

Breaking Bread Together

Campus dining innovations increase communal opportunities



By Monica M. Walk

Eating together builds relationships and community. That knowledge resonates across centuries, surfacing in Bible passages, the musings of chefs, and the research of anthropologists.

Building on that wisdom at Marian University entailed renovating campus dining spaces while simultaneously restructuring how and when those spaces are used. The new experience was ready to greet students when classes convened in late August.

The cafeteria is no more: The Hornung Student Center Dining Room now takes its place.

The physical transformation is immediately evident. The cafeteria-style line, snaking in one door to traverse the stainless steel gauntlet of food choices and exiting with tray in hand to find seating, is gone. Now, three fresh food preparation stations are open to the dining area, in a room filled with warm wood tones, modern lighting, and stainless steel accents that feel more high-end chic than institutional.

"We have completely renovated the front of the house," said Nikki Kramer, general manager of campus dining services at Marian for Sodexo Education. "This gives students a restaurant experience."

The building renovation was funded by Sodexo in celebration and acknowledgement of a contract extension with the University. Sodexo, which provides onsite service solutions to businesses and organizations around the globe, is Marian's food service and facilities provider. Both units contributed to funding the renovation. Sodexo employees serving Marian are located on campus.

The wall came down

While the dining room in recent years had received cosmetic alterations, the cooking area was original to the 1966 installation.

"The food was behind a wall," recalled Kramer, a former Marian student who has worked for Sodexo for eight years and stepped into the GM role last

"Food to a large extent is what holds a society together and eating is closely linked to deep spiritual experiences."

Peter Farb and George Armelagos
'Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating'

November. "We talked for years about knocking down that wall. I kept a piece of the wall for myself and for the president. It's so iconic."

Much of the renovation work was completed by Sodexo-approved contractor EDE. Layne Sessions, Sodexo director of campus services, coordinated estimates from local contractors for portions of the work.

Sessions and his crew attended to kitchen and dining room details, emptied and reassembled the dining area as new flooring and fixtures went in, and coordinated code enforcement with the health inspector. He and Kramer collaborated on timetables and work

flow to ensure the project was completed on time.

Fittingly, the renovated room was ready for use by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Agnes during their summer gathering on campus. An official ribbon-cutting and rededication was held on Founders Day, Sept. 8, as part of the university's 75th anniversary celebration.

Connecting on campus

How the Marian community uses the improved dining room underscores an equally improved eating philosophy. More hours and options mean more opportunities for connection and creating community.

Now open from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m., the dining room is a campus hub.

The longer hours ensure everyone has a chance to eat healthy foods. Noting that a cafeteria line can encourage bad eating habits — overindulging by taking a portion of every item offered — Kramer explained that during set meal times for breakfast, lunch and dinner, students can now select entrees and side dishes and have their food cooked to order and served with a nice plate presentation. Between those designated meal times, healthy soups, salads, fruits and juices remain available. Both residential and commuter students now receive food points to spend in any campus dining location.