

Fairfield University playing new tune with Jazzman's Café



PAUL KING

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Jazzman's Café is the first in a series of foodservice changes at Fairfield University designed to uphold the philosophy that students should be catered to as discriminating consumers.

FAIRFIELD, CONN. — The Jazzman's Café that opened last month in the renovated Campus Center on the campus of Fairfield University here may be only 600 square feet, but it is much more than a new retail concept or gathering place for students, faculty and staff.

The coffee bar is emblematic of a philosophy found increasingly on campuses nationwide that students should be catered to as discriminating consumers with lots of choices. For Fairfield University the cafe is the first in a series of foodservice changes designed to uphold that philosophy.

"Probably the past 10 years or so we've tried to look at residential life and foodservice in a different way," said James Fitzpatrick, assistant vice president for student services at the 3,100-student private, Jesuit-run university. "Before, students were viewed as captive — they got one meal plan, no options.

"Those days are gone," Fitzpatrick added. "Students are sophisticated customers who choose a university as much for services and facilities as they do the academic qualities. We felt strongly that auxiliary services and the residence halls had to match our academic programs."

On a cold Friday morning in January, Jazzman's made its "soft" debut on the third floor of the Campus Center, which also houses the main dining facility for resident students. As a few students milled about, the staff worked feverishly to place the pastries, salads and sandwiches that complement the variety of Seattle's Best coffees and Chai teas sold at Jazzman's.

Steven Schleiffer, general manager for Sodexo, Fairfield's foodservice provider, explained that the Fairfield County Health Department only that morning had given the university the OK to open the facility. As a matter of fact, as the noon hour approached on opening day, there were still few lunch items available.

"We've only started making sandwiches, because we weren't sure that we'd be open," Schleiffer said.

But the buzz over the coffee-bar concept had been traveling across the campus for months, in the wake of

a \$25 million renovation of the 36-year-old student center, which included \$5 million for a new cafeteria servery.

"When the building was renovated two years ago, we were able to install a retail-style servery in the board operation," Schleiffer said. "Then we had to look at the cash operations. But because of the scope of the original project, the university wasn't able to address those operations in the way they wanted."

The delay proved fortuitous, because in the interim Sodexo acquired Wood Dining Services, the Allentown, Pa.-based food-management firm that has gained recognition in recent years for its development of retaillike concepts, including Jazzman's.

Using Wood's concepts and expertise, Sodexo presented Fairfield administrators with what Schleiffer called an aggressive marketing and expansion campaign. Jazzman's was chosen to be the first piece of the new retail business.

"Student input indicated that coffee bars were a hot concept," he pointed out. "So Jazzman's addressed a need we really hadn't dealt with."

The build-out was completed in an open space that the university thought might be a recreation area. The left side of the unit contains a seven-seat bar, while the right side has a display case with a variety of fresh-baked pastries. A refrigerated case on the far right end holds salads and sandwiches, also made fresh on campus each day.

A 10-table seating area fronts the coffee bar. Schleiffer said Jazzman's would be open until 2 a.m. every day, and plans call for six computer terminals to be added to the far wall of the Jazzman's seating area, effectively turning the unit into a cyber cafe.

The interest in Jazzman's has extended even beyond potential customers, according to Jennifer Belcher, retail-dining manager for Sodexo at Fairfield.

By Paul King