GATHERING AROUND THE TABLE: AN EXAMINATION OF DINING SERVICE EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS AND ROLES IN COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES

by

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(Under the Direction of Amy E. Stich)

ABSTRACT

As leaders at colleges and universities continue to review processes to help support students towards achievement of goals, scholars suggest they consider the organizational missions, structures, behaviors, values, and culture within their institutions as well as their institutional definitions and benchmarks for student success. They must ask: Are there any key units whose efforts and contributions are missing?

Upon review of literature related to organizational efforts around student success, it became evident that there are a number of units, such as dining services, whose efforts are clearly absent. This single case study explores how dining fits into one institution's organizational approaches to student success.

Research was designed to provide insights on the perceptions of community members within one campus unit with the goal of understanding both organizational and individual roles related to student success. This dissertation was informed by organizational theory to shed light on the larger institutional role and provide a framework for understanding individuals' perspectives.

Data collection included interviews with 25 administrators and staff, document analysis, and observations. Upon analysis, three themes emerged. The first theme, "staying true to the expressed values: institutional alignment for student success," relates to ways the dining services unit has worked to incorporate the larger institutional mission and values into their own public-facing documents in order to communicate similar goals and values related to student success. The second theme, "developing organizational conditions for student success," relates to the various ways the dining services staff demonstrate shared values and practices that shape the culture of the unit and function to enhance student success. The third theme, "fostering student growth for success," captures participants' perceptions about how dining services may support students' growth and development as learners and emerging professionals.

Findings suggest there is value in including dining services in institutional planning efforts around the student experience. Further, data suggest that when invited to the table, dining services can play an important and steady role in helping the university achieve its goals for student success.

INDEX WORDS: Campus dining, organizational culture, employee perceptions, student success initiatives

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my grandparents, my parents, and my husband: Yegsa Mazadoorian, Nighos Mazadoorian, Jean Buckwell, Don Buckwell, Janice Mazadoorian, Harry Mazadoorian, and John Lockhart.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I was approached by the director of dining services at the university where I worked. My colleague was concerned because a large number of first-year students had inquired about meal plans that did not exist. He wanted to make sure members of our advising community had accurate information to provide students. We agreed to distribute meal plan information to advisors to help dispel students' misinformation. As our conversation continued, we concluded that advisors would benefit from a dining experience in the facility where most first-year students eat. Many advisors had not been to this particular facility in years, and more had never been. The goal was to invite advisors to the location, allow them to sample the culinary offerings available to students, and develop firsthand perspectives on the food, space, and services.

We invited all academic advisors to the residential dining facility for lunch. While they ate, colleagues provided an overview of dining services. Our first speaker was the facility's executive chef, who immediately shared his pride for his team's desire to make campus dining a positive, delicious, and nutritious experience for students. He expressed his sense of duty to ensure residential students receive well-balanced meals that they enjoy eating, and reminded us of the foundational premise that he incorporates into all facets of his job: Students must have daily nourishment to be successful in the classroom and beyond. He wrapped up his conversation with the statement: "Student success is my number one priority." That comment continued to resonate long after I left the dining

facility. It prompted me to think differently—more globally—about student success efforts. It challenged me to think about who is "at the table" when student success efforts are planned, and how campus leaders engage constituents across campus to help students succeed.

Background

Undergraduate student success is a critical area of focus for most institutions of higher education within the United States. Leaders at colleges and universities dedicate significant time and resources with the goal of increasing undergraduate persistence and graduation rates (Habley et al., 2012). Completion within a four-year timeframe is especially concerning; only 44% of 2015–16 first-time bachelor's degree recipients completed their degree within four years of enrolling in postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Yet graduation rates are slowly improving. Between 2010 and 2018, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at baccalaureate institutions increased by four percentage points, from 58% to 62% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Still, campus leaders continue to seek new strategies to increase retention and graduation (Kezar, 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Museus, 2014). Over the past two decades, cross-divisional teams have emerged with the charge to investigate holistic approaches and systemic solutions to support student persistence and graduation (Kezar, 2003; Tinto, 2012a). The composition of these groups may vary by institution; they are most frequently populated by faculty and staff within the divisions of academic and student affairs. Often, the teams are comprised of colleagues from traditional student

support areas such as: academic support/learning centers, wellness, academic advising, teaching and instructional services, and residential life. Priorities and plans vary by institution, as there is no uniform remedy to increase student retention.

Problem Statement

As leaders at colleges and universities continue to review their current approaches and look towards new processes and initiatives to help support students towards achievement of goals, they must consider the organizational missions, structures, behaviors, values, and culture within their institutions, as well as their institutional definitions and benchmarks for student success (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005/2010). They must ask: Are there any key units whose efforts and contributions are missing?

Upon review of literature related to organizational efforts around student success (e.g., Habley et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005/2010), it is evident that there are a number of units, such as dining services, whose efforts are clearly absent. However, there is some interesting research that has emerged around dining services. For example, Bauer (2012) conducted a survey of first-year students at Kansas State University. The survey findings indicated students who eat in dining halls feel more socially connected, and students who sit with others for meals rarely feel lonely. Additionally, the survey found a positive relationship between grade point average and use of the dining center. Glasser (2012) also acknowledged these positive relationships between dining and social connections, yet also noted trends and conveniences, such as food trucks, grab and go options, and in-room appliances may work against the benefits of community dining. Similarly, Samura (2018) urged campus leaders to consider spatial approaches to campus

design, including dining halls, as they are important spaces for students to build relationships and community and may contribute to students' sense of belonging.

Student satisfaction with the dining experience is frequently considered to be an important contributor to students' overall college experience and satisfaction (Hayes et al., 2003). Still, there is a large gap in the literature related to how these units can be included in institutional planning for student success. There is also very little research that indicates how their efforts contribute to student engagement, retention, and success. In order to learn more about how dining units may support student success, this research utilizes a case study of a dining services organization to investigate how the unit may contribute to fulfillment of institutional goals, organize to support the student experience, and how their employees perceive their roles in relation to student success. Further, organizational literature suggests that institutional objectives must be adaptive and incorporated at multiple levels of the organization in order to be achieved (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005/2010; Strange & Banning, 2015; Tierney, 1988). Therefore, this research also considers whether the perspectives of dining leadership align with staff working "on the ground" with students.

Research Purpose

There is little research related to dining services and student success. This qualitative case study focuses on organizational approaches to student success that include dining services. Specifically, the study was guided by the following questions:

- How and to what extent do leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises incorporate the institution's goals around student success and engagement into the goals and planning efforts for dining services?

- How and to what extent do dining services staff at the institution perceive the role of dining services with regard to supporting students' engagement and success at the institution?

Overview of Literature Review

The literature review is organized into three sections. The first section investigates the history of dining services, considers the evolving role of dining services, and highlights research that suggests a more active and varied role by dining organizations to support student engagement and belonging. Next, it focuses on research related to student success, with a focus on college student involvement and engagement as factors that support student persistence. Then, using a theoretical lens of organizational culture, this review investigates how dining units may align with the institutional mission and goals to support student success initiatives on campus. The literature review concludes with the argument that more research is needed to understand how dining service units may align and contribute to the institutional goals for student engagement.

Methods

This qualitative research was designed as a single case study to investigate the dining services organization at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst. The instrumental design of the case study was selected to provide insight on how dining service units may help to support student success at other universities and colleges.

Research was conducted through document analysis, direct observations, and 25 employee interviews. Interviews were coded through a two-cycle process. Documents and field notes were analyzed to verify findings from interviews and provide additional context. Overall, data aligned consistently within the same themes.

Overview of Findings

Findings from this case show that leaders within dining and auxiliary services have aligned their goals with institutional goals related to student success. While front-line dining staff were often unaware of the institutional goals related to students, their descriptions of their work and relationships with students demonstrated evidence of both the dining unit and the university's values, and the work they described embodied the university's goals. Additionally, data indicated that dining and auxiliary staff members within UMass Amherst view dining as having an ongoing and direct role in student success and engagement efforts.

The data were organized into three themes. The first theme, "staying true to the expressed values: institutional alignment for student success," examines how the dining services unit has worked to incorporate the larger institutional mission and values into their own public-facing documents in order to communicate similar goals and values related to student success. The second theme, "developing organizational conditions for student success," highlights the shared values and practices of the dining unit that shape its culture and function to enhance student success. The third theme, "fostering student growth for success," illustrates staff perceptions about how dining services may support students' growth as both learners and emerging professionals through educational opportunities and student employment.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review investigates how dining services may be more intentionally linked to student success on college campuses in the United States. First, it focuses on the history and evolving role of dining services, then highlights research that suggests dining organizations are taking a more varied and active role in supporting student engagement and belonging on campuses in US higher education. Next, it reviews research related to college student involvement and engagement as factors that support students in their persistence towards graduation. Using organizational culture as a theoretical lens, this review emphasizes the importance and role of dining units and considers how they may be integrated into campus student success initiatives. Finally, this review argues more research is needed in order to understand how employees within dining services view their roles related to institutional student success efforts. The scope of research is limited to literature focused on baccalaureate programs in US four-year postsecondary institutions.

Campus Dining Services: An Overview

Campus dining services have existed since US colleges were founded during the colonial era. The residential model of US higher education, modelled after Oxford and Cambridge in England, was designed for faculty to act *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent). Rudolph (1962/1990) referred to this as *the collegiate way*, and offered the following definition:

> The collegiate way is the notion that a curriculum, a library, a faculty, and students are not enough to make a college. It is an adherence to the residential scheme of things. It is respectful of quiet rural settings, dependent on dormitories, committed to dining halls, permeated by paternalism. (p. 87)

There are early reports of student dissatisfaction with food provided on campus as well as the campus administrative structure (Bok, 2013; Rudolph, 1962/1990; Thelin, 2019; Thelin & Charlton, 1987). During both the "bread and butter rebellion" and the subsequent "cabbage rebellion," Harvard students protested the inedible food as well as the authoritarianism of the faculty (Bush, 1969; Thelin & Charlton, 1987). Even during the infancy of US higher education, students made it clear that the meal offerings on campus mattered, and they expected administrators to make changes based on their feedback about the quality of the food served in dining commons.

Dining commons were designed to encourage students and faculty to build community over meals, and also allowed faculty to monitor students' diet and nutritional intake. Looking back at the earliest days of campus dining, it is interesting to note that it was intended to strengthen community development, promote student engagement, and foster relationships between students and faculty on campus. Thelin and Charlton (1987) acknowledged an important connection between dining and the college experience:

> At first glance, the temptation is to take for granted the dining hall facilities as a peripheral function with little connection to the serious mission of the campus. However, our review of historical records suggests a very different finding: the dining hall is integral and distinctive in shaping the character of the residential liberal arts college. And it is important in the financial and architectural condition

> of the institution. Above all, it is the real and symbolic facility which has provided "food for thought." (p. 27)

Campus dining has long been a foundational—often overlooked—core component of the student experience. The following section investigates the organizational context of dining services with an institution.

Organizational Context

In order to learn more about the leadership, values, and priorities within a dining services unit, it may be helpful to consider both the organizational mission and where dining services is situated within the organizational structure of an institution. At many universities, the administrative or business services division is where auxiliary services, including dining services, reside. Auxiliary units have been described as units on campus that charge individuals for their services (Powell et al., 1992, as cited by Priest et al., 2006). Snyder et al. (2019) defined auxiliary services as:

> those essentially self-supporting operations which exist to furnish a service to students, faculty, or staff, and which charge a fee that is directly related to, although not necessarily equal to, the cost of the service. Examples are residence halls, food services, college stores, and intercollegiate athletics. (p. 831)

Keeling et al. (2007) suggested dining provides a service that is focused across all populations within an institution and helps to integrate students across the university. While the reporting structure of dining services within an institution of higher education most likely reflects the culture of the organization, I noted an absence of literature investigating the organizational structure of dining services. This may be an area for future research.

Self-Operating vs. Outsourcing

Bok (2013) noted that cuts in state appropriations and poor conditions in the stock market often drive colleges to cut costs. The outsourcing of functions, including dining operations, is a tactic that is frequently used to save money by campus leaders. Wekullo (2017) defined outsourcing, or privatization, as the decision to use an external source for goods or services rather than delivering them in-house, which is referred to as self-operating.

Wekullo acknowledged that, historically, campus leaders have had concerns about outsourcing. These concerns include fear of losing control of the quality of service and diluting the sense of community identity, institutional culture, and collegiality. Wekullo noted additional concerns related to the possibility of a decline in staff morale, wages, and benefits. Similarly, Priest et al. (2006) highlighted one large Midwestern university that investigated the possibility of outsourcing their dining services. The university's facilities were old and in need of renovation. Students rated the food as less than average. However, through an institutional self-study, it became evident that in addition to being in a strong financial position, the dining services staff was well respected within the profession and on campus. Dining staff also had a reputation for building strong relationships with students. For these reasons, the institution remained self-operating and a student-led committee of students and staff were charged to continue to review processes and policies. The group changed the meal plan structure from an all-you-can-eat system to a point system. They chose to diversify the dining options, and recommended outsourcing parts of the dining operations in order to offer more selection; the university elected to become franchisees so they could remain flexible and

periodically change the offerings. This approach allowed them to retain control over staffing, which was considered a strength within the organization.

Bartem and Manning (2001) were clear that in order to be successful, outsourcing must support the institutional mission:

> The university's mission must drive the means and ends of any business partnership. If these are in conflict, mission wins. The fundamental premise of any outsourcing relationship is that the culture of the business needs to serve the culture of the university. As in another of our auxiliary services we need to be cautious not to shift from Aristotle to Vince Lombardi: We must educate and lead, not just run and win. (p. 47)

In determining whether dining services should be delivered in-house or through a contracted vendor, colleges need to carefully weigh their strengths, challenges, and goals in order to make a decision that is beneficial for their institution, including students (Bartem & Manning, 2001; Priest et al., 2006).

Making Money vs. Meeting Student Expectations

Dining operations have consistently served two distinct functions on campus: to support the student body and generate revenue (Thelin & Charlton, 1997). Today, as colleges and universities strengthen efforts to provide their students food that is better quality and dining spaces that are more attractive and welcoming, the reactions can be polarizing. Some think the evolution of dining services is a market-driven expectation, while others dismiss a focus on innovations in dining services as frivolous consumerism. In keeping with this criticism, Gladwell (2016) suggested that one elite institution's focus on providing an outstanding dining experience was irresponsible; he believed that the

money spent on food should have been allocated to provide more financial aid and support that would help enroll and retain under-represented students. Bok (2013) noted that elite institutions are frequently criticized for improving their dining offerings, housing options, and other student amenities. Yet, Bok also noted these institutions would not be able to attract applicants and enroll them if their dining facilities and meal offerings resembled what was offered to previous generations of students, even if the costs were much lower. If we believe that the *collegiate way* (Rudolph, 1962/1990) continues to be an important focus for institutions that serve a large population of traditional-aged students, then certainly institutions will continue to focus on dining services as being an important facet of the student experience. Still, leaders at colleges and universities must weigh both student expectations and the need to self-sustain as an organization in order to determine the right balance for their institutional goals and objectives. The following section discusses the increasing focus on professionalism and innovation that leaders in higher education are placing on the role of dining services.

Dining Services Today: Expanding the Role for Innovation

College dining spaces serve an important and foundational function on campuses. Communal meal spaces allow students to gather and socialize in an informal environment and build relationships with their peers and faculty (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2019; Kuh, et al., 2005/2010).

Interestingly, college dining spaces may even be a model for the workforce. Cardone (2009) noted that some of the most innovative high-tech firms have created employee campuses that seek to build community. These are modeled after college

campuses and include cafeterias that provide high quality food for employees. They also offer open, comfortable spaces for group dining and community interaction.

College dining leaders may consult professional standards and focus on building relationships with other professionals to learn and share best practices as the role of dining expands. Achieving student satisfaction, contributing to student learning, creating an inclusive environment, and fostering staff development are areas of focus for leaders within auxiliary and dining services (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2019). Additionally, reducing food insecurity is a growing area of focus (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Each of these may relate to student success, some indirectly (development of staff) and some directly (achieving student satisfaction, contributing to student learning, creating an inclusive environment, and reducing food insecurity) and are discussed further in this research.

Professional Standards

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) publishes standards for services in higher education that support student learning and engagement. While CAS standards address many of the service units within student affairs organizations, CAS has also developed standards for the auxiliary services functional areas (ASFA) as well as specific standards for dining service units. The 2019 CAS contextual statement for auxiliary services notes:

> Both “student affairs” and “auxiliary services” are names used to describe multi-functional umbrella organizations that, through a variety of means, address the out-of-classroom needs of students, faculty, staff, and visitors on college and university campuses. Auxiliary services typically encompass functional areas that

> follow business practices and principles in their service design and provision. Student affairs functional areas are more likely to focus upon student life, personal development, student learning, and well-being. This distinction will vary from campus to campus, and each campus determines the heading under which each student service functional area will exist. (p. 60)

The CAS contextual statement for ASFA (2019) notes that auxiliary units provide students places to live, meet, socialize, eat, attend events, and work on campus and they play a key role in promoting the success of students. The CAS standards expect that auxiliary programs will contribute to student learning, development, and success, and should also contribute to students' socialization. Additionally, CAS outlined that auxiliary student employment should incorporate professional growth and development, training, and responsibilities into students' employment experiences. The CAS contextual statement for dining services programs (2019) identifies the need to provide diverse groups of students with healthy, sophisticated, and varying options, and recognize religious and ethnic events that support the student body diversity and community diversity. The 2019 CAS standards also make it clear that supporting student growth and development are expectations for both auxiliary and dining service programs.

Professional Organization

The National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS) was founded in 1958, and was the first association dedicated to college foodservice (National Association of College and University Food Services, n.d.). Today, NACUFS is the largest professional organization for college dining services (National Association of College and University Food Services, 2019) and offers five collegiate dining knowledge

domains within their framework. The domains include: *business administration, guest experience, talent management, campus and community engagement,* and *professional intelligence*. Each domain includes sub-domains that provide core competencies for managers and strategic leaders, yet two domains most clearly demonstrate the connection between the dining organization, students, and the overall campus community.

The *campus and community* knowledge domain identifies the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive environment for students, ensuring the dining "brand" aligns with the institutional mission, vision, and culture, and supporting strategic campus initiatives. The *professional intelligence* knowledge domain focuses on creating a safe and inclusive environment, building strategic alliances, and focusing on a shared purpose with campus stakeholders (National Association of College and University Food Services, 2019).

An increased focus on professionalization within dining services helps to align the unit's goals and purpose with the goals and mission of the institution. Another facet of professionalism includes a deliberate focus on using student employment to develop and strengthen students' skills and professional behaviors, which is discussed in the following section.

Student Employment

Student employment during college has been a constant throughout the history of US higher education (McCormick et al., 2010; Tuttle et al., 2005, as cited in McClellan et al., 2018). Dining service units are frequently among the largest employers of student employees. Additionally, working on campus can help students prepare for post-college success (McClellan et al., 2018).

Mayhew et al. (2016) suggested that working on campus may benefit students, as multiple studies found a positive relationship between on-campus employment and retention and graduation. Through analysis of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data, McCormick et al. (2010) found that full-time students who worked on campus for up to ten hours a week self-reported grades that were slightly higher than other students' self-reported grades, and full-time students who work more than twenty hours per week on campus reported slightly lower grades. Similarly, Mayhew et al. (2016) found through an expansive review of literature that students who worked "extensively" (p. 393) were less likely to persist and graduate.

Research consistently indicates that there are great opportunities to help students link on-campus employment with their learning, personal growth, and career development (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2010; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012). McCormick et al. (2010) found that on-campus employment is "educationally beneficial" for students (p. 201) and suggested that faculty and staff must be "full partners" (p. 205) to help students connect their academic and cocurricular experiences with experiences as student employees. Similarly, Kuh (2010) noted that student employment has potential to help students apply classroom learning in real-life situations, which may help clarify career interests and goals.

Astin (1984/1999) suggested that on-campus employment can provide students with a greater network of support who can help them with challenges that arise. Additionally, on-campus work can help students offset some of the costs associated with attending college, especially as tuition costs increase. Employment within dining units often provides students additional benefits, such as free meals at every shift. Dining units

have also increased efforts to support students who may experience food insecurity while attending college. The following sections addresses food insecurity on campuses in more detail.

Reducing Food Insecurity & Dining Services

As the cost of attending college rises, the issue of food insecurity continues to grow more prevalent on college campuses. National studies continue to highlight food insecurity as a growing problem at colleges and universities, and data indicate that the incidence of food insecurity is higher for students who identify as first-generation, non-White, and/or low-income (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Through analysis of a 2018 survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2019) identified alarming data about the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses. It revealed that 44% of students at four-year colleges indicated they worried about food running out before getting money to buy more. Moreover, 47% reported they could not afford to eat balanced meals. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) 2020 higher education policy brief, *Policy Matters*, indicated that students' basic needs, including food security, are an emerging policy issue (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2020). Similarly, college affordability, which includes the cost of food and housing, has been on the AASCU's annual list of top ten policy issues for several years.

With the cost of college attendance becoming prohibitive to many students, a growing number of low-income students who enter higher education experience food insecurity (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). College leaders nationwide realize they must take action to help ensure that students' basic needs, including nutritional needs, are met.

Dining units have started to partner with administrators to help put measures in place to support food insecure students, such as vouchers for campus meals that can be delivered through programs and services that support students directly (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Diaz and Gaylor (2020) conducted a qualitative study of students to learn how food insecurity impacts their learning and campus experiences overall. Not surprisingly, Diaz and Gaylor found that students who experienced hunger and a lack of nutritious food also reported they experienced low energy, distraction, lack of focus, and stress while in class. Clearly, Diaz and Gaylor noted, students must have their nutritional needs met to be successful in the classroom and beyond, and urged that campuses share the responsibility to make systemic changes to address concerns related to food security. Similarly, Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2016) recommended that leaders at colleges and universities investigate the needs of students locally on their own campuses, and work with the campus and greater communities to address the challenges in order to ensure students' basic needs are being met.

Shifting Toward Student Success

This research seeks to understand how dining services may support college student engagement and outcomes. In the previous sections, I provided a brief history and the role of dining services on college campuses, as well as an overview of organizational and operational approaches to delivering dining services. The following section shifts towards literature related to student success and focuses on student engagement, involvement and preventing departure. I begin with an exploration of definitions of

student success that will help as I work towards connecting dining services with student success efforts.

Defining Student Success

There are varying, often competing definitions of student success. Frequently, definitions focus on completing college. Tinto (2012a) referred to student success as "translating the opportunity access provides into college completion" (p. 4). One measure of success may be graduation; however, we also know that students leave institutions for varying reasons, including transfer to other institutions, and still go on to achieve their personal, academic, and career goals.

Smithers (2019) challenged the logic of defining student success solely by graduation, and argued that measurements of student success construct student realities that work against liberal education. Additionally, Hearn (2006) observed that while many constituents (including policymakers, the greater community, university leaders, and students) are focused on graduation rates, they can be relied upon too heavily as a single measure of student success. Hearn also noted that from a policy perspective, it may be unfair to compare graduation rates across institutional type and level, as colleges and universities serve different types of students with varying levels of readiness. Hearn suggested that when considering student success, leaders and policymakers should be focused on more than graduation rates alone. For example, focusing on career preparation and employability, understanding student intent and satisfaction, and reviewing graduation rates would provide a more comprehensive view of student success than focusing only on graduation rates, and would aid us to understand student success more holistically. Nevertheless, when we consider that most students enter a four-year

institution with the goal of earning a degree, as well as the commitment by college leaders to provide structures and supports to help students to achieve their degrees, it is understandable that graduation rates remain a key indicator of both student and institutional success.

Kuh et al. (2006) defined student success as "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance" (p. 7). Kinzie and Kuh (2017) noted that student success "broadly refers to students reaping the promised benefits of the postsecondary experience" (p. 19).

Not only are there multiple definitions of student success, there are also nuances with measuring student success. Habley et al. (2012) identified three major limitations with the framework around student success. First, institutions are held accountable for graduation outcomes over which they may have some influence, yet they have little control. Second, institutional type is usually not taken into account within the current framework, and completion rates vary greatly across institutions with different missions, size, selectivity, and levels of student preparedness and ability. Third, institutions compare against and compete with other institutions, and institutional success is often measured by how well an institution brings in and retains students. Like Hearn, Habley et al. suggested that student success means more than graduating from the first institution of enrollment. While meeting a desired graduation rate remains one important measure of institutional ability to support student success, student success should be defined and evaluated along with other measures identified by campus leaders.

Historically, student success research has focused heavily on traditional-aged, first-time college students. As our demographics shift and we see more students of color, first generation students, and adult students moving into the majority, there are limitations with previous studies, and we must consider the experiences and needs of historically underrepresented groups (Kezar, 2019). Further, in 2015-2016, 72% of students who were at least thirty years old at graduation took more than ten years to graduate (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). This is one clear and compelling data point that reinforces why leaders need to consider goals beyond four and six-year graduation rates.

Hagedorn (2012) identified four basic types of retention: course, program/discipline, institution, and system. Course retention is measured by whether a student completes a course, while program/discipline retention refers to those students who remain in their major or discipline. Institutional retention identifies those students who continue at the institution where they started. System retention focuses on students who leave one institution and continue to persist at another institution.

This research focuses on organizational approaches to institutional retention, as it is intended to learn about how campus leaders, as well as faculty and staff, help to involve and engage students within their campus community.

What Matters for Student Success? Involvement, Engagement, & Preventing Departure

Numerous studies have investigated both institutional and student factors that contribute to student persistence and graduation, and each point to characteristics (and in some cases, specific initiatives) that have been identified to help students connect more

deeply to their learning experience and to the institution as a community. This section focuses on organizational approaches to three key areas of research: student involvement, engagement, and preventing student departure.

Student Involvement

Astin (1984/1999) presented a student involvement theory for student development that focused on individual students' investment of time and energy in both educational and co-curricular activities. Astin posited that the more involved students are, the more likely they are to persist, and identified a number of important forms of involvement that positively related to student success.

Students who lived on campus were more likely to be positively engaged in interactions with faculty, involved in student government and/or fraternities and sororities. Additionally, students who lived on campus were more likely to persist towards graduation. Students who participated in honors programs were more likely to persist towards graduation, and demonstrated higher satisfaction with quality of instruction and interactions with faculty. Students who spent the greatest amounts of time on their academics were deeply engaged with their academic community, yet they reported being more socially isolated. Students who reported frequent interactions with their faculty expressed stronger satisfaction across areas than their peers. Similarly, student athletes also reported strong satisfaction with the intellectual community, institutional administration, peer friendships, and the academic reputation of the institution. Finally, students who participated in student government reported increases in political activism and higher satisfaction with peer relationships. Student involvement theory was offered as a tool to help university personnel understand both "quantity and

quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528) in order to build more effective learning environments.

Astin explained five postulates of student involvement theory. First, involvement includes both physical and psychological energy. Second, involvement occurs along a continuum—an individual student will demonstrate different levels of involvement for different activities and different students will demonstrate varying levels of involvement for the same activity. Third, there are both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of involvement. For example, a student's involvement in a club can be measured quantitatively by counting the hours spent in meetings or on specific activities. Involvement may also be measured qualitatively. Consider a student who shows up to a meeting and chats with friends via text message throughout the meeting; they are most likely involved at a different level than a student who attends the meeting and participates throughout. Fourth, student development and learning related to educational programming is "directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in the program" (p. 519). Finally, effective educational practices and policies increase student involvement.

Student Engagement

Harper and Quaye (2009) articulated an important distinction between involvement and engagement: One can be involved without being engaged. In an effort to learn more about institutions that earned a reputation for successfully engaging students, Kuh et al. (1991) investigated "institutional environments that promote student learning and personal development" (p.6) outside of the classroom, and detailed their research in

Involving Colleges. Through this extensive qualitative research project, Kuh et al. (1991) identified five categories and conditions that were shared across the involving colleges. The conditions include:

- A mission and philosophy that are clear and lived by members of all constituent groups,
- A campus environment that manages and utilizes space in inviting ways that encourage community engagement and collaborative interaction while still offering spaces for students to be alone,
- A strong sense of campus culture where students feel included and share a commitment to traditions and what is collectively valued,
- Policies and practices that are aligned with the institution's missions and values, and
- Campus leaders, faculty, and staff who are all committed to achieving the mission and supporting students' development.

Kuh et al. (1991) also discovered that students at these schools understood and valued how the institutions worked, were engaged academically and outside of classes, built meaningful relationships with faculty and/or peers, and understood their responsibilities for their own learning. Additionally, students' expectations aligned with the experiences they were offered. Overall, these institutions knew their mission, knew what to do in order to accomplish it, and knew how to deliver the experiences to the students. This research, conducted thirty years ago, was heavily focused on institutions that served traditional-aged students. Kuh et al. (1991) indicated that involvement looked different at large, urban institutions where many of the students were working adult commuter students. As student demographics continue to shift and reflect more students

entering college at different life stages, it will be important for campus leaders to be mindful of their student populations when considering how to involve them.

Kuh et al. (2005/2010) identified two components of student engagement that contribute to student success. The first component identified was students' time and effort spent on studies, which lead to experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second was how institutions allocate resources and structure services for learning opportunities that invite and encourage students to participate and benefit from their offerings. Through the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project, Kuh et al. (2005/2010) identified institutions that exceeded predicted scores within the effective educational practice clusters of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as well as higher than expected graduation rates. They targeted twenty campuses with diverse institutional characteristics (including size, type, control, and geographic location), in order to learn about their efforts to promote student success. Upon conclusion of the study, Kuh et al. (2005/2010) discussed six features that were shared across the twenty institutions:

- Alignment between the stated mission and educational philosophy and what's enacted,
- Student learning is a steadfast priority,
- Environments that are designed to support educational enrichment,
- Clearly identified pathways to student success,
- A focus on continuous improvement, and
- The quality of education and student success are shared responsibilities.

Considering the prevalence of "mission creep" within US higher education (Bok, 2013), Kuh et al.'s (2005/2010) research offers an important reminder that institutions must focus carefully on their educational mission, goals, and structures to successfully engage students' learning and development.

Preventing Student Departure

In contrast to the work of Astin and Kuh, Tinto (1993) outlined an interactive model of student departure. Tinto's model focuses on how issues of "adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations" (p. 112) influence a student's decision to leave. The model focuses on the student's longitudinal experience within an institution and the interactions that occur over time to contribute towards departure.

Tinto's model views the institution—and the academic and social communities within it—as part of a larger structure of external communities to which a student belongs. Students' commitments to each of their communities must be balanced with their institutional commitments, although Tinto noted the worlds are frequently independent of each other. Supportive interactions with members of the campus community can positively influence a student's integration. Nevertheless, if the student is pulled by external commitments, they may still end up leaving. Tinto stressed the decision to depart is based upon an individual's perceptions of their experiences within the institution. In order to demonstrate institutional commitment to retain students, Tinto (1993) identified three principles. First, effective retention programs are committed to students, and value student welfare more than any other institutional goals. Next, effective retention programs are committed to the education of all students. Finally,

effective retention programs are committed to building educational and social communities in which all students are integrated. Tinto's principles urge leaders to keep student needs at the forefront of their planning and decision-making.

Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek (1987/2009) studied students' use of campus facilities as predictors for retention through the second year. They administered a survey to a stratified random sample of first-year students in their second semester, then analyzed the combinations of variables (facilities used) for students who were retained. For the entire sample, eating in the campus dining hall was a significant predictor for retention, however, taking meals in the dining hall was not a significant predictor for Black students within the study. Unfortunately, the research study did not provide details about the culture of the campus community, nor did it provide descriptive information about the climate of the dining facility to help understand if the facilities, staff, and fellow diners were consistently welcoming to students of all backgrounds, and whether the meals provided offered a sufficient variety of options for students. Although this study raised more questions than it answered, it emphasized the need for campus leaders to better understand if and how student patterns differ across demographic groups, and whether the information they learn may help to identify areas of strength as well as areas in need of development to support and retain specific populations.

In the following section, I discuss organizational considerations for campus leaders focused on student success.

Focusing on Student Success: Considerations for Leaders

Research consistently indicates that student involvement, engagement, and belonging matter for success. Historically, student affairs professionals have created

extracurricular opportunities for students to become involved in the campus community, and faculty and academic units continue to refine processes to promote student engagement both in and out of the classroom (Astin 1984/1999, 1993; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh, et al., 2005/2010; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Yet we still do not know much about how additional units, such as dining services, influence student experiences and outcomes.

In order to promote student success within their institutions, leaders' efforts must be intensified to explore systemic approaches to student success and pursue seamless collaborations in order to identify and measure student success through multiple dimensions (Habley et al., 2012). Tinto (2012a, 2012b) identified four factors necessary to move towards institutional action to promote student success. *Expectations* must be consistent and clear. Different types of *support*—academic, social, and financial—promote student success. *Assessment and feedback* are important for students and faculty to ensure learning occurs. *Involvement* in the classroom is a critical factor. To help increase involvement, Tinto (2012a, 2012b) discussed pedagogies of engagement and highlighted multiple examples, such as a common curriculum, classroom assessment techniques, and supplemental instruction. Further, Mayhew et al.'s (2016) synthesis of research led to the conclusion that services and interventions designed to engage students are most effective when they are intentionally linked.

Clearly, campus leaders must also consider how to bring in additional campus partners to support student engagement, as well as how to pair or package multiple services to best support students. Dining services could be a strong partner in both regards, especially if the organizational culture values cross-divisional partnerships.

The following section discusses the importance of including dining services in student success efforts.

The Importance of Including Dining Units in Student Success Efforts

Manning (2013) noted that organizational perspectives are best understood when viewed with an interdisciplinary approach. From a student retention perspective, interdisciplinary teams aim to focus on student involvement and engagement through holistic, collaborative approaches (Kezar, 2019; Tinto, 2012a). However, there are a number of units, including dining services, which are often absent from these efforts. This was evident in the literature review, although partnerships that support student success efforts are becoming more visible. One example is the University of Michigan's dining program, which has recently built research partnerships with the School of Public Health and the School of Engineering aimed at building community and enhancing student engagement (Davidson, 2019).

Another consideration is whether students' use of dining services may be related to their connections with other students. Jarratt et al. (2019) studied students' meal swipes at the University of Iowa to estimate social connectedness. Their research looked at the frequency of first-year students' meal swipes and proximity of other students swiping at close intervals. This research was conducted at key points in time during their first semester to create an indirect measure of students' social networks called the meal index or m-index. A high m-index indicated greater social connectedness. At the end of the fall semester, a higher m-index for domestic students (regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and academic preparedness), was correlated to a higher predicted graduation rate. Interestingly, international students with a lower m-index at the

end of fall semester were predicted to have a higher likelihood of graduation than international students with a higher m-index. This discrepancy indicates more research is needed to determine if different housing situations or dining patterns of international students should be reviewed. Jarratt et al. suggested other data sources are being gathered on campuses that may also be ripe for exploration as possible predictors of student success. Similarly, Bowman et al. (2019) suggested that future studies may want to investigate the role of dining in shaping student friendships. Other institutions may have also identified partnerships with dining services with an eye towards enhancing the mission of the institutions, however, there is limited information available (Jarratt et al., 2019).

The literature reviewed in this section illustrates an emerging focus on student dining behavior and campus partnerships that may be related to student engagement, connection, and success. It also illustrates that further research is needed to learn more about how campus leaders are involving dining services in campus planning and action to achieve institutional goals. In the next section, I discuss important considerations for campus leaders as they plan for student success.

Taking Action for Student Success: What to Consider

Keeling (2014) stressed the importance of the holistic well–being of students so that they may learn and grow. Keeling suggested that we must make learning, student well–being, and learner success the highest priorities for institutions, and leaders must take responsibility to make significant changes to their campus cultures so this may occur. As campus leaders continue to refine their approaches to student success, they must also pay attention to how their organizations are structured, what is going well, what

is missing, and how they want to plan to move forward. Kuh et al. (2005/2010) noted two major principles for institutions to incorporate into their strategic planning for student success: *sustainability and alignment*. Student academic preparation and institutional resources must be taken into account when building programs and policies, and this must be done with consideration for the institutional mission and values.

Similarly, Tinto (2012a) indicated institutions must align actions to support student success and outlined four key areas for institutional alignment:

- Align actions within and across the institution to support structures;
- Align structures to support students in the first year;
- Align institutional action to address student needs and reduce barriers to success;
- Align faculty & staff actions to engage and support student learning.

These multiple layers of alignment ensure that the people and offices responsible for them work together in a collaborative and cohesive manner (Tinto, 2012a).

As a best practice, Tinto (2012a) recommended that cross-functional teams be charged to oversee institutional planning and action related to student success. These teams, according to Tinto, must include representation from all units whose actions impact student retention and graduation. This suggests a practical opportunity to involve dining services within the cross-functional teams.

Research indicates that it is important to link comprehensive, cross-divisional retention programs (Keeling, 2014; Mayhew et al.; 2016 Tinto, 2012a). Some programs, while successful when combined with others, are not as effective on their own:

> comprehensive strategies for promoting student success that combine student services (such as academic advising, tutoring, mentoring) with curricular

> interventions (such as first-year seminars, learning communities, supplemental instruction, shorter-term developmental courses), financial aid or other strategies have the potential to dramatically improve retention and graduation. Interestingly, the best evidence simultaneously suggests that some of these practices may not be effective individually, but they may be highly effective when several are implemented in a cohesive package. These integrated programs may also provide other benefits, such as cognitive and intellectual gains. (Mayhew, et al., 2016, p. 552)

Kezar (2019) identified six shared features of effective, diverse student success infrastructures. They are: equity, broad stakeholder engagement, collaboration, clarity & transparency, learning, and alignment. If leaders at institutions want to see improvement in their measures of student success, they must also consider who their students are, so they may determine how to help them be successful. They must also ensure measures of success remain relevant as populations shift and change. One example of a leadership focus on a diverse student success infrastructure is the University of Michigan, where campus leaders identified diversity, equality, inclusion, and food security as campus goals; these goals were then also aligned as goals of the dining organization (Davidson, 2019). This provides a clear, current example of an institution that has engaged dining services to help achieve what Kuh et al. (2005/2010) referred to as a *living mission*.

While utilizing interdisciplinary teams provides a strong foundation, it is not enough. It is also imperative that leaders diversify those teams' efforts with the goal of ensuring that the perspectives of all students are considered and represented. Here too, is an excellent opportunity to engage dining services. There may be great opportunity to

highlight their menu and meal planning to help ensure that all students are able to select options that are familiar and satisfy dietary, religious, and cultural needs, while also providing a sense of "home" for students from many geographic areas.

Finally, when we think about institutional action to support student success, we must consider how the initiatives will be evaluated and measured for effectiveness. Terenzini (1999) stressed that in order to measure effectiveness in higher education, it is crucial that members of a campus community understand the purpose and intended outcomes of their work:

> Assessment requires reconsideration of the essential purposes and expected academic and nonacademic outcomes of a college education. It also requires a clarity of institutional and programmatic purpose as well as a specificity of practice often absent on many campuses or hidden in the generalities of recruiting materials. What *should* students get out of attending college? What should they get out of attending *this* college? In addition, assessment requires that we try to understand whether the things we do and believe to be educational in fact produce the intended outcomes. (p. 646)

Assessment helps to determine if progress is being made towards reaching desired outcomes, yet it is also important to realize that because many initiatives focused on student success are "layered" with other initiatives that support student success, it is often difficult to determine whether a program or initiative has a direct impact on student success. For these reasons, colleges and universities frequently struggle to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. This inability to identify specific causal factors for student

success suggests that qualitative research may help campus leaders learn more about how campus initiatives, including dining services, support student success.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is guided by organizational theory to help understand how elements of organizational structure, culture, and behavior may impact institutional conditions for student success. Kuh (1989) defined organizational theory in higher education as:

> a window through which to view the behavior of individuals (students, faculty members, student affairs professionals) and groups in relation to the college as a complex organization. In addition, organizational theory informs interpretations of processes such as resource allocation, policy–making, personnel management, leadership, institutional renewal, reorganization of administrative units, and termination of programs. (p. 209)

Patterns of organizational behavior within colleges and universities are directly related to the retention of undergraduates (Berger, 2001). While organizational theory is vast, this research draws upon Tierney's (1988) conceptual framework of organizational culture. Organizational culture has been identified to help illustrate ways in which campus culture and environments influence student success, and will help to provide deeper context for the importance of studying how dining services organizations may support student success.

Organizational Culture

When groups have established stability and common history, a culture begins to form (Schein, 1990). Organizational culture occurs when a group or organization has observable artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990).

Organizational culture includes how an institution defines itself and works towards achieving its goals, as it focuses on the values, assumptions, beliefs, and ideologies that are shared by members of an organization (Peterson & Spencer, 1990). As we consider institutions of higher education, it is clear that there are different levels of organizational culture within the institution. Peterson and Spencer (1990) provided additional context: Organizational culture is sociologically based and reflects an institution's holistic perspective, while organizational climate is psychologically based and is focused at the level of the individual. "If culture is the 'organizational value', then climate is the 'atmosphere' or 'style'" (Peterson & Spencer, 1990, p. 8). Tierney (1988) proposed a framework of organizational culture illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

A Framework of Organizational Culture

Environment:	How does the organization define its environment? What is the attitude toward the environment? (Hostility? Friendship?)
Mission:	How is it defined? How is it articulated? Is it used as a basis for decisions? How much agreement is there?
Socialization:	How do new members become socialized? How is it articulated? What do we need to know to survive/excel in this organization?
Information:	What constitutes information? Who has it? How is it disseminated?
Strategy:	How are decisions arrived at? What strategy is used? Who makes decisions? What is the penalty for bad decisions?
Leadership:	What does the organization expect from its leaders? Who are the leaders? Are there formal and informal leaders?

(Tierney, 1988, p. 8).

According to Tierney, the six concepts within the framework all occur within an organization, although he stressed “the way they occur, the forms they take, and the importance they have, differs dramatically” (p. 9). In addition to providing insight about the overall culture of the organization, Tierney’s framework may also be helpful to consider when trying to understand how a campus approaches student success. For example, if students are not prominent within a number of the dimensions of an institution’s framework, we may infer that the organizational culture values students differently than an institution where students are included throughout the framework.

Why Should Campus Leaders Focus on Organizational Culture?

Tierney (1988) observed administrators frequently do not understand the role of organizational culture until they are faced with crises that must be addressed. He provided an overview of organizational culture to help leaders identify, understand, and overcome problems within their institutions. A lack of cultural understanding, according to Tierney, weakens leaders’ abilities to address problems and challenges in times when organizational complexities and fragmentation are intensifying. While Tierney made it clear that understanding organizational culture itself is not a remedy for problems within an institution, he noted that understanding the culture may help a leader make an effective decision rather than an ignorant one.

Strange and Banning (2015) suggested that because colleges and universities, and the units within them, are highly complex organizations, the design of the institution will influence how student support services and programs are structured. This is an important consideration when campus leaders intend to address organizational concerns related to student success; what works for one institution may not be what is needed at another. Yet

when we consider student success, it is clear that each institution's organizational culture must value and focus on supporting undergraduate students' learning, growth, and development. Additionally, individual units, faculty, and staff, must build a climate that supports the culture. Kinzie & Kuh (2017) stressed enacting a student success mindset to encourage the belief that all students can achieve, and developing faculty and staff to foster this mindset.

In order to achieve a diverse student success infrastructure that supports an institution's long term cultural change, campus leaders must explore their institution's values and history, audit the institutional infrastructure, and promote accountability, responsibility and continuous improvement across all roles within the organization (Kezar, 2019). It is crucial for campus leaders to ensure that equity, diversity of experiences, and students' multiple identities are considered and incorporated into the institution's infrastructure. Museus (2014) stressed that students of color frequently struggle with the dissonance they experience between their own cultural meaning making and the cultural information within their college environment.

Specific initiatives within higher education, such as providing targeted financial assistance to students who are close to completion, or building an undergraduate research program to help students build strong connections with their faculty and academic area of study, are part of the organizational climate that supports the institutional commitment toward student success and graduation. These efforts may gain more support and momentum when they are aligned with the institutional mission, which will be discussed in the next section.

Institutional Mission: A Foundation for Supporting Student Success

When we want to understand what an institution values, we refer to its mission. An institution's mission impacts the culture of the campus, and acts as a guide for the goals and objectives of the university. The mission should drive how business is run on campus, and also helps members of the campus community define who they are, what they value, and where they are headed (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005/2010; Renn & Patton, 2011). Institutions of higher education have two missions: *espoused* and *enacted* (Kuh et al., 2005/2010). Espoused missions are external facing statements, and often vary by institutional size and control. Enacted missions reflect what the institution does, and who it serves (Kuh et al., 2005/2010). Institutions that are successful in aligning their espoused and enacted missions embed their mission into policies, practices, procedures, set high expectations for students, and provide services and programs that support students (Kuh et al., 1991).

If campus leaders are truly focused on creating conditions that support student success, they must ask themselves: Are undergraduate students included in our statements of what we do, who we are, and what we value? And, have we set up our structures and processes in a way that allow us to focus on excellence in teaching and support for undergraduate students? Do our campus environments help to support our students?

Dining Services' Contribution to the Institutional Mission

As discussed earlier, many institutions have become focused on offering students high quality and delicious options for on-campus dining. In addition to more diverse menu offerings, some institutions have focused heavily on embedding their institutional mission into the campus approach to food and dining.

Kuh et al. (2005/2010) highlighted The Evergreen State College, founded as an egalitarian community, committed to a symbiotic relationship with the natural settings in which it is situated. An on-campus organic farm was developed to provide the campus community a sustainable, fresh food source, as well as to provide students significant experiential learning opportunities. Touted as a living, learning laboratory, students can apply for internships at the organic farm, where they learn and develop agricultural skills, sales and marketing skills, and leadership skills (Evergreen State College, n.d.). They are one of the local growers that provides dining services with sustainable, organic products.

The mission of Gonzaga University, a Jesuit institution, includes preparing students for a life of service (Gonazaga University, n.d.-a). Through a student life initiative for community engagement and service, Gonzaga offers a campus kitchen which uses student volunteers to recover and re-purpose food in order to provide healthy meals to those in need within the greater Spokane, Washington community (Gonzaga University, n.d.-b). Additionally, the Gonzaga community, in partnership with their contracted dining service provider, offered meal and grocery assistance to a local neighborhood that was devastated by the pandemic of 2020 (Gonzaga University, 2020).

While the two previous examples provide clear and multi-layered examples of how dining services can partner with the campus community to support the institutional mission, campus leaders at many institutions frequently focus on creating inviting spaces within their dining commons, campus centers, and other spaces where students can take meals or have coffee with other students—and faculty—in order to build community, connect informally (Kuh et al., 2005/2010) and promote student engagement.

Expanding Organizational Approaches for Student Success

Campus leaders may rely upon organizational theory to understand the multiple subcultures across campus, make informed decisions, and create change on campus (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Kezar, 2011). Bolman and Deal (2017) provided a practical summary of different perspectives of organizational thought through four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. While each frame has its own unique orientation and concepts, the most effective and dynamic campus leaders approach their work—and their organization—holistically through the lens of multiple frames (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Reflective and responsive campus leaders help to ensure that their community is considering the evolving needs and changing demographics of the student population. Research suggests that whole system approaches to culture change are more effective than isolated, one-off approaches (Kezar, 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Colleges may benefit from opportunities to bring more campus partners together to review and plan to holistically support student engagement and success on campus.

Organizational Culture as a Lens for Research

Tierney's framework for organizational culture (1988) led me to consider if and how the institutional mission of the case is used as a basis for making decisions and organizational planning within the dining unit. Tierney's framework also led me to investigate what information is communicated within the organization and how it is disseminated to the employees on the front lines within the dining unit. Since this research investigates institutional approaches to supporting students that are less frequently referenced in the literature, organizational culture is critical to understanding

an exemplar dining unit renowned for student satisfaction. Thus, this research is informed by organizational culture to better understand the relationship between dining services and student success initiatives at one university.

Summary

A substantial amount of research has been dedicated to college student retention. The research focuses on a number of important factors that support student success and retention. Relationships, meaningful learning opportunities, and engagement in co-curricular experiences have been identified as keys to this success. Research has continued to demonstrate that student interactions with their peers, faculty, and the community at large have a positive influence on student persistence, graduation, and success, yet there is more work to be done in order for institutions to engage students more holistically. Given the pronounced gap in the literature, there is clear value in studying how dining services organizations contribute to student engagement and institutional effectiveness.

An institution's organizational design will influence how student success initiatives are structured and delivered, and leaders must be thoughtful in their planning so that the initiatives align (Kezar, 2019; Kuh, et al., 2005/2010; Tinto, 2012a) with the institutional mission, goals, priorities, and objectives. Institutional leaders who seek to improve their persistence and graduation rates will likely benefit from bringing additional campus partners, such as auxiliary and dining services, into the strategic planning around student success.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Undergraduate student success is a critical area of focus for most institutions of higher education in the United States. Leaders at colleges and universities are dedicating significant time and resources with the goal of increasing undergraduate persistence and graduation rates. As discussed earlier, student engagement and student involvement are often areas of focus by campus leaders when they consider how to support students toward goal achievement.

Additionally, as colleges and universities continue to review their current practices and look towards new processes and initiatives to help support students towards achievement of goals, they must consider the organizational missions, structures, behaviors, values, and culture within their institutions as well as their institutional definitions and benchmarks for student success. They must ask: Are there any key units whose efforts and contributions are missing?

In reviewing the literature related to organizational efforts around student success, it was evident there are some units, such as dining services, whose efforts are related to student success, yet are still not widely incorporated into the student success frameworks. This motivated me to investigate further.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate how employees within the dining service organization at one institution of higher education perceive their unit's role related to student success efforts.

In order to learn more about how dining units may support student success, this research explores how dining services fits into one institution's organizational approaches to student success. Specifically, this research was guided by the following questions:

- How and to what extent do leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises incorporate the institution's goals around student success and engagement into the goals and planning efforts for dining services?
- How and to what extent do dining services staff at the institution view the role of dining services with regard to supporting students' engagement and success at the institution?

This study was designed to provide insights on the goals, actions, and perceptions of community members within one campus unit, with the goal of understanding both organizational and individual roles related to student success. This was informed by Tierney's framework of organizational culture (1988) to shed light on the larger institutional and organizational role, as well as to help provide a framework for understanding individuals' perspectives.

Research Design

This research study was shaped by a constructivist worldview to understand how members of a community view their experiences within it, including how they make meaning of their interactions with others within the organization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach was selected because the study is intended to explore both the lived experiences and perceptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) of individuals within the dining services organization, as well as to understand the context and setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) of a dining services organization within a university.

This research study utilized a single case study approach to focus deeply on a dining services organization within one institution. When a case is examined in order to provide insight into a larger phenomenon or issue, it is referred to as an instrumental case study (Stake, 2003). Designed as an instrumental case study, this research investigated one dining services organization and aims to provide insights into how college dining services units can support student success. By analyzing perspectives of staff within one dining services organization, I sought to understand ways in which these individuals work toward student success. These data may provide new insights about how lesser-known campus members contribute to student success efforts.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted a case study is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). A bounded system refers to the parameters of the case, what will and will not be studied, as well as the timeframe (Miles et al., 2020). For this case, I investigated one dining services unit, its organizational structure and role within the larger institution, the organizational mission and goals, and dining service employees' descriptions of their experiences as well as their perceptions related to student success that were shared during participant interviews. This case is bounded by a focus on one university's institutional mission, goals related to student success, the dining service organization's goals and services, the perceptions of campus leaders responsible for dining services, and perceptions of employees within dining services. This research did not investigate the perceptions of faculty, students, or staff and leaders outside of dining and auxiliary services. While it would be interesting to study student satisfaction and perceptions related to dining services, this case was designed to investigate institutional and employee approaches to student success.

Case Selection

To help with case selection, I focused on identifying a college or university that has a strong focus on undergraduate (baccalaureate) education, as my research is focused on undergraduate student success. I intended to select a dining unit where staff members are employees of the institution rather than a third-party vendor. This was deliberate so that I might be able to get a more streamlined view of organizational culture. By selecting a "self-operating" dining services unit instead of a third-party contractor, I was able to study a case that reports directly within the institution's organizational structure.

Additionally, I wanted to study an exemplar dining unit. I determined that it would be helpful to focus on a dining service unit that is considered to have a strong reputation for student satisfaction and peer recognition. I sought a dining services organization identified as exemplary by students (The Princeton Review, n.d.) and active in the community of food services organizations/professionals.

I consulted with the director of dining services at the institution where I work. My colleague is an active member of the National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS), the largest professional organization for food service professionals in higher education. This consultation helped to identify institutions whose dining service units are self-operating. After I identified institutions that met my specific criteria, I identified a large, public flagship institution in the northeast, UMass Amherst. UMass Dining was voted number one dining in the country by their students for five consecutive years (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020). They are also well-respected by peers and colleagues within the higher education dining community.

I contacted the director of UMass Dining directly, introduced my research, and gauged interest for the study. Once he granted permission to conduct my research within the organization, he became my gatekeeper for the site.

Methods for Data Collection

As data collection and research were planned, I followed appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols and designed my research with an informed ethical approach. As I prepared to gather data, I made sure that my practices were set up to follow both procedural ethics as well as "ethics in practice" (*microethics*) as situations arose (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). I needed to make sure that all participants received the same treatment even though there may be power imbalances within their work environment. For example, I was thoughtful about recruiting participants so it would be clear that participation was voluntary, and not viewed as a hierarchical expectation or required by managers. Additionally, I avoided gathering and reporting data that could be personally identifiable or linked back to a specific participant. I sought to report my findings accurately, and refrained from reporting only positive results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Document Analysis

After I selected the case, I gathered documents to learn more information about the institution as a whole and provide institutional context (Bowen, 2009). A review of documentary materials helped me to identify additional questions for the interview protocol and may also help contextualize interview data later (Bowen, 2009). I retrieved the institutional mission, goals, and core values online, as well as the dining unit's organizational mission, goals, and core values. I investigated student success materials,

including intended student outcomes, six-year graduation rates and any corresponding goals, and any specific institutional priorities that have been identified to support student success. I also reviewed the highest-level organizational chart for the institution so I could begin to understand the organizational and reporting structure of the case. These documents provided supplementary research data (Bowen, 2009) about the organizational structure and student success efforts at the institution. I also reviewed meal plan pricing and structures, descriptive information about facilities, nutritional information and menus, and communications targeted at students and families. These materials provided broad coverage (Yin, 1994, as cited in Bowen, 2009), as well as additional context about the case, and allowed me to learn more details about the case. One benefit of document analysis, according to Bowen, is there is a lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity within the process. Documents are unaffected by the research process, and unlike other qualitative research methods, reflexivity is less of an issue through the document analysis within the research process. Similarly, analysis of documents designed for employees, students, families, and the greater community provide stable data about the case that are not impacted or influenced by the researcher's presence (Bowen, 2009).

Observations

I used observations as a method to gather data. Observations are common in qualitative research and are often considered a primary source of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Observations allow a researcher to gather data within the natural setting of the case; they also allow the researcher to gather data firsthand, rather than hearing about the phenomenon from a secondary source (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Non-members of the community may notice things that have become

routine to participants, which can help provide additional context to the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I visited campus in person over two days in order to observe multiple facets of the case. For most observations, I utilized the stance of "complete observer" (Gold, 1958, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 145) to watch the daily operations in an anonymous manner in a completely public setting. As I explored the case through observation, I was able to see the physical layout of dining venues, observe employees at work in their day-to-day environment, see the dining patterns of the patrons, sample the food, and get a feel for the overall dining experiences(s) at the institution.

Interviews

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe semi-structured interviews as a mix of questions with varying structure. While specific information is sought from participants, there is a flexible approach to wording and how the interviewer navigates their guiding questions. I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with both the executive director of Auxiliary Enterprises (the parent organization of dining services) as well as the director of dining services in order to understand their leadership perspectives related to the case and student success. Since many administrative employees and leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises provide direct support for the dining program, I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with employees serving in varying roles across both Auxiliary Enterprises and dining services. Interviewees included administrators, managers, shift supervisors, and front-line workers, such as cooks, cashiers, and custodians. In order to achieve multiple perspectives, I tried to proportionately distribute the interviews across roles. I sought a diverse staff who represent differences in gender, race/ethnicity, and time in their positions within the institution. Marshall and Rossman

(2016) noted that there are multiple, complex factors in determining sample size. However, as a starting point, Guest et al. (2006) suggested that in order to identify high level, over-arching themes, a sample of six interviews may allow for the development of meaningful themes with useful interpretations. Further, Guest et al. (2006) noted that for a fairly homogenous group of employees, twelve interviews should be sufficient to understand common perceptions and experiences. Since I planned to interview employees with different roles, I estimated that I would need to interview twelve administrators/managers/supervisors, and twelve front-line employees in order to identify common perceptions and experiences for both types of employees. Data saturation is the point in research "when new information produces little or no change to the codebook" (Guest et al., 2006, p.65). I needed a large enough sample so that my research still achieved data saturation, even if some participants' responses were not as robust or detailed as other participants.

I originally planned to conduct all interviews in person as part of a campus site visit. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic challenged my ability and timeline for in-person research. While I was fortunate that I was ultimately able to visit campus to observe the case and have an in-person experience with dining, my timeline got delayed. In order to stay on track, I broke the interviews into two phases.

For the first phase, I conducted interviews with administrators and leaders remotely via Zoom. Working through my gatekeeper, I was able to connect with a number of administrative leaders who work in Auxiliary Enterprises at UMass Amherst and lead initiatives directly related to dining services and operations. Responsibilities

included: budgeting, procurement, training, nutrition/dietary, menu design, and overall leadership for the dining and auxiliary units.

For the second phase, I conducted in-person interviews with front-line employees. Upon arrival to campus, I worked with my gatekeeper to connect with assistant managers within dining. While there are four residential dining commons on campus, only one was open for the summer. However, it was staffed with employees from all four dining commons. Each day of my visit, the assistant managers on duty shared my recruitment message with employees who were scheduled to work. Any employees who volunteered to participate during their shifts were walked over and introduced to me.

After completing the interviews, pseudonyms were assigned for all participants, and they were categorized by a high-level description of their functional responsibilities. This allowed me to identify their roles or general responsibilities while also protecting their identities. As an additional protection, I removed individual employees' length of service from the table of interview participants. The list of employees who participated is provided in Table 2.

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) advised researchers to record interviews and take only brief notes in order to maintain eye contact with interviewees. For in-person interviews, I found a table within the dining commons, and set up a computer off to the side of the table. I used Zoom to audio record the interviews, used the built-in transcription that Zoom offers, and took additional notes on paper. I reviewed the interview transcriptions carefully, and re-listened to recordings to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. I also used Zoom to audio record the remote interviews and followed the same processes for transcription and review.

Table 2

List of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Functional role
Ethan	Assistant Manager, Dining Commons
Noah	Assistant Manager, Dining Commons
Quincy	Assistant Manager, Dining Commons
David	Auxiliary Enterprises Administration
Kyle	Auxiliary Enterprises Administration
Lloyd	Auxiliary Enterprises Administration
Nancy	Auxiliary Enterprises Administration
Thomas	Auxiliary Enterprises Administration
Cassie	Cashier
Faith	Cashier
Fiona	Cashier
Kevin	Cashier
Lucy	Cashier
Dawson	Cook
Isaac	Cook
Lila	Cook
Mila	Cook
Olivia	Cook
Eric	Custodian
Ulysses	Custodian
Bob	Dining Services Administration
Henry	Dining Services Administration
Elizabeth	Dining Services Administration/Nutrition
Teresa	Dining Services Administration/Nutrition
Nick	Supervisor, Dining Commons

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) cautioned against making interviews too long for participants. Based on my preliminary interview protocol and practice interview, I expected my interviews would take approximately 45 minutes; I planned to schedule one hour with each remote interview participant to allow flexibility around unforeseen issues that may interrupt the interview process. For the in-person interviews, I worked with my gatekeeper to identify a campus contact who assisted me in arranging interviews outside of peak hours, such as lunch time and early evening. This helped to lessen the risk of

employees being called back to their work station during a meal rush, and also reduced the background noise in the dining commons where we met for interviews.

Seidman (2013) noted that the social identities of participants and interviewees can affect issues of equity in an interviewing relationship, and suggested that there are many potential issues of power, including "who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, and who benefits" (p. 101). As a middle-aged, White, heterosexual female conducting the interviews, I remained mindful that I was interviewing people whose identities are different than my own. I paid attention to potential issues of equity and power throughout the interview protocol, and paid close attention to my own experiences and identities and how they differ from participants. I tried to build rapport with participants, yet followed guidance to control the rapport in the interviewing relationship (Seidman, 2013). I demonstrated positive regard, respect, and genuine interest towards participants. A few participants were visibly nervous as we started the interviews, yet each appeared to grow more comfortable as the interviews continued, some increased their voice levels, some became more animated and expressive with their facial expressions, some provided more eye contact, and some opened their posture. They also provided more details and experiences as the interview progressed.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) stressed an awareness of organizational politics and sensitivity to human interactions. Although I followed protocols to ensure confidentiality of participant data, as well as participant anonymity in reporting, I was aware that some employees may have felt uncomfortable or unsafe talking about the organization, its goals, and their perceptions, especially if they have had negative experiences on the job. I was respectful of participants' employment situation and experiences, and remembered

that I was asking them to discuss their thoughts and experiences related to their current role. I reminded participants that they could skip any questions, and could also choose to end the interview early if they decided they no longer wanted to participate.

Data Analysis

Interviews were coded through a two-cycle approach as proposed by Miles et al. (2020). Codes provide clear, operational definitions and are intended to be used consistently over time within research (Miles et al., 2020). First cycle coding allows for an initial summary of segments of data (Miles et al., 2020). First, I created an *A Priori* list of possible codes from the student success and organizational theory literature, such as "engagement," "career development," and "organizing for success." This initial list was used to guide preliminary analysis, and was slightly revised throughout the coding process. During the first coding cycle, I also applied *In Vivo* coding to capture short phrases directly from the participants' own language (Miles et al., 2020), which included "*local, healthy, sustainable, and delicious,"* "*parents eat free*," and "*with us three times a day*."

Second cycle coding seeks to identify patterns within the data, and researchers accomplish this by categorizing data into a smaller number of "bigger-picture" categories, themes, or concepts (Miles et al., 2020). During the second cycle of coding, I organized, streamlined, and winnowed initial codes into three categories and themes that emerged: institutional alignment for student success, developing organizational conditions for student success, and fostering student growth to support success.

In an earlier section, I described my processes for conducting document review. When analyzing the documents, I skimmed, then read carefully, and interpreted the

documents (Bowen, 2009) before coding the data. The data provided through this research helped to verify findings from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). I tried to categorize into the same codes and themes as the interview data. I expected to examine some documents that were not aligned with the codes and themes as the interview data, however, most of the codes related to student success lined up consistently.

Field notes from observations were coded and themed to help triangulate data within the case, as well as to identify areas within the case that were not aligned.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four key terms for trustworthiness that I kept in mind as I developed my research design: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In order to strengthen trustworthiness within the case, I brought together multiple sources of data, including document analysis, observations, and participant interviews to more deeply illustrate the research findings, a technique referred to as *triangulation* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin, 1978, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As I analyzed my findings, it was important to describe the experiences, language, and visual details of the case, which is referred to in qualitative research as rich *thick description* (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This helped me to present the case as vividly as possible. I attempted to identify discrepant information that could go against the themes. I strove to spend sufficient time in the field to learn more about the case, its' participants, patterns and behaviors of community members within the case, and the physical environment of the case. I worked with my major professor through a process referred to as *peer debriefing*. I used the questions, as well as the suggestions provided, to identify areas in need of

clarification and revision so as to ensure that my account of the case resonates with readers.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Peshkin (1988) asserted that subjectivity is present throughout the entire research process and argued that researchers should continue to identify their subjectivity throughout the research. As a first step in the process, I identified my subjectivity that could bias my research. I have worked in higher education for over twenty years. My primary focus has been to provide academic support and advising for undergraduate students. I gradually transitioned from direct student services to administration and leadership. Regardless of role, my focus has consistently been to ensure that students have the necessary supports to engage with the campus community, achieve academic success, and actualize their goals. While my positions have always been directly related to student support, I also believe that all faculty and staff members at institutions of higher education have a role (whether direct or indirect) supporting student success. I understand that others may not agree with my belief.

As a higher education professional, I value my colleagues in dining services, and am always excited to see the innovation and creativity their organization exhibits. Because of this, I view dining services with positive regard, and have always approached the unit as a possible conduit to student success. I often look at the possibility of what *could* happen or what *could* be offered to support students. I had to remember to listen carefully to the experiences and perspectives of the participants. As a researcher, I remained careful to not let my biases for possibility unconsciously taint or influence my research.

I have many years of experience working in food service, outside of higher education. As a food service professional, I gained satisfaction through serving and engaging others. I wanted to provide the best experience for customers. I must remember that not all who work in food service are passionate about fostering connections between people and food. Some may not enjoy engaging with others, and I cannot assume that everyone that I talk with will be as excited or interested in these connections as I am. I realize that I could have negative biases against those who do not demonstrate enthusiasm or passion for their work. I was careful to listen for those biases during interviews.

I grew up in a household that focused heavily on communal meals. I value cooking, eating, and socializing with others over meals, as well as spending time with others to prepare food. I have always had sufficient access to food. I was aware that I have blind spots about those who do not enjoy food, those who can't access enough food, and those who have issues and disorders related to food, and remembered to listen carefully for experiences and perspectives different than my own.

I was mindful to temper my enthusiasm as I designed my interview question to avoid tainting the study and the data. I managed this by frequently referring to the research questions as I framed the interview questions. This helped to ensure that my questions were designed to draw out participants' experiences as well as how they view their role in relation to student success. I practiced my interview questions with a peer colleague to gain confidence in the process. When I interacted with participants during interviews, I refrained from over-engaging with them. I sought to limit my time talking to briefly establish rapport, confirm my understanding, or shift to the next question. I asked

clarifying questions as needed, with a goal of drawing out interviewee experiences and perspectives.

Conclusion

As leaders on colleges and universities continue to sharpen their focus on student success, it is feasible that different units on campus will be engaged to help support student success efforts. This case study analysis offers insights on how leaders and employees at one institution approach student success through the lens of employees of a lesser-utilized organization. This study may provide valuable insights for leaders who are considering changes to their organizational approaches to promote student success.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This dissertation was designed to investigate how employees within the dining service organization at one institution of higher education perceive their unit's role related to student success efforts. Ultimately, the findings from this case show that staff members within auxiliary and dining services at UMass Amherst see the dining organization as having an ongoing and direct role in student success and engagement efforts.

The findings from this research study of an exemplar case suggest there is value in including dining services in institutional planning efforts around the student experience and success. Further, it suggests that when invited to the table, dining services can play an important and steady role in helping the university achieve its goals for student success.

This chapter identifies and describes three themes that emerged through data analysis. The first theme, "staying true to the expressed values: institutional alignment for student success," relates to ways the dining services unit has worked to incorporate the larger institutional mission and values into their own public-facing documents in order to communicate similar goals and values related to student success. The second theme, "developing organizational conditions for student success," relates to the various ways the dining services staff—at all levels—demonstrate shared values and practices that shape the culture of the unit and function to enhance student success. The third theme,

"fostering student growth to support success," captures participants' perceptions about how UMass Dining may support students' growth and development as learners and emerging professionals. This chapter will provide data that support the themes, and explain why they are relevant to student engagement and success.

Staying True to Expressed Values: Institutional Alignment for Student Success

Kuh et al. (1991, 2005/2010) stressed the importance of campus leaders infusing the institutional mission into the work of all units. During interviews and document analysis, it became evident that a number of the university's strategic values provide a foundation for the core values of Auxiliary Enterprises, the larger organizational unit in which UMass Dining resides. A number of them relate specifically to UMass Dining's goal of building community around its customers, which helps to promote student engagement and success. Through the 2018-2023 campus strategic plan, leaders at UMass Amherst articulated a commitment to the following values:

- Excellence. In whatever we choose to do, we strive for excellence.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness. We are committed to the success and well-being of every individual in our community regardless of group identity.
- Openness. As a university, we are committed to free and open intellectual inquiry and expression.
- Integrity and Stewardship. As a community, we set high standards for personal responsibility and institutional integrity, and hold ourselves accountable in managing institutional resources and for advancing sustainability of our planet.
- Innovation. We stimulate, recognize, and reward innovation and creativity.

- Impact. We aim to create far-reaching impact on society by welcoming students and faculty from around the world and assisting them to contribute to the welfare of people both locally and globally. (University of Massachusetts Amherst, n.d.)

Similarly, Auxiliary Enterprises has outlined the following core values: “We care about our people, strive for sustainability, carry ourselves with integrity, aim to have impact, and are devoted to excellence” (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, n.d.-a). As I demonstrate in the findings to come, these core values became evident through document analysis and interviews. Additionally, interviews with employees within UMass Dining also aligned with two of the University’s goals and action steps related to students:

> Goal 1: Establish UMass as a destination of choice where academically accomplished, socially responsible seekers of a world-class education succeed in a research-rich, inclusive learning community.
>
> Goal 3: Establish UMass as a community of choice for students, staff, and faculty that exemplifies the power of diverse perspectives and mutual respect. (University of Massachusetts Amherst, n.d.)

These goals were referenced in dining services administration interviews; one dining services leader summarized them in the following manner:

> Well, the university has—put it this way-—the strategic goals are falling under at least three different areas, which is being the destination of choice, employer of choice, and community of choice. And when we look at those particular things, is the destination of choice for now, not only the you know the best of the brightest

> students, but also a very diverse group of students pulling from first generation students, working, and having open arms, and dignity and respect. And really keeping that.

Overall, there appeared to be alignment between the university goals and priorities and what administrators and leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises discussed as priorities to enhance the student experience. One assistant manager shared that information is transmitted through the different leadership channels in order to inform employees of the goals within the division:

> Like sometimes we'll have a once-a-year rally that we do usually at the beginning of the semester with our Vice Chancellor. And he'll kind of, at that point in time, relay some of the goals overall for the university and planning for the future, basically talking about the trends in college education, about basically, then the next year's coming up … and so we do get some of that information.

The administrative staff were more aware of the university's specific goals than front line staff. Yet during interviews, front line staff focused heavily on dining's role in helping the university become a destination and community of choice. They also focused on relationships they have built with students, and the responsibility they feel feeding and supporting the diverse community of UMass learners. Staff overwhelmingly regarded UMass students as a successful and accomplished group of learners and spoke about the respectfulness of the student body.

When asked if they were aware of institutional efforts related to student success, most of the front-line staff indicated that they were not familiar with any specific university-led efforts or initiatives, yet every front-line employee I interviewed discussed

the healthy offerings of high-quality food, as well as the diversity of cuisines they strive to make accessible and available for the diverse student community. They frequently mentioned student employment opportunities, and referenced the positive connections between students and dining services employees. Most shared an example that highlighted dining services' role in supporting the "whole" student, and felt a duty to engage and support student patrons, student employees, and family members.

Employees expressed pride in their role within an organization that provides delicious meals and nourishment for students, and there was a consistent message of aiming for excellence when providing service to students. This came through most vividly when employees shared that UMass Dining has been recognized nationally as the best campus dining for five years in a row (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2021). These reflections provided evidence that UMass Dining has focused on the university's value of *excellence.* It suggests a commitment to the institution's value of *openness* by listening to student feedback about the food and making improvements based on student feedback. It also demonstrates a commitment to the overall health and well-being of students.

Additionally, as they talked about their experiences and perceptions of the role of dining services, front-line staff frequently spoke of experiences that could be mapped to the university's values of *diversity*, *integrity*, *innovation*, and *impact* when describing their own experiences as employees who serve students. Auxiliary and dining staff demonstrated how their team helps UMass achieve its goals. They expressed a commitment to diversity and shared a sincere passion for doing their jobs well. Front-line staff expressed great pride in being part of the growth and evolution of the dining

program, and consistently shared the belief that their work is closely related to the student experience. When I asked the question: “What role do you think dining services plays in the UMass student experience?” The most common answer was: “A pretty big one!”

When I spoke with administrators, there were two campus leaders who were frequently cited as being integral to the success of both UMass Dining and the students overall. The first was the Chancellor of UMass Amherst. The second was the Executive Director of Auxiliary Enterprises. Both were cited as visionary and inspirational planners who possess the ability to encourage and genuinely connect with employees.

David, an administrator within Auxiliary Enterprises, was very clear that a commitment to students coupled with strong interpersonal skills are important and necessary at the highest level of leadership:

> There's been a focus on student success, and also partnering with the right donors, and also being the place where students will get their best value when they invest in an institution. You know our current Chancellor is really a fighter for that. I mean he's—I'm not sure if you know much about him—but his PhD was in physics. So, he's like a super, super smart guy, but when you talk with him it's like you're the only person in the room, he really makes you feel like you contribute to UMass, and he does that intentionally … he has a really, really great demeanor. I call him the mayor of UMass because you just see, when you see him on campus, he's taking selfies with students, he has a really great ability to connect with people, whether you're speaking his academic language or just you're on the street.

One administrator shared that the culture at UMass Dining has slowly changed over the years to become an exemplary organization that focuses on students and community. They stressed that engaged leaders supported a deliberate and intentional path to create this change. This provides evidence of university leaders' commitment to fulfill Auxiliary Enterprises' mission to set the standard for dining services in higher education and enhance the quality of life for community members, which includes students. This employee also speculated that both the university and unit-level cultures have become so strong that it is unlikely that a leadership change would disrupt the trajectory of the organization in a negative way:

> So, I have no doubt that if there was ever a leadership change, and that eventually happens, we have a good core structure here that I think will continue, our focus and our mission … it's not like you have a new person here and you're automatically going to forget everything that you've learned, it's part of the thing, you don't forget culture. That's why it's so hard to change culture in an institution, because it's strongly embedded like DNA, so that's our DNA, it is not going to change. … I'm pretty confident that whoever comes up next will have the same type of qualities … maybe some different ones … everyone's different, so, but I think the theme will remain the same, that focus on customer service. To focus on excellence. The focus on continuous improvement, the focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, the focus on our team. I don't think they'll ever change.

One of the leaders discussed how validating it can feel to partner with leaders across divisions on campus in order to provide students with an immersive experience that is designed to help them connect and engage with other students to help build

relationships and community. He described a shared experience with a leader from Student Affairs and Campus Life:

> The first Friday night we had a carnival. And part of me was like: Will these students really want to go to a carnival type of thing? Where it's, you know, the outside bowling, and they had a mechanical shark that they rode on, and there was a DJ. And we had dining services there providing fried dough with all sorts of really, really cool, you know carnivalesque type of food items, and it was packed … and it was great, it was an outdoor event, you know where its safely run, but over that first five days or four days of school, we have a number of these different types of things ... and I said to her as we're watching this whole thing happen: "How many best friends were just created this moment? How many lifelong relationships started with something we put together here?" And when you look at that, from the perspective of building a community around food, how many thousands, over the years has [director of Auxiliary Enterprises] created with this vision of UMass Dining, and putting this care and culture into—you know—creating a student experience? And lifelong? And so, it's more than just serving the food and that's where the folks who are engaged and on the front lines may start to feel that spirit of more than just a cog in the wheel.

The statement above demonstrates UMass Amherst's goal of building community, and provides evidence of one of the core values of Auxiliary Enterprises: caring about people. Both of these are important conditions to promote student engagement and success (Keeling, 2014).

Developing Organizational Conditions for Student Success

This section discusses ways in which dining services not only communicates a shared commitment to enhancing student success, but cultivates conditions for student success at UMass Amherst. In this section, I illustrate how dining focuses on specific components of UMass Amherst's culture and how dining serves to bring values into practice to build community and support students.

Employees within dining recognized leaders' ability to highlight how the UMass Amherst community has been enhanced by the leader of Auxiliary Enterprises' passionate focus on emphasizing the important connections between people and food, rather than solely performing a service function. This was stressed by Henry, a leader in UMass Dining:

> And I think again, the evolution of meal plans and dining programs and things like that, credit goes to Lloyd for his vision and his confidence in the fact that I'm not just the person who is serving your hamburgers, I'm actually creating a culture on campus here. I'm developing a UMass experience and in conjunction to the academics, athletics, the registered student organizations, and we're just as important as that. And I need to continue to, you know, tell that story and advocate for it, because otherwise you get pigeonholed into, well, you're a service function to the university.

Henry's statement above provides a salient example to illustrate UMass Dining's commitment to partner with other campus units to develop organizational conditions that support the student experience.

The following section addresses UMass Dining's efforts to create an organizational culture that is inclusive and supportive of the diverse campus community.

Focus on Diversity: People and Cuisine

One way that leaders in UMass Dining have brought values into practice is by their focus and emphasis on increasing the diversity within dining. This came through in a number of interviews of both administrators and front-line workers. UMass dining has focused on hiring staff from a wide array of cultural and ethnic backgrounds to help diversify the cuisine and better reflect the changing community of UMass Amherst. During interviews, I talked with 10 dining employees who self-identified as having immigrated to the US from seven different countries. Several of these employees shared they proudly seek to support all students, and they feel an extra sense of pride when they meet or work with students who share the same cultural and/or ethnic background.

Employees also focused heavily on how dining services supports the diversity within the campus community. One of the front-line workers, Ulysses, shared his thoughts around how the diversity of food options on campus help provide students with more familiar options, regardless of their home, and make an impact on the community by positively impacting the quality of life for students:

> The food is also an important part for the students … when I came to UMass the varieties of food from the different continents, from countries, was limited. I could see some limited food. And, so kids like coming from [name of country]. I'm from [same country] or India, whether they liked it hot and spicy, the food was limited … so we were not used to the pasta and burger, all these things, and for us when there comes food time, and then we are a little bit disappointed. But

> then, UMass integrated all kinds of food, like you have Chinese now, you have Indian, you have pasta, you have, you know, so all these things. … So, a lot of people, and now even, the kids come from Asia, they are so used to eat Chinese food, Asian, or European food, for them it's not that different now.

Overall, front-line employees' approach to service for students seemed to be genuine. Consider the following statement from one of the cooks, Olivia, when asked how she feels about her role serving UMass Amherst students. Her comments suggested that focusing on offering an array of diverse menu offerings helps to ensure that more students can have access to familiar foods, which may, in turn, help them feel like they are part of the community:

> I feel good about it, I mean, I know that what we do gives them, or at least some of them, comfort, you know the home cooked food, and we try to do a lot from different cultures, so that everybody gets a little piece of home on one day or another.

Similarly, Nancy, an Auxiliary Enterprises administrator, suggested that a more diverse dining community allows students and families to feel more included in the community. She explained that when students see more people who look like them, and have the option to eat food that is familiar to them, it may help make UMass Amherst a community of choice for them and their families:

> But also, the diversity and inclusion part … we are the largest employer of staff on campus, and that includes full time, part time, and students. So just by doing that, it's exciting to be able to tell folks how many folks we have from different backgrounds, just working for the dining program, which allows us to be

> authentic when we're promoting authenticity within our menu and cuisines because we usually do chef leads at the station so, like, we have someone who's from Puerto Rico and stuff and so they'll come and make genuine—do a station takeover—and make their home, their own food. And we have different themes throughout, and so, the university really loves … basically just sharing it … for other students to feel like they would love to enroll and like be part of a program that does that.

Nancy's reflection provides further evidence of the university's commitment to attracting and welcoming students from diverse backgrounds. It demonstrates UMass Dining's commitment to helping all students feel like they belong. It also reinforces a systemic change that UMass Dining has deliberately made in order to welcome student diversity as a positive part of the campus community, an important condition for student success (Hurtado, et al., 1998; Kezar, 2019).

The following section discusses leaders' ongoing commitment to staying connected to their community, which embodies the institution's values of openness and integrity.

Walking the Walk and Talking the Talk

Another lived value that appears to help build a supportive community through UMass Dining is being visible and accessible to the community. Leaders stressed how important it is to remain connected with their staff, students, and customers. I refer to this behavior as *walking the walk and talking the talk,* as it models the type of professional integrity that they expect from their team members who serve students directly. This also

reinforces Tierney's (1988) suggestion that effective leaders must make decisions with an awareness of how they influence the culture of the organization.

Interviews presented evidence of the ways in which messages and values are built into the culture to support and engage students. Consider the following statement from one leader in dining services as he explained the importance of continual interactions with students and staff on site:

> And it's not just for show ... at another organization I worked for in the past, I think one of the CEO's said something to the effect of "one of the most dangerous places a leader could be is behind a desk." Because you don't see what's going on, you're not there to feel good or bad, and there are times that I can't get out as much as I like to. But there are days that helps me refocus when I'm feeling that I'm not as productive as I could be. Just—okay—"let's park this for a bit, let's take a walk through Berkshire, which is one of our dining commons, or Franklin, or Hampshire, or one of the cafes. Let's talk to some students"—and that's me telling me that … "you are too focused on these emails and whatnot right now. That's not what you need to be doing." And when you come back after getting energized by something like that, the small things you were festering about are not that important, you know? I just created a memory and an engagement.

During the site visit, I spent time in one of the dining commons on campus and observed the community interactions over the course of two days. Both days, I sat in an ancillary dining wing that was situated on the side of the main dining commons. I selected a table that was next to a large wall opening where I could view people coming into the dining commons. I could also see the cashiers and a couple of the food stations.

While this section was fairly quiet with just a few diners in the early mornings, it was full of activity during lunch and dinner.

From my vantage point, I could also see staff walking around, engaging with colleagues and students. I noticed that nearly every administrator who I had interviewed a few weeks earlier via Zoom had come through the dining commons and interacted with other staff and students. I saw a team of cooks sitting at a table, discussing their work. I also observed some staff sitting down to take their meals in the dining commons.

One administrator shared her perspective on how leaders model values, and promote culture throughout the dining organization to make a positive impact on the student experience:

> I think it's the amount of thoughtfulness and care of that our directors, all the way down to our frontline staff, how much they care about the student experience … we see a lot of smiles on our student faces. I see one thing I forgot to mention is a lot of students really develop relationships with the staff. For example, there was one staff who work in the omelet station and she said that one of the students got to know her very well and, at the end of this semester like gave her a gift, thanking her for making omelets, like all those months, even during covid. So, I think that … how the whole operation works, and how the student dynamic with the staff is just so naturally the way it is, I think it's just enjoyable for staff members to want to be better for the students and for us to do better, as a whole to reach our goals, whatever those goals are.

In addition to providing examples of how leaders have modelled behaviors that focus on student relationships, employees who participated in interviews overwhelmingly shared that they thought UMass Amherst is a great place to work.

A Great Place to Work

Kezar et al. (2019) suggested that while colleges and universities have traditionally been considered a great place to work, turnover is increasing on campuses, and low wages, insufficient benefits, and lack of job security all contribute to the hiring and retention issues that campuses are experiencing more frequently.

This was not the case with the dining staff at UMass Amherst. The 25 employees interviewed for this study ranged from 2 to 37 years of service to the university. The average length of service for this group was 14 years, and the median was 16 years of service.

A majority of interviewees shared that culture was a major factor in their decision to work at UMass. During interviews, employees in both administrative and front-line roles cited good benefits, a positive work environment, commitment to work/life balance, opportunities for growth and development, and longevity as part of a positive organizational culture within Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining. Only one interviewee found this problematic: he noted that opportunities for promotion are few and far between, since employees frequently stay in their roles for ten years or longer.

Several participants indicated that they had been recruited by leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises to join the team. One employee shared that when he was considering joining the UMass team, his colleagues half-jokingly teased him that at such a large institution, he could be relegated to baking sheets of brownies all day. He immediately dismissed

that possibility, as the Executive Director had laid out a vision with passion and persuasion, and offered license to develop the position.

Consider the following statement from Noah, an assistant manager, as he discussed being in a job that he loves: “So if you have no passion, its just kind of—it’s—it’s not—it’s not the best, I guess, but this is my passion, so I love this job.” Similarly, one of the cashiers, Lucy, shared her passion for working in UMass Dining: “I enjoy it. I love my job. I like the students, like my coworkers. I just like the atmosphere of the students coming in, and interacting with them.”

Interview data revealed that employees believe UMass Amherst is a great place to work. Data also revealed that employees within Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining value their co-workers; UMass dining was frequently referred to as a family environment.

Storytelling to Communicate and Reinforce Values

Bolman and Deal (2017) stated that stories “carry history, values, and group identity” (p. 271). Through the document analysis process, I discovered that leaders within UMass Auxiliary Enterprises stress storytelling as a key marketing strategy designated to help achieve their mission and core values (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, n.d.-a).

Leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises and employees within UMass Dining frequently and consistently shared communal stories and conveyed similar perceptions about the role of dining services in the student experience. There were three stories that repeatedly came up that were directly related to their perceptions of dining services’ role in the UMass Amherst student experience: *students choose UMass for the dining*; *local, healthy, sustainable & delicious;* and *they’re with us 3 times a day*. Document analysis

provided additional context for Auxiliary Enterprises' focus on storytelling overall, as well as these three storytelling themes, which will be discussed below.

Students Choose UMass for the Dining

Employees within Auxiliary Enterprises and dining expressed great pride that UMass Dining has been voted by their students as the best campus dining program for five consecutive years. Employees also acknowledged that they have worked hard to market and showcase dining services as a responsive, student-centered organization in order to help students select UMass Amherst for their education. Nancy, an administrator, reflected on the boost this provides to employees as they continue their efforts to tell the UMass story:

> But it's fun because I've actually gotten … emails from students saying, like, I chose UMass because of the dining program or I chose UMass because of the dieticians that are on hand, so it's kind of empowering and really exciting to be the reason, and they know about all these things, because of the channels that we're telling these stories.

UMass Dining has focused heavily on providing support for students with dietary restrictions or allergies. This came up as a positive influence in students' decisions to attend UMass, and is illustrated through one of the dieticians' accounts:

> A lot of students with allergies, they've told me that because we're able to accommodate their needs. Where other schools don't do it the same way. They came up here. I had a student from Pennsylvania, a couple schools in Pennsylvania said: We can't meet your need, get an apartment, cook for yourself. And they came up here when it came down to making the decision, he's like no, I

> like what UMass does and how they can accommodate, and the parents felt more comfortable too.

Leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises were clear that they work hard to collect feedback from students, and then to analyze the data in ways that will help them meet student expectations. It also helps them identify whether dining factors into students' choice to attend UMass for college, as illustrated by the following statement from David:

> We're big analytics people here on campus, or at least in our department, and we like to kind of ask a lot of questions, you know through surveys, and also, you know, kind of off the cuff when we're talking with parents. But with our surveys one of the things we ask is: All things being equal, how important was UMass or the dining experience to you, in selecting UMass? And by and large it's very high, I think it's upwards of 70% ... so that's very important about actually getting people in the door. I'm not saying that people come here just because of the dining, right, but it's, I think it's a contributing factor, having a great dining program. It really kind of sets the tone, because when you're coming to a campus and you're visiting the institution for the first time, first impressions, really, really matter.

One of the cooks, Dawson, noted that the attention that students and families pay to campus dining as part of the whole campus experience is much different than previous generations of college-going students, and that the strong reputation of dining now helps with the overall reputation of the university:

> I do think, in the past, nobody really cared or talked about dining services in a university. It is an aspect that if I asked like, say, like my father's generation,

> they'd be like: “the chicken tenders and pizza.” I know that. But I think right now, especially with UMass here, people know about, even outside of you know, the cooking circles, like the cooking community, people know about UMass and the award-winning cooking, the team, and I would want to say that, like even has become a selling point of the university. ... It just happened recently, I wore a UMass shirt outside to do some shopping and the cashier recognized UMass and she was like: “Oh, I'm a senior in high school. I'm applying to UMass to go to next semester, and you guys have the best food, right?” And I said: “Yes, five years in a row, thank you.”

While the team focused heavily on UMass Dining being a contributing factor to students choosing UMass Amherst, they also indicated that UMass Dining is a contributing factor to retaining students. While specific data were not provided, participants frequently indicated that a higher-than-average percentage of returning students remain on a meal plan; this is illustrated through Teresa’s comments below:

> So, I think that it really does impact students’ decisions about coming here, but then also, you know the fact that, when they are here, they take pride and eating, you know, they tend to stay in the meal plan throughout their four years, more than any other school.

Similarly, Lucy shared that off-campus students frequently remain on the meal plan, and went on to suggest that students gravitate towards the dining commons for the community it offers:

> And they just love the dining hall. Students who live off campus have a meal plan, because they love the dining hall so much, they just don't want to cook …

> they like it for the food, the atmosphere, like the socialization too, a lot of them like socializing in the dining hall, meet their friends, hang out**.**

Employees within UMass Dining were clear in their belief that UMass Dining helps to distinguish UMass Amherst as a destination of choice as well as a community of choice.

Local, Healthy, Sustainable & Delicious

UMass Dining has identified *local, healthy, sustainable, and delicious* food as a core value (Toong & DiStefano, 2016). Each of these components takes coordination and commitment at multiple levels, from procurement to preparation. This core value has also become part of the unit's storytelling, and UMass Dining and Auxiliary Enterprises have even developed an educational resource for leaders at other universities to consider as they try to incorporate this core value into their dining programs (Toong & DiStefano, 2016). This core value was also visible on UMass Dining publications that emphasized the importance to the community (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, n.d.-b). The components of this core value are also featured prominently above one of the stations in the newly renovated Hampshire dining commons. While it may be natural to assume that this is only a marketing campaign, one administrator, Thomas, highlighted that these concepts were identified through direct feedback from students:

> There's plenty of variety of the food, there's plenty of listening to local, healthy sustainable, like those are hot button words, but there's follow through with those like sustainability, for instance. There are … four permaculture gardens now on campus that didn't exist, you know what, six–seven years ago! [This became a goal] as a direct result of those conversations with students.

Additionally, Elizabeth observed students frequently inquire about foods that are sourced locally and sustainably, and UMass Dining has started to identify these foods for students:

> But we have 20 to 25,000 students on the meal plan and the meal plan has increased over time. And so, with that we have the menu identifiers, which are the little line signs by the food and we had we have certain icons of … local, sustainable…

Bob, a leader within Auxiliary Enterprises, suggested that although they have become part of the culture, these values and the efforts around them will continue to develop as the dining team refines approaches to environmental stewardship and meeting student expectations:

> Our mantra for the program has always been local, sustainable, delicious, right? We really have what we call the core values of what the program is all about, right? And sustainability. And right now, we feel sustainability should be even more. We talk about regenerative.

Staff consistently indicated that these values were developed to help meet student expectations. Staff also shared the belief that students continue to appreciate UMass Dining's commitment to a focus on local, healthy, sustainable, and delicious offerings. Publications on the Auxiliary Enterprises website provided further data to reinforce UMass Dining's commitment to these values (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, n.d.-b).

They're With Us Three Times a Day

One storytelling theme that came up with employees was "they're with us three times a day." This phrase captured staff's observation that over the course of four years and multiple daily visits to the dining commons, students first gain familiarity with the staff and spaces, and subsequently build community with the staff. Additionally, communal dining spaces were noted as important places for students to gather with friends, study, and be "at home." Staff were proud of these relationships between students, staff, and the dining environment. A number of administrative and front-line staff commented that students feel at home with the staff and comfortable in the spaces that dining offers. When asked about how dining plays a part in community building, a cashier shared observations on how students and staff begin to build relationships:

> Oh yeah, I mean it's like they're in here every day, every single meal, so you know, it's a familiar face again, and after a while you know, either you make small talk, or they make small talk and then you go from there.

Additionally, Noah, an assistant manager, indicated that is what makes dining services such large part of a student's experience at UMass, as well as how the pandemic changed student behavior:

> I think it plays a big role, I mean they're here three times a day, right? I feel, like some of the students are always here. They like hanging around, they eat breakfast, they do homework here, they do studying here. It wasn't like that for the last couple years, but I feel like we are going to get back to that, where you see the same people here, they're eating, they're doing homework here, they're talking to their friends and they're here a lot. So, I feel like that's a big part of it.

This storytelling theme suggests that regular interactions between dining staff and students help build community. Further, while not linked by a specific storytelling theme, participants provided descriptive data related to building and community with students and families, which will be further discussed in the next section.

Building Community to Support Student Success

Auxiliary Enterprises' first core value is: "We care about our people." This community-forward focus was evident in employees' interview responses as they discussed their daily interactions with students, colleagues, and parents. The following section will highlight findings related to employees' focus on relationships with students.

Students Matter to UMass Dining

On the second day of my campus visit, I arrived at approximately 8 AM and walked through the dining commons to observe what was going on. There were many food smells in the air, especially garlic and onions. I heard different noises from machines, trays stacking, silverware being replenished, custodial tasks, and general food preparation. Student traffic was beginning to increase as student athletes started to arrive in groups. I walked past a dining station where I noticed a cook talking with a student as he was preparing their food. As they continued, I overheard the student ask the cook how his day was going so far and what his hours were for the day. I heard him respond to her questions before he asked her similar questions about her day. They seemed to know each other and were genuinely interested in each other's responses about what the day held. Watching the cook engage with the student, shifting easily between the cooking tasks and their conversation, I inferred that these types of conversations with students were a regular and important part of this cook's day.

Employees indicated that they wanted to please students with services, including the culinary offerings, which can be summarized by a statement shared by Dawson:

> As a cook, my job is to provide good food, and I hope that it makes somebody's day because when people say that: "Oh, the chicken Alfredo is so good" it makes my day. And this makes me happy and I hope that we, as the culinary team, contribute to some happiness or it's a highlight of the day.

During interviews, front-line staff shared that student relationships are extremely important to them. Fiona, a cashier, recognized that she is the first point of contact for students when they enter the dining commons, and makes it a point to try to connect with all students. She has developed strategies that allow her to make connections with students as they pass through her line:

> Like if it's a hockey game I wear the hockey jersey. Or if it's a football game, I'll have my football t-shirt on and, for different holidays, I dress up … I had a different hat on every day and some people noticed that about me. And they would come up like: “You have a different hat on!” I was like: “I do!” And they will talk to me about that. … I just try to make it exciting for students, because I'm the first one that they see when they first come into the building. So, every student that comes in, I say: "Hi, how are you?" or: "Good morning, how’s your day going?" And I greet every single one of them when they come in.

While cashiers discussed more about their relationships with student patrons who they get to know over time, cooks talked almost exclusively about their relationships with student employees. One front-line employee indicated that student relationships have been a driving force in keeping him satisfied with his work:

> I have seen so many students … and I always have good relations. I enjoyed that. ... I came as a [type of degree] student. While I was doing my [type of] study … my friend recommended me, do you want to work in the dining hall? And, right after I finished my [type of] study, I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed the work working with the students, working with this job, and it doesn't require a very sophisticated head, but working with the students. The more I started working with them … there are a lot of things that I really learned from the students. That is, the students will always be very, very positive … so far, I don't have any bad experience that I regret: "Oh my God, why did I go to [type of] school to do this kind of thing?" I always thought that I have a choice, because I have a degree and if I want to go do something else, I have a choice, but this job …. I was able to stay longer. It is because every time you come here … they [students] always encourage me, so they never disappoint you.

While the value of student relationships came up in the majority of interviews, employees also stressed the importance of listening to students and using their feedback to make improvements. This was also evident through document analysis. At UMass Amherst, all students are encouraged to share feedback via text or email, through a program called Text n Tell (Lavallee, 2014). Additionally, a team of student ambassadors are hired to provide regular feedback to dining leaders. Ambassadors share feedback from their own experiences as well as what they see and hear from others (Toong, 2012). Students are also invited to provide feedback through participation in research and development processes within UMass Dining (UMass Dining, n.d.-b).

One of the assistant managers, Ethan, shared his observations on how the different ways in which dining helps students build community:

> Well, I think community is a huge thing and just having a place that's comfortable to be with your friends. I mean, school, a lot of the time, is a very serious thing, but … just making connections with other people and how important that is for people. And I think dining is a place where that happens for a lot of people. And we have very comfortable dining services and very accommodating … it's a very diverse population here. If you look around the dining halls, there's lots of international food. I feel like we try to make all sorts of people welcome, and not only welcome, but comfortable and a place where they can come and feel like they're in a community with each other. And I think dining it's actually a big part of that. Maybe something similar to that would be like the gym or something like that. It's just something where you know you still got to live and enjoy life, and you can't always be focused on your academic studies … I think this is very good place for leisure time. And I think it's really enjoyable … people really like the food here they and they get excited coming here.

Staff shared how important student feedback is for continuous improvement and student satisfaction within the organization. Thomas noted this is not merely lip service, rather student feedback is used to make meaningful decisions around what the unit prioritizes and invests resources in:

> When they say that they listen to students they actually do, this isn't just a tagline that you can put on promotional materials. They actually listen and react to students when students offer suggestions or ideas there's a reaction to that. It's not

> just something that's: “Okay, yeah, cool. Yeah, yeah, good idea, you know, why don't you go and, you know, get some experience in life and let's just forget about that.” They actually consider it, and I mean, I know that lots of universities do mystery shopper type experiences and so don't we, and so we get that feedback as well. But we do listen to—and then react to—student feedback. And I think that that's been a driving force in a lot of the directions that we've gone.

Responsivity to student feedback was provided as another example of how UMass Dining demonstrates that students matter.

Conversations with dining employees indicated that they value their relationships with students. They also communicated a sense of pride that students use the dining facilities to share meals with friends, study independently, and meet with student groups. They recognized that comfort within dining space indicated a connection to the environment. This reinforces the importance of informal learning environments as well as connecting through a sense of place (Strange & Banning, 2015). Additionally, student feedback is taken seriously to help improve the student experience. All of these provide examples of ways that UMass dining demonstrates that students matter. Interviews indicated that relationships with parents also matter. The next section shares findings related to UMass Dining’s focus on parents.

Parents Eat for Free: Building Trust

Research indicates that families may influence students’ decisions to remain or leave an institution (Tinto, 2012b). An early conversation with one of the leaders shared that Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining value parents as an integral partner to support students for success. To help strengthen this partnership, parents of students on

meal plans are invited to eat for free with their student in any of the campus dining commons. He explained that it's a valuable investment that builds trust and confidence with parents and allows them to experience firsthand what day to day dining is like at UMass Amherst. He had observed that on many college campuses, parents don't get a chance to experience campus food offerings except for major events such as open-houses, orientation, parents' weekend, and graduation. This investment, he shared, also provides transparency and it helps to maintain the level of trust that parents have in UMass Dining. When families come to campus to see their student on an ordinary weekday and have lunch in one of the dining commons, they are able to see the wide variety of healthy and delicious offerings that are regularly provided. He shared that he believes this offers an important reassurance to parents about student wellness, and they don't need to worry about their student having access to good, healthy, homemade food. This information was also emphasized on the dining website, under a page designed specifically for parents (UMass Dining, n.d.-a).

Similarly, many staff who participated in interviews recognized that parental trust in UMass Dining is important. Most stated that parents want to be reassured that their students will have good options for a balanced diet that will support their success as college learners. Quincy summarized this as he discussed his observations:

> One of the favorite parts is when you have … parents coming on a tour, like, literally, their jaws drop when they're walking around and they just seem so impressed and so excited to come in and try the food … and the parents will know that their students are going to be taken care of while they're here and studying and not have to worry about how they're going to cook their meals and we also

> are very accommodating to some of our students that have specific allergies. So that's reassuring too, to the parents, because that's a big scare to them if their son or daughter is allergic to peanuts and it can be life threatening thing. So, to know that they're being well taken care of and we're gonna make sure to do our best that nothing happens to them.

One of the cooks considered her own perspective as a parent when she discussed parents and UMass Dining. She recognized that parents frequently help students with college costs and may therefore want some assurances that they are investing in a healthy, high-quality experience for their student:

> I always look at it, as if my son was here, like, I would just want people to treat him well and to make sure that the food that he gets is good food, and its healthy food, and its cooked properly. I try to see it from the parent's perspective, the person that's paying for the whole thing, you know what I mean?

Interviews illustrated the importance of building trust with parents as part of UMass Dining's efforts to help establish UMass Amherst as both a destination and community of choice for students.

Fostering Student Growth to Support Success

Leaders in higher education often focus on educational and co-curricular systems that promote student growth, learning, and autonomy (Astin, 1984/1999; Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 1995/2010; Mayhew et al., 2016). Imbedded in these concepts is a focus on student agency. Bandura (2001) described agency:

> To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions. Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and

> distributed structures and functions through which personal influence exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place. The core features of agency enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times. (p. 2)

Conversations with employees in UMass Dining reinforced an organizational focus on promoting student development and agency. There were two topics that came up consistently in interviews with regard to student development: supporting students as they learn to make healthy decisions around nutrition and wellness, and providing opportunities for students to focus on their career development through student employment opportunities within UMass Dining. Both will be discussed in more detail below.

Student Wellness, Nutrition, & Success

Employees of UMass Dining took pride in promoting students' growth by offering opportunities to learn more about a variety of international cuisines and focus on healthy meal options. Additionally, there are many resources that are offered to help students learn how to manage food allergies/dietary restrictions. Campus documents provided students with educational information around nutritional information, allergens, and food safety.

One of the dieticians, Elizabeth, recounted the story of a student who entered the university with severe allergies and how she was able to witness his experience as he gained confidence and independence with regard to his diet:

> I even had a student who had peanut, tree nut, shellfish, sesame, egg, and dairy allergies. And his freshman year I worked with him and he ended up getting a job

> at one of the dining commons serving food—he can serve. As long as he doesn't ingest it, he's fine. So, he got to know the staff. And by sophomore year, he's like nope, I don't need to meet with you. I'm comfortable at the dining common. I know the staff. I know where I can eat. If I have any questions, I'll ask. So, it's like when that happens, it makes me feel good because their comfort level is great, that they know who to ask for.

Additionally, Dawson discussed efforts to help UMass students learn more about personal nutrition and diet, and highlighted a session that had been designed for student athletes: "this morning we did a tour of the facilities for the women's basketball team, then after that I did a demo to really showcase … to get them interested in some just simple, healthy cooking."

Similarly, the living laboratory kitchen in Worcester Commons is set up to offer students "a greater interaction with cooking and learning more about different menu dishes they normally may not experience" (UMass Dining, n.d.-b, para 4).

Student Career Growth and Development

Auxiliary Enterprises employs over 1,000 UMass students (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, 2021). UMass Dining has focused on helping students gain meaningful work experience. During interviews, many employees focused heavily on the importance of providing student employees with experiences that will help them to grow and develop as emerging professionals. They pointed out that for students who are interested, working in dining offers the chance to gain leadership experience; student employees even have the opportunity to work their way up to

supervisor. The following statement from Quincy, an assistant manager, reinforces full-time staff's commitment to helping student employees to build leadership skills:

> We have started to hire student supervisors, so they're performing the same duties as some of our full-time staff, supervising the line. it's great for them, because they can use on a resume and they're getting some real experience. And it is super helpful to us too, because they're really flexible and able to help us with whatever we need. … I hope that they would say that … I helped them train and develop some skills that they can use once they graduate. I think when you when you're in college working with your peers and being able to manage your peers it's giving them some experience that's really going to help them once they graduate. It can be tough when you have to tell someone your own age—or even for them to tell someone older when they are supervising some of our full-time staff—like what they need to be doing. They seem to do it with ease, and so I think it's great for them and great for us.

Similarly, Bob captured a few employees' statements that working in dining services helps students build resilience and confidence:

> We built a very good, you know, I think that we've got a very good platform for them to learn and mature as a human being. To face experiences of what the pressure of real work is all about, right? When you have to build 1500 sandwiches in four hours. You look and say: "Alright, how are we going to do it?" There's somebody there to show you, all right, let's do it. And then, next time: "Oh yeah, we need 2000? No problem." So, it builds the competence, the ability to say that let's do it, rather than saying that "I can't do," "I won't do it," and so on, so forth,

> so hoping that I will contribute to the training and everything would build a better workforce in terms of maturity, mentality, and saying: “Hey, let's go get it” rather than saying: “No, we can’t do it.”

Olivia also shared reflections on student employees, their experiences, and also shed insight on the relationships that full-time employees build with those who return for multiple years:

> Oh, for the most part they're great, they're very helpful, they're smart, they, for a lot of them, I know we are—and this is from them telling me—their first job opportunity. So, it's interesting to see the growth because sometimes we have them—we've had students from freshman through graduation—so it's bittersweet. It's always good to see them, you know graduate and move on, but, you're with somebody for four years, they become a part of the team, you know, and then they leave, so. But you know, always, always happy for them. And I've kept in touch with quite a few to see how they're doing in life. I see them get married, have kids, it’s cool. … I think that they would say they had a good experience. And we try to be patient. And I know I've done reference letters for some of the kids, they've specifically asked. I think it's a positive experience. … I mean, I think that there's also some friendships that have formed.

UMass Dining staff observed that students often are grateful for what they learn through their experiences as student employees. Some students who have graduated take the opportunity to contact them and express gratitude for what they learned. Not surprisingly, staff shared how happy this makes them. One of the cooks, Lila, was

beaming when she recalled a former student with whom she had a strong working relationship contacted her:

> One of the students is still in touch with me, she always tells me: "You know, I told my mom that you teach me how to cook. I learned how to cook when I worked with you." … She is doing a master's in computer science [but she still appreciates what she learned as a student employee]. … "you teach me so many things to cook."

Finally, one of the administrators, Thomas, commented about how many traditional-aged students must learn to make good decisions when they arrive on campus. He provided examples of how this occurs through menu/dietary decisions as well as decisions about their employment:

> In many cases, for the first time in their lives they're able to make decisions about the food that they're going to eat for three meals, a day, every day, seven days a week, that's quite a responsibility. So, if you want to have french fries every night, nobody is there to stop you … it's about that sort of self-discipline of: "Okay, well, I don't actually need french fries every night*."* And I think that then ties in with their job: you can work as many hours as you want, but you're still going to [have to] fit your study and you've still got to fit your playtime in.

Thomas' reflections indicate an understanding of the developmental growth that he frequently observes in the students who eat and work in UMass Dining.

Employees within dining communicated there is a rewarding opportunity to help interested students strengthen interpersonal and professional skills, build meaningful relationships, gain culinary experience, and receive leadership training via their

employment in UMass Dining. This educational component came through as a point of pride and satisfaction in interviews. Additionally, it was interesting to note that these data support all four themes that were identified as campus-wide learning objectives for student success: community, agency, responsibility, and proficiency (Joint Task Force on Student Success Learning Objectives, 2018).

Summary

Data show that leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining have aligned their goals with the university's goals for student success, and have provided vision and leadership to transform the organization into one that is considered to be exemplary by students, employees, and peers.

Data illustrate that employees in dining services see one of their roles as supporting student engagement and success at UMass Amherst. This research study identified that employees within UMass Dining focus on building community through their relationships with students and their families. Data also show that staff believe their roles promote student growth, development, and agency. This is accomplished via efforts to provide nutritional education as well as healthy and diverse menu offerings. Additionally, UMass Dining staff focus on supporting students' career growth and development though student employment opportunities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

A frequently heard statement in higher education is: “Student success is everyone’s responsibility.” Cross-divisional teams that are charged to focus on an institutional framework to examine factors related to student success can streamline and reduce decentralized, isolated approaches to supporting students. Yet when cross-divisional teams occur, dining is not always included at the table.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate how employees within the dining service organization at UMass Amherst perceive how the organization fits into the institutional approaches to student success, and how staff perceive their unit’s role related to student success and engagement efforts. Using Tierney’s (1988) framework of organizational culture as a theoretical foundation, the study sought to gain insights on the goals, actions, and perceptions of community members within Auxiliary Enterprises and to understand both organizational and individual roles related to student success. The following section will address findings related to the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

This research was designed to examine perceptions of leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises and front-line employees with regard to the role of dining services in student success and engagement efforts. The following research question was posed with the goal of understanding the perceptions of leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises: How and to what

extent do leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises incorporate the institution's goals around student success and engagement into the goals and planning efforts for dining services? Overall, data suggest an there is an alignment between university goals and priorities and the goals that administrators and leaders within Auxiliary Enterprises discussed as priorities to enhance the student experience. Data indicated that leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises clearly focused on two goals within the 2018-2023 UMass Amherst Campus Strategic Plan: establishing UMass as a destination of choice for students, and establishing UMass as a diverse community of choice for faculty, staff and students (University of Massachusetts Amherst, n.d.).

Specific examples related to the goals were illustrated through the first research theme, "staying true to the expressed values: institutional alignment for student success," as well as the second theme, "developing organizational conditions for student success." Both were supported in Chapter 4 with detailed examples from staff interviews that mapped to the institutional goals and unit-level mission and core values.

Within the UMass Auxiliary Enterprises leadership team, there has been ongoing and thoughtful planning around diversity to build a culture that reinforces student success and engagement efforts at the institution. This includes featuring the efforts of the UMass Dining program in recruitment and marketing materials to help attract a diverse population of prospective and admitted students, as well as offering current students a diverse array of dining options that represent many cultures from around the world. This focus helps to make students feel familiar, welcome, and comfortable within the campus community.

There is no doubt that UMass Dining's leaders have deliberately and methodically planned for dining's evolution from a standard dining program into an exemplary dining service organization that embodies the institutional mission, values, and goals. As with any unit focused on continuous improvement, research indicated there may be additional opportunities to integrate UMass Dining more directly and visibly to the student success framework at the university.

The second research question, which asked how and the extent to which dining services staff at the institution viewed the role of dining services with regard to supporting students' engagement and success at the institution, was primarily addressed via rich interview data. Data show that staff within UMass dining see a direct relationship between their work and student success and engagement. During interviews, dining employees emphasized their organization's focus to strengthen community relationships, especially those with students. Both administrators and front-line workers placed great value on dining employees' roles in developing relationships—and community—with students.

In addition to illustrating leaders' efforts, the second theme, "developing organizational conditions for student success" provides detailed examples from front-line staff interviews that demonstrate conditions that the UMass dining team has developed to build community, support diversity, and engage students. Interviews also suggested that UMass Dining may be a contributing factor to students' ongoing satisfaction and engagement at the university.

Further, interviews revealed that the dining staff encourage students to gather in the dining commons and other campus dining spots, such as the retail locations, with a

focus on strengthening students' community and engagement. Recent renovations to one of the dining commons includes alcoves with comfortable furniture and booths. Both have large screen monitors on the wall so that groups of students can meet up and study together.

The third theme, "fostering student growth for success" sheds light on staff's perceptions around their roles helping to promote student agency. Dining staff saw their roles as integral to help students learn about diversity, wellness, and nutrition through menu offerings and educational opportunities. Dining staff also viewed student employment as an important condition to support student growth. Student employment offers students the ability to build relationships with other members of the community, provides students the ability to gain work experience, and learn how to navigate professional interactions with individual colleagues and teams. For students who are interested, student employment within dining also offers mentoring relationships as well as the opportunity for students to work their way up to supervisory positions, where they can build transferrable leadership skills.

Findings Mapped to Organizational Culture

Because this research study utilized Tierney's (1988) framework for organizational culture, it was helpful to consider key research findings within the six concepts of the framework: *environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership*. Study data were mapped to each of the concepts to help understand the culture of UMass Dining.

Through interviews, I was able to understand perspectives about the campus environment and the UMass Dining environment. Staff described UMass Amherst as a

big, diverse, friendly, innovative, and supportive environment. Additionally, UMass Dining was regarded as a friendly, family environment. Interviews revealed that students are a highly valued population within the campus community.

The mission of UMass Amherst indicates that the university values diverse perspectives to strengthen the community of learning for students (University of Massachusetts Amherst, n.d.). The mission of Auxiliary Enterprises is simple and clear: They seek to enhance the quality of life for the community at UMass Amherst (University of Massachusetts Amherst Auxiliary Enterprises, n.d.-a). Auxiliary Enterprise's mission provided a foundation for the community focus that would be revealed through interview data.

As I considered the concept of socialization, it helped me to understand how staff focus on building relationships with students as well as supporting students' peer relationships. Staff within UMass Dining provide students a comfortable and welcoming environment where they can study, eat, and build community with other students. Diverse menu offerings help students feel welcome and valued. Dining staff observed they have more frequent and consistent interactions with students than most other roles on campus, and consider their interactions an important part of student engagement. Relationships with students are a gratifying and sustaining factor of staff employment. Additionally, prospective and incoming students—as well as all parents—are invited to experience UMass Dining as a way of introducing them to the community and its offerings.

Interviews suggested that information is transferred through the levels and ranks of staff within Auxiliary Enterprises. It became clear that storytelling is an important method for Auxiliary Enterprise to share information, illustrate priorities and initiatives,

and reinforce the organization's values. Social media provides a way for dining to both disseminate messages and receive feedback.

Data revealed strategic priorities of Auxiliary Enterprises, designed to help achieve the goals of the university and unit. Employees at all levels identified community and people as the core area of focus for UMass Dining. Data show that auxiliary leaders contribute to the diversity of the campus population by hiring diverse employees and building community through diverse menu options. Partnerships across divisions are designed to strengthen support for students. Additionally, a focus on innovation and excellence drives employees. This may contribute towards UMass Dining being voted the number one campus dining program by students for five years in a row.

Interviews indicated that strong leadership matters. Administrators in UMass Dining suggested that executive campus leaders value UMass Dining's contributions to make UMass Amherst a destination and community of choice. Staff indicated that Auxiliary Enterprises leaders are visible, collaborative, and demonstrate that they value staff, especially by encouraging creativity and innovation. Front-line staff discussed their appreciation for opportunities to grow and advance within UMass Dining.

Cross-Divisional Partnerships to Support Student Success

Through this case study research, I was unable to identify an ongoing cross-divisional team that is charged to oversee planning related to student success efforts (Tinto, 2012a). However, research identified a weekly cross-divisional meeting that is open to faculty and staff across campus who have a role in student success (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2021b). The *Success @UMass Weekly Development Sessions* offers professional development workshops delivered by campus community members.

The sessions include topics such as: advising, financial aid, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) compliance, and assessment. It was not evident through document analysis whether Auxiliary Enterprises or UMass Dining have presented to this audience, nor were these sessions discussed in interviews.

Document analysis also identified a dedicated team who focus on supporting undergraduate student success (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2021a). This team's website offered further evidence of partnerships across different divisions, although at the time of this research, Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining were not clearly identified as resources for students. There may be opportunity for additional partnerships in order to share information and resources related to nutrition, food security, and student employment as supportive conditions for student success.

Specific, targeted cross-divisional partnerships that focus on elements of student success were illuminated through this research study. For example, through document analysis, a cross-divisional task force that was charged to look at campus-wide student learning objectives was identified (Joint Task Force on Student Success Learning Objectives, 2018). While both faculty and staff were represented on the committee, Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining did not appear to have representation on this specific committee. Yet interviews with leaders in Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining clearly indicated dining's role in other cross-divisional partnerships to support students. For example, interviews revealed that strong partnerships exist between the Dean of Students Office and UMass Dining to identify students who may need additional support and resources. Additionally, interviews and document analysis illuminated research partnerships between UMass Dining and the School of Public Health and Health

Sciences (UMass Dining, n.d.-b) to learn more about the relationship between student diet and grades.

Implications

This study may provide valuable insights for leaders who are rethinking their organizational approaches to promote student success. There are three major implications that were identified through this research study. First, this study reinforces research that argues that in order to have a meaningful impact, institutional mission and goals must be integrated at the unit level as well as across units (Kuh, et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 1995/2010). Next, it reinforces that collaborative, cross-divisional actions help to ensure a systemic and campus-wide focus toward student success (Kezar, 2019; Tinto, 2012a). Lastly, it affirms the research that there are opportunities for dining units to help students make meaningful connections about their learning and development through on-campus employment (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2010; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012).

Study Limitations

This single case was intended to explore perceptions of employees within a dining services unit that is considered an exemplar. By design, it took a limited view, and did not incorporate the perspective of students, parents, or campus leaders outside of Auxiliary Enterprises. Since this study focused solely on employee perceptions, funding, budgeting, and overall economics were not considered in this study.

An additional limitation is that on-campus research was conducted during the summer. There were fewer students on campus and staffing was reduced. Only one of four residential dining commons was open for business, although retail operations were

also open for observation. I was not able to observe the case during one of its busiest times of the year.

A third limitation was that the study was conducted at a residential campus that serves a predominately traditional-aged undergraduate student body. It offers a limited approach to how dining services supports students at a time when the college-going population is changing. These findings may not be relatable to different types of campuses, such as a community college that serves a wider range of learners at different points in their lifespan and does not offer a residential experience. Similarly, because of the narrow focus of this research, this study did not focus on barriers to success that college students may face, such as food insecurity.

Recommendations for Practice

After analyzing the data, I have identified four recommendations for campus leaders who are reconsidering their institutional approaches for student success and trying to determine if dining services has a role to play.

Research stressed that in order to meet institutional goals, there must be alignment. As such, dining leaders should first revisit their unit's mission, vision, strategic goals, policies and practices to determine if they are aligned with the institution's (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 1995/2010; Tinto, 2012a).

Next, dining leaders should focus on professional partnerships that build community between dining and other units on campus, including academic departments and student affairs to strengthen or layer the community of support (Mayhew et al., 2016). For example, UMass Dining partners with the Dean of Students Office to coordinate support for students who may be experiencing food insecurity. Interviews

revealed that UMass Dining provides students with free meals whenever they are requested. Dining notifies the Dean of Students Office to help ensure the student's needs are being met. Additionally, interview data identified partnerships between athletics and dining. One cook highlighted a cooking demonstration for the women's basketball team that focused on offering the athletes options for preparing simple, healthy meals These findings provide clear examples of how cross-divisional partnerships can strengthen the community of support for students.

Third, leaders should determine if there are key partners outside of the campus community who should be engaged to build relationships around supporting students' dining and nutritional needs. For residential colleges, it may be most appropriate to focus on parents and families. For non-residential campuses, it may also be important to consider engaging employers and spouses/partners. All institutions would likely benefit from partnerships with community agencies to support food security.

Finally, through the review of literature, it became evident that there are opportunities to more intentionally link on-campus employment with student learning (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2010; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012). Leaders in dining units should create opportunities for student employees to reflect upon and make meaning from their on-campus employment within an educational context. This has been cited as a rich, yet under-developed area to help students use their on-campus experiences for learning, growth, and development (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2010; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012). Further, Kezar et al. (2019) reinforced the value of staff relationships to support student learning:

> staff also provide an independent source of observational learning about professional demeanor, office skills, and issues like time management. … Sometimes students work directly with staff in work-study roles, sometimes they are role models, and sometimes they serve as informal mentors or interact in ways that lead to more vicarious learning. (p. 117)

While leaders on campuses, including UMass Amherst, have focused on providing student employees opportunities to gain meaningful work experience to prepare for their careers, it is not clear whether efforts are underway to also link their employment to student learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

As discussed earlier, this case study focused solely on the perceptions of full-time employees; the student perspective is missing from this research study. Therefore, one recommendation for future research is to interview students at UMass Amherst for their perspectives on dining's role in their experience. This would allow leaders to determine if perspectives of students and staff align, and whether there are opportunities to build more intentional connections to support students.

Given the research that suggests the value of linking student learning more closely with student employment (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2010; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012), a recommendation for future research is to investigate campus employers who have set up reflective opportunities for students to make connections between their course learning and their on-campus jobs in dining services. This research may help leaders who are considering aligning student learning and employment more closely.

Clayton (2014) investigated how dining services change as an institution focuses on goals for growth. Clayton's study focused specifically on enrollment growth and the impact on the dining services unit at an institution that has outsourced dining for over 50 years, and focused exclusively on administrators' perceptions. Although the purpose, research questions, study design, and specifics of the cases were very different from this study, it is interesting and important to note there were still a number of similar findings between the studies. Data collected in both studies identified that employees believe that strong leadership matters for the success of a dining organization. Both studies revealed that administrators believe dining service employees have an important role in the student experience. Additionally, both studies identified dining services' emphasis on relationships between students, parents, and dining staff. Further, in both studies, staff's commitment to meet students' dietary needs came through remarkably similar stories about a student choosing the institution because of the nutritional support offered. The similar findings between the two studies give pause for consideration. This suggests that a future multi-case study may help to identify whether these similarities indicate trends across dining services, including: valuing leadership, a commitment to meeting students' dietary needs, a focus on student relationships, and the importance of dining to build community.

It may be helpful to also study the effects of outsourcing on dining employees' perceptions of their roles related to student success and engagement. Kezar et al. (2019) indicated that the higher education employment landscape has changed over the years. Institutions have shifted to more contingent faculty and have outsourced many staff roles. Kezar et al. have also indicated that employees are increasingly becoming more

dissatisfied with the work conditions and overall environment within higher education. Similarly, Magolda (2016) noted that institutional leaders often find outsourcing jobs to be efficient and cost effective, yet when outsourcing occurs, campus employees who are impacted have a different experience. Staff frequently get hired by contractors to continue in the same role, yet their hours are reduced and they are no longer eligible to earn benefits. While UMass Amherst is a self-operating dining unit, many other institutions have outsourced dining operations. Considering the research and concerns around the long-term effects associated with outsourcing staff roles (Kezar et al., 2019; Magolda, 2016), it could be helpful to learn about the experiences of front-line dining employees at self-operating and outsourced institutions. Further research is warranted to investigate whether there are differences between the perceptions of front-line staff in both self-operating and outsourced dining units.

Conclusion

This study highlighted an exemplary dining unit and investigated the perceptions of employees who work within it. While there are likely more opportunities for UMass Dining to be included at the table, there was strong evidence of Auxiliary Enterprises and UMass Dining's alignment within the university. Careful planning and thoughtful leadership have helped this organization evolve over several years from an average dining facility to a well-recognized model of campus dining that is highly valued by the UMass community, including students and parents. Front-line staff are proud to be employees of UMass Dining, value relationships with students, and see the role of dining as a contributing factor to student engagement and success.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DINING/AUXILIARY LEADERS

Background & Current Position

- Tell me a little about yourself and your career.
    - How did you arrive at this role? How long in position, etc.
    - What does a typical day look like for you?
    - How do you describe UMass? The students?
    - How does you feel about leading a unit that serves UMass students?
- Talk to me about your day-to-day interactions with dining services?
    - How often do you interact with dining staff (supervisors, front line workers, student employees)?
        - What does that interaction look like?
    - How frequently do you take your meals in the dining facilities on campus?
        - What is that experience like for you?
    - Tell me about your interactions with students and dining services staff?

Institutional Goals Related to Student Success & Engagement

- Tell me about your institution's goals related to student success and engagement?
- Can you talk about how various divisions on campus work to focus on those goals?
- Does your campus have a central team that coordinates efforts around student success and engagement? *If yes: Can you share some details about it?*

Dining Services & Student Success/Engagement

- What role do you think dining services plays in the UMass student experience?
- Follow up if necessary: What types of initiatives do you believe your dining team offers that relate to the student experience?
    - (Community building, career development, health & wellness, etc.)
- How do you think a student's employment in dining services impacts their experience at UMass? Is there anything else you would like to share related to dining and the student experience?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FRONT-LINE DINING STAFF

Background, Current Position

- Tell me a little about your role.
    - How long have you been with UMass? This role?
- What made you choose a career in college dining services?
- What does a typical day look like for you?
- How do you describe UMass? The students?
- How does you feel about working in a unit that serves UMass students?

Institutional Goals Related to Student Success & Engagement

- What does student success mean to you?
- I'm interested in knowing what you know about the university's goals for student success (connections, progress through degree program, graduation, job placement, etc.).
- Does the university share goals, plans, etc. with the larger community?

Dining Services & Engagement

- What role do you think dining services plays in the UMass student experience?
- What do you see as your role in students' experiences on campus?
- How does the dining services team find ways to help students feel connected? (Welcome, familiar, bonded, nourished)
- Think about the students you've known. What do you think they would say about their interactions with dining services? With you?
- What would you say about student employees? What have you observed about their experiences working within dining? (Connections, engagement, etc.)
- Is there anything else you would like to share related to dining and the student experience?

APPENDIX C: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

June 11, 2021

Dear Amy Stich:

On 6/11/2021, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Gathering Around the Table: An Examination of Dining Service Employees' Perceptions and Roles in College Student Success Initiatives
Investigator:	Amy Stich
Co-Investigator:	Lynne Mazadoorian
IRB ID:	PROJECT00003883
Funding:	None
Review Category:	DHHS Exempt 2iii

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 6/11/2021.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 6/11/2026. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Leigha Restrepo, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX D: EXTERNAL RECRUITMENT PERMISSION LETTER

UMassAmherst

Human Research Protection Office

Mass Venture Center
100 Venture Way, Suite 116
Hadley, MA 01035
Telephone: 413-545-3428

June 23, 2021

Lynne Cook Mazadoorian and Professor Amy Stich
Institute of Higher Education
University of Georgia

Thank you for submitting the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) documents for the project entitled, "Gathering Around the Table: An Examination of Dining Service Employees' Perceptions and Roles in College Student Success Initiatives" (IRB ID PROJECT00003883). The UMass Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) is satisfied that you have taken all of the necessary steps to reduce any risks associated with the project and approves the request to recruit participants at UMass Amherst in accordance with your approved IRB protocol.

Thank you for contacting the UMass Amherst HRPO.

Sincerely,

Iris L. Jenkins

Iris Jenkins
Assistant Director, HRPO