

Is Your University Falling Behind Because of Its Food Program?

Written by Ginny Grimsley
Friday, 14 June 2013 10:06

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Social Architecture a Key Role in Recruitment & Retention; Industry Leader Gives Tips

A record 33 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds hold bachelor's degrees, up from 17 percent in 1971. Today's high school graduates know that a college degree means earning power so, despite the rising expense of post-secondary school, the business of higher education is more competitive than ever, says industry-leading social architect and entrepreneur David Porter.

An often-overlooked component in the coveted "three Rs" – Recruitment, Retention and Alumni Relations – is the dining hall and student meal plans, he says.

"During the mid 1990s, campuses throughout the country were dealing with widespread disenchantment with their aging dining facilities and stale menus, so many paid food contractors to take over management. That was a big mistake," says Porter, who designs dining programs and dining halls at colleges throughout North America. He shares tips for keeping students on campus, where they're more likely to bond with each and their schools, in "The Porter Principles: Retain & Recruit Students & Alumni, Save Millions on Dining and Stop Letting Food Service Contractors Eat Your Lunch" (www.porterkhouwconsulting.com).

"For most universities that contract out, the foodservice provider that controls tens of millions of dollars in purchases for the school is also its sole source of guidance on student dining. No matter how you slice it, there is a blatant conflict of interest here."

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Porter, who has worked with the University of Georgia, University of New Hampshire, Ferris State University, George Mason University and the University of Richmond, among others, identifies three areas schools should focus on in their meal program and facilities:

- Do they make students want to eat on campus? Social architecture is the conscious design of an environment to encourage social behaviors that lead toward a goal. In this case, the goal is solidifying students' connections to one another and commitment to their school by drawing them together in a leisurely way at least once a day. Gathering together and socializing over meals on a regular basis helps students develop relationships that increase the odds they'll stay in school, and that they'll be active alumni after graduation. Students who live and dine on campus tend to have higher GPA's and are more likely to graduate.
- What do prospective students see? When giving tours to prospective students and their families, is the dining hall a destination, and if so, is it one to be proud of? The kitchen is a non-negotiable element in creating a home. If a future student sees the dining hall as an uninviting ghost town with drab food, then he or she will feel less inclined to live on campus, and may even seek another school simply for its more accommodating campus.
- Are good meals available when students want them? Parents and students both know what time young people tend to get up in the morning and how late they go to bed. Many classes extend well into the evening and lots of students avoid early morning classes. Meals need to be available well beyond the outdated 9-to-5 time frame. Trying to accomplish that by including off-campus restaurant deals in the meal plan, or having too many locations available on campus, will be counter-productive. That decentralizes the dining experience.

About David Porter

David Porter, FCSI, is chief executive officer and president of Porter Khouw Consulting, Inc., a foodservice master planning and design firm based in Crofton, Maryland. David has more than 40 years of hands-on food service operations and consulting experience and is a professional member of the Foodservice Consultants Society International. Porter Khouw Consulting has worked with more than 350 clients to conduct market research and develop strategic plans, master plans and designs for the college and university market. Porter is a graduate of the prestigious hospitality program at Michigan State University and has been recognized repeatedly as a leader in his field.

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