



LBAJqnRJ

# Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez

## Entry details

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## Introduction:

Pineywoods Dining Hall was created as a meaningful upgrade, reflecting SFA's Piney Woods heritage and commitment to enhancing campus life. It emphasizes regional identity while serving as a welcoming community space for students and the campus. The project, with a \$28.9 million budget and a multi-year timeline, prioritized stakeholder input, sustainable materials, and operational efficiency, including menu planning, staff training, and safety. Design teams, leadership, and dining staff collaborated to develop a resilient, functional, and inviting facility that enriches the student experience and campus community.

## Essay:

Planning for the new cafeteria started years ahead as university leaders aimed to replace the old 1960s building with a modern facility that better meets campus needs. The objective was not only to upgrade the infrastructure but also to redefine dining as a key part of the student and residential experience at SFA. Students, faculty, and staff participated in focus groups to discuss styles, materials, seating, and spatial flow, with their feedback directly influencing interior design choices to reflect how Lumberjacks naturally gather and dine. We highlighted East Texas and its pine forests by using southern yellow pine sourced within 500 miles of campus, which promotes regional pride, supports local industries, and aligns with our sustainability goals. Community input also guided the culinary program, featuring nine stations with allergen-friendly options, vegan dishes, Latin cuisine, pizza, pasta, and halal and kosher items available upon request. Staff training emphasized station flow, equipment use, and food safety,

supported by a soft opening involving Athletics and the Residence Hall Association. Early media outreach built excitement, while careful budgeting, scheduling, and sustainability priorities ensured a smooth opening that demonstrates SFA's commitment to stewardship, quality, and providing an inclusive, student-focused environment.

#### Introduction:

Marketing and launch efforts were designed to translate the building's purpose into excitement, clarity, and measurable community engagement. Signage and mock-ups in the legacy hall previewed the experience, and digital campaigns kept diners informed. The visual identity echoed timber grain and SFA history, culminating in a grand opening that felt like a campus-wide celebration. A ribbon cutting, band performance, free meals, keepsake glassware for early attendees, and interactive touchpoints such as the feedback and community recipe walls turned curiosity into participation. Post-launch, transparent menu publishing and ongoing surveys sustained momentum and learning, while financial targets and operational dashboards tracked performance.

#### Essay:

The August 14, 2025, opening marked a major milestone: SFA's first mass-timber dining facility, and the UT System's first mass-timber project, deserved a celebratory debut. University leaders hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony energized by the marching band, while guests enjoyed complimentary meals, and the first 500 received commemorative glasses. Before opening, the team built awareness through signage, architectural mock-ups, and local media interviews, while interns enhanced the interior with professional graphics, branded elements, and an SFA history timeline that strengthened the sense of place. Engagement continued beyond day one through surveys and focus groups that captured preferences on food, atmosphere, and events, creating a continuous improvement loop.

A key indicator of early success was usage: Pineywoods Dining Hall saw an approximate 60% jump in fall guest counts compared with the previous dining hall, signaling both the facility's strong appeal and the effectiveness of pre-launch marketing. Following opening, the operation reached about 90% of its financial plan, supported by strong early satisfaction with the facility and dining experience, alongside opportunities for refinement. These combined efforts built awareness, delivered a memorable launch, and established a measurement framework to sustain performance. Marketing success was reflected in attendance, sentiment, insights, and reliable daily service delivery.

#### Introduction:


Collaboration powered every milestone, from naming to training for day-to-day execution. Student Government convened a campus-wide vote that chose "Pineywoods Dining Hall," while SAA, Student Engagement, University Marketing, The Pine Log, School of Hospitality, and Athletics contributed resources and reach. Design and construction partners coordinated closely with dining leadership to align aesthetics with operations. Community voices, students, faculty, staff, and Nacogdoches community members were engaged through focus groups, media outreach, and opening day activities. This Facility was shaped by many hands and built for the campus and community.

#### Essay:

Campus collaboration began with active listening. Architects led focus groups with students, staff, and faculty to gather feedback on styles and materials, ensuring design decisions reflected the reasons behind their preferences. These insights shaped both the exterior and interior experience. Student Government guided the naming process, presenting the final decision to the full body, and "Pineywoods Dining Hall" was selected to honor the place and identity. Operational partners strengthened readiness with a soft opening with Athletics and the Residence Hall Association, which also served as live staff training. The School of Hospitality contributed a signed chef coat and wooden date letters to commemorate the event. University Marketing, The Pine Log, and local media amplified awareness by sharing project milestones. We continue to promote inclusion. The campus dietitian provides hundreds of annual consultations, and allergen-friendly, halal, and kosher options improve accessibility. As the facility evolves, these partnerships will guide menu development, sustainability education, and student employment, reinforcing Pineywoods as a hub of hospitality and community connection. Regular check-ins and shared metrics

keep teams aligned on student success and campus impact. Today, Pineywoods serves as a vital gathering space that elevates dining into an essential part of the student experience.

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