

Colleges & Universities: Preparing for When the Students Return

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Foodservice programs in Colleges & Universities (C&U) changed dramatically when COVID-19 hit campuses across the country in mid-March of 2020. Suddenly, students were told to pack up their belongings, leave their dormitories, and head home. Campuses shrank from a population in the thousands to the low hundreds. Lucrative sporting events were cancelled along with graduation and reunion weekends, summer programs and conferences. Dining halls were closed indefinitely. Naturally, this had a severe impact on revenues for C&U foodservice operators. According to estimates from the Coronavirus Foodservice Impact Model, published by IFMA and Datassential, the C&U segment experienced an average decline of 48%, compared to pre-COVID projections.

At the time of the publishing of this whitepaper (late June 2020), most college campuses remain closed, or are operating at a minimal level. Foodservice Directors are very busy, however, as they prepare for what their operations will look like when students return to campus in August and September. This whitepaper summarizes the key challenges that C&U foodservice directors face as they prepare for the next school year. Additionally, we will address some of the changes students will experience as they return to campus, which offer new opportunities for foodservice manufacturers.

Note that this discussion puts a blanket over the United States, knowing full well that not every college and university campus is the same. Protocols vary widely by state, urban/suburban/rural, number of students living on campus, and overall size of student population.

The content of this whitepaper is the output of listening to weekly discussions among C&U foodservice directors that sit on IFMA's C&U Operator Council. The 22 members of the Council are listed at the end of this whitepaper.

Below are the top challenges facing C&U foodservice directors that have been discussed on the weekly council calls.

- **Revenue shortfalls** – It's difficult to make investments in new food operations when your revenues from the previous school year were down an estimated 48% or more and the uncertainty of whether students will return in the Fall. Some students may opt to continue with remote learning, if they are reticent to live on campus. Consequently, student meal plan enrollment is likely to be down for the 2020/21 school year, which hampers the ability of Foodservice Directors to flex their operations to meet the changed needs of the population they serve. If the campus relies on sporting events and conferences to drive ancillary revenue, the cancellation or curtailment of those events could have a dramatic impact on revenue as well.
- **Capacity constrained feeding** – The IFMA C&U Council members share one common belief: they do not have clarity on how students will react to the new menus and protocols that are being put in place to safeguard against infection. The mandate handed down to many of the Council members is to reduce capacity in the dining halls by 25%-50%, increase throughput speed through the servery, and provide more pre-packaged and to-go options. Executing on these mandates is their current challenge, but they know when students return, some of their best laid plans might need to evolve. However, without having dealt with a challenge like this before, it is a bit of a guessing game.
- **Serving diverse diets on a reduced menu** – College & University students are renowned for being demanding eaters with a vast array of dietary requirements: vegan, vegetarian, high protein, lactose intolerant, allergy free, etc. In contrast to these demands are the needs of foodservice operators to reduce capacity, increase speed of service, and cut food costs. One solution is to reduce the number of offerings available to students, but operators note that doing so while still meeting the long list of dietary needs won't be easy.

Despite the need for substantial change, there is one area where C&U foodservice directors will not compromise: sustainability. Many campuses have spent years building their sustainability programs and are not willing to backtrack in order to reduce costs or increase efficiency. So, packaging that is reusable or compostable

will still be favored over less expensive options. Sourcing from local providers will still be preferred, when possible. Manufacturers will still need to be able to tell their products' origin story and back that story up with facts that support responsible sourcing and animal welfare.

Based on the mandates put in place to enhance physical distancing and reduce opportunities for infection, changes will be made to the way students are fed during the upcoming school year. The list of changes below is not all encompassing, but it does summarize those that are consistent across the IFMA Council and those that offer foodservice manufacturers opportunities to introduce products and offer labor or cost-saving solutions.

- **Pre-packaged foods and beverages for carry out** – Students lingering in the dining hall to socialize, study, or just hang out will not be commonplace this coming school year. Instead, students will be encouraged to use the cafeterias to get their meals and then move on. Self-serve options like salad bars will not exist. Instead, C&U operations will rely on providing a wider assortment of tasty, healthy, and ethnic options that travel well, can be reheated, or eaten on-the-go. This change offers a unique opportunity for foodservice manufacturers to partner with C&U directors to come up with creative to-go solutions, keeping in mind that sustainability edicts must still be followed. For example, one solution that some Council members have mentioned is providing students with personalized, reusable carry out containers that can be sanitized and then filled with food for carry out.
- **Reservations accepted** – As strange as it sounds, it's true. On some campuses this fall, students will use apps on their phones to make a reservation for a certain time to use the cafeteria. Since capacity could be limited to 50% of normal occupancy, not all students will be able to enter the dining halls at the same time. Instead, they will need to stagger their eating times. Operators agree this is a better solution than having students waiting in line outside the dining halls, which defeats the purpose of creating physical distance.
- **Increased speed of service** – A buzzword heard on many IFMA C&U council calls is throughput. Much like a factory, dining halls will be about efficient movement of students through the servery and dining hall. Since self-serve options are not viable, that means that every meal will need to be prepared and served by a staff member. However, operators note that the meal cannot take a long time to prepare; students cannot be standing around waiting for their food. Once again, foodservice manufacturers can leverage this opportunity and provide solutions that increase speed of service without compromising quality and taste.

Over the last three months, C&U foodservice directors have been challenged like never before. Their world has been turned upside down and they have had to adjust on an almost daily basis. Consequently, they are open to ideas on how to recoup their lost revenue while still adhering to the new safety protocols that are now in place. Foodservice manufacturers, their trading partners, and broadline distributors need to create partnerships that focus on driving new value into the C&U foodservice segment.

IFMA will continue to host and listen to the C&U Operator Council and provide its members with the insights and best practices to help build these partnerships and support operators in the segment. In addition to the C&U Council, IFMA is also hosting Councils in the Healthcare, K-12, Business & Industry, and Small & Mid-sized Chains segments. For reports on the other segments, including [Healthcare \(PDF\)](#) and [K-12 \(PDF\)](#), visit IFMAworld.com.

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