



Campus Dining 'Fan'fare

Virginia Commonwealth University
 Revamps its Dining Options with
 NACAS Business Partner Help

by

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&

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Several young people on a street corner in the Richmond, Virginia, area called the Fan are chatting about what they want for lunch – Pizza? Chinese? Vegetarian? Steaks? Restaurants, diners and pizzarias to satisfy all their cravings are all within a short walk but instead, they all head directly to Shafer Court Dining Center, a compelling new dining experience at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

When the University, ARAMARK, Hanbury Evans Wright Vlatas + Company, and Ricca Newmark Design approached the planning table for this facility, they took some calculated risks – including a two-story design on an urban corner, selection of high-end corporate interiors, and an innovative meal program that has changed the face of board-plan dining. Their gamble paid off. Shafer Court Dining Center has changed the dynamics of the campus and is having a positive impact on student recruitment and retention.

Shafer is the first built piece in a complex planning puzzle meant to give VCU an identity as a mature, congruous campus, physically uniting the VCU Medical Center with the Monroe Park Campus. Since VCU President Eugene P. Trani arrived in 1990, \$1 billion in new construction has responded to growth in programs, research and expanding enrollment, and more is planned. VCU currently has 27,500 students, and it is expected to grow to 30,000 by 2010.



The updated master plan, VCU 2020, emphasizes campus life as well as classrooms, and works at establishing places for students to come together. The \$18-million Shafer Court Dining Center, with its outdoor plaza, is just across the street from Monroe Park, the new heart of campus, and on a path with the Student Commons and Cabell Library. It is an important destination in a central north-south pedestrian connector and fulfills the intent of a Strategic Plan for Dining Services developed in 1999.

“The University has focused a lot of attention on creating a sense of campus at the Monroe Park Campus site,” said Brian Ohlinger, VCU’s associate vice president for facilities management. “This can be particularly difficult in an urban environment.”

“The design of the new building, along with the exterior areas for eating and seating, encourage students to gather and socialize at the dining center’s centralized location,” added Paul Jez, associate vice president for business services and treasurer.

Meal Plans

In the mid- to late-1970s, there were very few dining options for VCU students. Classmates would walk to one of only a few fast-food restaurants near campus for lunch or dinner. Later, a

dining hall was placed in the lower level of the Hibbs Building, otherwise full of classrooms. Other campus food choices remained limited. The 1999 dining master plan provided the menu for change. Focus groups and interviews with faculty and students gave VCU staff and designers insight on food preferences, the desire for late-night dining opportunities, and the need for a place to socialize and interact. It became clear that in order to truly meet customers’ needs, and to plan for the University’s future growth, VCU needed a new dining center.

Location, Location, Location

The Shafer Court Dining Center sits on land once occupied by a 1960s-era Life Sciences building. It is across from Cabell Library and the Hibbs Building, which currently is being renovated for additional academic space. When the Life Sciences building was razed, planners decided against squaring a new building to the corner. Instead, Shafer was set back, at an angle, giving the illusion of long arms reaching out to the VCU community. A pedestrian plaza in front of the building unites the neighborhood with a compass made of paving stones – a contemporary play on the old saying, “All roads lead to Rome.”

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–Brian Ohlinger

Because its location in a traditional neighborhood known to locals as The Fan (VCU being at the crux) is shared by the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart and some historic row houses, designers sought to break down the scale of the building. One façade gestures to the row-house proportions and captures views of the Cathedral's rose window. The opposite façade now serves as a well-lighted, welcoming pathway leading from University residence halls, replacing what once was a dark and uninviting alley. In another neighborly gesture, much attention was paid to screening sounds and smells on the backside of the building, which abuts the row houses. Ultra violet hoods treat grease-laden air before escaping, and a large pulper compacts most waste. Only paper is deposited in dumpsters near the service area, and these are emptied regularly.

Most importantly, Shafer has exceeded the University's expectations as the social beacon for faculty, staff and students.

Drum Beats

But the site also had its challenges, being extremely tight for vehicular access and utilities. A two-story solution was the result. Students, faculty and staff enter a vaulting, round gallery space anchored by a two-story "drum." This drum accommodates the elevator, and directs patrons up a gradually winding stair to the second floor restaurant serveries. It is a dramatic center of energy, up and down, anchored by a colorful information pylon.

The second floor's large dining area consists of market-style service islands with performance cooking. Plenty of tables, in a variety of settings, offer diners a chance for activity, study and quiet, or places to see and be seen.

The first floor is bustling, too. If community members pass through for a quick coffee and pastry, they can grab something from Compass Pointe Emporium, which boasts student favorites like Sbarro and Vie de France. Market 810 to Go offers fresh fruit and salads. Across the space is Rodney's, with tables for eating, sofas for lounging, nooks for studying (equipped with wireless Internet access) and large plasma screen televisions for catching up on the news or NCAA basketball tournaments. Rodney's also is a place for Election Night parties, St. Patrick's Day celebrations and live entertainment. Also downstairs is the Compass Room, a well-appointed private meeting room.

Fine Finishes

There is nothing institutional about Shafer. In fact, the University set an expectation and challenged designers for sophisticated, elegant appointments that would be durable and stand the test of time. Custom millwork and vinyl floor inlays set a playful tone. Flooring in the drum area is a combination of green slate from India, black slate from Brazil and limestone from France. Silcon-based Zodiac tabletops resemble granite, and ultra-leather chairs and stools, tested during a "sit-off," look like leather, but are durable and easily cleaned. Lounge furnishings in Rodney's are equally high-end, including long, custom-designed study tables with wheels for flexible arrangements. Furniture finishes contribute to the overall impression of quality and design, but do not call attention to themselves as objects.

Food is the focus of the facility, and the venues, by Ricca Newmark, underscore that fact with colorful glass-tiled walls, custom-designed hood enclosures, patterned wood counters with stone tops and colorful accent lighting. The material and color palettes are quiet and controlled to allow the food display and service areas to stand out.





Multiple sources of architectural and decorative lighting were incorporated to allow the facility to “change moods,” throughout the day and evening. The dimming system and the interior, automated window shades are linked to provide automated daylighting controls for the interior lighting system.

Students are ever more sophisticated and ever more demanding. They equate quality of environment with quality of food. Imagine the difference if the food was presented under low ceilings and 2x2 strips of fluorescent lighting, and meals were eaten at long rows of Formica tables on metal folding chairs, with stained carpet underfoot.

One signature of the interior spaces is specially commissioned art from VCU’s renowned art school faculty. There are 11 pieces in all. Examples include a 42-foot long by 12-foot tall mural wrapping from the Emporium to the faculty dining room, where a textile work adorns the wall. A colorful glass tile mural delights visitors in the servery. The installations make an emotional connection to the University.

The interiors definitely let customers know that the Shafer Court Dining Center is a very special place on campus.

Four-Star Dining

Tantalizing dishes served up daily at Field of Greens (salad bar); Sergeant Pepper’s (vegetarian and vegan selections); Basil’s (pizza and pasta), Fan Fare (home-style and comfort foods); Stir Crazy (Mongolian grill favorites) and Rams’ Grill (burgers and fries) compete for attention. So long turkey tetrazini. Hello racks of ribs and lobster tail, made-to-order omelets, and wood-oven baked pizzas.

Fresh ingredients are peeled, chopped, tossed and cooked right in front of customers’ eyes, making dining a little like theater. Early risers grab fresh fruit smoothies off trays as fast as the staff can toss strawberries in a blender. Lunch brings stir-fries with chicken, shrimp or tofu. As dinner hour approaches, a sushi chef takes his place where the omelet maker had been for breakfast. Because of the large number of international



students on VCU’s campus, vegan choices are interesting and varied. The fresher, made-to-order meals allow students and patrons to feel more in control of what they are consuming.

The old-fashioned cook-and-park-in-warmers-style of serving has gone the way of freshman beanies. Chape Whitman, of Ricca Newmark, says his firm has been designing display cooking areas for about ten years.

In planning for Shafer, VCU took the conclusions of a 1999 dining master plan to heart. Staff visited other universities to see what they had-and had not. VCU wanted to make Shafer everything that Hibbs was not – and raised the bar again.

Historically, residential dining agreements and contract fee schedules are based on the number of meals contracted. Once students purchase a meal plan, there is little incentive to encourage them to use it.

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VCU's Department of Business Services and its food-service provider, ARAMARK, sought to change this model. ARAMARK structures its agreements with campuses according to each institution's unique goals and priorities, notes Kate Moran of the firm's corporate office. VCU's agreement rewards the contractor based on the number of meals actually served.

ARAMARK has been extremely creative in providing upscale menu options, including steak and lobster, and offering special events such as a gourmet Valentine's Day dinner to keep student interest high. Chefs behind the counters clearly take pride in their products and enjoy cheerful exchanges with their customers. In addition to the basic meal plan, students can upgrade for high-end options with an extra swipe of their cards. The result has been more meal plans sold, more meals consumed, happier customers and increased profits.

On a recent evening, for example, the sushi chef carefully rolled beautiful pink tuna with cucumber and other freshly chopped ingredients and placed the artfully garnished treats on a lovely square plate. A group of friends crowded around to watch, as one young woman said, "Come on. I'm buying!" She swiped her card for the meal-plan upgrade five times – enough to treat them all. VCU treats proud students, prospective students and parents to Sunday brunch during quarterly Open House weekends, making Shafer more popular than the local pancake house, and hungry residents from the greater Richmond community can share in the excitement as well, paying a set price for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

The proof is in the pudding, so to speak. For the fall 2004 semester board plan, dollar sales were up 13 percent over the same period of the previous year. A total of 4,578 dining contracts were sold for the fall 2004 semester compared to 3,289 contacts for the prior year. This is a 39 percent increase





in the total contract sales since the facility opened in August. Even more telling is the fact that faculty and staff this year begged for a meal plan, and VCU Dining has accommodated. Best of all, other campus facilities, such as the University Student Commons, haven't suffered.

Shafer's energy has been contagious. The effort to blur the line between retail and board dining appears successful.

"I am not required to get a meal plan, because I live off campus, but I did," said Lisa Santoro, a member of VCU's women's crew team. "I eat breakfast and lunch at Shafer and hang out sometimes between classes, too."

"Shafer has made my experience as a commuter at VCU much better, not just by providing excellent dining variety, but also by providing a space on campus where my team can meet to get some of our goals accomplished," added Gregory Keefer, an MBA student.

Sophomore Daryl Gousby gets right to the point: "I love it, and it's all you can eat!"

Since opening, representatives from 10 other universities have visited the dining center. VCU also hears from parents of prospective students who have visited other universities and say that Shafer is an outstanding dining services facility and program.

"Shafer Court Dining Center has completely changed the dynamics of this campus. It is so refreshing to see patrons utilizing every inch of this space throughout the day," said Pam Neff, senior dining services director, ARAMARK. "This facility has become a new symbol for VCU's vision to make this campus a tight knit community." ♦

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Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University is a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University-Extensive, ranking it as one of the top research universities in the nation and only one of three such institutions in Virginia. Twenty of our graduate, professional programs are ranked by U.S. News & World Report as among the best in the nation.

We trace our founding to 1838 when the medical department of Hampden-Sydney College opened in Richmond and later became the Medical College of Virginia. In 1968, MCV and the Richmond Professional Institute were merged to create VCU, an institution with two campuses in the heart of the state's capital and a third campus, called the VCU-Qatar School of Design Arts, located in Doha, the capital of Qatar. The VCU-Qatar School offers bachelor's degrees in graphic, fashion and interior design.

VCU's MCV Campus is the site for the VCU Health System, one of the most comprehensive academic health centers in the nation, complementing our nationally ranked School of the Arts, School of Social Work and other schools and programs.

VCU's location in Richmond gives our students a unique opportunity to combine academic and real-world education, allowing them to create their own educational goals. The faculty and administration are committed to the students who want to be a part of a leading, dynamic university.



Stephen Wright AIA is an award-winning design principal with Hanbury Evans Wright Vlattas + Company. He is fascinated by how materials go together and how designers celebrate those connections. "Details make the difference between a building and architecture," he says. Steve studied furniture design in architecture school at Virginia Tech, which led to a broader interest in interiors and materials used in interiors—learning about them, understanding the craftsmanship. He then explored lighting and its impact on interior space. All of this knowledge has been put to work in

projects ranging from lush country club and corporate environments to university residence halls, dining facilities, libraries and bookstores.



Diane L. Reynolds, MBA, is the Director of the Department of Business Services for Virginia Commonwealth University and leads the auxiliary units of parking and transportation, dining, retail, and mail services, which generate 35 million dollars in revenues annually that support programs and fund capital projects for VCU students.

She received a Master of Business Administration degree with Beta Gamma Sigma distinction from the VCU Fast Track Executive MBA program in May 2004. She currently

serves on the boards of directors for the National Association of College Auxiliary Services East and the Virginia Commonwealth University Fast Track Executive MBA Alumni Association. She is a member, supporter and volunteer for the Colon Cancer Alliance.

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