



Brent Beringer

NACAS ON-CAMPUS HOSPITALITY COLLEGE

FOODSERVICE EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENT

T*his year, On-Campus Hospitality partnered with NACAS to present the first annual College Foodservice Excellence Award to honor an individual who has significantly improved on-campus foodservice. The award recognizes a higher education foodservice professional who has gone above and beyond to make the dining experience of his or her customers — students, faculty, staff and guests — the best it can be and has greatly improved food service on the campus or in the industry in general.*

The award was presented on Oct. 23 at a ceremony at the 43rd Annual NACAS Conference at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel in Orlando, Fla. The 2011 recipient is Brent Beringer, resident district manager with Aramark at the University of Virginia Dining Services in Charlottesville.

Brent Beringer knew he wanted to be involved in the hospitality field at a young age.

“It started back when I was a kid and my grandmother ran a restaurant in Wisconsin,” he said. “While I never got to work for her, it inspired me to want to be in this business. I started off washing dishes in this business. The ability to be involved in people’s lives and make them feel at home is really a great thing about the hospitality business and I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

After graduating from Florida State University’s Dedman School of Hospitality and spending time in a number of different aspects of the hospitality industry, Beringer joined Aramark 13 years ago in the Business and Industry division as district manager for Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

After three years in that position, the opportunity at the University of Virginia became available. “When the opportunity opened up at the University of Virginia, it just seemed like something to jump in after I visited the university,” he said.

Beringer said that there are a number of reasons why the university appealed to him. “One was certainly the university itself. It is a pretty special place and I know everyone feels this way about their school, but this truly is a very special place. I don’t know that I ever thought I would feel this way about a college I didn’t attend.”



Another reason was the environment offered by college and university foodservice. “The on-site foodservice world — all the great ideas, all of the energy, all of the innovations tend to come in the college market from the students — a lot of it from what they have seen when they travel the world,” he said. “It gets driven by the market, and the energy and creativity involvement that you get to have with students who are certainly going to be tomorrow’s leaders is just great.”

The move also allowed him to focus his efforts. “I transferred from a district manager position that had responsibility over 36 accounts on the business and industry side, spread over a wide area, to being able to focus on just one piece of business, one relationship, one group of customers — the students here,” said Berenger. “It really simplified life a lot.”

He enjoys the non-commercial side of the industry. “A lot of it is being able to work with — both on the Aramark side and the university side — the caliber of people who we do, and a part of the business that values learning and growth and development, which isn’t always the case in a for-profit restaurant or hotel business, both of which I have worked in in the past. That really changes things.”

He continued, “It means that there is an interest in helping people become more than they are today that you don’t always see in the hospitality industry. So often we think of the lower-end, non-career-forming types of jobs, and that tends to be less of the case in this type of environment because you are dealing with long-term players and people on the other side were willing to nurture that.”

University of Virginia Dining Services

In the 10 years that Berenger has overseen dining, the campus has grown immensely, both in the number of venues and student participation.

From Fiscal Year 2003, his first year with U.Va. Dining, to Fiscal Year 2009, Berenger has grown sales by 41.8 percent. He has also dramatically increased the number of early signed meal plan contracts, from 400 in FY03 to 3,700 in FY09.

“We are still a largely voluntary meal plan program here on the grounds,” Berenger said. “Most of the students who are on meal plans have chosen to be on them; it is not a mandatory situation. The program is heavily residential, it always has been. We have at this point five residential all-you-care-to-eat facilities.”

The number of retail venues has grown from nine in 2001



to a newly opened 19th location, with a 20th in the works. “That side of the business has really blossomed and created a lot more opportunity for people to be able to eat in the neighborhoods, where they are learning, where they are living,” he said. “It creates a whole lot more faculty and staff interaction because there are atmospheres that are conducive to the cross-pollination that happens in an informal setting with students and faculty and staff.”

In addition to adding retail locations, Berenger has overseen the construction of a new residential dining facility from the ground up. “We have remodeled more than a dozen others,” he said. “One of the blessings and one of the challenges of a university like U.Va. is that there is, at this point, so much construction — a lot of it dining related, a lot of it not. The flow of the students, faculty and staff changes the needs on an almost weekly basis. That creates a challenge, but also creates an opportunity to build very inviting operations or locations for students, faculty and staff.”

Technology

A big change on campus, and in the industry as a whole, has been the advancement of technology — “everything from the obvious and simple such as going to a state-of-the-art point-of-sale system from a 1970s-style cash register,” said Berenger.

“One of the great things we have had success with is creating more immediate feedback loops using technology and using text-based comment card systems, mystery shopper surveys that students are doing for us right on their cell phones.”

Other schools have taken notice of U.Va. Dining communication with students. “We are getting a lot of interest from sister universities on how to better communicate with students through the different technologies that we use,” he said.

“The biggest one for us that has been a huge change is actually converting the comment system that the students have

to a text-based system,” said Beringer. “We basically took it from 100 or 150 relatively unmanageable comments a day that had to be collated to upwards of 600 a day, but much more manageable, easy to respond to and easier to make changes. That really is the big thing — to be able to use that technology to speed up the pace of change students expect; they are here just for four years.”

Sustainability

Beringer and U.Va. Dining have been recognized many times for their sustainability initiatives. In 2010, U.Va. Dining was recognized by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality’s (DEQ) Virginia Environmental Excellence Program (VEEP) with an E3 award, which represents exemplary environmental excellence.

His colleagues note that Beringer has been the leader when it comes to campus sustainability efforts. “In 2005, I approached Brent about the implementation of an Environmental Management System (EMS) at U.Va.,” said Jessica Wenger, Environmental Projects Manager at U.Va.’s Office of Environmental Health and Safety. “While managers from other departments balked, Brent jumped in with both feet and asked what he could do to help the process.”

In 2007, after receiving multiple requests from students and organizations on a variety of sustainable dining topics, Beringer created the Green Dining Committee, consisting of a group of students, alumni and dining administrators who meet to discuss sustainability issues. “We brought all of the student groups together within this umbrella organization,” he explained. “We basically put them in charge of it. We said, ‘it is your campus, you live here, what would you do?’”

The team has worked to come up with a sustainable buying program modeled on Aramark’s Green Thread sustainability initiative. Green Thread is based on five green stakes that all of Aramark’s locations are expected to do, such as a water and energy conservation plan, daily use of green cleaning products and an increase in sustainable food offerings.

“They are the ones who really got us moving,” said Beringer. “They were able to help us define what sustainable purchasing is, for example. They identified it as local, organically grown, fairly traded, humanely raised and put it in a bullseye-type of format. The center is local and we work out from there. We went from three percent in that first year before we actually defined what sustainable purchasing was. We collate this on an annual calendar basis and by December 2010, we had just over 28 percent. It was a huge increase.”

Beringer was also critical to the success of the school’s composting program. “Brent was willing to listen to the student idea, worked closely with me on the DEQ’s involvement in approving the process, and continues to support the program in any way he can,” said Wenger.

“We are diverting about 200 tons of material a year out of the landfill,” said Beringer. “This past year we got to see some of that compost come full circle and go into the student garden. Here on grounds, there are two student gardens. We were able to buy up and return some of the compost to where it came from.”

Beringer not only promotes sustainability efforts on his own campus, he is also a sustainable steward with Aramark and helps set Aramark’s sustainability policy by visiting other

BRENT BERINGER AT-A-GLANCE:

Originally From: Woodstock, Ill.

Education: BS Hotel Restaurant Administration, Florida State University

Industry Memberships and Certifications: NACAS, NACUFS, and AASHE

Marital Status: Married to Jackie, 25 years

Children: Britt, Aileen and Erik

U.VA. DINING AT-A-GLANCE:

Location: Charlottesville, Va.

Operated by: ARAMARK Higher Education

Enrollment: 13,800 undergraduates

Number of dining facilities on campus: 25

Approximate number of meals served daily: 10,000

Key Staff: Brent Beringer, *Director of Dining*;

Terry Locklair, *Director of Operations*

Mora Sims, *Director of Retail Operations*

Bryan Kelly, *District Executive Chef*

Nicole Jackson, *Marketing Manager*

schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region to help them implement their sustainability program.

“Brent’s passion for making dining operations more sustainable is infectious,” said Wenger. “While some may be skeptical that changes can be made to influence a big company such as Aramark, Brent has demonstrated that small changes over time can have a significant impact.”

Community Relations

According to his colleagues, Beringer’s strong point is his ability to create a positive relationship between the campus and the neighboring community.

“After two decades of service at U.Va., including 10 years as the community relations director, I can honestly say that I have never encountered a foodservice professional who has done more to unite the university with the community,” noted Ida Lee Wooten, U.Va.’s director of community relations.

“The interesting thing is that community relations are not even necessarily absolutely critical to what I do every day, but it is critical to the university’s mission and to what the students want to see,” said Beringer. “We want to facilitate that any way we can. We do a lot with the community, both on a business side and a more community support side. Most of that, we work through the existing fabric of the university — the events that the students put together and what the university wants to support.”

Dining organized a chapter of Campus Kitchen and has teamed with companies to donate food to local food banks. “We get a lot of great support in doing this kind of thing from partners like Kellogg’s,” he said. “They did their first ‘Share Your Bowl’ event here last year. It was really quite a success with about 10,000 pounds of Kellogg’s cereal being donated to the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank.”

Wooten quoted Sir Winston Churchill in describing Beringer: “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

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