

Short Order

SUSTAINABILITY

Co-Ops On Campus

A new organization is teaching college students how to create sustainable quick-serve co-ops to compete in valuable campus environments. By Brendan O'Brien

College campuses have become a hotbed of competition for quick-service brands interested in taking advantage of a young, hungry demographic. Now sustainable food co-ops mean additional competition from a grassroots movement that is trying to shift students' perceptions of foodservice.

At the center of this competitive trend is the Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive (CoFed), an organization that offers support services for students across the country who hope to create their own sustainable quick-service options on college campuses.

The organization, which was founded a year ago, runs a week-long training program each summer that teaches students about developing business plans and fundraising. The organization then provides ongoing direct consulting, training, and networking services in the hopes of helping sustainable food options compete for campus market share.

"There is a new demographic coming up that is interested in healthier food, which is true across the board," says Yoni Landau, cofounder of CoFed. "We work to source convenient fast food-style food sustainably and healthily. We use volunteer labor and community organizing components to bring local sustainable foods to competitive price points."

Quick-service chains are paying close attention to this growing segment that wants sustainable and healthy foods, says Dan Pawlak, vice president of nontraditional sales of Moe's Southwest Grill.

"A lot of students are interested in sustainability and better-for-you types of foods," says Pawlak, who



says Moe's offers grass-fed, gluten-free, and vegetarian items on its menu.

"We have differentiated ourselves from our direct competitors in this way, making it easier for us to make headway on campuses because we are offering students what they are looking for," he says.

Scott Weingarten, national real estate development manager for Panda Express, says the company uses college campuses as a market test on healthy eating.

"The health consciousness of the students is something that we are using a lot," he says. "We now point out items that are 250 calories or less because they are trying to eat healthy. That is something we have been using throughout our stores."

Panda Express does not try to directly compete

with other quick serves on campuses, he says. It may, however, compete for students who are community-minded, an important aspect that is driving CoFed co-ops.

"The campus is a community, and we want to support our communities," Weingarten says.

Landau says two-dozen CoFed co-ops could be competing on campuses in the next couple of years.

"Local and sustainable food needs more decentralized decision making," she says, "so folks that are letting their buyers at individual franchises make decisions about where the produce is sourced can have real sustainable food, and our new generation will see and know that. Folks that are trying to simply greenwash ... will be dismissed."