



HIGHER EDUCATION AND COVID

by Phineas Dowling, PhD

Campus Dining in a Pandemic

As colleges and universities across the country are reopening amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the many challenges they face is the question of how to resume campus dining and reopen dining halls. The dining hall is a staple of the college experience and a mainstay of campus promotional imagery. We've all seen the photos of a group of students casually sitting around a table in a brightly lit dining hall. Campuses everywhere have spent the last few decades enhancing their dining options as a way to appeal to students to live up to that promotional image.

Almost every campus has its own dining hall (maybe several), and most have locations with fast food chains and other commercial dining options. One of the great appeals of these dining experiences is the sense of communal gathering. Students can grab lunch with their friends and run into other friends. Students can spend hours hanging out in dining spaces, talking with friends, studying, flirting, procrastinating, all with ready access to food and beverages. The dining hall is as much a part of campus life as the residence hall.

So what happens to the dining hall when a global pandemic means students can't hang out in groups? When they can't stand near the staff as food is served? When buffet-style menus mean a greater chance of infection? Where the very tables and chairs those promotional-photo students are sitting at are now vectors for transmission? When they can't eat while wearing a mask?

Safety is the Priority

The priority for every college and university is of course the safety and health of their students and employees. While the safest option is to close on-campus dining, that is not really a possibility for most institutions. Many students rely on campus dining as their sole source of food, and some small college towns don't have many dining alternatives for students. The challenge is balancing the needs of the students and the university with safety.

Another issue often overlooked in discussions of campus safety during the pandemic is the health and safety of the staff. The people that fill the ranks of dining hall and custodial staff—some of the teams that will have the greatest burden put upon them as campuses reopen—often come from populations that are most at risk. Carlos Aramayo, union president of UNITE HERE’s Local 26 in Boston, which represents 14,000 dining-hall staff members at higher ed institutions, notes in a recent *New York Times* roundtable, “The members in our local are 85 percent black and brown and often live in multigenerational households, and many of them have comorbidities for the virus.”

The COVID-19 virus has disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous, and Latinx populations. According to COVIDTracking.com, “Nationwide, Black people are dying at 2.4 times the rate of white people.” While there are many reasons for this staggering infection gap, systemic institutional racial and socio-economic disparity has played a major role. As Aramayo further points out, the members of his union are pulled between their need and desire to work and their justified fear: “People

are very afraid to go to work. They are very afraid of the public-transit system. They’re very afraid that the institutions may not take the level of responsibility that’s necessary to keep them safe.”

Dining hall and custodial workers are often some of the lowest paid employees of an academic institution and are generally paid by the hour. That means if they don’t work, they don’t get paid. Working, however, puts them at greater risk of infection. This risk increases for dining hall staff who work in large teams, indoors, often under hot conditions while serving hundreds or thousands of students each day. As Aramayo has noted, even their commute to and from work can increase their risk as so many hourly workers across the country rely on (often crowded) public transportation.

While the risk to workers should be enough to give one pause, the higher the risk of infection for dining hall workers, the higher the risk to the students, staff, and faculty to whom they serve food. Any considerations of safety and risk-reduction must take into account the safety of workers as well as the students and faculty.

Ways to Reduce Risk

Many colleges have already implemented a number of changes over the summer to their on-campus dining options to try to mitigate risk. These changes have been operational, focused on limiting hours, adjusting workers shifts, and moving to pre-prepared meals ready to go (“grab-and-go”), and shifting seating to outdoor dining areas. These changes can help, but become more difficult to manage as schools reopen in full and large numbers of students return.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests a number of potential changes. The biggest change should be to move away from buffet and self-serve dining as this poses a much greater risk of infection. Shared objects, such as serving spoons and tongs, can quicken the spread of germs, bacteria, and viruses. This is a major change, however, as most campus dining halls mostly rely on buffet and self-serve dining, as it is more efficient and economical than made-to-order options. Students also like the speed and choice that buffet and self-serve dining offers. The CDC

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encourages that campus dining instead shift to grab-and-go meals or serving individually plated meals.

A move to grab-and-go or made-to-order meals comes with many of its own obstacles, however. For one, it requires a lot more preparation and labor from staff, which risks greater exposure to them. A shift away from buffet and self-service models can also mean long lines for diners, which puts them at risk of exposure by being in proximity with others for extended periods. Long lines also mean students may not be able to get food in the times between classes. Meals-to-go also means a lot more waste (both in terms of trash and spending). In addition to the packaging required for to-go dining, the CDC also recommends the use of disposable utensils and dishes to reduce the need for staff to handle and clean these service items.

Some solutions to these obstacles are about making changes to how and when people work. Staggering shifts can reduce staff bottlenecks at workstations. Installing physical barriers between staff in the kitchen where possible can help, as well as barriers (such as plexiglass) between staff and diners at points of contact, like registers. Another

simple change can be to make adjustments to guide diners through the dining hall. Painting directional arrows to encourage diners to move in one direction, and putting up barriers and stanchions to prevent free movement can help risk-reduction. Some other simple fixes can be limiting the number of diners allowed in a dining hall at one time and spacing seating out to the CDC-recommended six feet. Moving service and dining outside can also help reduce risk, but is perhaps not as realistic in many regions.

Some other fixes can be more difficult and expensive. Some fixes can make the dining hall experience more efficient with less contact or to even offload dining services from campus. This can mean the development or purchase of phone apps that allow students to order meals in advance for pick up or even scheduling dining times to limit the number of diners at any given time. Another option is to integrate touchless biometric scanners (hand readers, iris/face scanners, etc.) or self-scanning “passes” on students’ phones. Such biometric or phone access allows for fewer points of contact with staff by removing points of sale (POS) swipe and register stations and could allow for faster movement through lines. Several colleges and

universities already deploy biometric systems in dining halls, including the University of Maryland, Virginia Tech, and St. Thomas University.

Colleges may also consider partnering with local restaurants to offer students credits for meals. Partnering with the local community can mean that fewer students are eating at the dining hall (without additional expenses to them) and local businesses are financially supported during this difficult time.

As long as campuses are open, students are going to rely on campus dining for meals. While colleges and universities may not be able to give them the promotional-photo experience, there are ways to adapt to current circumstances and prepare for a safer and healthier future.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Phineas Dowling has a PhD in literature from Auburn University. His research focuses on Scottish identity and British literature of the long eighteenth century. In addition to his scholarship and teaching, Phineas has a strong interest in pedagogy and university administration.

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