

Food Service Thoughts BOT Meeting Oct 26 2019

My name is Michael Strmiska. I have been a faculty member at this college for 11 years, with past experience teaching at colleges and universities in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Japan, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. I have seen a lot of institutions of education and how they work, or don't work. I wish to express my grave concern about a situation at this college, a place that is very dear to me. For several years now, we faculty have been continually hearing from President Young and others that the college has a serious problem of falling enrollment. We faculty are constantly told that we should be looking for ideas to help the college recruit new students and retain the ones that we have. Well, on the principle of "if you see something, say something," I wish to argue that the lack of a decent food service at this college is causing harm to student experience and satisfaction, and overall community pride and morale, and that this may be hindering our efforts at recruitment and retention. I have been involved in many conversations with fellow faculty, staff and students and nearly all agree that the vending machine food is terrible. Most of my students tell me that they go off campus to get their lunch, and quite a few have told me that they have gotten sick from eating vending machine food. As I have seen over my career at multiple institutions, it is very important to have a comfortable, pleasant atmosphere at a college to get people to want to spend time there and to have a good feeling about the place. Most colleges nowadays are looking to add better amenities for their students and see this as a key part of college image and college marketing. Walking into an institution that only offers vending machine fare is NOT a good experience, not for prospective students, not for current students, not for visitors, not for families. It makes us look like a very standard institution that does not care about its population. It does NOT make students want to spend time here. It makes them want to go away, and I fear that when students drive over to Dolson Ave to get their lunch at Subway or McDonalds or elsewhere, they may not come back to the college that day, but keep driving. Conversely, if we had hot meals, good coffee and other such things on offer, students would be more inclined to spend time here, to gather with other students, and thus become more attached to our college community. I do understand that our previous cafeteria service was much too expensive and I suspect it was probably badly managed, but I do not think the Pepsi Cola vending machine service is the only option. I have had discussions with people both on campus and in the city of Middletown and I believe that if make use of local businesses and the labor of the students in our Bridges program who are training in food service operations, we can come up with fairly low-cost options that will provide a greater range of hot meals and also good quality fresh coffee, which I know is a particular complaint of many students. Having dining areas where students can gather to eat hot meals, drink coffee, socialize, relax and study, would do a great deal to improve morale and community. I ask the board to be receptive to those on campus who want to see a revived food service with hot meals served by human beings. Let the vending machines be available but not as the exclusive option on campus, and do not ask students to go to food trucks when it is raining or snowing. We need a food service inside our buildings, just like almost every other institution of higher learning in this state and in this country, and I and others are ready and willing to develop new options and enter into discussions.

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