, more conventional college c-store retail outlet along with the school’s famous ice cream products.

Balancing the Crowds

More recently, BYU Dining Services has had to address the challenge posed by the changing resident student customer base. In 2007 the university closed down the Deseret Towers residential complex. That eliminated not only 1,850 beds whose occupants had been required to purchase meal plans, but also one of the campus’s two residential dining halls.

With a growing vacancy rate and aging mechanical systems, Deseret was a relic of an era when younger students were content with a no-frills room and a meal plan. In its place, BYU opened the Wyview apartment complex to single students and launched its chartered housing program, an arrangement where the university works with private property owners to provide housing for students.

The dilemma this move posed for Dining Services was twofold: one, it reduced the mandatory meal plan base, and two, it put greater pressure on retail outlets, since the students formerly eating in residential dining halls were now flocking to them instead.

In response, Wright and his team formulated what he calls a “three-legged stool” on which the future of campus dining at BYU would be built.

One leg would be a new state-of-the-art residential dining facility that would not only be an attractive alternative to the retail outlets, but one that could motivate more students to purchase meal plans so they could eat there at a discount.
all meal periods from the venue’s previous incarnation.

“In fact,” Wright says proudly, “students who live there [Helaman Halls, the major dorm complex in which the Cannon dining complex is located] walk back to Cannon for lunch now instead of eating elsewhere. That frees up the student center for commuters.”

Cannon also has helped boost voluntary meal plan purchases. Some 2,000 non-resident students have purchased meal plans for this semester, many drawn by the opportunity to eat at Cannon at deeply discounted rates, Wright says.

BYU’s meal plan structure requires students living in campus singles dorms to purchase meal plans. For these students, some 1,800 in all, BYU Dining offers several options, each with Cannon at its core, combined with some additional dining dollars that can be used at the retail outlets. Another 1,600 students live in campus apartments. They are not required to buy meal plans, but the department has several tailored to their needs, as well as to the needs of commuters, who form the bulk of the enrollment.

Getting a Fair Share of Stomach

Getting more commuters to eat on campus, whether through meal plan purchases or by day-to-day cash transactions, is a major goal going forth.

The retail mix to lure them is already impressive. Besides the three Creamery locations and the nine-station Cougareat food court, BYU dining operates a pair of Jamba Juice outlets and Orville & Wilbur’s Wings in its Game Center.

Jamba Juice, as well as the Creamery ice cream bars, help compensate for the lack of campus coffee shops that can represent up to 30 percent of revenues at some conventional campuses, according to Wright. “Chocolate milk sells well, but it sure doesn’t compete with coffee,” he laughs.

For more of a sit-down occasion, there is the Legends Grille in the Student Athletic Center, where students can gather to socialize and watch BYU sporting events on 11 large-screen plasma TVs. Faculty and staff tend to gravitate to the more formal Skyroom restaurant with its spectacular views, and the Museum Café, inside the BYU Museum of Art.

The future direction of retail on the BYU campus is foreshadowed by a new initiative that was piloted last fall in a new wing of the N. Eldon Tanner Building. The Blue Line Deli & Market concept is designed to fit into nontraditional locations around campus, which Wright deems crucial for capturing additional “share of stomach” from busy commuters.

“We’ve found that our biggest competition is the student who skips a meal or brown-bags.”

Concessions Success Story

The concessions managed by BYU Dining at Brigham Young’s campus sports venues used to be a very loose affair, with fans allowed to bring whatever they wanted in. That of course cut concessions sales significantly.

However, after 9/11, the university decided to close the gates to outside food for security reasons, which made upgrading the previously pedestrian fare served inside an imperative. That’s when BYU Dining Director Dean Wright decided the best approach was to bring in outside brands to fill out the concessions lineup. The result: a series of brands—Dippin’ Dots, Pita Pit, Snowie, Teriyaki Stix, Costa Vida—that have made both customer satisfaction and sales soar.

“We were not only able to increase the total dollar amount we paid to the athletic department by 400%, but we had enough left from our share of the revenues to install credit card readers in all our permanent concession stands,” boasts Wright. The investment in card readers—made at a time when that technology was only starting to be implemented in concessions—upped sales and check averages further.

“The first year, we averaged seven percent of sales from credit cards,” Wright says. “Last year in football it was 28%, so it certainly was worth the financial investment.”

Football is king when it comes to concessions. Not only does one home football game generate the same concessions sales as the whole basketball season, but football games are prime catering opportunities, with 20 or more banquets and groups of 1,200 at a time mingling in the open air or under tents at each game.

Another initiative made in connection with the athletic department was Legends Grill, a retail fast casual outlet with 11 flat-screen TVs where students can socialize. Located in the student athletic center, it serves an array of grilled items, pizzas and appetizers. Customers order at the window and pick up when their orders are ready. There is no table service.
THROW FM INNOVATOR bags,” Wright explains. “Our studies show the biggest reason for skipped meals is that they don’t have time to stand in line, or don’t have time for a full meal.”

The Blue Line concept is designed to address this. “We all still eat with our eyes,” Wright notes. “Blue Line can fit anywhere with a long narrow hallway where students can walk through and see the food available, priced right and looking appealing.”

Depending on economic circumstances, the next Blue Line will open in the school library in a year or two. Future sites are still to be determined but will be vastly aided by the opening of the culinary production center, which will eliminate the need for retail outlets to have production space, leaving more for display while allowing the menu to be diverse and appealing.

The Blue Line in the Tanner Building is styled after a New York deli market, offering two hot sandwich selections, three soups, a chili and a Blue Plate Special daily. The Blue Plate special, priced under $4, is designed to draw in students on a budget with an economically priced full hot meal choice such as lasagna, stuffed baked potato and shepherd’s pie.

This is complemented by an extensive selection of packaged salads, sandwiches and other grab-and-go items. These emphasize affordable favorites like 99-cent microwaveable mac-and-cheese and beans-and-weenies dishes.

“With the economy the way it is, students are watching their money and we need to give them attractive options,” Wright says.

The flexibility and variety of the menu mix at the retail outlets is expected to increase once the new culinary center opens this summer.

Not only will the center remove the burden and restrictions associated with onsite production at each outlet but by removing the need for production equipment at individual sites, it will make them feasible for more locations.

Wright says he’s already planning to put another concept into the student center food court, using space where a bakery operation currently sits. With baking centralized in the production center, that space will be freed up.

What that concept will be is not yet determined, but knowing Wright, it ought to be something special. FM

FM A Largely self-contained portion of the BYU campus houses the Missionary Training Center (MTC), where 3,000 young men and women attend eight-week courses focused on learning foreign languages and cultures and preparing to go on missions encouraged by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Young men between the ages of 19 and 25 are expected to serve a two-year mission, often overseas, while young women of at least age 21 are expected to serve 18 months.

BYU Dining’s cafeteria in the MTC serves three meals a day to these trainees in a “military-style” format dictated by the need to accommodate 3,000 people in a two-hour window (the trainees come in shifts, with each getting 40 minutes to eat). The trainees are cloistered, so it is basically a captive audience, and the cafeteria is closed to outside diners.

BYU Dining Director Dean Wright made a commitment to improve the foodservice to the MTC when he came to the campus in 1997. Previously, the dining hall was a rather basic operation where the food was filling and plentiful, but uninspired.

That has now changed, and in fact, the MTC dining hall served as the prototype for the BYU campus’s showcase Cannon Center Commons dining operation. It will consolidate production operations, allowing efficiency and greater menu choice.

A Really Closed Campus

The MTC cafeteria must serve 3,000 people in 40-minute shifts over a two-hour window. It now offers diners a choice of four distinct food platforms.

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