

INFORMATION:

Getting from
Concepts to Outcomes



Problem-Solving Vignette: “Food Service: An Institution-Wide Indigestion Problem”

You are a staff member in the Office in Institutional Planning, Quality, and Effectiveness (IPQE). You arrive early for a regular meeting of a campus-wide committee on which you serve. As people wait for the meeting to begin, one person begins sharing comments about the “outbreak” of complaints about the quality, quantity, and diversity of food available in the dining halls.

Someone else in the group comments that this should be a simple problem to address by a competent food service director. He wonders out loud why the food service director doesn’t just assert her leadership and put in a call to the food provider to insist that the issue is addressed.

As the discussion continues, however, it becomes apparent that the situation is really not all that simple. It seems that what began as a complaint by a few students has now mushroomed into a rapidly expanding outpouring of complaints across social media, as well as student and parent blogs. Apparently, complaints have been “liked,” reposted, and affirmed in comments in dozens of posts. Letters of complaint have been sent to various university senior leaders (residence life, student affairs, dining services, the provost, and the president) and to members of the Board of Trustees. Comments in the postings and letters indicate a growing anger and resentment about what is described as an extreme shortage of food and limited options, representing a particular problem for vegetarians and others with food restrictions (allergies, religious requirements, etc.).

Many parents have apparently written several times over several months angry about the problem, expressing frustration that the university seems to have failed to take effective action. Several writers commented that the problem is so serious that they would have considered another institution if they would have had any idea a situation like this would develop.

The storyteller explains the situation has reached the point where the VP for residence life and the president have felt a need to respond in postings and in personalized responses to some parents. The individual explains that food service is outsourced so this is not solely an internal problem to address. Several weeks ago, the problem had been communicated to the food service provider, who indicated that they would

investigate. Administrators are hoping the provider is following through on its promise to “look into the situation.” Meanwhile, complaints continue to flood in and an article summarizing the situation appeared in a letter to the editor in the Sunday and e-edition of a large newspaper with regional circulation.

As the scheduled meeting begins, the storyteller summarizes by saying: “It seemed like a simple and easily solved problem at the outset, but it is growing out of control, and it has become a viral issue and a preoccupation within the campus community and beyond.”

As you reflect on what you heard, you find yourself thinking about whether you and the office of IPQE might be able to help. You confer with your colleagues in IPQE and decide that this is the kind of problem with which you/your office could potentially help.

Your office contacts the office of the VP for residence life who has responsibility for food services and offers to meet with her to see if she thinks there are ways in which you/your office can be of assistance. When you meet, she reiterates and validates the accuracy of the story you’ve heard and voices her desire to move expeditiously to address the problem and find ways to prevent something similar from happening in the future.

She’s concerned about the expressed dissatisfaction with dining hall food, and worried that social media commentary and the potential impact on the school’s reputation among prospective students and their parents. She explains that while this is becoming a crisis of the moment, and although she is relatively new in the position, she has heard that there is a history of problems with food services that has come to light on student graduation surveys. A further fear is that this issue could become a significant topic among high school students and parents, potentially affecting their decisions about what institution to attend next year.

She notes also that none of this reflects well on the staff involved or her leadership. She is interested in whether and how you and your office/program might be helpful in addressing this problem, and perhaps in helping establish an information strategy framework to help anticipate, monitor, and head-off these problems going forward before they become a crisis.

Through the discussion, a number of questions are identified that need to be answered: These include: How widespread is the dissatisfaction? What exactly are students and parents dissatisfied about? (Have the precise concerns about “quality,” “quantity,” and “diversity” been clarified?) What are the differences between this year and previous years? What strategy is being adopted by the food service vendor to define and address the “food” problem?

Getting Started: It is agreed that she will convene a meeting and invite representatives from the various offices that influence or are affected by this situation, to clarify where things stand now, and brainstorm about how your office might be able to be of assistance in thinking through, developing, and perhaps facilitating an information strategy to help with the situation.