

## DIETETICS STUDENT-OPERATED RESTAURANT: THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Student-operated restaurants (SORs) can be an integral part of dietetics education and the customer experience is crucial to the success of these operations. No known previous research has explored SORs sponsored by dietetics programs. An electronic survey was used to explore factors that encouraged or discouraged customers from dining at the SOR as well as their choice of on-campus restaurants. “Healthy choices” and “speed of service” influenced dining selection on campus. “Food quality” and “nutritional value” encouraged, while “times open” and “waiting in line” discouraged patronage. Significant differences in factors that encourage dining were discovered between age groups, students and staff, and single or married customers.

**Keywords:** dietetics education, foodservice management, student-operated restaurant, management education

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### INTRODUCTION

#### Student-Operated Restaurants

Student-Operated Restaurants (SORs, alternatively called Student-Run Restaurants) facilitate experiential learning for students planning to enter the food and nutrition industries. SORs are described as on-campus restaurants in which students prepare and serve meals (Josiam, Foster, Malave, & Baldwin, 2014) and learn quantity food production and service principles (Neis, 1993). Nies (1993) surveyed four-year hospitality management program directors to identify how many programs utilized SORs and to determine how SORs were used for instruction. Nies (1993) found that nearly half (n=38) of responding programs reported the use of SORs. Furthermore, programs with SORs most frequently housed the restaurant in the same building as the academic program (n=22), had a seating capacity of 51-100 customers (n=22), and had varied days of operation for lunch service (Neis, 1993). Though dated, this is the only known national study investigating SORs and is specific to the hospitality management curriculum.

More recently, Josiam et al. (2014) assessed the quality of food, service, and the customer experience at one SOR affiliated with a hospitality management program. They found that customers considered the food, service, and overall experience to be of good quality. The most significant barriers to increased patronage for the customers surveyed were: convenience, parking, and payment methods. Josiam et al. (2014) also found that customer perceptions differed among gender, age, user frequency, and patron type (mature

vs. young). Responding customers were interested in improved menu variety, portion size, service time, and payment options. Josiam et al. (2014) did not investigate the customers' interest in and concern for nutrition of food served.

#### Dietetics Education and Standards

Dietetics is a multi-faceted profession integrating “principles from food, nutrition, social, business, and basic sciences to achieve and maintain optimal nutrition status of individuals and groups” (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2017, p. 17). The SOR can be an intersection of many of those principles for dietetics students as they experience quantity food production (including food science principles), interact with peers to accomplish time-sensitive tasks, engage with customers, and assure the SOR meets its business objectives. There is certainly a place for the consideration of nutrition principles in the context of quantity food production as menus are developed and customer preferences are assessed.

The Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND) regularly releases education standards that must be met by dietetics education programs. The 2017 ACEND accreditation standards indicate that the curriculum of Didactic Programs in Dietetics and Coordinated Programs in Dietetics must include “food science and food systems, environmental sustainability, techniques of food preparation and development and modification and evaluation of recipes, menus and food products acceptable to diverse populations” (pg. 9). Additionally, the ACEND accreditation standards include a variety of knowledge requirements that could be potentially met in the SOR environment and through associated coursework. To date, there is no known research regarding SORs sponsored by dietetics education programs.

#### Student-Operated Restaurant Characteristics

The customer experiences at and perspectives of a dietetics-sponsored SOR at a large private university in the mountain west were explored in this study. This SOR serves lunch four days per week (Monday through Thursday) and is open nine weeks per semester. At the time of the study in 2017, there was an average of 135 customers per day and the average check price was approximately \$6.78. The SOR experience is currently a three credit hour course for two lab groups of 9-10 junior dietetics students (Monday/Wednesday, and Tuesday/Thursday) and the lab hours are 9:00 AM – 1:30 PM. In the fall semester, two sets of four dietetic interns rotate through the SOR and complete specific management functions as part of their supervised practice experience. Two part-time dietetics faculty members share the management of the SOR in addition to instructing the laboratory experience and complementary coursework. Furthermore, the SOR has several part-time paid student positions: two undergraduate teaching assistants, one cashier, four dishwashers, and one night-cleaner.

The SOR has a fast casual service model with a rotating menu allowing customers to choose from a la carte options such as the main entrée,

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sandwich, entrée salad, soup, taco salad, bread, cookie, and dessert. Customers place selected items on a tray, pay the cashier, and seat themselves in the dining room. When finished, they place their tray and dishes on a cart that is then taken to the dish room by student workers. Finally, the SOR has a reward system that allows customers to earn either a free cookie, drink or fruit salad after five meals are purchased, or they can wait until they have purchased ten meals and receive a free entrée.

At the time of this study, there was no known research regarding the customer experience at SORs sponsored by dietetics education programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore customer perspectives and experiences at a dietetics sponsored SOR at one university in the mountain west. The specific objectives of this study were to: (1) identify factors that most encouraged or discouraged patronage at the SOR and influenced customer choice of on-campus restaurants, and (2) gather customer feedback about the quality of their experience at the SOR.

## METHODS

### Questionnaire Development

An electronic survey instrument was developed and administered using Qualtrics (Provo, UT) survey software. Relevant literature related to the customer experience at a SOR served as a reference during survey development and some items (motivators and barriers to patronage as well as rating the quality of the customer experience) were modeled after items from a previous survey (Josiam et al., 2014). To ensure content validity two experts in the area of SORs, foodservice management, and dietetics education reviewed the instrument and provided specific feedback. Feedback included suggestions to reword (e.g., "fruit salad" to "fresh fruit" and combining juice, milk, soda, into "beverages") and re-order certain items (e.g., list of menu items was re-ordered based on popularity of items) and those revisions were made to the instrument accordingly. Face validity of the instrument was verified through a pilot test conducted according to guidelines outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009). A group of 13 undergraduate dietetics students and four dietetics faculty (all of whom had eaten at the SOR) completed the questionnaire and responded to additional questions regarding instrument readability, overall survey organization, and the type of device used to complete the survey. Pilot test participants did not suggest any revisions be made to the instrument.

### Questionnaire Content

The final survey instrument addressed several topics associated with the customer experience at the SOR (Table 1). Specifically, it included the following: two items regarding frequency of dining, 17 items addressing what factors encourage or discourage customers from dining at the SOR (-5 to -1=discourage, 0=neutral, 1 to 5=encourage), 10 items exploring relevant factors in choosing where to dine on campus (1=not at all important, 5=extremely important), one item asking with whom customers typically dine at the SOR, one item investigating where customers eat when not dining at the SOR, four items regarding the quality of the customer experience (1=terrible, 5=excellent), one item identifying what customers typically ordered at the SOR, two items exploring customers' understanding of the SOR's affiliation to the dietetics program, two items regarding marketing of the SOR, five items addressing participant demographics, and one open-ended question inviting participants to share what they most liked or disliked about the SOR experience. To determine the internal reliability of the measurement scales, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. Each scale was found to have internal reliability as shown with the following Cronbach's Alpha scores: encourage or discourage ( $\alpha=0.824$ ,  $n=17$ ), deciding where to dine ( $\alpha=0.801$ ,  $n=10$ ), and quality

( $\alpha=0.793$ ,  $n=4$ ) (George & Mallery, 2003 [as cited in Gliem & Gliem, 2003]). The initial view of the survey instrument presented a modified informed consent statement specifying that completion of the survey indicated agreement to participate. The institutional review board at the host university approved this study prior to data collection.

### Recruitment and Distribution

The sample consisted of SOR customers at a large private university in the mountain west who had consented to include their email address on the SOR customer email list ( $N=5,817$ ). An email was sent to participants through the SOR customer email list which invited them to participate in the study and provided a hyperlink and QR code to the survey. The survey was active for two weeks in April 2017 and a reminder email was sent to participants who had not taken the survey after one week.

### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using statistical software package (SPSS 24, 2016). Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, modes, and standard deviations were calculated and used to assess the distribution of the data. Means for scaled items (items that encourage/discourage, importance of factors regarding where to dine, and quality) were calculated and used to identify factors most commonly selected by participants. ANOVA was used to identify significant differences between mean scores for factors that encourage or discourage patronage based on demographic characteristics. Three researchers reviewed open-ended responses, identified key themes, and coded open-ended responses accordingly. The codes were counted and reported within each theme.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographics

There were a total of 418 responses to the survey, however, responses from customers no longer on campus and incomplete surveys were removed resulting in 379 usable responses (6.5% response rate). Due to the nature of the contact list, there were multiple contacts presumed to be duplicates, no longer utilized, or of people who are no longer affiliated with the university which is likely reflected in the response rate. Response rates in other recent dietetics-focused surveys have ranged from 9-15% (Howells, Sauer, & Shanklin, 2016; Manore et al., 2016; Wynn et al., 2016; Patten & Sauer, 2017).

**Table 1: Topics, Number of Items, and Cronbach's Alpha Scores for the Questionnaire**

Questionnaire Topic	# of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Frequency of dining	2	
Factors that encourage/discourage customer from dining	17	$\alpha=0.824$
Relevant factors in choosing where to dine on campus	10	$\alpha=0.801$
With whom customers typically dine at the SOR	1	
Where customers eat when not dining at the SOR	1	
Quality of the customer experience	4	$\alpha=0.793$
What customers typically ordered at the SOR	1	
Customers' understanding of the SOR's affiliation to the dietetics program	2	
Marketing of the SOR	2	
Participant demographics	5	
Open-ended question inviting participants to share what they most liked or disliked about the SOR experience	1	

The majority of participants was female (65.4%, n=248). Nearly half were between the ages of 19-25 (48.0%, n=182) and 30.1% were over 46 years old (n=114). Participants were primarily undergraduate students (50.1%, n=190) or staff, faculty, or administration (39.3%, n=149). Approximately half (46.7%, n=177) were married, and more than one-third had an annual income less than \$24,999 per year (n=144).

Participants most commonly dined at the SOR 2-3 times per semester (29.9 %, n=113) or once per semester (26.2%, n=99); they typically dined with friends (53.6%, n=203), by themselves (47.0%, n=178), or with university colleagues (31.7%, n=120). When not dining at the SOR the majority of participants packed a lunch from home (63.1%, n=239) and only 15.3% (n=58) chose to dine at another on-campus restaurant. This was notable to researchers as it was assumed other on-campus options would be the greatest competition to SOR patronage.

#### Factors Influencing Customer Patronage of SORs

Participants rated to what extent a list of 17 factors encouraged or discouraged their choice to dine at the SOR using the following scale: -5 to -1=discourage, 0=neutral, 1 to 5=encourage (Table 2). The factors receiving the highest mean rating for encouraging/discouraging participants to dine at the SOR were "quality of food" (3.36 ± 1.55), "nutritional value" (2.73 ± 1.70), "location" (2.59 ± 2.24), and "cleanliness" (2.59 ± 1.73). The factors that received the lowest mean rating were "work/class schedules" (0.71 ± 2.51), "weeks open" (0.27 ± 2.04), "hours open" (-0.02 ± 2.30), and "parking access" (-0.20 ± 1.30). Although "parking access" had the lowest mean score of all factors, only 12.7% of participants rated it in the "discourage" range while 82.6% rated it in the "neutral" range. "Hours open" (47.2%, n=179), "weeks open" (34.8%, n=132), "waiting in line" (30.3%, n=115), and "work/class schedules" (29.0%, n=110) had the highest percentages of participants who indicated that those factors "discouraged" dining at the SOR. Eleven of the 17 items had a mode of zero indicating that participants commonly had a neutral opinion to many factors. When surveying students about on campus dining services (non-SOR), Nee Ng (2005) also found convenience of parking to be an issue. Josiam et al. (2014) found that the greatest barriers to patronage at their university's SOR were "convenience," "parking," and "credit card/payment methods." Only concerns with parking overlapped as a leading barrier or factor that discouraged patronage between the present study and Josiam et al (2014) and in fact, payment options were considered primarily an encouraging factor for participants in the present study.

#### Differences in Encourage/Discourage Based on Demographic Factors

When comparing for differences between mean scores for factors that encourage/discourage patronage, significant differences were identified based on age, student status, and marital status (Table 2). For all three of these factors, there were significant differences in encouragement (mean scores) for the hours that the SOR was open and for the reward system. The hours that the SOR was open encouraged customers aged 46 and up more than those 18-25 ( $p<0.000$ ); staff, faculty, and administrators more than students ( $p<0.000$ ), and married customers more than single customers ( $p<0.000$ ). In terms of the reward system used at the SOR – it encouraged customers aged 18-25 more than those 46 and up ( $p=0.001$ ); students more than faculty, staff, and administrators ( $p<0.000$ ); and single customers more than married customers ( $p=0.002$ ). The nutritional value of menu items also encouraged customers aged 18-25 more than those 26-45 ( $p=0.006$ ). Comparisons with other demographic variables were explored, however, they were not statistically significant. These results may reflect the life stages and financial situation of SOR customers. Most

customers who are aged 46 and up are likely to be staff, faculty, or administrators and, therefore, may be more likely to be on campus and/or have a lunch break during the hours of SOR operation. The reward system may be most attractive to students with less disposable income and who are more familiar with the technology used (QR codes) to facilitate the reward system.

#### Factors Influencing Customer Choice of Where to Dine on Campus

Participants were asked to rate the importance of 10 factors that potentially influence their choice of where to dine on campus (1=not at all important, 5=extremely important; Table 3). The three factors that received the highest mean score of importance were "healthy choices" (4.03 ± 0.90) "speed of service" (3.98 ± 0.81), and "atmosphere" (2.97 ± 0.95). The factors with the lowest mean score of importance were: "labeled with allergy information" (1.97 ± 1.20), and "food allergy accommodations" (1.94 ± 1.22), and "vegetarian/vegan options" (1.76 ± 1.13). The low importance of food allergy information labeling and accommodations may be an artifact of the sample size of this study and because those unaffected by food allergies are less likely to make dining choices based on these features. Food allergies are a serious and growing concern with prevalence in the general population being 4% of adults and 5% of children (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease [NAID], 2017) and SORs should continue to monitor patrons' preferences and needs.

#### Student-Operated Restaurants and Nutrition

Most participants (77.6%, n=294) were aware the SOR was run by dietetics students as part of their major and believed that because of this, foods served at the SOR should "definitely" (41.2%, n=156) or "probably" (45.4%, n=172) meet specific nutritional guidelines. "Healthy choices" was rated as the most important factor amongst participants for choosing where to dine on-campus, but having the "food labeled with nutrition information" was rated as only slightly important. Additionally, nutritional value was as the second highest encouraging factor for dining at the SOR. Perhaps this information can support dietetics-sponsored SORs in showcasing and synthesizing dietetics students' nutrition *and* foodservice skills. Another study investigated customer satisfaction at a university food court service in Oklahoma and the authors encouraged management to attend to several attributes including the nutrition of the food to improve satisfaction (Kim, Moreo, & Yeh, 2006). Other research has identified environmental factors such as high cost of healthy foods, lack of tasty healthier foods, and the abundance of high-fat and calorie-rich choices as being barriers for university students to make healthy eating choices on-campus (Mongiello, Freduenberg, & Spark, 2015). Further, a national study assessed the dining environments on and near 15 university campuses throughout the USA and concluded that campus environments provide little support for eating healthy (Horacek et al., 2012). There is an opportunity for dietetics-sponsored SORs to model healthy eating environments at universities.

#### Quality of SOR

Participants were asked to rate the quality of food, quality of service, value for price, and overall experience of the SOR (1=terrible, 5=excellent; data not shown). Quality of food received the highest mean at 4.52 (SD= 0.58), followed by quality of service (4.43, SD=0.61), overall experience (4.32, SD=0.61) and value for price (4.12, SD=0.80). The mean of each factor was between "good" and "excellent" on the scale. Josiam et al. (2014) also found that customers indicated the food, service, and overall experience to be of good quality. This seems to indicate that SORs provide a positive customer experience even though they are working with students who are learning the principles and skills associated with quantity food production. Other research investigating on-campus university

**Table 2: Differences in Mean Ratings of Factors that Encourage or Discourage Patronage of a Student-operated Restaurant Based on Age, Customer Type, and Marital Status (n=370-379)<sup>a</sup>**

Demographic Factors	Age												
	Overall Mean <sup>b</sup>	Age			P-Value <sup>d</sup>	Customer Type			P-Value <sup>d</sup>	Marital Status			P-Value <sup>d</sup>
		18-25	26-45	46 and up		Student	Staff/Fac/Admin	Other		Single	Married	Other	
Factors		Mean <sup>c</sup> ± SD				Mean <sup>c</sup> ± SD				Mean <sup>c</sup> ± SD			
Quality of Food	3.36	3.56±1.48	2.82±1.65	3.27±1.57	0.022	3.53±1.49	3.15±1.63	3.00±1.25	0.051	3.51±1.47	3.27±1.64	3.00±1.00	0.203
Nutritional Value	2.73	<b>3.00±1.67<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2.20±1.62<sup>2</sup></b>	2.58±1.74 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>0.006*</b>	2.95±1.65	2.43±1.75	2.60±1.55	0.015	2.83±1.69	2.68±1.73	2.11±1.45	0.189
Location	2.59	2.52±1.97	2.38±2.66	2.81±2.42	0.617	2.57±1.93	2.68±2.59	1.93±2.63	0.464	2.69±1.97	2.58±2.40	1.47±2.88	0.081
Cleanliness	2.59	2.52±1.67	2.55±1.68	2.79±1.84	0.132	2.52±1.70	2.65±1.80	3.00±1.51	0.505	2.53±1.66	2.66±1.79	2.42±1.71	0.705
Temp of Food	2.20	2.16±1.80	2.11±1.88	2.33±1.92	0.833	2.16±1.81	2.23±1.90	2.53±1.85	0.738	2.12±1.84	2.37±1.85	1.68±1.50	0.187
Speed of Service	1.78	1.68±1.90	1.54±2.05	2.11±2.01	0.154	1.73±1.92	1.83±2.00	2.00±2.36	0.827	1.67±1.98	1.96±1.97	1.11±1.76	0.117
Price	1.55	1.23±2.60	1.43±2.22	2.15±2.04	0.010	1.23±2.57	1.97±2.15	1.53±1.51	0.015	2.58±2.25	1.36±2.56	1.71±2.24	0.252
Atmosphere	1.54	1.71±1.99	1.26±1.81	1.41±2.02	0.278	1.68±1.97	1.31±1.97	1.73±1.80	0.194	1.60±1.95	1.50±1.97	1.16±2.06	0.615
Reward System	1.48	<b>1.83±1.85<sup>1</sup></b>	1.32±1.65 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>1.00±1.83<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.001*</b>	<b>1.81±1.77<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>0.98±1.84<sup>2</sup></b>	1.73±1.94 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>&lt;0.000*</b>	<b>1.81±1.80<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>1.19±1.90<sup>2</sup></b>	0.79±1.18 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>0.002*</b>
Payment Options	1.48	1.53±1.94	1.55±1.86	1.39±1.87	0.503	1.53±1.93	1.32±1.81	2.40±2.10	0.091	1.52±1.98	1.44±1.81	1.11±1.94	0.653
Support Dietetics Program	1.46	1.15±2.11	1.86±2.08	1.78±2.05	0.022	1.21±2.13	1.79±2.04	1.73±1.98	0.033	1.32±2.16	1.55±2.07	1.42±1.77	0.569
Support Dietetics Students	1.36	1.05±2.18	1.75±2.27	1.63±2.22	0.043	1.17±2.21	1.62±2.27	1.40±1.89	0.170	1.22±2.20	1.40±2.28	1.84±1.83	0.462
Waiting in Line	0.77	0.57±2.06	0.72±2.32	1.14±2.15	0.149	0.64±2.10	0.91±2.18	1.13±2.39	0.406	0.54±2.10	1.03±2.20	0.21±1.93	0.055
Work/Class Schedules	0.71	0.71±2.56	0.32±2.57	0.97±2.41	0.345	0.73±2.58	0.65±2.44	1.13±2.26	0.773	0.65±2.44	0.83±2.63	-0.16±2.04	0.253
Weeks Open	0.27	0.17±2.03	0.15±2.14	0.53±2.03	0.476	0.20±1.96	0.37±2.13	0.47±2.39	0.680	0.21±1.90	0.25±2.18	0.53±1.47	0.805
Hours Open	-0.02	<b>-0.47±2.31<sup>1</sup></b>	0.06±2.27 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>0.70±2.17<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>&lt;0.000*</b>	<b>-0.048±2.29<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>0.60±2.17<sup>2</sup></b>	0.40±2.32 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>&lt;0.000*</b>	<b>-0.63±2.15<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>0.45±2.33<sup>2</sup></b>	0.32±1.73 <sup>1,2</sup>	<b>&lt;0.000*</b>
Parking Access	-0.20	-0.18±1.25	-0.22±1.63	-0.25±1.19	0.965	-0.23±1.20	-0.20±1.27	0.13±2.53		-0.17±1.30	-0.17±1.29	-0.89±1.56	0.065

<sup>a</sup>The actual number of responses varied due to missing data

<sup>b</sup>Scale for factors that encourage/discourage patronage was: -5 to -1=discourage, 0=neutral, 1 to 5=encourage

<sup>c</sup>Likert-type scale was used as follows: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

<sup>d</sup>Results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) were statistically significant; \*(p< .01)

<sup>1,2</sup>Items with differing superscript numbers have significantly different mean scores

**Table 3: Factors Influencing Where Customers Choose to Dine On-campus (n=373-378)<sup>a</sup>**

Factor	Mean	SD
Healthy Choices	4.03	0.90
Speed of Service	3.98	0.81
Variety of Menu Choices	3.88	0.87
Atmosphere	2.97	0.95
Grab and Go Options	2.79	1.17
Labeled with Nutrition Information	2.58	1.24
Local Foods	2.52	1.20
Labeled with Allergy Information	1.97	1.20
Food Allergy Accommodations	1.94	1.22
Vegetarian/Vegan Options	1.76	1.13

<sup>a</sup> Actual number of responses varied due to missing data

dining (non-SOR) services found that consumers considered “food quality” and “sanitation” to be of high importance whereas “price,” “service,” and “environment” were all considered low importance (Joung, Lee, Kim & Huffman, 2014). Identifying the target population’s perceptions of these attributes can inform the strategic planning of a SOR.

#### Likes and Dislikes of Customer Experience

Participants were given the opportunity to answer the following open-ended question: “Is there anything you have especially liked or disliked about the [SOR] customer experience?” Nine key themes emerged from analysis of the data (Table 4). Factors that customers liked the most included: food quality and taste (n=95); service (n=28); food variety and menu options (n=26); and price (n=23). Themes from factors most disliked by customers included: hours and days open (n=45); available seating (n=28); food variety and menu options (n=24); price (n=18); and waiting in line (n=17). Josiam et al. (2014)

also found that customers were interested in improved menu variety and service time, two of the themes that were also identified by our participants. Price and variety/menu options emerged as both “liked” and “disliked” by participants in this study. This may be due to differences in income and expectations of SOR customers. Although less frequently mentioned, participants indicated they enjoy supporting students by visiting the SOR, and several were concerned about the perceived nutritional quality and information of food served.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Understanding the customer experience at a dietetics-sponsored SOR is essential to assuring customer satisfaction and improving management of the operation. Customers at a dietetics-sponsored SOR identified factors that encourage/discourage patronage, factors that influence where they choose to dine on campus, and specific items that they liked or disliked about the SOR customer experience. One of the most encouraging factors for patronage of the SOR was the “nutritional value” of items sold. Aligned with that, participants indicated that “healthy choices” was the most influential factor in deciding where to dine on campus. This warrants further investigation as to what cues customers to consider menu options as “healthy choices” and to identify if there is a gap between customers desiring “healthy choices” and purchasing “healthy choices” in the SOR setting. Dietetics-sponsored SORs have a unique advantage of having students exposed to both nutrition and foodservice didactic work which may help meet these customer needs.

Nutrition of menu options could also be used to better inform marketing practices of an SOR and attract additional patrons. Marketing efforts could also focus on enticing current customers to eat more frequently at the SOR due to the fact that when not dining at the SOR, customers typically eat a lunch from home rather than dining elsewhere on campus.

**Table 4: Results from a Thematic Analysis of Open-ended Comments Regarding what Customers Most and Least Liked about Their SOR Experience**

Most liked about SOR experience	Illustrative Quotes
Food Quality and Taste (n=95)	“The best food you can get on campus.” “I think the food is excellent, well prepared and good tasting.”
Service (n=28)	“The cashier is always very friendly, asks me about my day, and remembers who I am. The cooks/servers inside politely answer any questions I have.” “I especially like how careful and thoughtful your workers are--they are determined to serve well and get it right. They are very dedicated to the lab and are awesome!!”
Variety and Menu Options (n=26)	“I loved how the menu was different each week and how there were always multiple meal choices each day.” “I really like the menu options; there's lots of variety.”
Price (n=23)	“There's nothing like it on campus for the price.” “Excellent value.”
Most disliked about SOR experience	Illustrative Quotes
Hours and Days Open (n=45)	“I wish that it were open during spring and summer semesters, as well as opening earlier in the semester and closing later.” “I would like it if the [SOR] was available on Fridays.”
Seating (n=28)	“The only problem I had was that there never seemed to be enough seating. The seating area was very small and crowded, and often I felt uncomfortable or rushed while eating.” “There is not enough space to sit with a group of people.”
Variety and Menu Options (n=24)	“I would appreciate a more diverse menu. Every semester the menus seem the same.” “One reason I don't dine more frequently at the [SOR] is because I have dined multiple times with the same entrees in a short period of time. If more new options were available, I would dine more frequently at the [SOR].”
Price (n=18)	“It is a little bit pricey.” “I would eat at the [SOR] MUCH more often if it wasn't so expensive.”
Waiting in Line (n=17)	“The lines tend to get a little long.” “Sometimes the line completely stalls (waiting for food to be cooked, usually). That is frustrating.”

A better understanding of the customer base and what encourages or discourages dining could be used to help identify strategies to increase patronage. Significant differences in mean scores for encouragement were identified for the hours the SOR is open and the reward system used based on age, customer type, and marital status. Strategies could include SORs ensuring that their loyalty program is not solely technology based in order to cater to customers of all ages. Promotions could also be developed to target those not regularly dining at the SOR.

Management of this SOR should consider how to maintain the strengths identified by customers and also attend to aspects of the SOR that were disliked. For example, they may choose to investigate opportunities to extend the hours and days the SOR is open each semester. Consideration may be given to extending and/or adjusting the current seating to increase occupancy. Also, "price" and "variety and menu options" emerged as both liked and disliked in this study. The pricing structure and menu could potentially be assessed to assure options exist for the different customers served by this SOR.

Exploring customer perceptions and experiences of dietetics-sponsored SORs using both quantitative and qualitative approaches can help a dietetics program assess its success in meeting customer expectations. Other dietetics-sponsored SORs may model this method for obtaining customer feedback and use findings to educate students about the customer experience and customer satisfaction.

This research has several limitations. Findings from this study may not be generalizable to other SORs due to variances in products, services, and populations served, but the methodology of investigating customer perceptions and experiences is something that could be useful to many programs. The response rate is a limitation of this study, future studies could identify new ways to access the population and assure the contact information is current. Further research should explore the prevalence of dietetics-sponsored SORs and how they are used in the curriculum to meet ACEND education standards. Best practices for teaching dietetics practice principles in SORs should also be identified.

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