TOWN HALLS: UNPRECEDENTED CHANGES MAKING STUDENT EXPERIENCE BETTER

Houston, Feb. 27, 2014 – The University of Houston experienced an unprecedented level of change this past year in dining and housing — all aimed at improving the college experience for students.

Those accomplishments were spelled out during the annual Food Services and Student Housing town hall meetings, which were held Feb. 20 and 21 in the Fresh Food Co. in Moody Towers. Open to the entire UH community, the gatherings not only provided an overview of the past year, but allowed dining and housing to outline their strategic vision for 2014-15.

The entire Food Services and Student Housing presentations can be viewed online here.

UH Dining

The opening of the first phase of the University Center renovation project in January included a brand new food court that’s home to a Panda Express, Chick-fil-A Express, McDonald’s, Starbucks and Cougar Xpress Mini Market, said Amber Arguijo, marketing manager for UH Dining.

The past year saw other changes as well within UH Dining. Tandoori Nite in the UC Satellite has expanded its hours to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and the “Your Voice Counts” survey program was implemented that allows diners to provide feedback.

“We’re really proud of the things UH Dining has accomplished. It’s been really a growth year for us,” Arguijo said.

There’s more to come. Another food establishment, Freshii, will open in January in the UC. More halal options for Muslim students continue to be explored, including the possibility of offering halal menu items in the two campus dining halls. In addition, the to-go container program is expected to be restructured, while nutrition programming will be enhanced. Also, an additional food truck pad location is being explored for an area in front of the Science Building along Entrance 14.
UH Dining is also looking into the possibility of restructuring the meal plan program as early as the 2015-2016 academic year.

Meal plan pricing is being updated. On average, the wide range of meal plans offered by UH Dining will increase just 3.5 percent for the 2014-2015 academic year due to inflation and increasing food costs. One of the plans — the Lifestyle 160 — is actually going down in price this coming year.

"We want to make sure we provide affordable solutions and stay in line with President Khator’s goal of graduating students with the least amount of debt," Arguijo said. "We don’t want to needlessly raise prices or add in features that students don’t want. We want to make sure that we are making decisions that benefit the campus community while still keeping prices low."

**Student Housing**

It’s been a very busy year for Student Housing and Residential Life, which opened not one but two new residential facilities this past August: Cougar Village II and Cougar Place. In addition, it also took over management of the Bayou Oaks apartment community.

Including the two partnership properties — Cullen Oaks and Cambridge Oaks — the university now has a little more than 8,000 on-campus bed spaces, said Don Yackley, executive director of Student Housing and Residential Life.

Other projects were also tackled this year. The Faculty-in-Residence program was revised and improved, and the MAP-Works initiative was launched.

"MAP-Works is student success technology that we use to work with first- and second-year students in the residence halls to help them be successful and get them connected to resources on campus if they are struggling," Yackley said.

The annual EBI survey, which asks questions of the residents, brought good news, as Student Housing showed improvement in all three major indicators, as well as significant improvement in 15 of 19 factors. In addition, new housing software is being purchased that will provide better service to students. Also, conference programs are coming to UH during the summer and utilizing the residential facilities, which helps generate revenue.

Approximately $3.5 million was budgeted this past year for projects to improve or maintain facilities, including elevator, HVAC and other improvements in Moody Towers. The upcoming year will include a whole host of additional projects to improve the residential facilities.

Housing rates are increasing slightly this coming year. The rates are going up 3 percent to offset deferred maintenance costs, operating costs and debt service for new construction. Prior to the rate changes, Student Housing contacted other universities in the region to see how much they were changing their rates. UH compares favorably to the other schools.

"Our residential facilities are still a great bargain for students who want to improve their overall college experience," Yackley said.

About the University of Houston

The University of Houston is a Carnegie-designated Tier One public research university recognized by The Princeton Review as one of the nation’s best colleges for undergraduate education. UH serves the globally competitive Houston and Gulf Coast Region by providing world-class faculty, experiential learning and strategic industry partnerships. Located in the nation’s fourth-largest city, UH serves more than 39,500 students in the most ethnically and culturally diverse region in the country.