

Food Trucks Help Commuter Schools Keep Up

Whitney Duffey and Joyce Fasano

Tue, 2014-07-22 16:11

A ‘food cart court’ can provide quality foodservice for nontraditional students, while providing schools real profit potential. Here’s a primer on what you need to know when considering such an alternative.



[Students enjoy the Haute Wheels event at Houston Community College.](#)

Promo Image (medium)

There are many logistical and financial challenges in addressing nontraditional students’ dining needs. Students may lack interest in, or may not have a schedule that conforms to, traditionally structured meal plans. Campus growth may mean one facility alone does not provide adequate foodservice coverage. Class schedules may dictate on-the-go meals at unpredictable times, but the revenues rarely support extended operating hours. So what is an administrator to do? A “food cart court” could be the answer.

When developing a food cart program, administrators should consider the nuances of implementation. Foodservice management and operations consultants should ask clients various questions to identify the optimal on-campus truck locations—if there will be any town-gown considerations, for instance, and who the target customer will be.

The following represents some questions that administrators should ask themselves before embarking:

Related

[Food Trucks Expand Their Role in Onsite](#)

[Keep On Truckin'](#)

Location. The old real estate adage “location, location, location” also holds true for food trucks and carts. While all are semi- or fully mobile, they generally will park in one predetermined location on a campus. Accordingly, picking the right spot can make or break a food cart program. Critical considerations include:

Foot Traffic. How visible is the intended location? Remember: out of sight, out of mind. Is the intended location in a peak pedestrian area? Or are you counting on food trucks to divert pedestrian traffic from elsewhere on campus? If you're expecting to change traffic patterns, make sure you're setting realistic expectations. The typical commuter student is often balancing school with work and/or family, and is therefore not likely to waste time searching for food. Pick potential locations that are no more than two minutes off the beaten path and conveniently accessible to parking and classrooms.



Geographic Expansion. Has the campus grown in recent years, or are there future plans to expand geographically? For many community and commuter colleges, growth often means that a single foodservice location will not be convenient to where the students park, arrive via public transportation or take their classes. Instead of picking one food cart court location, consider past and future growth patterns and create multiple food cart “hubs.”

Utility Access. For many desirable campus locations, there is a need to install new water and electrical connections to provide utility service to most carts and trucks. If you're unsure whether there is sufficient electric and water in your intended location, a discussion with the campus facilities department will typically provide the necessary information.

Adjacent Amenities. Is your intended location near tables, benches or other seating? Is there an awning or other covering to provide protection from the elements? Are there nearby trash and recycling receptacles? Who will service the trash/recycling containers on a regular basis? This type of infrastructure is important for the food carts' success, keeping your campus clean and promoting student interaction. If you find the location lacking in any way, your institution should consider making small, targeted capital improvements. A simple seating arrangement with trash receptacles

will go a long way to supporting your carts or trucks.

Campus Considerations. Will your new food cart court cause any aesthetic or campus design integrity complaints? Will it require that vehicular traffic be rerouted? Administrators should remember to use a campus-wide lens to understand the carts' impact and assure the program has no unexpected consequences.

Proximity to Other Foodservice Facilities. Do you intend to replace your existing dining operation with food trucks or carts? Or do you expect that they will supplement the existing program? It's important to define realistic expectations, as multiple food concepts on a small campus can create unnecessary competition, with a detrimental financial impact. If there's insufficient demand, or too small a student body, introducing food trucks to a community college or commuter campus will either be unsuccessful or squeeze out the existing concepts. Is there a foodservice contract operator on campus? If so, the operator may require a commission fee or rent from trucks to offset the introduction of competition to its on-campus retail outlets.

Town Gown Considerations. Is your campus located in close proximity to its surrounding community, or in an urban area? Or is it more remote? If you answered the former, you may need to carefully consider your impact on the neighboring community. Many local businesses enjoy proximity to food trucks, seeing them as creating vibrant street-level activity. However, you may receive push back from local restaurateurs who often see trucks and carts as competition with significantly lower overhead. If you're encouraging your trucks/carts to park in the public space, be aware that there may be local ordinances requiring special permitting or parking approval. For example, at Hillsborough Community College (HCC) in Tampa, FL, there are no permits needed when trucks park on HCC property, but when trucks parked at the Ybor City campus or on city streets, the operator, Tampa Bay Food Truck Rally, must apply for and receive city permits.

Know Your Audience

(Continued from page 1)

Target Audience. As with any business venture, knowing who your potential clientele will be is important for determining day-part segmentation, cuisine mix, total number of carts or trucks and any special programming. With respect to a community college or commuter school audience, the following are some of the key demographics to address:

Commuter Students. Commuter students require special considerations due to their unique schedules. For example, is your commuter population taking primarily night classes? If so, you may need to provide on-campus dinner options. Is parking tight on campus, making it difficult for students to leave and buy food? If so, you may be able to expand your food offerings based on students' desire to stay on campus.

Millennials. Also known as Generation Y, the Millennials (aged 18-35) make up an ever-larger proportion of community college and commuter students as they seek practical skills training and flexible schedules that allow time for school, work and family. For this reason, administrators should



especially consider food trucks. With ever-revolving locations and menu offerings, many trucks have already mastered the effective use of social media out of sheer necessity. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are among the best ways trucks communicate with potential customers, and this is especially appealing to a Millennial audience. This group also tends to be highly price sensitive. When establishing your program, try cultivating “\$5 meal deals” or other affordable options, a strategy that has worked well for the truck program at Tallahassee Community College (TCC) in Tallahassee, FL.



Faculty and Staff Members. It’s important not to forget another key demographic on all campuses: the school’s employees. Data collected as part of Brailsford & Dunlavey surveys shows that faculty and staff members have their own unique set of concerns. Convenience is often a number one concern—after all, no one wants to be late for a class they are teaching. Healthful options are also important to this group, who may be eating on campus as often as five days a week.

Prospective Students, Alumni and Donors. Special food truck events can be a great way to showcase your institution to prospective students and to reconnect with alumni or donors. For example, Houston Community College has hosted a Haute Wheels Food Truck Festival once a year since 2011. Event organizer Debra Ford of Ford and Company claims the event is the largest food truck gathering in the city, catering to a broad audience and benefitting the HCC Foundation.

Advice for Maximizing Your Investment. Now that you have a better idea of where your food cart court will be located and whom it will be serving, it’s time to understand the financials. Creating a food truck/cart court is roughly 75 percent cheaper than building a traditional-style food court with a kitchen. HCC South Shore Campus president, Dr. Allen Witt, concurs that the financial benefit is clear cut. “Instead of spending our limited building funds on a cafeteria, the college decided to invest in classrooms and use food trucks to provide hot meals,” he says. “This decision has turned out better than anyone expected... We've saved money on construction, provided a rich selection of food and helped local businesses. Everyone wins..." Collecting rent as a landlord is often far more financially rewarding than paying losses on an underutilized facility. However, it is important that administrators understand all the potential financial considerations to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Trucks Versus Carts. For community colleges and commuter schools, carts can be more financially justifiable than trucks, depending on the size and needs of the campus. What’s the difference between a cart and a truck? Food trucks are a fully operational vehicle and kitchen “under one roof.” Carts are smaller, less expensive cooking units that become mobile when connected to a vehicle.

Operational Considerations

(Continued from page 2)

Administrative and Operational Structure. How a food truck program is structured can greatly impact its financials. The program can be self-operated, foodservice contractor-operated, or operated by third-party companies whose sole purpose is to organize a consortium of independent food truck operators. For example, TCC works with the Tallahassee Food Truck Association (TFTA), which sends two to three food trucks to its campus on a weekly basis. TFTA President Rebecca Kelly explains, in exchange for parking on campus “trucks ‘donate’ a small fee to the college each time they set up...[which] goes to a general scholarship fund.” If your administration is looking for the most “no muss no fuss” model, colleges can simply lease space for operators to park their trucks. As long as the operator has a business license, is inspected by the health department and has adequate equipment to ensure food safety, there is no reason the administrator need be anything other than landlord.

Potential Capital Outlays. While creating a food truck operation is generally a smart financial move compared with more costly brick and mortar alternatives, it is important administrators understand all the potential capital outlays. Most obviously, there is the truck itself (if a college is self-operating its food truck program). Food carts and trucks can run anywhere from \$50,000 to \$1.5 million, depending on their size and complexity. Other potential costs are less obvious, like trash receptacles, tables/seating, an adjacent covered dining space and utility connections.

Meals Plans. If meal plans are in place, administrators need to decide whether to allow students to use meal dollars at the food trucks. Permitting the use of meal plans has several benefits: It can increase overall meal plan sales, improve participation and satisfaction rates and provide a high level of convenience for students. However, there are potential complications. Accepting meal plans puts trucks in direct competition with other meal plan-accepting facilities on campus. If campus foodservice is contracted, it can complicate the transfer of funds between the food truck operator and foodservice operator.

Measure Results. As they do with any business venture, food cart or truck program administrators should regularly evaluate performance and make adjustments to best accommodate market demand and preferences. For example, at HCC the student government association periodically distributes surveys to students, faculty and staff to gather feedback on favorite food trucks and preferred price points.

Food trucks and carts can be quality, affordable foodservice operations with real profit potential. Yet, any administrator considering food trucks must understand the nuances of implementation—including operational structure, agreement mechanism, financial and legal considerations, impact on campus foodservice contractor and logistical considerations.

Whitney Duffey is an assistant project manager at Brailsford & Dunlavey and can be reached at wduffey@programmanagers.com. Joyce Fasano, FSCI is a vice president at Brailsford & Dunlavey and can be reached at jfasano@programmanagers.com. Brailsford & Dunlavey is a program management firm with comprehensive in-house planning capabilities, dedicated to serving educational institutions, municipalities, public agencies, and non-profit clients. Thanks to representatives from Hillsborough Community College, Tallahassee Community College, and Houston Community College who agreed to be interviewed by B&D for this article.