

'berg focus

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DINING

With Purpose

Sustainability plays an increasingly important role in how colleges operate, and Dining Services is one area where everyday decisions can make a meaningful difference. At Muhlenberg, Dining Services approaches sustainability as a long-term commitment that influences how food is sourced, prepared, and served. These efforts not only reduce environmental impact but also support student well-being and encourage more mindful consumption on campus.



HYDROPONIC GARDEN

For Dining Services, sustainability is about building a responsible system that benefits both people and the planet. "At Muhlenberg College, sustainability in the dining program means intentionally making food, service, and operational choices that support environmental health, local communities, and student well-being, not just good food for the moment but a healthier, more responsible system for the future," says John Pasquarello, general manager of Dining Services. This philosophy guides daily operations and long-range planning across dining locations.

Integrating sustainability into food services is especially impactful because of the scale of campus dining. Hundreds of meals are served each day, meaning that small changes can lead to significant results over time. "This is important because food systems affect the environment, human health, communities, and long-term costs, and food services have the scale to make a real difference," Pasquarello says. Food production is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, water use, and waste, making dining services a critical space for sustainable action.

Reducing food waste remains a central focus of Dining Services' sustainability efforts. One of the most visible initiatives supporting this goal is the Think Before Tray program in Wood Dining Commons. This program encourages diners to take only what they can realistically eat, which helps limit unnecessary waste. "Our Think Before Tray program rolled out a few years ago and took the number of trays in the Wood Dining Commons from 800 to now fewer than 200," Pasquarello says. Fewer trays often result in smaller portions and more intentional choices, significantly reducing plate waste.

In addition to encouraging mindful dining, Dining Services tracks waste behind the scenes to inform decision making. "Our kitchen also has a system that measures what's thrown away that helps our staff understand waste patterns and adjusts production and purchasing accordingly," Pasquarello explains. This data allows the culinary team to refine menus, portion sizes, and ordering practices to better align with actual consumption.

Menu planning is another important part of sustainable dining. Offering more plant-forward options helps lower the environmental impact of meals while still meeting student preferences and nutritional needs. "By offering plant-forward menus we lower carbon emissions through proper sourcing of items," Pasquarello says. These choices support a more sustainable food system and expose students to a wider range of dishes that can influence habits beyond campus.

Student involvement plays a key role in strengthening these sustainability initiatives. Dining Services continues to expand opportunities for students to participate directly through internships, feedback forums, and the Student Culinary Council. "Increasing student and campus collaboration by involving students more directly through internships, our student Culinary Council, and feedback forums so our efforts reflect student needs and ideas," Pasquarello notes, is an important priority. These collaborations ensure that sustainability efforts remain relevant and responsive.

Dining Services also works closely with campus partners to align its sustainability goals with broader institutional priorities. By collaborating across departments, dining initiatives become part of a larger campus wide effort rather than isolated programs.

Through waste reduction, thoughtful menu planning, and strong student collaboration, Dining Services demonstrates that sustainability can be woven into everyday dining experiences. These efforts show how intentional choices, made consistently over time, can contribute to a healthier campus and a more responsible approach to food.

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Dining Services

Where Food Meets Fun

Throughout the academic year, the Wood Dining Commons offers more than just daily meals. It also hosts a variety of theme nights, turning ordinary dining experiences into opportunities for excitement, exploration, and learning. From student-designed menus to national food holidays, these events bring energy and anticipation to the dining hall while highlighting creativity, culture, and community.

One of the most popular series is Meals Around the World, a student-driven initiative that encourages participants to explore cuisines from different cultures. Students help design the menus, which are then prepared by the dining staff. Executive Chef Michael Brack says these events are especially meaningful because they allow direct interaction with the students who inspire them. "My favorite theme nights are the Meals Around the World because the themes and the menus are created by students. It gives me an opportunity to interact directly with our customers and create foods I know they want," he says. By combining student input with culinary expertise, these meals become celebrations of both food and culture.

The excitement generated by theme nights is clear throughout the dining hall. Whether Brack overhears conversations, receives comments on the Napkin Board, or is asked directly by students, anticipation is always high. "In case of Meals Around the World, students know the menus were created by their peers, which builds the excitement of trying something new and learning about what may be an unfamiliar cuisine. We had overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the Meals Around the World series," Brack says. The involvement of students encourages diners to step outside their usual choices and engage with new flavors.

Certain theme nights stand out not only for their menu but also for the learning experience they provide. Brack describes the Indigenous American meal as a personal favorite. "Through the student who inspired the meal, Lexy Widi '26, and books by Indigenous Chef Sean Sherman, we all learned a lot about preparing the foods of that culture. Despite the cuisine originating from the place we live, none of us knew much about it," he says. The planning and research required to prepare this meal presented challenges, particularly in sourcing unique ingredients, but these challenges also made the event especially meaningful.



Theme nights are not limited to cultural celebrations. Dining Services also hosts events tied to national food holidays, seasonal activities, and sports celebrations. For example, the opening day of baseball inspires a special takeover at the Nosheries, giving students the chance to enjoy baseball-themed foods and a festive atmosphere. Seasonal celebrations such as finals week add another fun twist to campus dining. In the fall, students look forward to Fast Food Fest, while in the spring, Carnival Night offers a playful and indulgent experience to mark the end of the semester. These events provide a break from the usual routine while creating a sense of community in the dining hall.

Planning and executing theme nights is not without its challenges. "Some of the food items were difficult to source and some ingredients were new to us," Brack says. "So that became both the challenge as well as what made it so special." Navigating these challenges requires creativity, collaboration, and flexibility from both students and the culinary team. Each event is a chance to experiment with new recipes, refine techniques, and enhance the dining program.

Some theme nights have even led to long-term additions to the menu. Pizza Rustica, now a perennial favorite, first appeared as part of a themed meal more than a decade ago. "I think we knew it would be a hit that night, but I never thought it would make it onto our regular menu, let alone remain so popular all these years later," Brack says. This demonstrates the lasting impact that creative events and student involvement can have on campus dining.

Beyond the food itself, theme nights change the atmosphere in the Wood Dining Commons. The energy is different from a typical day, with conversation, laughter, and curiosity filling the space. Students are excited to share their experiences with friends and discover new flavors together. The combination of student-inspired ideas, professional culinary execution, and festive presentation makes theme nights a highlight of the dining calendar.

Chef Brack emphasizes that the goal of these events is not only to provide a memorable meal but also to build engagement and connection. "Theme nights give students a chance to shape the dining experience while learning about different cuisines, traditions, and celebrations. They bring joy and energy to the dining hall," he says. Through these events, Dining Services demonstrates its commitment to creativity, student involvement, and a dining experience that extends beyond simply serving food.

Looking ahead, Dining Services plans to continue expanding the variety and scope of theme nights, incorporating student feedback and exploring new ideas. From global cuisine to seasonal festivities and cultural celebrations, these events create a space where students can gather, learn, and enjoy food together while shaping the future of dining at Muhlenberg.

By combining creativity, student input, and culinary expertise, theme nights at the Wood Dining Commons transform meals into experiences. They celebrate culture, community, and curiosity, offering students opportunities to try new foods, share ideas, and create lasting memories along the way. For diners, each themed event is more than a meal. It is a chance to connect with friends, explore new flavors, and be part of the evolving story of campus dining.

More Than a Napkin

Throughout campus, there are many formal and informal ways students, faculty, staff, and community members can share their thoughts about daily life at Muhlenberg. One of the most enduring and interactive of these spaces can be found inside Wood Dining Commons. The Napkin Board, a simple corkboard filled with handwritten notes on dining hall napkins, has become a cornerstone of communication between Dining Services and the campus community. What may appear at first glance as a collection of quick comments and doodles plays a significant role in shaping the dining experience for everyone who eats on campus.

The Napkin Board invites diners to leave honest feedback about their meals, suggestions for future offerings, or even lighthearted observations about their day. Customers write directly on napkins and pin them to the board, creating an ongoing, highly visible conversation. Once the board fills up, the notes are collected, reviewed, and thoughtfully addressed. Executive Chef Michael Brack writes responses to each napkin, which are then posted for the community to read. This transparent process reinforces the idea that feedback is not only welcomed but valued.

According to John Pasquarello, general manager of Dining Services, the Napkin Board is far from a new experiment. "The Napkin Board has been a longstanding tradition of getting feedback from the Muhlenberg community for decades," Pasquarello says. Its longevity speaks to its effectiveness. While many feedback methods rely on online surveys or suggestion boxes, the Napkin Board stands out because of its accessibility and immediacy. Anyone passing through Wood Dining Commons can participate, making it a shared space for voices across campus.

Over the years, comments posted on the Napkin Board have led directly to meaningful changes within Dining Services. Pasquarello recalls one example that still stands out. "I remember getting feedback from a special event years ago where we first introduced Pizza Rustica," he says. "The comment asked us to offer this in the Wood Dining Commons on a regular basis, and we did. Without that napkin comment, we may have had the last slice of Pizza Rustica in 2012. Hard to imagine."

The success of the Napkin Board relies on consistent attention and follow-through. Pasquarello makes it a priority to stay engaged with the comments. "I personally read the napkin comments daily and often ask students who are looking at the board if we answer their question," he explains. "It is a great way to stay in touch with our guests." This daily interaction helps Dining Services stay aware of current concerns and preferences while also showing diners that their voices are being heard in real time.

Chef Brack echoes the importance of this regular engagement. "We post responses to the Napkin Board every two weeks, or as soon as it fills up, which I enjoy as I really like to engage in dialog with our customers," he says. Responding publicly allows Dining Services to clarify decisions, explain limitations, and highlight upcoming changes. It also reinforces accountability, as the entire community can see how feedback is addressed.

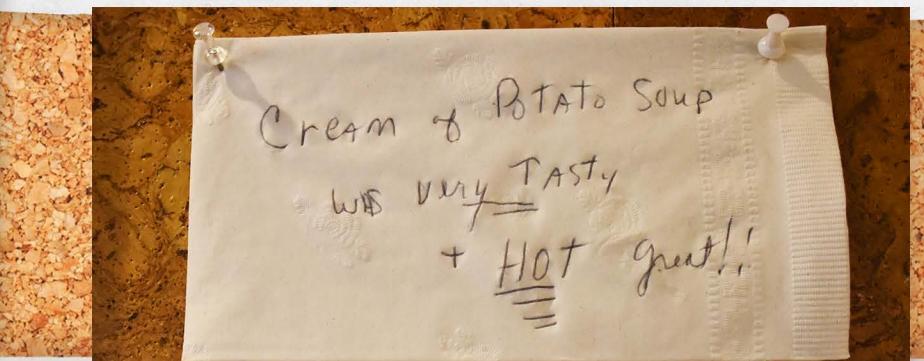
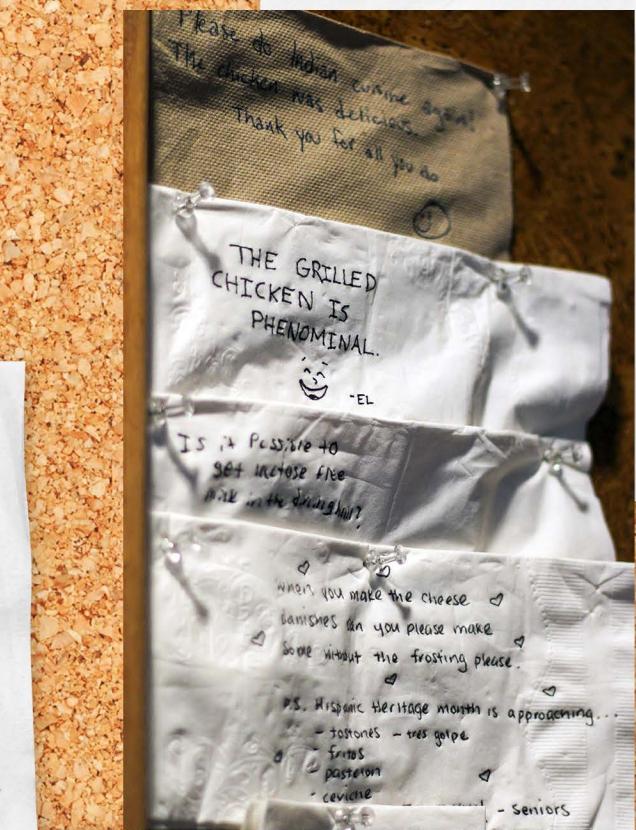
Beyond practical suggestions, the Napkin Board also captures the personality and creativity of the campus community. Many notes include humor, drawings, or playful commentary. "Yes, I wish I had as much wit as some of our Napkin Board posters," Brack says. "The humorous posts bring a lot of joy to our team. Sometimes we reference posts from months ago." These moments of levity help humanize the dining staff and foster a sense of shared experience within the dining hall.

The dialogue created by the Napkin Board strengthens relationships across campus. "The fact that we summarize the comments and post our replies demonstrates our willingness to listen and make changes," Pasquarello says. "We are happy to get feedback, both positive and constructive." This openness builds trust and encourages continued participation, even when feedback is critical.

For Dining Services, the Napkin Board serves as both a reflection of current satisfaction and a guide for future planning. "Hearing directly from the campus community helps us make informed decisions that we can make immediate decisions on or create longer range plans that improve customer satisfaction," Brack explains. Whether it leads to a quick adjustment or a long-term initiative, feedback helps ensure that dining services evolve alongside the needs of the community.

Looking ahead, student input will continue to shape dining on campus. "Every decision we make is based on customer feedback," Brack says. "When there are new ideas posted we make every effort to incorporate those thoughts into action." As long as students and other diners keep writing, the Napkin Board will remain an essential part of dining culture at Muhlenberg.

In an era where digital communication often dominates, the Napkin Board stands as a reminder that meaningful feedback can begin with something as simple as a pen and a napkin. By turning everyday comments into actionable change, Dining Services demonstrates its commitment to listening, improving, and building a dining experience shaped by the community it serves.



A Seat at the Table



Dining Tour

to help shape what our offerings and service look like,” Brack says. “Forming a culinary council allows interested students the opportunity to engage with the Dining Services leadership team on a regular basis to discuss and implement customers’ requests and new concepts.” The council formalizes this engagement, creating consistency and structure for student involvement.

The Student Culinary Council meets on a biweekly basis and participation is open to the entire campus community. Students do not need a culinary background or prior experience to attend, making the council accessible to anyone with an interest in food, dining, or campus life. These meetings offer far more than discussion alone. Over the past semester, council members and attendees have participated in hands-on culinary demonstrations and tastings that bring learning directly into the dining environment.

“Last semester we had demonstrations on knife skills and knife sharpening, enjoyed promotional tastings from Red Door Catering, Wild Blue Hot Bowls from GQ, and our on-campus Pastry Kitchen,” Brack says. These experiences allow students to learn practical skills while also gaining insight into how dining operations function behind the scenes.

This fall, Dining Services launched a new initiative designed to strengthen collaboration between students and dining leadership while shaping the future of food on campus. The Student Culinary Council, which began in the fall 2025 semester, creates a dedicated space where students and Dining Services staff can meet face-to-face to exchange ideas, plan events, and work together to enhance the dining experience for the entire campus community.

The council was created with connection in mind. For Dining Services leadership, maintaining an open and ongoing dialogue with students is essential to understanding what works, what can be improved, and what new ideas are worth exploring. “It is very important for Dining Services to stay connected with students,” says John Pasquarello, General Manager of Dining Services. “The creation of a Student Culinary Council is an excellent way for us to work with students and use this group as a sounding board for events and promotions.” By bringing students directly into the conversation, the council ensures that dining initiatives reflect the interests and needs of those who use campus dining spaces every day.

At its core, the Student Culinary Council is rooted in collaboration. Pasquarello describes the council’s mission as an opportunity “to work together in a collaborative, progressive, and dynamic manner, gathering information and taking action to continually improve the guest satisfaction, food, services, and atmosphere in dining on campus.” This shared approach allows students to move beyond simply offering feedback and instead take an active role in shaping dining programs and priorities.

Executive Chef Michael Brack echoes this philosophy, emphasizing that student voices have always been central to Dining Services programming. “As with all our programming in the Wood Dining Commons — aka d-hall — we want our customers

Looking ahead, the council plans to continue expanding its programming. “Over the spring semester, we will have a visitor from Twin Maple, our local potato farmer, and Butter Valley Harvest, our hydroponic basil farmer, and more,” Brack says. These visits connect students to local food systems and highlight the broader network that supports campus dining.

Beyond technical skills, participation in the council helps students develop communication, collaboration, and leadership abilities. Students learn how ideas move from concept to execution and how feedback is evaluated and implemented in a real-world setting. For Dining Services staff, these interactions provide invaluable perspective. “Bringing people joy through food is the reason I became a chef,” Brack says. “Being able to interact directly with our customers, allowing me to hear their likes and dislikes, is invaluable.”

One of the most successful outcomes of the Student Culinary Council has been the emergence of student-led initiatives. Brack highlights the Meals Around the World series as a standout example. “The Meals Around the World series, initiated by Sophie Tomov ’26, has been extremely successful and resulted in 20 different student or student group inspired meals in the last three semesters,” he says. The series invited students to share dishes connected to their cultural backgrounds or personal experiences, which were then brought to life in the dining hall. “We have received overwhelmingly positive feedback and participation in the project,” Brack adds. For the culinary team, facilitating the series has been equally meaningful, offering opportunities to learn about new foods and traditions while celebrating campus diversity.

As the Student Culinary Council continues to grow, Dining Services is excited to see how student involvement will shape future programming. From culinary workshops and facility tours to new menu concepts and themed events, the council provides a platform for innovation grounded in community input. Its open structure ensures that fresh perspectives are always welcome, keeping dining services responsive and evolving.

The launch of the Student Culinary Council represents a commitment to partnership. By creating space for students and dining professionals to collaborate, Muhlenberg’s Dining Services is investing in a dining program that is not only responsive, but shared. As students continue to bring their ideas, creativity, and curiosity to the table, the council is poised to make a lasting impact on dining for everyone on campus.

Knife Skills



Sauce Off



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Q & A

WITH KATE SHELLEY ASSISTANT DEAN OF STUDENTS AND DIRECTOR, RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCE

Question: What impact does the dining program have on the campus experience?

Kate Shelley: When I first started at Muhlenberg 20 years ago, I lived in the residence halls, and was quite frankly, a terrible cook, so Muhlenberg Dining sustained me for years until I learned how to cook for myself.

Question: What was your first impression of the Wood Dining Commons? Did it remind you of Hogwarts or a ski lodge?

Kate Shelley: I started at Muhlenberg before the Wood Dining Commons existed. When I started here it was a parking lot! As soon as I saw the plans it reminded me of the Great Hall in Hogwarts. Some of the early mockups even showed the tables in the opposite direction which definitely gave it that feel. Seeing it from the very beginning and getting to introduce new students to it every year is so much fun!

Question: If you were stranded on a deserted island, what one food could you not live without? What one food would you not want on the island?

Kate Shelley: My dessert island food would be cheese, and if I'm honest I'd rather not have any mango on my island. I'm not a fan and it has a way of making everything around it tastes like mango.

Question: What is the most bizarre or adventurous food you have tried?

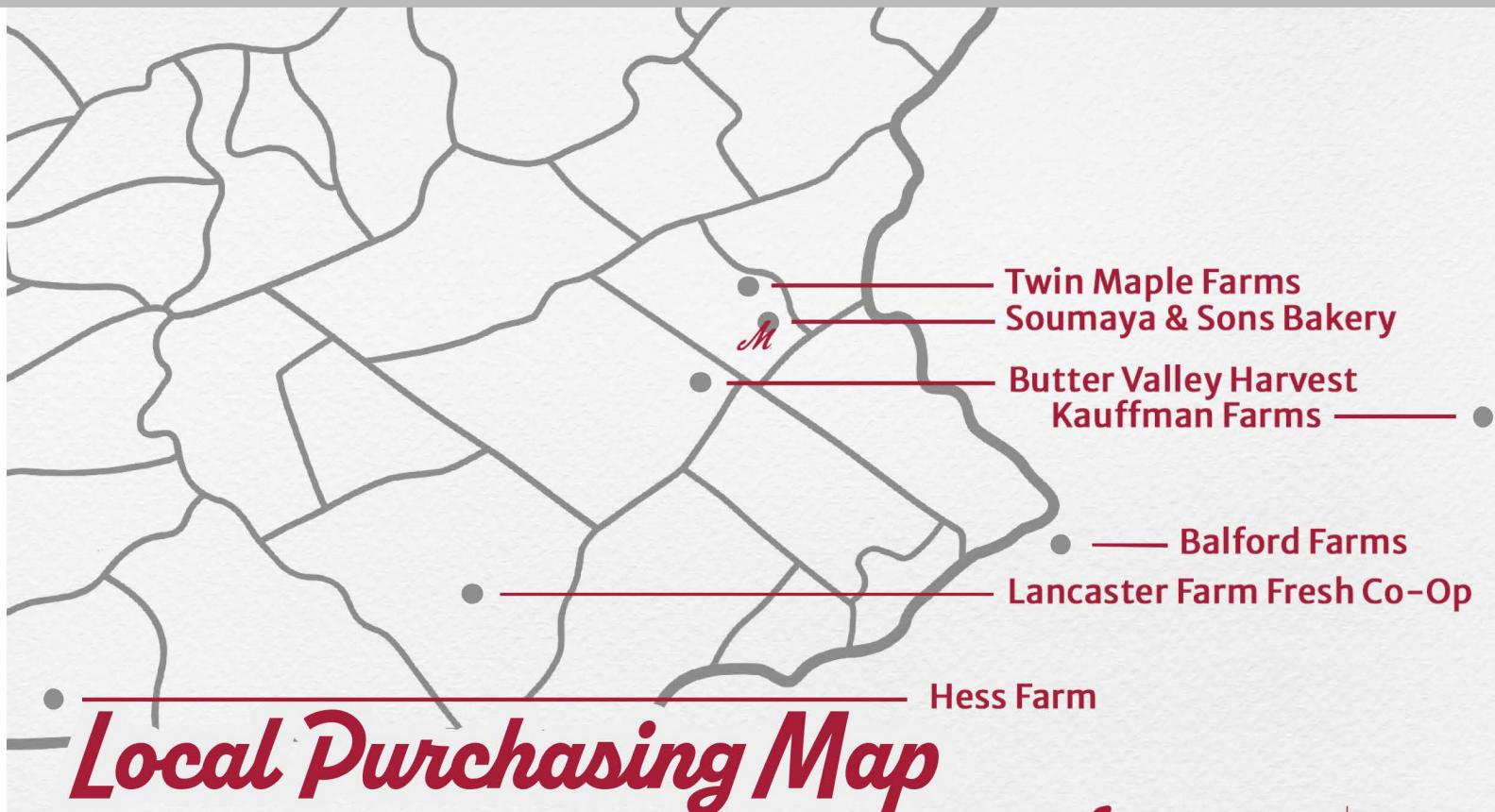
Kate Shelley: I was a very picky eater growing up, so what's adventurous for me is a low bar! I tried cottage cheese this year for the first time and I actually really like it now.

Question: What is your favorite food to prepare at home?

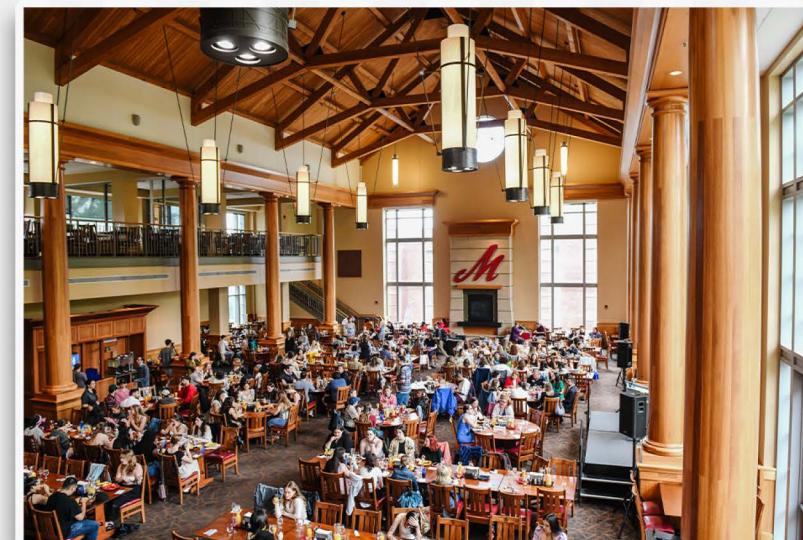
Kate Shelley: Buffalo Chicken with mashed potatoes and carrots. It's quick, easy, and I never get sick of it.

Question: In terms of customer service, what can transform a good experience into a great or unforgettable one?

Kate Shelley: It always makes a lasting impression when someone greets you, whether it's Awa or Nu at the cashier, or Kelly as she's restocking tables, James making sure that I see some of my favorite foods are on the menu, Chef Mary as she's helping a student explore their options for the day, or Rabbi Powers letting me know that I will definitely want to try a batch of something new that they are serving at the Noshery.



Commencement Luncheon



Immediately following commencement ceremonies, graduates, families and guests are invited to attend an all-you-care-to-eat buffet luncheon in the Wood Dining Commons.



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