

How to Increase Profitability in Higher Education

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Attendees: Shady Lane Foods, Shri Bark, Tony's Seafood, Sarcastic Sweets, African Alliance of RI, JWU, RI Food Policy Council, Baldor, Hope & Main, RI Food Strategy...

Who is Involved: Students, Admin, Educators, Distributors, Farms, Food Service Workers, Manufacturers, Chefs/Cooks, Marketing, Government Programs (Policy), Parents, Packaging/Materials

Observations:

- **Purchasing Challenges:**

- Communication & Payment: Inconsistent communication and delayed payments from universities create significant challenges for vendors.
- Procurement Processes: Vendors face difficulties navigating complex university procurement processes, often lacking transparency and clarity.
- Prioritization: Universities often prioritize established suppliers and established menus, hindering the introduction of innovative and locally sourced dishes.
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- **Supply Chain Issues:**

- Communication & Flexibility: Vendors need improved channels to communicate supply chain challenges and disruptions to universities.
- Resource Limitations: Navigating consistent supply with limited resources, particularly for perishable goods like seafood, poses a significant challenge.
- Local Integration: Integrating local farmers into supply chains requires a coordinated effort and can present logistical hurdles.
- Last-Mile Delivery: High costs and logistical complexities associated with last-mile delivery remain a major obstacle.

- **Vendor Needs:**

- Clarity & Transparency: Vendors require clear communication and transparency from universities regarding pricing, procurement expectations, and contract terms.
- Risk Mitigation: More consistent contracts with universities are needed to mitigate the risk associated with serving large institutional buyers.
- Preferred Vendor Status: Access to preferred vendor status and clear guidance on how to obtain it are crucial for vendor success.

- **University Needs:**

- **Balancing Priorities:** Balancing the desire for local food with other critical factors such as cost, convenience, and student demand presents a significant challenge.
- **Meeting Student Needs:** Meeting the diverse needs of students, including demands for high-quality, allergen-free, and globally inspired options, requires innovative solutions.
- **Scalability & Local Sourcing:** Finding local vendors capable of meeting the scale and consistency demands of university dining services is crucial.
- **Sustainability & Education:** Integrating sustainability and local sourcing into food service programs while also fostering student education on local food systems is essential.
- **Customization & Innovation:** Opportunities for product customization and culinary innovation, as exemplified by JWU, can enhance the dining experience and support local producers.

Principles: Core Values

- Sustainability & Climate-Smart Practices
- Quality
- Capacity
- Reasonable Pricing & Vendor Profitability
- Ease of Preparation
- Packaging Needs
- Strong Relationships & Communication
- Resilience
- Local Sourcing
- Shelf-Life
- Integrity & Transparency
- Consistency
- Efficient Logistics
- Supporting Local Communities

Ideas (Potential Solutions):

- **Improve Communication & Collaboration:**

- Establish clear and accessible communication channels between universities and vendors.
- Develop a central directory of university contacts.
- Host local food expos to connect producers and buyers.
- Encourage university visits and buyer-vendor meetings.
- **Enhance Procurement Processes:**
 - Publish clear vendor requirements on university websites.
 - Advocate for state policies that increase local food purchasing mandates.
 - Explore options for student CSAs and farm-to-table programs.
- **Foster Education & Innovation:**
 - Implement food systems education programs for students and staff.
 - Encourage culinary innovation and the use of local, seasonal ingredients.
 - Support student-led initiatives, such as farm visits and tasting events.
- **Address Logistical & Operational Challenges:**
 - Explore innovative distribution models to reduce costs and improve efficiency.
 - Address waste reduction strategies within university dining halls.
 - Leverage technology to streamline ordering and delivery processes.

Steps to Try:

- **Publicly List Vendor Requirements:** Clearly outline vendor requirements on university websites.
- **Host Local Vendor Expos**
- **Advocate for Policy Changes:** Petition the government to mandate increased local food purchasing.
- **Implement Student CSAs**
- **Fund Farm Visits:** Secure state funding for K-12 & university field trips to farms.
- **Advocate for Free/Reduced Meals:** Advocate for the state to pass legislation for free/reduced meals for all students.
- **Promote School Snacks:** Encourage the use of local snacks in schools.
- **Host Monthly Local Food Events:** Organize monthly events at universities and K-12 schools featuring local vendors.