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Campus dining faces setbacks

Staff shortages and supply chain issues leave students dissatisfied

By Joe Wells
News Editor

When students returned to campus this past August, the dining halls may have looked the same but the vendor supplying and cooking the food had changed.

While the changes were made to help keep costs down at Slippery Rock University and other Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) universities, many students returning found the options to be lacking and the quality not how they remembered.

Back in July of 2020, PASSHE put out a notice for bids for the dining services of four of its universities in the western part of the state. Along with Slippery Rock, Clairon, Edinboro and Indiana universities would negotiate services to cut operating and meal plan costs.

The process brought in over 30 bids, including SRU's current provider AVI Foodsystems, Inc. In the end, the system selected Aramark Educational Services.

When Aramark took over on June 1, 2021, they worked to pass state health inspections and hire employees to fill the gaps left by workers not returning. When operations began in August this year, more than a third of their employees had not returned due to finding other work or retiring.

At the start of the semester Aramark had 27 full-time employee openings and 74 student worker jobs to fill.

The lack of employees forced Aramark to not open all facilities at the beginning of the year according to Christopher Cole, SRU's director of auxiliary operations and student services. Back in September, Cole said the university was working with Aramark to ensure high traffic areas remained open for when students need them and that quality didn't suffer due to the staffing shortage.

At the same time, Aramark raised its student worker wages to \$9 then \$9.50 an hour to hopefully encourage students to apply, according to Lisa

Rodgers, general manager for Aramark operations at SRU. The company also offered a \$200 referral bonus, a \$100 sign-on bonus for student workers and \$50 flex bonus, according to emails obtained by The Rocket.

While the wage increases and incentives did attract some new hires, just as many left for personal reasons, Rodgers said.

All the while, students began complaining to the Slippery Rock Student Government Association and university officials such as Cole.

In September, Jerome Drew, a freshman computer science major, spoke at the SRSQA meeting about what he saw as food safety issues after observing fruit flies in the donut case in Boozel Dining Hall. Vice President of Student and Academic Affairs Grant Warmbein sent Cole an email during that meeting.

On Oct. 18 Warmbein created an ad-hoc committee to look at food quality issues and work with university and Aramark officials to ensure students were receiving quality dining options. Warmbein appointed Sen. Gabe Stiles to head the committee.

At this same time, The Rocket filed a Right-to-Know request with the university for complaints directed to Cole and others at the university about the dining situation.

In an email dated Aug. 30, one parent wrote that their son had been complaining to them about a lack of food and open hours. The parent said that after working all day, the student's only option was Boozel Express where he got a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a cookie and milk for dinner.

Along with shorter hours and fewer options open, emails show Aramark had to move to disposable dishware due to a lack of dishwashers.

Even alumni were writing in at the end of August to complain about broken drink machines and a lack of cleanliness throughout the facilities.

Other students wrote to express their confusion with the new meal swipe system. With



RAYNI SHIRING / THE ROCKET

Since taking over dining operations in June, Aramark has faced many setbacks due to staffing shortages and supply chain issues. With minor improvements throughout the semester, meal swipe usage has increased 8% since September 2021.

the new meal plan, students can use their meal swipes at places like Rocky's with one meal swipe could purchase a meal valued at \$6.

According to Rodgers, the employee shortage and supply chain issues were the root causes of a lot of the initial issues. This coupled with the "learning curve" of the new meal plan system caused some setbacks but, a lot of those issues have been minimized.

Stiles said working with Aramark to iron out these issues has been great since the ad-hoc committee has formed compared to previous interactions with AVI staff.

"Aramark's definitely taken our opinions and put it into action, which I really appreciate," Stiles said.

One of those recommendations was to increase student wages to \$11 an hour. The sign on bonuses previously offered are still in effect as well.

While the committee and Aramark continue to work on solving the issues the company still faces, many students still are not happy.

Paige Mitsko, a sophomore psychology major, said she doesn't see many great vegetarian options offered so typically she will go to Rocky's or cook for herself.

Jennifer Braughler, senior

marketing manager for Aramark operations at SRU, said they are working to better identify vegetarian options for those seeking them, including new labels for grab-and-go items that let the person know if it's vegetarian or vegan.

Rodgers added that they are listening to student feedback on what meals are offered so students are not eating the same thing regularly.

"I've talked with vegetarians ... just to say what can we do better?" Rodgers said.

As part of the Student Life Survey released this past Monday, Warmbein noted that about 40% of students are still dissatisfied with Aramark even

after all the improvements. He believes that has to do with consistency, where some days things are great and other days not so much.

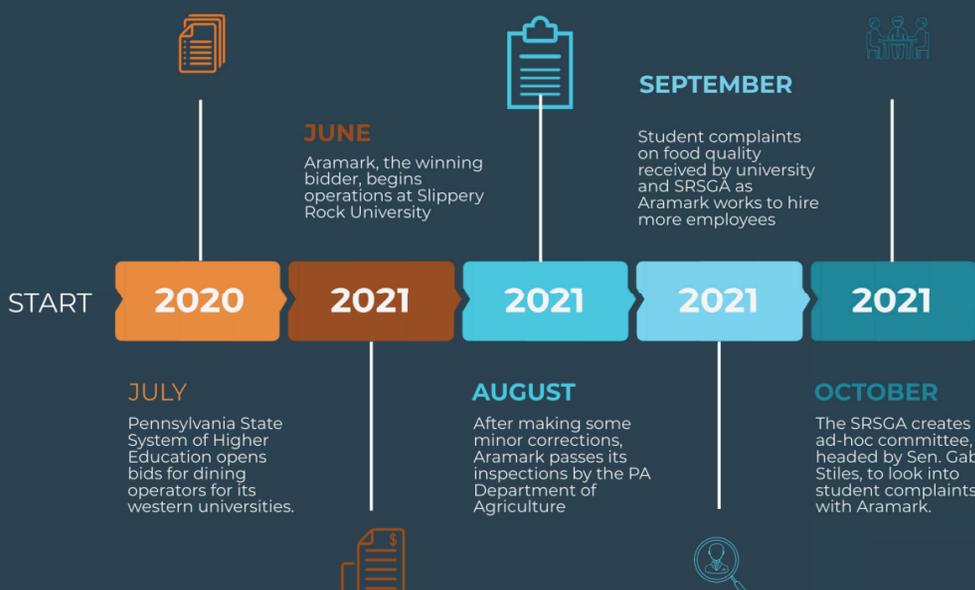
Stiles said that nights like taco night have become a big hit among students which he believes has resulted in an 8% increase in meal swipe usage since September. Still, only 60% of meal swipes are being used by students.

Rodgers said they are constantly looking at things to make improvements and hopes to see more staff in the spring.

"I will say our workers that we do have are awesome," Rodgers said.

SLIPPERY ROCK UNIVERSITY FOOD SERVICE TIMELINE

GRAPHIC BY: JOE WELLS



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