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Central Washington University

Entry details

Entry Name:	CWU Dining Services Innovative Dining Program of the Year
Institution Name:	Central Washington University
Entry Completed By (<i>name and position</i>):	Dean Masuccio, Director of Dining Services and 1891 Catering

CWU Dining stands out as a self-operated, student-centered program where innovation is driven by relationships rather than scale. Because Dining operates fully in-house, it builds deep cross-campus partnerships that integrate menus, marketing, student leadership, and community engagement into a unified campus dining experience. With over 300 student employees representing nearly 20 percent of all student jobs on campus, Dining functions as both service provider and learning community. Through a distinct declining balance model paired with an all-you-care-to-enjoy venue, authentic cultural collaboration, and data-informed strategy, Dining fosters belonging, affordability, and experiential learning as defining elements of the CWU student experience.

Essay:

CWU Dining differentiates itself through collaborative innovation infused throughout its operation. As a self-operated program, CWU Dining adapts quickly and builds sustained partnerships with academic units, student organizations, and cross-functional campus partners. Innovation is not isolated to a single initiative but is foundational to service design, menu development, marketing strategy, and campus programming.

The dining model reflects this philosophy. A declining balance structure provides flexibility and transparency, while an all-you-care-to-enjoy venue expands inclusive access without reliance on unused swipes. Menus are shaped by student feedback, Menus of Change University Research Collaborative (MCURC) principles, and designed to be

culturally inclusive. Marketing operates as a strategic, iterative process aligned with operational goals and initiatives. Student leadership roles extend beyond employment into meaningful responsibility, building institutional knowledge, and professional skill development.

Rather than competing on scale, technology, or capital investment, CWU Dining focuses on connection centered around food. Dining's mission, vision, and values drive authentic cultural representation, responsive service adjustments, structured food recovery, and mission-aligned events throughout the year. This integrated approach positions Dining not simply as a food provider, but as a catalyst for belonging, collaboration, and student success that reflects CWU's mission to be a community of access and opportunity.

Introduction:

CWU Dining's marketing strategy is student-powered, integrated, and strategically driven. In partnership with the Auxiliary Marketing team, which includes two full-time staff and six student creatives, Dining develops cohesive campaigns that elevate awareness, participation, and brand perception. Students execute social media, photography, video, environmental graphics, and campaign design under professional direction, reinforcing Dining's commitment to applied learning and CWU's broader institutional values. The marketing approach extends beyond promotion. It is a structured, collaborative process of defining goals, identifying audiences, deploying creative solutions, measuring outcomes, and iterating to strengthen engagement, access, and the overall dining experience.

Essay:

This approach translates into measurable outcomes and targeted solutions that address student needs. An example is the Apartment Flex Plan, developed after identifying apartment residents as an underserved population through student feedback, meal plan data, and conversations with partners. Dining collaborated with finance and marketing partners to design an affordable and flexible product, then launched a multi-channel campaign across social media, physical and digital signage, and email marketing. Participation increased 94% in the first year and 49% the following year. Performance data revealed email as a high-impact channel, leading to refined segmentation and expanded outreach.

Marketing also interprets student feedback to guide operational improvements. When surveys provided feedback regarding variety, value perception, and hours of operation, Dining responded by extending Central Marketplace hours, increasing the visibility of healthy options including vegetarian and vegan offerings, and refining the Holmes all-you-care-to-enjoy experience.

Student-developed visual assets contributed to Holmes' transformation into a more welcoming, school-branded environment that reflects CWU spirit and pride. Updates to layout, décor, and allergen visibility strengthened clarity and improved overall perception, with positive feedback from students and staff alike.

Through integrated storytelling and measurable strategy, marketing strengthens clarity, enhances perception, and ensures Dining remains responsive, student-centered, and continuously improving.

Introduction:

CWU Dining's chef-driven menus reflect a balance of culinary craftsmanship, accessibility, and intentional design. Influenced by MCURC principles and plant-forward strategies, menus are structured to promote health, sustainability, and inclusivity while prioritizing flavor, student appeal, and choice. Across Holmes Dining Hall, Fresh Bar, Village Grill, and retail concepts, offerings are continuously evaluated for quality, cost-effectiveness, guest experience, and relevance. Dedicated allergen-safe systems, inclusive halal options, and transparent nutritional information ensure all students can dine confidently. Seasonal rotation and local sourcing further reinforce CWU Dining's commitment to freshness, quality, and sustainability.

Essay:

Menu development begins with concept identity. Holmes emphasizes variety, portion-conscious plating, and an allergen-friendly station developed with the campus dietitian, rooted in familiar, comforting recipes. MCURC

principles influence menu design across Holmes and Central Marketplace. Through participation in an MCURC research study, Pasta and Fresh Bar menus were redesigned with plant-forward ratios and flavor-forward naming to encourage adoption of plant-based dishes. Village Grill has evolved into a fan-favorite ghost kitchen, delivering craveable offerings with streamlined production and an efficient labor model.

Menus are engineered using sales data, student feedback, and a structured framework to evaluate cost efficiency, production feasibility, and popularity. This approach informs decisions across menus and operations, including replacing low-performing items with high-demand options, refining production to improve pizza quality and throughput, and expanding healthier offerings and plant-based entrées. Core menus rotate seasonally to reflect regional availability and student preferences. Cultural partnership menus are co-created with student organizations to ensure authenticity.

The Top 9 allergen-friendly station is supported by Purple Paw trained staff who maintain AllerTrain and ServSafe certifications. Defined preparation zones minimize cross-contact, while halal offerings and transparent nutritional information strengthen inclusivity. Local sourcing partnerships with regional growers and Wildcat Farm reinforce freshness, seasonality, and sustainability.

Introduction:

CWU Dining Services is a self-operated, relationship-driven program intentionally designed to be agile, student-driven, and data-informed. Our hybrid service model integrates a declining balance structure with an all-you-care-to-enjoy dining hall, robust retail concepts, campus catering, concessions, and digital-first production models. Innovation at CWU Dining is not a single initiative. It is embedded in service design, staffing structure, sourcing strategy, and decision-making systems. Through intentional student leadership development, authentic campus collaboration, and data-guided operational refinement, CWU Dining continuously adapts to evolving student needs while advancing affordability, inclusion, sustainability, and long-term operational resilience.

Essay:

CWU Dining's innovation begins with structural service design. Holmes Dining Hall operates as an all-you-care-to-enjoy venue integrated within a declining balance framework, emphasizing portion-conscious plating, affordability, and reduced waste rather than swipe-driven volume. Retail concepts, markets, and digital-first production models expand access through campus-wide mobile ordering while stabilizing staffing and reducing wait times.

Staffing is intentionally student-centered and development driven. With over 70 student coordinators and managers, our formal leadership pathway distributes responsibility across scheduling, inventory systems, merchandising, and training development. This model strengthens operational bench depth while preparing students for advanced roles within or beyond hospitality. Staffing levels are determined through historical sales analysis, heatmap traffic modeling, seasonal forecasting, and event-based demand planning.

Menu development integrates seasonal rotation and hyperlocal sourcing, including organic produce from Wildcat Farm located less than one mile from Holmes. A dedicated Top 9 allergen-friendly station and integrated halal offerings ensure inclusion is structural rather than reactive. Menu engineering tools and structured feedback platforms guide performance-based adjustments.

Modern vector and combi ovens have restored throughput in high-demand concepts while enabling small-batch cooking that improves quality. Data informs staffing, menus, procurement, equipment investment, and long-term planning. Innovation at CWU Dining is systemic, measurable, and continuously refined.

Introduction:

CWU Dining Services is a central contributor to campus life, serving as both a nourishment provider and architect of community connection. Through mission-focused events, cultural co-creation, experiential learning partnerships, and intentional student engagement, Dining advances belonging, access, and student success. Dining spaces function as curated social hubs where students gather, celebrate, and build meaningful relationships. Partnerships with Orientation, Campus Activities, Athletics, the Multicultural Center, Wildcat Farm, and academic programs

position Dining as a proactive campus leader committed to high-impact practices that strengthen retention, identity formation, and holistic student wellbeing.

Essay:

Dining shapes both first impressions and year-end celebrations across the student life cycle. The academic year opens with the Jump Start Farm-to-Table Experience, Welcome BBQ, and Bowls of Abundance, creating early opportunities for connection, nourishment, and resource awareness. The year-end Food Festival serves more than 2,000 students, reinforcing school pride and shared celebration before Commencement. These events are intentionally free, ensuring all students can participate and belong.

Cultural partnership dinners, including Día de Los Muertos, Mabuhay, and Taste of Soul are co-created with student organizations. Students guide menu and recipe development while Dining provides culinary expertise and leads production support to ensure scale and quality. This shared model allows student groups to focus on cultural storytelling and tradition while strengthening authenticity and belonging.

The Jump Start Farm-to-Table Experience integrates culinary demonstration, agricultural education, and relationship-building for approximately 65 incoming first-generation students. Executive Chef-led instruction and continued cooking classes build life skills and campus connection throughout the year.

Dining also leads structured meal recovery efforts in partnership with the PUSH Pantry, repackaging and redistributing over 10,000 recovered meals annually to address food insecurity. Through collaborative programming and student leadership development, Dining advances CWU's commitment to access, equity, and high-impact student success.

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