

Employee Perceptions of a University Transition from Self-Operation to Contract Dining

Olivia Ford, PhD, MPH, RD; Alice Jo Rainville, PhD, RD, CHE, SNS, FAND
Eastern Michigan University



Background

Outsourcing non-academic functions on a university or college campus is becoming increasingly common. One such function is often dining services. Eastern Michigan University (EMU) transitioned from a self-operated dining program to contract management in the summer of 2016. According to the Director of Dining from the contract management company, EMU is the only contract the company holds in which employees were allowed to remain employed by the university as opposed to becoming employees of the contract management company. This was in part due to a strong union presence. The transition to contract management operation came as a surprise to many on campus and many were not happy with the university's decision.

Aims

There were 2 aims of this study:

- 1) Understand how the transition from a self-operated dining program (EMU) to a third party dining program has impacted dining services employees.
- 2) Provide directors and managers of the third party company and EMU Human Resources with valuable information regarding employee satisfaction and morale.



Sample

- 7 participants
- 6 male, 1 female
- 6 identified as white, 1 as black
- Average of 11.2 years of experience in position
- Four reported holding management or leadership positions and three line positions

Study participants were university dining employees who remained employed by the university after the contract management takeover of Dining Services. Employees were recruited via flyer advertisements placed in three Dining Services locations and email messages.

Methods

- 10 question survey assessing job satisfaction, demographics, employment status, position within Dining Services, and length of time employed by the university
- Structured interviews
 - all but 1 were one-on-one
 - 45-70 minutes
- Interviews were recorded
- Interviewers utilized a script of open-ended questions.
- Interviews took place in a private conference room in a building not associated with Dining Services.
- Interview question topics included job satisfaction, changes in their job, communication with management, opinions on the transition before, during, and after the transition.

Data Analysis

- Following conclusion of data collection, interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word and categorized for recurrent themes
- Survey data were transferred into Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistical analysis.

Results

- Dining Services employees were surprised by the announcement of the Request for Proposal due to the successful history of self-operation and were concerned about fewer opportunities for advancement.
- Communications were strained and employees reported that the contract management company did not provide opportunities for staff to meet and interact.
- Employees reported a lack of respect.
- Chefs reported discontent with new recipes, policies, and procedures.
- All employees had concerns about the quality of foods that the contract management company used.
- There were many concerns about labor including turnover among contract company employees, student employees' schedules, and less flexibility for student employees, which led to increased turnover and understaffing.



Limitations

- Small number of participants.
- Results may be skewed as those who were less satisfied may have been more likely to participate.

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that, overall, employees were not satisfied with the transition from a self-operated dining program to a program run by a contract management company. Although satisfaction varied by type of position. In general, those working in food procurement and production were less satisfied than those working in utility positions. This is likely in part because of the different roles these types of positions require.

The results from this study can be used by universities and contract management companies to improve transitions among Dining Services employees. Future research may examine the perceptions of contract management company employees to see if similar results are found with respect to job satisfaction and food quality.

Acknowledgments

This project was funded by an Eastern Michigan University Josephine Nevins Keal Professional Development Fund grant.