

NACUFS (2025)

Innovative Dining Program of the Year

Ole Miss Dining

University of Mississippi

Introduction:

At the University of Mississippi, our campus dining program is redefining the student dining experience with innovation, sustainability, and inclusivity at its core. Through a dynamic blend of chef-driven menus, student engagement initiatives, and forward-thinking technology, we have transformed campus dining into a vibrant culinary destination. From our all-you-care-to-eat concepts featuring globally inspired and locally sourced meals to cutting-edge mobile ordering solutions, a robust local food truck program and sustainability-driven residential programs, we continuously push the boundaries of what campus dining can be.

Essay:

Ole Miss Dining fosters an inclusive staffing culture that prioritizes employee growth, engagement, and well-being. We invest in our team through culinary apprenticeships, leadership mentorships, and opportunities that empower our team members. Our residential dining program is built on a foundation of made-from-scratch cooking, fresh ingredients, and a commitment to providing diverse, high-quality experiences. By emphasizing local sourcing, culinary craftsmanship, allergen-friendly ingredients, and innovative food service technology, we have created a dining environment that sets a new standard for excellence on campus.

All proteins served in our dining hall reflect our commitment to responsible sourcing—our chicken is halal-certified, and our pork and beef come from Home Place Pastures, a regenerative local farm where we participate in an innovative whole-

animal purchasing program. To maintain financial sustainability, we strategically schedule events and premium menu items while balancing costs with high-acceptability, lower-cost options. This ensures budget alignment while keeping prices low and value high.

Beyond just offering exceptional meals, our locations serve as vibrant hubs of connection, engagement, and belonging for the campus community. Ole Miss Dining not only provides nourishment but fosters a welcoming environment where students gather, collaborate, and form relationships.

Introduction:

As storytellers, the marketing team highlights the dedication to fresh, locally sourced ingredients, culinary innovation, and exceptional service through social media, digital content, and on-campus events. Acting as the direct line to customers, marketing gathers and analyzes feedback, curates special events, creates local and interdepartmental partnerships, and educates students. By fostering excitement around food through social media, digital outlets, sustainability, and nutrition, Ole Miss Dining creates a dynamic, customer-focused experience that strengthens campus culture and enhances student satisfaction.

Essay:

Data-driven decision-making is essential to Ole Miss Dining, ensuring we continuously adapt to student needs. Each semester, our marketing team conducts focus groups with freshmen to understand their dining preferences and experiences. This allows us to refine our offerings, create relevant programming, and enhance the overall dining experience. Marketing plays a crucial role in campus dining, utilizing platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X to connect with students. Digital displays across campus, along with partnerships with student organizations and ambassadors, help promote dining initiatives, events, and specials. Aligning our branding with the University of Mississippi fosters trust, strengthens partnerships, and enhances student engagement.

By leveraging social media analytics, we track sentiment, measure campaign effectiveness, and adjust strategies to remain responsive to student preferences. This approach ensures our messaging resonates with the campus community while maintaining a strong brand presence.

As Kathy Tidwell, Director of Contractual Services, shares, "We value student feedback for planning new locations, events to celebrate, and menu planning. The Marketing team has been instrumental in engaging students in programming and helping shape the future of food service here at Ole Miss. Students feel they have input into the concepts, so the satisfaction level is high."

Introduction:

Our stations offer customizable, nutritious options, emphasizing local sourcing, customization, culinary craftsmanship, and cutting-edge technology. By combining culinary excellence, student engagement, and experiential learning, Ole Miss Dining delivers an innovative, student-focused dining experience that enhances campus life. Ole Miss Dining goes beyond serving meals—it fosters community, engagement, and collaboration. By integrating high-quality dining with student-centered initiatives, we enhance campus life, support academic success, and align with the university's mission of inclusivity and well-being.

Essay:

Strong partnerships with departments like the Office of Sustainability, the School of Applied Sciences, and the Residential Colleges enrich our dining program. Graduate students in the Dietetics program gain hands-on experience through dining hall rotations, while the UM Compost Collective diverts over 164,000 pounds of food waste from landfills. Dining also hosts events like the Around the World dinner, and the Global Kitchen station which connects students with global cultures through food.

Innovative programs such as The Farmstand food truck bring fresh, locally sourced meals to campus while supporting small businesses and farmers, increasing local vendor partnerships by 200%. Our partnership with Home Place Pastures provides sustainable, whole-animal purchasing, significantly reducing our carbon footprint and boosting local procurement.

Ole Miss Dining also prioritizes sustainable seafood sourcing in collaboration with the Audubon Nature Institute. By

supporting Gulf fisheries and educating students on responsible sourcing, we contribute to both environmental and economic sustainability. Our Executive Chef works closely with students who have dietary restrictions, and our dining hall offers a station free of the top nine allergens. Through these initiatives, we create a dynamic dining experience that nourishes, educates, and connects our campus community.

Introduction:

By embracing innovation in every aspect of our program, Ole Miss Dining stays ahead of industry trends while prioritizing efficiency, sustainability, and customer satisfaction. Our forward-thinking approach transforms campus dining into a seamless, technology-driven experience, setting a new standard for university foodservice. Integrating advanced technology has enhanced, not reduced, human interaction in our dining program. With less time spent on manual processes, employees can provide better service and create a more welcoming environment. This blend of technology and personal connection boosts efficiency and strengthens our campus community.

Essay:

Ole Miss Dining leverages cutting-edge technology to enhance accessibility, efficiency, and sustainability. Autonomous Starship delivery robots and Grubhub mobile pick-up have reduced congestion, expanded food access, and optimized late-night ghost kitchens for students studying late. The PizzaForno vending machine offers 24/7 handcrafted pizzas, ensuring fresh, on-demand meals.

The Grubhub mobile ordering platform integrates all retail outlets, food trucks, and Starship robots into a seamless experience, allowing students to use meal swipes and dining dollars across multiple locations. This convenience has contributed to a 22% increase in voluntary meal plan sales.

In dining halls, robotics streamline food prep while maintaining scratch-made quality. The Pancake Making Robot, Picnic Pizza Robot, and X-Robotics Pizza Cube enhance efficiency, while the Leanpath Waste Tracker helps minimize food waste. The Babylon Hydroponic Micro-Farm supplies fresh greens, saving 13,128 gallons of water annually.

Beyond dining halls, innovations like Quick Eats AI-driven smart stores and Vicki Coolers AI vending machines provide checkout-free access to meals and essentials. These advancements create a modern, student-focused dining experience, blending convenience, sustainability, and innovation. Since implementing these innovations, Overall Satisfaction and Customer Service scores have increased by 15%, demonstrating their impact.

Introduction:

Our commitment to student feedback, local sourcing, and technology ensures a dynamic, student-focused dining experience. Beyond meals, we offer internships in culinary arts, marketing, sustainability, and hospitality, providing hands-on learning. Events and partnerships strengthen campus connections, while innovations like delivery robots, the Quick Eats AI store, and Grubhub enhance convenience and engagement. By putting students at the center of our decisions, Ole Miss Dining goes beyond serving meals—we shape an inclusive, vibrant campus experience that students are proud to be part of.

Essay:

Coleman Grimmett, the Senior Director of Business Operations for the Vice Chancellor shares, "This close connection fosters an inviting sense of comfort where social interactions and cuisine are wonderfully paired in an atmosphere that complements the mission, vision and values of our institution – education, research, healthcare, outreach, innovation, creative expression and opportunity. High quality, high value food services programs and experiences are fundamental to the overall success of Ole Miss"

In summary, Ole Miss Dining continues to evolve by melding classic culinary experiences with 21st century technologies. This diversity of thought allows us to provide an experience that is both familiar and forward thinking. Our focus on community and local partnerships is a differentiator and allows us to celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit while providing cuisines that are adventurous to some and a taste of home to others. Our team excels in making sustainable choices, embraces the role of emerging technology, and identifies the impact our dining program can have on the college experience.

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