Stakeholder Interviews

University of Richmond Dining Services

Maya Vincelli, Assistant Director of Retail Operations

As the Assistant Director of Retail Operations, Maya Vincelli oversees the operations of several retail locations on campus, including Passport Café, 8:15, ETC, Dean’s Den, and Lou’s. Now in her 17th year at UR, Vincelli does considerable research into sustainable sourcing and meeting students’ demands as they evolve by generation. She describes her mission as “finding the intersection between food and sustainability and people.”

Vincelli cites that members of Generation Z, current college first-years and sophomores, look for a purpose behind their purchase choices. She’s seen a movement of students away from sugary drinks—perhaps out of a desire to “eat their calories instead of drink them”—though not away from single-use plastic bottles as a whole. “Bottled water is our #1 seller at every location,” Vincelli explains. “If I pulled the top 20 [best-sellers], it would be 50% of the top 20.” Additionally, Vincelli finds students to be extremely overscheduled—to the extent that they buy food and drink for more than one meal at a time to avoid waiting in line more than once. This desire for quick checkout purchases is another reason students may reach for a single-use, plastic beverage or container instead of a reusable option.

Vincelli spoke about the balance between food cost, service, and sustainability in operating retail locations, even as she tries to accomplish all three. At the end of the day, retail locations have a budget, she explains, “and have a return that they’ve guaranteed to the university, and that goes into the university’s general fund, which helps pay for scholarships. So we do take [dining decisions] really seriously—we want to behave really ethically with your money.” She says that because Dining Services is a functioning unit of a nonprofit, she has more freedom to serve students as best as she possibly can. With this desire, though, Vincelli too faces a “chicken and the egg” dilemma. She wants to help students make a healthy, sustainable choice, but also has
to be prepared to meet students where they are. How does give students what they want, while guiding them towards options that are better for them and the planet?

One of the initiatives she’s launched multiple times at Passport Café (Passport) is offering reusable plates and silverware to students as a “for here” (rather than “to go”) option when ordering. During summer 2019, Vincelli expounded, she located some plates and dining cutlery that Catering was planning to dispose of, and quickly offered them a second home at Passport. She says that her motivation behind this move, as in her previous three attempts to introduce reusable plates to Passport, was to “encourage people to take a break and… work on how much disposable things we have here.” Unfortunately, the plates were stolen immediately. Vincelli interprets this resistance towards the plates as evidence of the necessity of changing the culture of the university in regards to non-disposable options. She intends to persist in her efforts of implementing reusable dining service ware in both Passport and 8:15 so the campus community continues to be exposed to this concept. “The hardest part is convincing someone to change,” she acknowledges.

Even though promoting non-disposable dining ware is more laborious for her staff (as they have to wash dishes multiple times per day instead of just emptying waste bins), Vincelli remains committed to sustainable initiatives like this one. She believes that because a large percentage of her customer base is students, there is “this space to take care of people in a generous and sustainable way.” She views sustainability as a habit, rather than work, and hopes that students, employees, and managers can see it that way as well.

Vincelli sees UR’s history of success in working with vendors to promote sustainable efforts as indicative of the power of a collective, grounded voice. When UR requested Coca-Cola to sell them a more sustainable plastic water bottle, Coke delivered to campus the PlantBottle—a SPB comprised of 30% plant-based materials—before it was even released nationally.¹ Vincelli claims that local vendors can be even

more responsive to UR’s requests. She provided an example of a local bakery agreeing to deliver its weekly items in a reusable bakery box, rather than in disposable boxes, to better meet Passport Café’s sustainability goals and also avoid a new tax on bakery paper. In this way, Vincelli illustrated how whether UR is negotiating with a large, national vendor like Coca-Cola or a small, local vendor like the bakery, leveraging UR’s long-standing relationship with them as well as a potential reduction in their costs can induce the vendor to adopt more sustainable practices.

Vincelli emphasized the ability of students to make change on campus. “Dining services is not this giant corporation,” she explains. “It’s just me and you, having a conversation. I can’t make good decisions for students unless they communicate with me.” Vincelli looks for student feedback, such as on the annual Campus Dining survey, to guide her decision-making in providing what will enable students to be successful. In addition, she utilizes policy statements, like UR’s professed value of Responsible Stewardship and the Office for Sustainability’s goal of sustainable stewardship, to justify forward-thinking decisions as contingent with the university’s goals.²,³

Vincelli says that the spirit of sustainability, to her, is “to use something that had lost its value but that still have plenty of life.” In her role as Assistant Director of Retail Operations, her goal is to “look at things with new eyes and find a new home for something that someone else deems replaceable.”

² https://strategicplan.richmond.edu/mission/index.html
³ https://sustainability.richmond.edu/goals/plan1/goal-3.html