

UT-Austin Catering Program of the Year

University of Texas at Austin

Introduction:

Forty Acres Catering sets the standard for university catering by combining operational excellence, culinary creativity and strategic vision. With a seamless online booking system, personalized client touchpoints and precise event execution, our catering program ensures every event is thoughtfully curated. Under Dr. Robert Valdez's leadership, Forty Acres Catering has overcome financial challenges while expanding services and maintaining a reputation for innovation. Through its commitment to excellence, Forty Acres Catering doesn't simply serve food—it creates unforgettable experiences that elevate campus dining.

Essay:

Forty Acres Catering represents the pinnacle of university catering, blending operational excellence, culinary creativity, and strategic vision. As a self-operated program within University Housing and Dining, our streamlined sales process—powered by an online portal and Spoonfed event tracking—ensures seamless planning, personalized communication, and precise execution. Weekly Banquet Event Order meetings and consistent client touchpoints allow us to deliver tailored experiences at every scale.

Our commitment to excellence is evident in our curated events, from Vaquero Night to the SEC Housing Officers Conference, where every detail—from tastings to final presentation—is thoughtfully planned. Tastings are an integral part of our approach, helping clients visualize their events and finalize menus with confidence.

Under the leadership of Dr. Robert Valdez, we've closed a financial deficit to breakeven in 7 months, expanded staffing, and strengthened our reputation for high-impact service. We engage student staff, partner with local vendors, and uphold sustainability efforts in every aspect of our work.

Whether serving a small student or a high-profile gathering, our team brings consistency, creativity, and care to every event. Through this holistic, student-powered model, Forty Acres Catering sets the standard for university hospitality—delivering events that go beyond expectations.

Introduction:

Forty Acres Catering's brand philosophy — "Student Powered. Chef Inspired. Community Focused." — drives a marketing strategy that positions us as more than just a catering program, but a dynamic campus experience. Through high-quality visuals, immersive events and cohesive branding, our Marketing team ensures our catering program has strong brand recognition across all platforms. Signature events like Vaquero Night and Longhorn Fiesta double as live marketing showcases, using themed entertainment and interactive dining to engage the University community. By transforming marketing into an experience, Forty Acres Catering builds excitement, strengthens brand loyalty and remains a memorable part of campus life.

Essay:

Forty Acres Catering's brand philosophy—Student Powered. Chef Inspired. Community Focused.—guides every marketing effort, creating a distinct identity that resonates across the University of Texas at Austin. Our marketing strategy blends visual storytelling, immersive event experiences, and polished promotional materials to elevate catering beyond traditional food service.

In collaboration with the University Housing and Dining Marketing team, we develop consistent, high-impact materials including signage, flyers, digital graphics, and branded collateral. These materials maintain brand consistency across platforms while showcasing the creativity and quality of our offerings. Photography and video content extend our visibility, capturing the energy of events and highlighting the spirit of the Forty Acres.

Signature events like Vaquero Night and Longhorn Fiesta serve as live marketing platforms. These large-scale experiences feature thematic entertainment, vibrant visuals, and chef-led food stations that allow guests to engage with the brand firsthand. From Aztec performers to Folklorico dancers and Texas-inspired décor, every detail reinforces our identity and connects food with culture.

By transforming events into interactive brand touchpoints, our marketing strategy builds excitement, strengthens loyalty, and ensures that Forty Acres Catering remains a memorable and impactful presence on campus.

Introduction:

Forty Acres Catering offers diverse and thoughtfully curated menus designed to enhance events of all sizes, from small student gatherings to large-scale signature events. The catering team continuously refines its core offerings, balancing innovation with cost efficiency, expanding dietary accommodations and increasing in-house food production. With a focus on creativity, sustainability and exceptional service, Forty Acres Catering transforms meals into memorable culinary experiences

Essay:

Forty Acres Catering offers thoughtfully curated menus that serve a wide range of events—from small student gatherings to signature experiences with over 1,000 guests. Our Food for Thought program provides student organizations and residence halls with fresh, affordable refreshments, including snacks, breakfast items, reception-style bites, and desserts.

At the other end of the spectrum, our themed menus turn high-profile events into immersive culinary journeys. At the SEC Housing Officers Meeting, for example, menus like "Monsoon Kitchens Fare" and "Texas Valley Basin" reflected global and regional cuisines, with each menu designed to tell a story.

Our core menu is continuously refined to reflect modern tastes and meet diverse dietary needs. We've introduced customizable breakfast bowls, expanded vegan options, and seasonal features while phasing out underperforming items. Menus include icons for vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-friendly options, and we go beyond standard accommodations to provide creative, customized solutions for allergies and dietary restrictions.

We've strategically reduced ready-to-use items, increased in-house food production, and consistently maintained food costs at a 28% target. Every menu we create balances flavor, color, and texture—turning meals into memorable, sensory-rich experiences that reflect the bold spirit of the Forty Acres.

Introduction:

Forty Acres Catering elevates food presentation into an art. From elegantly plated meals to casual street tacos, our team crafts immersive dining experiences that are tailored to every occasion. Seasonal menus and themed presentations, like the Hollywood-inspired Golden Horns Gala or the culturally rich Longhorn Fiesta, showcase creativity and attention to detail. Through strategic food placement, thematic décor and sustainable serving practices, every meal becomes more than just food—it becomes an experience.

Essay:

Forty Acres Catering approaches food presentation as a dynamic art form tailored to every occasion—from high-profile executive events to casual student gatherings. Whether serving a plated meal to the Board of Regents or street tacos from our in-house food truck, each presentation reflects the event's tone and tells a story.

Our versatility shines through themed experiences like the SEC Housing Officers Meeting, which featured elegant service lines and chef-attended stations, or Longhorn Fiesta, where vibrant buffet displays celebrated cultural heritage. At Vaquero Night, food became part of the entertainment through interactive stations, while the Golden Horns Gala showcased vintage-inspired displays that matched its Hollywood theme. Even modest events like Food for Thought programs receive full attention to visual detail.

We design serving lines using risers, in-house decor, and theme-appropriate uniforms. Platters and displays are arranged to create meals that are visually compelling and on-theme. All food is served on elegant china or compostable, waste-free plates in alignment with our sustainability goals.

Through thoughtful styling, themed décor, and immersive setups, we create presentations that engage guests and elevate the experience—making each event uniquely memorable and reflective of UT Austin's vibrant spirit.

Introduction:

Forty Acres Catering's student-powered staffing model blends professional development with exceptional service, employing 40 student workers across various leadership levels. This dynamic team ensures versatility, from chef-attended stations at executive events to interactive food trucks at student gatherings. Under Dr. Robert Valdez's leadership, strategic refinements include enhanced job roles, pay, and career progression, strengthening both operations and student growth. The result is a highly skilled team capable of delivering outstanding service at events of all scales.

Essay:

Forty Acres Catering employs a unique, student-powered staffing model that blends professional development with exceptional service. With 40 student employees across roles—Assistants, Associates, Managers, and Admins—our dynamic team brings energy, innovation, and fresh perspectives to every event.

Service design is core to our approach and tailored to each event. From elegantly plated meals at executive conferences to street food trucks at student celebrations, our team delivers with versatility and professionalism. At the SEC Housing Officers Meeting, guests experienced multi-line service with chef-attended stations like the "Texana Ranch Grill" and the "Sweet Wagon" dessert bar. Events like Vaquero Night and the Golden Horns Gala featured thematic stations and decor-aligned buffet lines.

Under the leadership of Dr. Robert Valdez, a systems review refined job descriptions, introduced pay increases, and created new roles to support growth. Specialized positions, including Zero Student Managers, have enhanced operations while deepening leadership opportunities for students.

Our flexible scheduling, comprehensive training, and clear advancement paths provide meaningful hands-on experience. The result is a capable, professional student team that consistently meets the highest service standards while gaining real-world skills—making our model a standout in both service delivery and student development.

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