

# Julie Bannister



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## Entry details

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Institution Name:	University of Pittsburgh
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## Introduction:

The University of Pittsburgh's Recreation and Wellness Center represents a \$240 million commitment to student well-being. When Pitt Eats was tasked with creating dining concepts for the nine-story, 270,000-square-foot facility, leadership recognized the opportunity: to design nutrition as a core pillar of the wellness experience rather than a convenience add-on. This ensures every offering supports the active lifestyles of the students served. From the earliest planning conversations, every decision — concept style, staffing structure, vendor selection, and menu development — was driven by this guiding principle: Provide health-conscious options to help support the campus community's wide range of health and wellness goals.

## Essay:

Listening to the campus population informed planning for the Rec Center's dining program. Student surveys, focus groups, and dining advisory conversations held before opening revealed a desire for options matching diverse lifestyles, new cuisines, and a focus on nutrition and health. That insight shaped three purpose-built concepts — Recharge Café, Edamame, and Squeezed — each targeting a distinct nutritional mission: post-workout recovery, plant-forward customization, and functional hydration.

Style and atmosphere were equally intentional. Vibrant colors, a living plant wall, and neon accent lighting are reflective of the center's energetic identity. The customizable build-your-own architecture of Recharge and

Edamame was developed collaboratively by chefs and registered dietitians, ensuring menus are both inspiring and nutritionally purposeful.

Staffing was integrated from day one. Positions were mapped to individual stations with clearly defined tasks, enabling smooth, timed order turnarounds. Associates trained in the space weeks before opening through recipe sessions and soft-opening rehearsals, building real operational confidence before launch.

Vendor engagement was deliberate. Pepsi ensured proper fountain and beverage infrastructure. USEFULL reusable containers were designed into the physical layout — with dedicated checkout and return stations. Local protein vendor Ready was engaged post-opening, reinforcing Pitt Eats' commitment to sourcing partnerships that reflect community values and student preferences.

#### Introduction:

The launch of Pitt Eats' three concepts in the Recreation and Wellness Center was as carefully engineered as the dining program itself. Marketing efforts began long before a single morsel was served, building anticipation through social media walkthroughs, email newsletters, and previews designed to generate buzz while simultaneously gathering feedback. The overarching goal was to position Recharge Café, Edamame, and Squeezed not merely as dining stops but as part of students' health and wellness goals. That narrative was reinforced through multi-channel outreach, intuitive on-site signage, and targeted mobile campaigns that turned first-time visitors into returning regulars from opening week.

#### Essay:

Pre-launch marketing leveraged the energy surrounding the Recreation and Wellness Center's opening. Social media was a primary driver: walkthrough videos, "eat with me" content, and food highlights generated organic engagement before students ever entered the building. Soft openings welcomed campus stakeholders — including the Athletics Department, Resident Advisors, Student Government Board, and Dining Advisory members — creating advocates and yielding actionable pre-launch feedback.

Knowledgeable staff guided guests through each concept's customization model. On-site, the day of the launch, there were sampling stations and Squeezed punch card distribution. Because the facility sits at street level, sidewalk signage extended visibility to foot traffic beyond the campus community.

Digital screens within the facility and across campus promoted daily specials and limited-time offerings. The Pitt Eats mobile app added push notifications and a loyalty and rewards program, turning transactions into sustained engagement. Postcards distributed to nearby hospitals and department buildings drew non-student visitors.

Athletics department collaboration aligned the wellness dining narrative with the university's athletic mission and opened Name, Image, and Likeness partnership opportunities. Financial and operational performance has been tracked through real-time meal plan integration data, confirming strong adoption and repeat visit rates since launch, demonstrating that the marketing investment translated directly into measurable results

#### Introduction:

The successful launch of Pitt Eats' Rec and Well Center concepts was the result of sustained collaboration across the university. Dining did not build this program in isolation. Student Affairs, sustainability and academic departments, student organizations, and campus leadership were all engaged during the process. It could have been shaping the original concept and vision to amplifying the opening on social media. This cross-campus investment reflected a shared belief that the Recreation and Wellness Center was a community project, and that its dining program should be built, launched, and championed by the same broad community it was created to serve.

#### Essay:

Collaboration began long before construction concluded. Student feedback — gathered through annual surveys and focus groups — was the foundational input driving concept selection and menu development. Students articulated

their appetite for unique cuisines and health-conscious dining concepts. This early investment in student voice ensured buy-in before the first power bowl was served.

Student Affairs, which oversees the Recreation and Wellness Center, was a consistent partner throughout planning and launch. Sustainability partners collaborated on systems to support the building's overall sustainability goals and encourage composting and use of USEFULL reusable containers.

Student organizations served as ambassadors. Resident Advisors, Student Government Board members, and Dining Advisory participants attended pre-opening tastings and soft openings, providing feedback that refined both operational flow and menu offerings before full launch.

The Athletics department engaged through a Name, Image, and Likeness partnership, representing the concepts to the campus community through athlete-sponsored menu items. Three women's volleyball players powered menu items at each concept: a chicken katsu bowl, a customized omelet, and a fresh-pressed juice. Other campus departments previewed and evaluated the concepts pre-opening. This broad institutional involvement ensured the dining program's integration into the campus ecosystem was seamless from day one, reflecting a shared commitment to student wellness.

Log in to [nacufs.awardsplatform.com](https://nacufs.awardsplatform.com) to see complete entry attachments.



PDF

Squeezed Loy... 776 KiB



Rec Center \_Juic... 879 KiB



Rec Center - Jui... 3.0 MiB



Rec Center - Ful... 3.0 MiB



Rec Center Inte... 3.0 MiB



Rec Center Live ...2.8 MiB



Rec Center Inte... 3.5 MiB



Rec Center - Op... 2.0 MiB



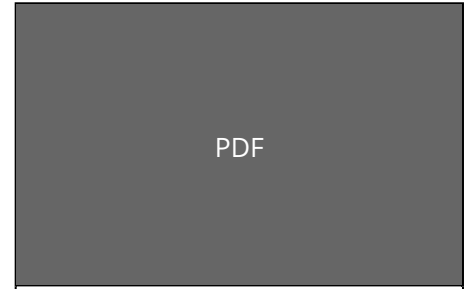
Rec Center Ope... 2.1 MiB



Rec Center - De... 259 KiB



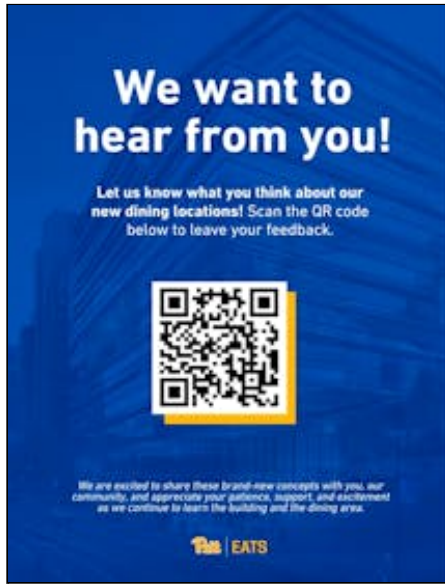
Rec Center A-Fr... 484 KiB



Community\_Po... 1.9 MiB



Rec Center Hor... 3.7 MiB



Opening Survey...251 KiB



NIL Marketing R...751 KiB



Pre-Opening So... 2.4 MiB



Attachment name  
Rec Center Preview

<https://youtube.com/sh...>



Attachment name  
Rec Center Preview Scre...

<https://youtu.be/65-XA...>

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<https://youtube.com/sh...>