

Heather Holsinger



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Entry details

Entry Name: Rodeo Dinner 2025 - YeeHaw!

Institution Name: James Madison University

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Heather Holsinger, marketing manager

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Introduction:

For our Rodeo Dinner 2025, our team of award-winning chefs eagerly saddled up for the opportunity to showcase their talents and remind students why JMU Dining remains one of the top three reasons students choose the university. Taking on a full culinary takeover of the 101,000-square-foot residential dining hall—known proudly as D-Hall—the team transformed every corner of the space. Across all seven stations, chefs drew on diverse techniques, premium ingredients, and creative flairs to craft an expansive lineup of bold, customized flavors that celebrated both innovation and tradition.

Essay:

The menu highlighted bold flavors and skilled culinary techniques across every station. Guests were greeted with the Wagon Wheel Pizza, baked to a perfect crisp and finished with the spicy-sweet combination of hot honey and chorizo. Slow-cooked favorites followed, including Braised Brisket folded into Outlaw Birria Tacos and tender Rattlin' Rodeo Ribs glazed with Mango Hoisin sauce, served alongside Steamed Mexican Street Corn.

At Fire Wok, chefs crafted the crowd-pleasing Sunset Bowl, pairing crispy fried orange chicken with savory fried rice. Students craving modern comfort food could enjoy a Saloon Smash Burger with Bootlegger BBQ Sauce and curly fries or savor the flame-kissed Hen and Harvest Grilled Chicken Tenders. Roasted Red Potatoes with Paprika, seasonal vegetables for Vegan Bowls, and the hearty Mushroom French Dip added depth and variety.

Dietary needs were thoughtfully accommodated through the True Balance Station—free of the top nine allergens—along with the Vegan Grain Bowl Station and other plant-forward options. Freshness took center stage at the Produce Station with a made-to-order Southwest Salad. Rotisserie fans could dig into the smoky, succulent Creole BBQ Chicken.

To finish, indulgent desserts like the S'mores Brownie and Blueberry Cobbler offered a warm, sweet finale to the meal.

Introduction:

JMU Dining is committed to bringing innovation to campus in ways that strengthen connection and community. Nestled in the rural heart of Harrisonburg, VA, there's no better way to highlight the region's southern charm and valley heritage than with a full-spirited Rodeo Night. With a student body of roughly 23,000, every event is crafted to create a down-home, small-town atmosphere—one that reflects why Harrisonburg proudly carries the title of "The Friendly City" and makes students feel right at home.

Essay:

No detail was overlooked in making this night unforgettable for our Dukes. Guests were welcomed through towering double balloon arches at both entrances, setting the tone for a fully immersive experience. Each station was transformed by hay bales, inflatable farm animals, horseshoes, and rustic farmhouse décor. A nine-panel screen played vintage black-and-white country western shows, while a curated playlist of top country hits filled the dining hall with authentic rodeo flair.

The spirit of hospitality came to life as every team member proudly donned cowboy hats and bandanas, adding personality and warmth to the celebration. Showcasing exceptional dedication, employees even handcrafted branding irons to mark "JMU Dining" onto hamburger buns, and designed custom serving plates—impressive detail that tied the theme together.

To keep the energy high, vendors set up interactive attractions including inflatable axe throwing, an electronic bobbing-for-apples game, and a themed photo booth complete with country-style props. These activities ensured students stayed entertained throughout the evening and left with keepsakes from what many called the event of the year.

Introduction:

With 30 dining locations across campus, digital screens in every venue, and a social media presence reaching over 18,000 followers, we were able to promote the event from multiple angles. Our marketing team developed custom-branded collateral exclusively for Rodeo Night to build excitement and emphasize that this celebration was unlike anything JMU Dining had hosted before. Promotion highlighted both the menu, and the interactive activities students could look forward to, while also putting a personal touch on the campaign by featuring the dining team members who helped bring the event to life.

Essay:

Our graphic design team sparked curiosity across campus by creating "Wanted" posters featuring each chef—an eye-catching teaser that got students talking long before the event. Alongside these, we developed a full suite of rodeo-themed branding that highlighted the time, date, location, menu, games, and prizes. These materials appeared on posters, digital screens, and our website, ensuring every student knew something big was coming.

On social media, our marketing team leveraged our 18k-strong following with playful reels and stories filled with cowboy imagery and sneak peeks of the thoughtfully prepared menu items. Every post reinforced that this wasn't just a dinner—this was an experience.

Inside the dining hall, tables were stocked with wooden games to keep students entertained between bites, while the garage rooms transformed into a lively activity zone. Vendors set up inflatable attractions never before seen in

our dining halls, creating moments students couldn't help but share. The students were fully immersed from the moment they walked in, making Rodeo Night a standout event they'll remember long after the last plate was cleared.

Introduction:

This event was a true team effort from start to finish. Our marketing staff brought the vision to life, while our talented culinarians crafted a menu that delivered bold, memorable flavors. Registered dietitians ensured that every student could enjoy the event safely, and our sustainability coordinator helped minimize waste through thoughtful planning and responsible practices. And of course, our dedicated food service team prepared and served every dish with care and enthusiasm. Together, their collaboration and commitment created a Rodeo Night the JMU community will remember.

Essay:

Both student workers and culinary staff were essential to the success of the event, contributing time, talent, and enthusiasm. Dozens of team members prepared ingredients to ensure every dish met the highest standards. One dedicated staff member even spent over a week crafting custom JMU branding irons, which were used to burn a rustic logo into display items—an authentic touch that quickly became a crowd favorite.

Marketing students dressed in inflatable cowboy costumes added a lively spirit as they helped manage attractions like inflatable axe throwing and electronic apple-bobbing. Hourly staff and culinarians embraced the theme with cowboy hats, bandanas, and sheriff badges, helping create a fully immersive experience for guests.

Throughout the evening, managers and marketing interns collected real-time feedback using digital VOC tools to capture meaningful insights. The presence of the university president and JMU's beloved mascot, Duke Dog, added excitement and made the event even more memorable for students.

Sustainability was also woven into the event. The sustainability coordinator supplied campus-grown microgreens for menu items, and chefs ensured both pre-consumer and post-consumer food surplus was composted. Local vendors provided produce and entertainment, while reusable décor and wooden tabletop games helped minimize waste and support environmentally thoughtful planning.

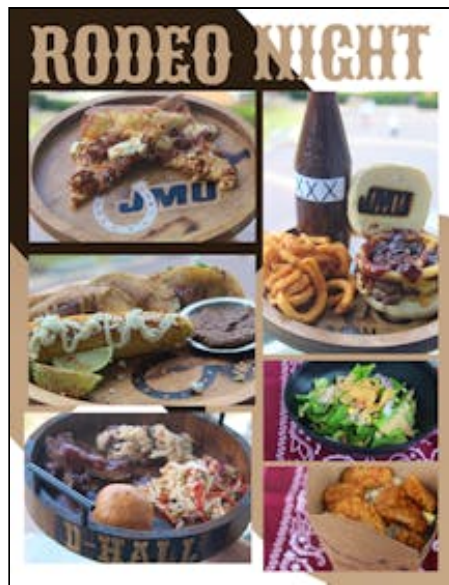
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