

Perfect Strangers: A Dining Experience

University of Chicago

Introduction:

Perfect Strangers transforms routine dining into learning where second-year students develop important life skills through curated dining experiences. Born from an encounter led to an organic exchange between our dean and students, the program deliberately connects strangers over meals at local minority and women-owned restaurants. Students learn professional networking, cultural competency, and local business appreciation while breaking social barriers. This unique approach bridges the second-year engagement gap - after first-year programming ends but before the third and fourth-year social circles solidify. This programming supports UChicago Dining's mission of creating diverse experiences that build vibrant community connections.

Essay:

Perfect Strangers distinguishes itself through its intentional fusion of dining, education, and community building. The program transforms each dinner into a structured learning environment where students develop multiple competencies simultaneously. Through carefully facilitated interactions, students practice professional networking, cross-cultural communication, and social adaptability – skills crucial for their academic and professional futures.

Our partnerships with MWBE venues create unique educational opportunities. Restaurant owners and head chefs share their entrepreneurial journeys, offering students direct exposure to diverse business perspectives and success stories. The

shared dining format, featuring multiple appetizers, entrees, and mocktails, encourages conversation and cultural exploration through cuisine.

The program's design ensures meaningful connections through a thorough vetting process. Applicants complete detailed questionnaires, and participants are strategically matched to maximize diversity of backgrounds and minimize prior connections. Pre-dinner icebreakers and guided conversations help students develop confidence in professional social situations.

What sets Perfect Strangers apart is its comprehensive approach to experiential learning. Students don't just share a meal; they develop crucial interpersonal skills while supporting local businesses and broadening their cultural horizons. By the end of the event, they've created a lasting impact beyond the dining table.

Introduction:

Perfect Strangers' marketing strategy capitalizes on UChicago Dining's integrated network of communication channels, reaching students during their daily experiences. Our dynamic digital displays across all residential dining commons and residence halls feature professionally designed content that aligns with UChicago's visual identity while highlighting our diverse restaurant partners. We strengthen our outreach through direct engagement with student leadership during regular house meetings. This multi-channel approach ensures our message reaches students through trusted sources and familiar spaces, focusing on skill development, cultural exploration, and community connection.

Essay:

Our marketing team strategically utilizes UChicago's residential and dining infrastructure to reach students where they gather most. Every residential dining common features digital displays showcasing program information and QR codes for seamless application access. This placement ensures maximum visibility when students are most receptive to food-related programming.

Our comprehensive outreach includes:

- Rotating digital content across all four residential dining commons featuring upcoming dinner dates and easy-access QR codes
- Coordinated digital signage throughout residential spaces, maintaining consistent messaging in both living and dining locations
- Regular presentations at student leadership meetings, enabling house representatives to share program details during weekly house meetings
- Strategic social media content on UChicago Dining platforms highlighting upcoming events and featured restaurants
- Targeted email campaigns to second-year students announcing upcoming dinners and application deadlines

Student leaders serve as crucial program ambassadors, encouraging peer participation during house meetings. This peer-to-peer marketing strengthens program credibility and generates organic interest.

Our multi-faceted approach consistently yields full program participation and growing waitlists for each quarterly dinner, demonstrating effective penetration of our target demographic through trusted channels and familiar spaces.

Introduction:

Perfect Strangers has revolutionized campus community building by creating meaningful connections between academic life, social development, and local culture. The program's dramatic growth demonstrates its powerful impact on student life. In its initial pilot with 20 applicants, to now over 100 per quarter, this program has grown 400% in student interest. The initiative seamlessly integrates UChicago Dining's mission while complementing our established House system. By targeting second-year students, we address a critical gap in campus engagement while supporting our commitment to sourcing nearly 40% of food from the surrounding ZIP codes and strengthening bonds between campus and local communities.

Essay:

The program's impact on campus life is evidenced through both dramatic growth metrics and compelling qualitative feedback.

Student testimonials:

'I think my perspective [regarding a MWBE venue] did change. I don't typically know when a business is minority or women-owned, so I don't really think to associate it with high-class food necessarily. This restaurant impressed me, and I think it's interesting and cool that it's minority and women owned.' - Chris D., Molecular Engineering Major

'[the stranger element] truly enhanced my experience. I had the opportunity to meet new peers, and being that we were all strangers, it wasn't too awkward or isolating.' - Annabel Y., Astrophysics Major

'It's refreshing to get to know people that aren't in my major/friend group. Speaking with different students and dining staff was a great experience.' - Isaac Y., Political Science Major

This surge in applications reflects our success in filling a crucial campus need. The initiative complements UChicago's broader community-building strategy by creating connections beyond traditional House boundaries. As participants share their Perfect Stranger experiences, inspire interest in local dining options and cultures. This organic growth has strengthened ties between campus and community while enhancing students' social and professional development.

Introduction:

Perfect Strangers transforms local restaurants into dynamic learning environments where every spatial element serves an educational purpose. Our carefully selected venues provide intimate settings that facilitate meaningful conversation and cultural exchange. Each location is chosen for its unique atmosphere, cultural diversity, and ability to accommodate our structured program elements. From pre-dinner gathering spaces for icebreakers to thoughtfully arranged seating that encourages group interaction, every aspect of the physical environment is designed to enhance learning opportunities and social connection.

Essay:

Our program's spatial design prioritizes both functionality and experiential learning. Each venue is evaluated based on specific criteria:

Physical Layout:

- Semi-private dining areas that balance intimacy with restaurant ambiance
- Flexible seating arrangements that facilitate group conversation
- Adequate space for chef/owner presentations and group discussion
- Comfortable pre-dinner gathering areas for icebreaker activities

Educational Elements:

- Open kitchen layouts where possible, allowing students to observe food preparation
- Display areas highlighting local ingredients and cultural artifacts
- Adequate lighting and acoustics for comfortable conversation
- Space and timing for restaurant owners to share their stories and interact with students

The design of each experience follows a carefully planned flow:

1. Welcome area for initial introductions and icebreakers
2. Transition to dining space with strategic seating assignments
3. Shared menu items ordered to encourage interaction
4. Presentation space for restaurant owners/chefs

Photo documentation captures these thoughtfully designed elements in action, showing students engaged in learning moments, from professional introductions to cultural discussions with restaurant owners. Each space becomes a temporary classroom where dining and education seamlessly merge.


Log in to nacufs.awardsplatform.com to see complete entry attachments.

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[Perfect Stranger...](#) 733 KiB

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Attention 2nd-year students:

Get ready for a chance to be selected for an exclusive dining journey like no other! UChicago Dining's Perfect Strangers event provides you the opportunity to experience an unforgettable culinary event at one of our partner dining partner venues. Featuring dinner at either Cibo or B&B, there'll be a chance to win a \$500 gift card to one of our partner dining partner venues. The 11-year contest to select the best dishes, dinner cooked with care and passion, with an emphasis on local and seasonal ingredients.

Here's what's in store for the selected 2nd-year students:

- Exclusive Dining Experience:** A special dinner featuring mouthwatering dishes prepared with care and respect by guest chefs.
- UChicago Dining's Perfect Strangers:** A special event in the downtown area with a unique, unforgettable dining experience.
- Memorable Moments:** Creating lasting memories with new friends and fellow students as you embark on this culinary adventure together.

To enter this exciting event, simply fill out the form below by Wednesday, November 29th. Spaces are limited, so don't miss out on this opportunity to create your dining experience and connect with new friends.

Perfect Strangers Sign-up Form

If you are selected for the first event we will inform you through email by Thursday, April 12th and you will need to confirm your attendance by Friday, April 13th.

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Attention 2nd-year Students:

Our first Perfect Strangers experience for this academic year will be on Tuesday, November 29th @ 4:30pm at Virtue Restaurant.



Get ready for a chance to be selected for an exclusive dining journey like no other! UChicago Dining's Perfect Strangers invites you to experience an unforgettable culinary event at a nearby local restaurant in the Hyde Park area. Each quarter we embark on a new restaurant with an entirely different group of people. This is your chance to savor delicious dishes crafted with care and paired perfectly with an ambiance that will leave you enchanted.

Here's what's in store for the selected 2nd-year students:

- Delicious Dining:** Enjoy a special dinner featuring mouthwatering dishes inspired by guest chefs.
- Exciting Atmosphere:** Immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the local Hyde Park culture, offering a unique dining experience.
- Memorable Moments:** Create lasting memories with new friends and fellow students as you embark on this culinary adventure together.

To enter for a chance to join us, simply fill out the form below by Wednesday, November 29th. Spaces are limited, so don't miss out on this opportunity to create your dining experience and connect with new friends.

Perfect Strangers Sign-up Form

If you are selected for the first event we will inform you through email by Thursday, November 29th and you will need to confirm your attendance by Friday, November 30th.

**If you are unable to attend this first event, but want to stay informed for future events, please add us to your email list. We'll reach out to you when future events are held.

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