

# Trayless wonder

— by Brian J. Bove



## Small changes yield big results in Campus Dining's sustainability quest

**It's** an iconic scene in cinematic history. In 1978's *Animal House*, John Belushi strolled through a college cafeteria line, loading his tray with an obscene mountain of food to great comedic effect.

At Grand Valley's Fresh Food Company in the Commons, students likewise graze from station to station, picking out whatever strikes their mealtime fancy. But they would have a hard time recreating Belushi's scene, because for the last year, those students haven't been able to use a tray to schlep food back to their tables.

The abolition of trays in Fresh Food Company is one of a series of efforts undertaken by Campus Dining as part of a comprehensive commitment to sustainability — a commitment to be not only environmentally responsible, but economically and socially sound, as well. Other initiatives include buying food from local

producers and switching to fair-trade, recycled and biodegradable products.

Since going trayless last August, Campus Dining experienced a reduction in food waste of around 960 pounds of food per week. With an average of 3,500 meals per day, that works out to about six ounces of food waste per person per day — or 28 pounds of food waste per customer annually.

But the benefits have gone beyond cutting down food waste. On a weekly basis, the change has saved 1,040 gallons of water, 15 pounds of detergent and 15 gallons of sanitizer.

The switch to trayless dining in the Fresh Food Company was a big deal, said Deb Rambadt, marketing manager for Campus Dining. The students to first experience it were the Laker football players, who came back before the semester started.

"When the football players came back with their *ginormous* appetites, they weren't too pleased. And within the first two weeks of the academic year, the returning students and faculty weren't too happy about it, either," Rambadt said. "We

got some e-mails; we got a little pushback. But when we explained why we were doing it, the acceptance level was very high, and people very quickly adapted."

Student Omar Gonzales, 19, was among those who were taken aback by the change.

"At first I was quite surprised," said Gonzales, a junior international relations and Spanish major from Grand Rapids. "I was expecting the trays because I had grown accustomed to them. I was confused and pretty disappointed."

But then Gonzales read the signs that explained why the trays were gone. "Then I understood," he said. "I saw the point." He said he appreciates Campus Dining's sustainability initiatives.

"I think it's good, because I do see a lot of our students throwing things away from fast food places," he said. "We're trying to get this message around, and that's a great way to go about doing that."

Not only did people like Gonzales adapt, but the Fresh Food Company's overall customer satisfaction numbers went up. According to a Campus Dining survey, Fresh Food Company rated a





5.80 on a 7 point satisfaction scale in Fall 2007 — up from 5.57 the year before, when trays were still in use.

Among the program's fans were visiting dietitians from Campus Wellness. "They were thrilled, because people were not taking as much food, they were being more conscious of their decisions and taking smaller portions," Rambadt said. "There's a certain amount of peer pressure that you don't want to be the one to go up and get seconds."

The idea to go trayless was the brainchild of Fresh Food employee Amarys Milnikel. "She's really the one who wanted to implement it, and quite honestly the rest of us thought it was a little risky. But she just kept it in the forefront and kept pushing it forward," Rambadt said.

Milnikel was singled out for praise by the president

of the higher education division of ARAMARK, Campus Dining's parent company, during a conference call of 400 colleges and universities. "That within our company was a tremendous note of recognition for us," Rambadt said.

Rambadt said Campus Dining understands that it needs to play a large part in Grand Valley's sustainability mission.

"I think part of it is recognizing how many meals we're serving a day and what the waste has been — not just packaging, but chemical use for cleaning dishes and food waste," she said. "I think it started on a personal level, but we've come to realize that the university has a much more enthusiastic and aggressive stance on sustainability, and that's something that's been cultivated in the last couple

of years. Because we are such a large department, we have great responsibility in helping the university meet its vision in terms of sustainability."

That sense of responsibility is shared by Food Service Director Tyson Dubay, who is the point person for Campus Dining's sustainability efforts.

"It really has become a significant part of my job," said Dubay. "I have this recurring thought in the back of my head that everything needs to tie back to sustainability. It's ingrained in my head now."

In addition to going trayless in Fresh Food Company, Campus Dining has moved to plates and utensils from renewable sources and toward buying local, organic and fair-trade products as much as possible.

"What it comes down to is

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— **Tyson Dubay**  
Food Service Director

*all photos by Andrew Terzes,  
except for top photo on page 24  
by Bernadine Carey-Tucker*



common-sense stuff,” Dubai said. “I’m the kind of guy who likes to try new things, and to get out there and be innovative. This provides a great avenue to break down walls, break through barriers.”

One of the big changes has been the switch to starch plates throughout Grand Valley’s dining spots. The plates are compostable and made from renewable sources. “That was a huge impact, because you’re talking large quantities,” Dubai said, adding that he worked with supplier Sysco to carry starch plates.

Dubai said some people were opposed to the new plates at first — partly because they bubble and warp when they come in contact with dense foods that retain heat.

“People didn’t know what they were, and they thought they were harmful to the environment and that they would release toxins when they melt,” he said, adding that opposition nearly evaporated once signs were posted explaining what the new plates were made of.

Another part of the sustainability program is a commitment to buying local, organic and fair-trade products. Dubai said about 20 percent of Grand Valley’s food is purchased locally, including from markets like Motman’s near the Allendale Campus.

“It’s not just about produce,” Dubai said, noting that milk, cheese and eggs are all purchased from local sources year-round.

Last year, Dubai had a couple of interns who also worked with the student group

Students for Fair Trade. Several years ago, that group was protesting one of Campus Dining’s restaurants over farm worker rights. Now, they’re helping research sources for fair-trade coffee and sugar for Grand Valley’s catering operations. Dubai said working with those students has helped keep him in the loop with the important issues.

“I want to stay ahead of the curve as much as possible. I don’t want the curve to catch up with us — that’s where we get into trouble,” he said.

Tom Minor, general manager of Campus Dining, said he’s been pleased with the response from diners. “It’s us doing the right thing, but we want to make sure that whatever we’re doing is appreciated by our customers,” he said.

Norman Christopher, director of Grand Valley’s university-wide Sustainability Initiative, said Campus Dining is one of the areas at Grand Valley that has made the greatest strides toward sustainability.

“The key to why they do this so well is leadership,” Christopher said. “They’re innovative, and they’re not followers. You could have somebody over there say, ‘I really believe in this, but show me another institution that does it.’ But I don’t see that. They’re willing to try stuff, which is huge.

“What they’re building is a transformational change. They’ve taught us the behavior we ought to be doing.”

Rambadt said she’s looking forward to doing more.

“I’m really impressed with the efforts that we’ve made. I have the opportunity to visit many other campuses, and we are at a much higher sustainability rate than 70 percent of the campuses

I’ve been to, and probably another 20 percent of them we’re neck-and-neck with.

“I’m very proud of where we are, but there’s always more we can do,” she added. “We’re having to be more and more creative to understand what we can do, because we’ve done the obvious things. We’ve switched our packaging to renewable resource products. We’ve got our student managers in hemp uniform shirts. We’ve switched some of the things that we’re doing behind the service walls — we’ve done things with our purchasing.”

One of the next steps, Rambadt said, would be to further reduce waste by embracing composting.

“We have ideas, and they’re pretty grand. But we don’t know if we have the infrastructure here on campus yet to handle those kinds of projects,” she said. “I think the exciting thing is that we’re all learning together, and we’re trying to understand where we can go from this point.”

