

# From Transactional to Transformational: Drexel University and Aramark Collaborate on Mission

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## Abstract

This analysis of the supplier relationship between Drexel University and Aramark offers a demonstration of the potential for intensifying an anchor institution's local economic inclusion strategies by leveraging the economic power of supplier partnerships. The operation of a major food service contract represents a substantial set of campus jobs and procurement, but this economic activity often remains outside the remit of economic inclusion efforts when the institution has no contractual influence over it. When an anchor institution can partner with a major supplier that shares a commitment to community impact, it offers opportunities to strengthen an anchor strategy. This article describes how Drexel University and Aramark used their campus food service relationship to deepen Drexel's anchor mission and core strategic priorities and Aramark's enterprise sustainability agenda, including the value of the negotiation process, and a set of outcomes in the form of initiatives in food insecurity, local economic inclusion and community engagement, research and technology transfer, and student co-op employment. Both the relationship building process and its outcomes offer a model for other institutions as they look to leverage the untapped economic activity of the major service suppliers.

**Keywords:** anchor strategy, enterprise sustainability, procurement, auxiliary services

## Introduction

There is an accelerating movement in higher education as an increasing number of institutions are establishing an “anchor mission” to more intentionally invest in the communities in which they are embedded. Many of these institutions are looking for tools and strategies that can move them to a next step beyond the impact of business activities like direct hiring and purchasing. Strategic collaboration with major suppliers can enrich and deepen an ambitious anchor mission, multiplying the mission’s scope and reach. Additionally, when suppliers have their own enterprise sustainability goals, there is mutual benefit when they are open to exploring a deeper relationship with clients that are embedded in community.

Drexel University and its campus food service supplier, Aramark, have built a mission-driven collaboration that reaches beyond the traditional boundaries of institutional contracting to deepen and enrich the commitment that each organization has to the communities in which they are embedded. Drexel has articulated a clear set of policies and practices regarding the university’s direct purchasing in the West Philadelphia communities surrounding its campus, but the purchasing and hiring done by suppliers chosen for major service contracts has represented a segment of institutional economic investment that has been largely out of the university’s control. Drexel used the opportunity of a change in food service providers to build expectations for local purchasing, social impact activity, student participation in food research, and student access to cooperative education employment positions into a new contract, and the early results are promising.

This analysis builds on existing work that describes the mechanisms of higher education anchor strategies and it represents a meeting point between literature and scholarship that examines corporate social responsibility and sustainable supply chain management. This study addresses a gap in the literature where these issues overlap: when colleges and universities collaborate on civic-mission-driven goals with their major suppliers. For professionals in higher education who are responsible for advancing an anchor strategy in their institution, it offers an example of a successful process that may be extrapolated to other settings.

The Drexel-Aramark partnership demonstrates how universities and their major service suppliers can leverage their relationships with one another to deepen their respective mission-driven work. The lessons learned about collaboration are informed by the perspectives of the authors who participate in crafting and supporting Drexel’s anchor mission and in negotiating and cultivating Aramark’s food service contract with the university. These lessons represent the authors’ reflections on the implications of such institutional relationships for advancing an anchor mission beyond the powerful but limited scope of direct purchasing. The analysis and supporting evidence offered here is based on the direct shared experiences of the authors in this process, and conversations with other participants. The facets of the relationship and negotiating process

chosen for description here are featured for their relevance to the intersection of these two organizations' community-facing missions.

## **Background**

### Drexel University and Aramark

In 2010, with the arrival of university president John Fry, Drexel established a plan to align the institution's core functions with a civic engagement mission (Fry, 2010). Established in 1891, Drexel is a private university located in West Philadelphia, with more than 26,000 students. It is known for its emphasis on cooperative education, or "co-op," in which students participate in up to 18 months of work experience as part of their graduation requirements. Having identified three dimensions in which an institution of higher education could carry out a civic engagement mission, Drexel has been developing strategies not only around its (a) academic mission; (b) its volunteer power; and (c) its operational and business functions, how the university hires workers, purchases needed goods and services, and builds and renovates buildings and spaces. Drexel further articulates a mission as an anchor institution by recognizing an obligation to the neighbors, communities, and other stakeholders located in the West Philadelphia neighborhoods near the University City campus (Office of University and Community Partnerships [UCP], n.d). This work is supported and centrally coordinated by the UCP. UCP incorporates a number of community engagement functions including: (a) the Lindy Center for Civic Engagement, which handles traditional student engagement as well as pedagogical supports for faculty; (b) the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partners, which is a neighborhood-based resource center inspired by cooperative extension; (c) an economic inclusion team who focus on local workforce access and small business support; and (d) a suite of early and K-12 education initiatives. Drexel's administrative departments like Human Resources, Procurement Services, and Business Services are also drivers of the civic engagement work, especially as related to institutional investment, and UCP works closely with them to achieve local economic inclusion goals. In the case of the Aramark relationship, Business Services and Procurement Services took the lead, with UCP acting as a support resource.

As Drexel has refined its approach to using the university's business expenditures to direct investment into West Philadelphia, it became apparent that there were untapped opportunities to deepen the anchor mission, namely through major service contracts. Outsourced business relationships for services like food, vending, and security represent economic activity on campus, jobs and purchasing, mainly, over which Drexel had not previously asserted influence. By rethinking the approach to such contract negotiations with fresh expectations regarding economic inclusion values and access for students, Drexel could unlock a set of opportunities for community stakeholders and for its academic mission.

With a corporate headquarters situated in Center City Philadelphia, just across the Schuylkill River from Drexel, Aramark is a food, facilities management, and uniform provider serving clients like Fortune 500 companies, major sports teams, healthcare providers, educational institutions, iconic destinations and cultural attractions, and numerous municipalities in 19 countries around the world. Aramark has roughly 270,000 employees and the company prides itself on its innovative approach to the services it offers, as well as on a comprehensive enterprise sustainability strategy.

Aramark identifies employee engagement, empowering healthy living, environmental sustainability, and local community investment as the main features of its enterprise sustainability strategy. The strength of the program has netted the company recognition as one of Fortune's "World's Most Admired Companies" (Fortune, n.d.) and as an employer of choice by the Human Rights Campaign and DiversityInc. (DiversityInc, n.d.) Aramark sums up its goals with the notion of making a positive impact on people and planet: enabling people to prosper on a healthy planet while supporting long-term business growth.

Considering the "people" part of this approach, Aramark supports employee wellbeing through an array of benefits and opportunities such as a culture of employee volunteerism, wellness benefits, a front-line education program, and a suite of employee health support services; the company likewise considers the wellbeing of its consumers through a range of healthful food offerings. Strategies for local, ethical, and inclusive sourcing act as a mechanism for community-level investment. For the "planet" side, the company reduces its environmental footprint by sourcing responsibly, operating efficiently, minimizing food waste, and reducing packaging.

### Supplier relationships in context

There is a gap in the literature at the intersection of institutional anchor missions and issues of corporate social responsibility and sustainable supply chain management, and we hope to establish a foundation for future work in this area. First, a closer look at Philadelphia is useful. In 2014, the city had the highest poverty rate among metropolitan areas with more than one million people. There is a growing need for building local economies that function for all, and inequality, low wages, and underemployment are entrenched in many localities (CLES and Democracy Collaborative, 2019). Today, Philadelphia relies on educational and medical institutions for much of its employment and economic growth (Harkavy, 2016); the city has one of the highest concentrations of anchor institutions in the country, with educational and medical institutions (eds and meds) comprising 12 out of its 15 largest employers. An anchor institution may be defined as an entity with long-standing or permanent ties to a location with no intention of leaving (Birch, et al., 2013). At the turn of the 21st century, the term anchor institution was created by economist Michael Porter who described a major corporation situated in a community that provides area residents with stability through employment and vibrancy.

The anchor institution's landscape is complex. However, when institutional and campus growth fails to take into account the needs of the often-marginalized neighborhoods nearby, it can exacerbate issues like housing affordability, and can drive residential displacement. These kinds of impacts seem at odds with institutional civic engagement work that aims to offer support and resources to organizations and residents in such neighborhoods; it may be the case that a well-developed local engagement strategy has followed a period of growth, or that an institution lacks internal coordination among these functions, or in some cases may simply not be concerned with the status of neighboring communities. Faced with such tensions between different institutional functions, universities often must reconcile their ambition to expand and grow against a civic mission (Thomas-EL, 2019).

A higher education movement centered in community engagement has surfaced and continues to develop as a mechanism for addressing poverty, racism, gentrification, and health inequity in the communities influenced by these institutions, and in part to address or ameliorate the local impacts of institutional growth. The response has encouraged the advancement of service-learning, volunteer projects, community economic development initiatives, and community-based participatory research towards generating mutually beneficial partnerships that deliver positive impact in nearby communities (Harkavy, 2016). Colleges and universities have an immense potential to be an integral part of community wealth building that prioritizes environmental, social, and economic justice. In this regard, anchor institutions influence the social determinants of health, a framework that looks past individual health to examine the way structural forces such as income, education, and social organization impact a person's well-being (Chinn, 2011). Harnessing this potential can influence local economies such that capital, rather than abandoning the area, can be held and regenerated, contributing to the recirculation of income when the economic opportunity, dignity, and safety of communities are prioritized and supported (CLES and the Democracy Collaborative). Researchers suggest that, despite this inherent potential, what may sometimes be lacking is "a deep and intentional drive to maximize the potential of [the institution as an anchor]" (CLES and the Democracy Collaborative). This prompts the question: how vigorously committed are anchor institutions to their role as agents of economic and social change? To what extent do they leverage the tools available to them to advance an anchor mission? The analysis provided here illustrates how Drexel turned a major supplier relationship into one such tool.

Institutions, then, that embrace such a commitment can engage their corporate partners in deepening this economic mission. Foundational corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature points to CSR as "the obligations of businessmen [sic] to pursue those policies, make those decisions, or follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of objective and values of our society (Bowen, 1953). Walton (1967) establishes that "social responsibility recognizes the intimacy of the relationships between corporation and society and realizes that such relationships

must be kept in mind by top managers as the corporation and the related groups pursue their respective goals.” The three pillars of CSR, clients, people, and community, aim to put humans and the planet first through intentionally operating in social, environmental, and economic responsibility (Peterson, 2019). When major business partners with CSR agendas can connect with anchor institutions working to establish strong connections with surrounding communities, impacts may be multiplied. This requires strategic systems thinking: who are the players? What are the incentives? What policies and procedures are in place that limit how anchor institutions and their business partners can procure from community businesses? (Clarke, 2017). System mapping can aid anchor institutions in understanding how to shift functions and structure to be more purposeful in their operations, routines, values, relationships, and resources (Clarke, 2017).

Some research suggests that anchor institutions can use sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) as an avenue to further disseminate their missions through corporate partnerships. A supply chain is defined as “a dynamic process that includes the continuous flow of materials, funds and information across multiple functional areas within and between chain members” (Jain et al., 2009). From an organizational perspective, the contributions to interorganizational relationships have been made through transaction costs and later complemented by contracting verbiage and the consideration for social change (Rodríguez-López et al., 2017). Research places an emphasis on the importance of early-formed relationships, trust, and dependence between organizations for their capacity to enhance innovation. It is suggested that a feedback process favoring communication, dependency, and trust ultimately allows partnered companies to establish a cycle of improving business results from better supplier relationships (Rodríguez-López et al., 2017). These factors may inform various institutional pressures in order to navigate other powerful organizations, missions and entities upon which anchor institutions depend, and the desire to fulfill the obligation an anchor institution has to its community (Sayed, et al., 2007). Snyder (2019) advocates for a new social contract in supply chains, one that furthers a business’s self-interest and, at the same time, considers others. Contractual parties can serve as moral agents to show and act on human compassion. Sayed further suggests that supply contracts are sets of promises, an inherently moral act (Snyder, 2019). SSCM illustrates that participating parties have the opportunity to learn and grow together, to adjust their relationship as needed, and to build upon a shared purpose. In the new social contract that Snyder supports, anchor institutions and corporations can use their partnerships as a way to achieve greater economic efficiency while simultaneously working toward shared moral pledges. In the Drexel-Aramark relationship that we discuss here, there is an explicit moral purpose that drives both Aramark’s enterprise sustainability strategy and Drexel’s development of a comprehensive anchor mission.

## **Discussion**

Drexel and Aramark formed a relationship in 2016 when Drexel invited Aramark to take over campus food services, and the relationship has been evolving through a set of distinct phases.

This discussion is arranged in a rough chronology of the development and negotiation process through which Drexel and Aramark set up an operating agreement and set of initiatives that have served to advance both Drexel's anchor mission and Aramark's community commitments. With each successive phase, from the fast launch through formalizing basic contractual needs, and from exploring options for building on the basics through the emergence of four distinct initiatives, the potential of this supplier relationship as a strategic tool deepened. In this analysis, the importance of intentional trust building over the course of ongoing contract negotiation and management is critically important, and while processes with major suppliers at other institutions may unfold in different ways, in this reflection the time that it took over the course of these four phases to forge a trusting working relationship has been instrumental.

### Establishing a New Business Relationship

Because of a disruption with a prior food service provider, Aramark arrived in the middle of an academic year and launched its presence at Drexel without a contract in place. Once Aramark was able to establish routine operations, the contract negotiation proceeded.

Drexel understood that the first priority was to ensure that Aramark was well integrated into the campus culture. From Drexel's point of view, the first 18 months of the relationship largely focused on Aramark getting comfortable with the campus, acclimating to the Drexel culture, and ensuring that the core dining program met students' needs. A food service supplier is the university's largest direct service provider to students. Food service is a high-touch relationship that has significant impact on the campus living experience, especially for first-year students, so getting this right is critical for the university, and doubly so because the food service supplier is providing nutrition to students who largely live in rooms that do not have full kitchens and, therefore, often cannot cook for themselves.

For its part, Aramark understood its goal as providing quality food and creating a positive student experience that would support academic success while also enabling clients to attract and retain students and talent, to operate efficiently, and to grow effectively. A long-time leader in the higher education market, Aramark has an understanding of what students are looking for in a food service experience. When the relationship with Drexel started in 2016, Aramark was eager to work with Drexel to reimagine the campus dining experience and what a deeper and more collaborative relationship could look like.

Accordingly, the early days of the relationship were focused on the immediate need to get the student dining program stabilized. Over the subsequent negotiating process of several months, however, a deep and lasting collaboration emerged, and a range of opportunities were uncovered where collaboration could flourish.

## Building Mutual Trust and Identifying Opportunities through Contract Negotiation

Developing a business relationship of this scope requires significant effort, and building relationships across negotiating teams takes time. For Drexel and Aramark, the process fostered mutual trust and created space for developing new ideas. Both teams felt it was critical in the first year to establish a foundation of developing common standards, common vernacular, and shared goals and expectations. Drexel's Business Services team, which commonly handles major service contracts relating to campus life and student services, and the Aramark local and regional teams enacted this first level of relationship building through a series of regularly occurring project meetings to ensure strong lines of communication regarding the core dining program.

A food service contract is a complex agreement addressing service, student satisfaction, financial performance for both organizations, and insurance and standard-of-care requirements. The process of developing a contract allows both organizations to set specific performance goals and expectations for each other. During the first year of operation, an internal agreement incorporated the basics of the dining program, but as contract negotiation between Drexel and Aramark played out, opportunities emerged to set broader goals around the general nature of the relationship.

After the initial year, as operations stabilized following the rapid launch, and the core functions of the dining program were being met, the teams felt confident about looking for ways to take the relationship to the next level, moving beyond the day-to-day core program management and thinking about how to operationalize a set of broader goals. The complexity of Aramark's business presented significant opportunities for Drexel to leverage the relationship. As a normal part of business operations, Aramark purchases food and supplies, hires individuals to work at dining locations, hires and trains individuals to be managers and supervisors, and deploys volunteers. At the same time, Drexel was actively thinking about how to deepen the relationship with its key suppliers as part of a larger institution-wide commitment to economic inclusion and local economic development, a buy and hire local strategy. The timing was right to figure out a way to work together to achieve broader impact.

In addition to the core program requirements that were detailed in the contract and were standard for comparable service contracts, Drexel introduced the idea of support for key university initiatives including local economic inclusion and support for Drexel's strategic priorities around food insecurity, student co-op, community engagement, and licensing and technology transfer. While the focus on these strategic priorities was somewhat ambiguous in initial 2016 contract negotiations, the respective teams have spent time during 2018 and 2019 defining, in more detail, where Aramark and Drexel can work together most effectively around food and jobs. Eventually

enshrined in the contract was a set of best effort expectations for Aramark to align with Drexel's local investment strategies along with reporting and evaluation requirements.

## From Higher Ed Nuts and Bolts to Strategic Contracting: Auxiliary Services as Relationship Builder

When developing a business relationship like this, the role of a university's auxiliary services department is critical. An auxiliary services department sits between university administrators and various suppliers, including those for food service, and often acts as both a translator and a connector. Inside the institution, the various organizational structures contiguous to auxiliary services can tend to favor goals that lean towards the poles of either the contract compliance and financial delivery or the student experience. Auxiliary services can help balance the two priorities.

The auxiliary services department of a university typically oversees services and programs that serve as the backbone to the university and the student experience. Its name depends on the institution, including auxiliary services, business services, campus services, and university services. The portfolio often varies among different universities, but it traditionally includes the main service-providing contracts like dining, vending, the bookstore, and mail services. The auxiliary services portfolio may also include housing, parking, licensing and trademarks, the identification card program, student centers, and real estate. At Drexel, this office is known as business services.

Drexel's business services delivers a set of programs and services essential to students and employees, aiming to foster dynamic campus destinations and community relationships. Business services administers campus dining, vending and retail, DragonCard services and the DragonDollars program, on-campus parking services, and mail service.

Business services' approach to balancing financial delivery and student satisfaction was to first consider how to best advocate on behalf of the institution and students as Drexel and Aramark began negotiations. Looking at internal business practices and at how peer institutions operate, it became clear that the best way to support Drexel's broader strategic initiatives in this partnership was to start small. Local hiring, shared in more detail below, is an example of starting small. Although the impact was substantial, a local hiring strategy was relatively easy for Aramark to implement, and candidate recruitment fit into a structure already developed by Drexel. Additionally, it made sense to look for ways to weave Aramark's current business practices into initiatives that already existed at Drexel. Business services spent time meeting with the Drexel departments that had a stake in the Aramark relationship, including student life, the office of University and Community Partnerships, and procurement services to better understand their goals in order to better inform conversations with Aramark with these interests in mind. With a

contract in place, part of the work was to then connect the right people in each organization to generate project development around the shared priority areas.

Local hiring is an example of this approach in practice. The opportunities in this area were clear: Aramark hires many people each year, and Drexel is committed to creating economic opportunity and access to jobs for West Philadelphians. In addition, Aramark offers jobs with fair starting wages and benefits, which meets another of Drexel's goals to not simply generate local jobs but to facilitate career pathways with family sustaining wages. Launching a collaborative local-hire effort meant first consulting with Drexel's economic inclusion team who, under the auspices of the Office of University and Community Partnerships, coordinate workforce access and small business support programming focused on West Philadelphia. Business services needed to understand their engagement process, how they prepare jobseekers for interviews and working, and how they support employers. The next step was to engage with the Aramark on-site human resources team to understand their process and hiring rhythms, followed by bringing the teams together.

#### Mapping contract negotiation around core priorities

In contract negotiations, suppliers may sometimes be faced with a range of client requests to support various initiatives over and above the core deliverables of the contract itself, and this can be especially true in the higher education space. One of the most effective practices over the past year in the Drexel-Aramark relationship has been making the connection to the university's strategic opportunities a frequent and regular part of the ongoing conversation. The Drexel team looked for opportunities to connect various initiatives at Drexel to the core dining program rather than asking for investments that felt like extras unrelated to that service. This has been a useful lesson and one that Drexel now considers in all of its significant supplier relationships.

An additional factor in this relationship building has been attention to the intersections between the wants and needs of the students and the broader goals of the university. Students and parents are increasingly asking for more when it comes to what a university dining program can offer. Of course, they want great food that is served by a friendly staff, but they also increasingly care about where the food is sourced, how the program impacts the local community, and how the institution's food service supplier supports their school's educational mission as well as alumni businesses. These expectations overlap with Drexel's anchor mission. Ongoing work to connect key personnel at Aramark to researchers at Drexel in, for example, food and hospitality, has generated opportunities that support student learning, healthful food choices, and local purchasing, opportunities that are now fully realized and offer benefits to the core campus dining program.

## The Payoff to Building Mutual Trust: Enriching Mission-Driven Initiatives

As in any relationship, there have been challenges with the Drexel-Aramark partnership. At times, Drexel and Aramark have had difficult conversations about contract deliverables, and about how to address any inadequacies that may arise. In the end, though, when trust is established and there is mutual respect in day-to-day communication, it is easier to overcome occasional disagreements and problems.

In instances of any contractual dissatisfaction, problem, or crisis, Drexel's business services office takes the approach of continued conversation. Whether with Aramark or any other major service supplier, proactively getting ahead of problems and taking a position of transparency has served well for supplier relationships. When Drexel communicates operational changes to the supplier as soon as a new need or problem emerges, along with a candid assessment of the institution's needs, it helps the supplier make any adjustments they need to implement in their service delivery. Further, preventing these problems being conveyed as surprises serves the project of trust building. As Drexel and its suppliers weather the COVID-19 crisis that has profoundly disrupted campus service contracts, the negotiating teams are leaning on this established atmosphere of forthright communication about evolving needs on the part of both Drexel and Aramark to lay the groundwork for an eventual service recovery.

Jointly, the teams realize that they are in a long-term relationship and that all share an interest in great outcomes for students and for each organization. The slow and intentional process of planning, and especially planning around mission, contributed to this atmosphere of trust between Drexel and Aramark. With that foundation, each has been able to take risks on mission-related initiatives that have fed back into the success of the process.

A working group with executives from both organizations has identified four key priorities for project and initiative development in addition to the core dining program:

- Drexel and Aramark will address food insecurity on campus. There is a growing number of students who are food insecure, and Aramark is uniquely positioned to provide guidance and support in this area.
- Drexel and Aramark will align initiatives and resources around local economic inclusion and community engagement. Aramark has several programs currently funded and being deployed that can be leveraged to create immediate impact in the neighborhoods surrounding Drexel.
- Drexel and Aramark will work together on technology development and finding places where academics, research, and industry intersect, with the Drexel Food Lab work observed as a prime example.
- Aramark will get engaged in the Drexel co-op program. As an international employer, Aramark has an opportunity to provide rich and deep co-op opportunities for Drexel students that can become a pipeline of talent into their organization.

These areas of emphasis, the teams believed, would allow Drexel and Aramark to reach beyond the traditional food service vendor transactions to develop a deeper relationship and create impact for Philadelphia communities while delivering benefits for both student learning and Aramark's sustainability goals.

### *Addressing Food Insecurity*

Many college students across the United States face food insecurity (Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, & Caldeira, 2017), lacking consistent access to the nutrition they need to lead a healthy life, with implications on their academic performance. When contract negotiations launched with Drexel, Aramark already had a set of practices in place to address student food insecurity. For example, the company is a research and development funder of Swipe Out Hunger, a student-led movement to end college hunger, and it also supports the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University, an action research center focused on access to healthy food on college campuses.

Aramark had also implemented the following practices in dozens of campus locations:

- The Food Donation Program provides gets unused and unserved food to qualified non-profit organizations, including student groups and the local campus community.
- Aramark donates funds, food items, or space to a number of university-managed food pantries.
- Aramark works with organizations like Swipe Out Hunger to facilitate the transfer of student meal swipes and leftover dining plan dollars to peers in need.

With these practices already a part of Aramark operations in other locations, there was an opportunity to connect the work of Drexel undergraduate student and now-alumnus Evan Ehlers to this supplier partnership. Ehlers leads a non-profit called Sharing Excess, which focuses on food insecurity on the Drexel campus and around Philadelphia, as well as building a model for other institutions to follow (Sharing Excess, n.d.). Drexel's business services team connected Ehlers with key personnel at Aramark to explore how Aramark could support this initiative.

The outcome, an agreement with Aramark to support a student meal swipe donation process, has been an important piece of how Sharing Excess works. Ehlers notes of the relationship with Aramark:

After nearly two years of collaboration and planning with Drexel and Aramark, we implemented a sustainable program that could anonymously redistribute donated guest meal swipes to students in need. In the first hour that we launched the program, we received over 240 meal swipe donations. What started out as an idea in my mind has evolved into an effective solution to a very real problem

thanks to the support of Drexel and Aramark. Together, we are now achieving our shared vision of no student ever going hungry on campus. (E. Ehlers, personal communication, November 11, 2019)

Aramark's support for Sharing Excess, brokered by business services, represents an intertwining of food service, a basic institutional function, with student learning outcomes and achievements, a focus on community impact and greater good, as well as the student life cycle experience of an entrepreneurial alumnus.

### *Local Economic Inclusion and Community Engagement*

In late 2018, business services and Aramark launched a pilot small batch purchasing program with The Enterprise Center (TEC), a West Philadelphia business development nonprofit that houses a commercial kitchen and business support services for local food entrepreneurs. This small batch program created an opportunity for TEC's small suppliers to provide food services and products to Aramark for integration into Drexel's on-campus dining program. This arrangement speaks to Aramark's interest in integrating the goals of strategic sourcing, supply chain sustainability, and supplier diversity inclusion, while also supporting Drexel's anchor mission to increase campus purchasing with West Philadelphia businesses. The business case for the connection comes from satisfying student interest in the kinds of locally produced and culturally relevant food products that TEC can provide.

For Aramark, implementing a relationship with TEC meant moving away from a traditional transactional supplier/provider relationship. Exploratory conversations looked for places where TEC's objectives could provide value for Drexel's dining program, and they uncovered opportunities where Aramark could not only purchase products and services from TEC's culinary members, but also help their entrepreneurs build exposure and capacity around the Drexel campus. Since the program began, TEC's local and minority-owned businesses and their products have been featured in catering menus, residential dining, special events on campus, and a bi-weekly farm stand for students with dining plans.

TEC's vice president Kim Carter has facilitated major institutional food service connections with the culinary entrepreneurs that the organization supports, stating "We work with Aramark (Drexel), Sodexo (University of the Sciences) and Bon Appetit (University of Pennsylvania)" and three businesses have scaled into a move into Center City Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market thanks to the consistent volume that these connections provided, Torityeah, Sweet Nina, and Birdie's Biscuits. As noted by Carter, "we currently do weekly business with Aramark with an average of six vendors: Tuck-Ins, Sweet Nina, Jillian Bakes, Birdies Biscuits, Shop Sho's Granola, Amira Delights, Brightland Coffee, Tortiyeh and KakeMi. The vendors sell at retail location on campus and at the farm stand" (K. Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2019).

Carter also notes, “the relationship with Drexel and Aramark has been a game changer for the small local businesses. It has provided the vendors with consistent revenue and exposure to a new demographic. This relationship provides an opportunity to sell to universities and their food service companies. It also provides local food options, provided by small businesses, to students. The vendors feel at ease with working with Drexel and are enjoying the opportunity to engage with the students.” Carter identifies important impacts of Aramark’s small batch purchasing program, including supporting the West Philadelphia economy, revenue for small and local businesses, job creation, and supporting minority and women-owned businesses. She further points to an additional pond-ripple, stating “The TEC vendors shop locally, so the program has an extended impact in the surrounding communities” (K. Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2019).

The scale of Aramark’s local purchasing suggests the potential for further developing this priority; Aramark’s total purchasing in Philadelphia zip codes during fiscal year 2019 on the Drexel account alone added up to roughly \$3.5 million, representing 48% of its total spend on the account.

As noted, along with its emphasis on local purchasing, Drexel also focuses on local hiring as part of its set of anchor strategies, and the Aramark contract offered the opportunity to deepen the commitment to workforce access for West Philadelphia jobseekers. Following a process that included developing an understanding of Aramark’s personnel needs, business services facilitated a handoff of Aramark’s site hiring managers to Drexel’s economic inclusion team, and the first material outcome of the collaboration has been a joint job fair during the summer of 2019. Ultimately, 15 new associates joined the Aramark at Drexel team as food service workers, cashiers, utility workers, and catering attendants.

In addition to linking with Drexel’s local purchasing and hiring priorities, Aramark has aligned some of its existing community commitments with Drexel’s volunteerism and service and education access priorities in West Philadelphia. The global volunteer program Aramark Building Community engages chefs, dietitians, and other employees to help families learn about and gain access to healthy food, support local community centers, and offer hospitality and food related career skill-building. Aramark employees at Drexel have participated in Aramark Building Community Day since 2017 with more than a dozen employees volunteering each year. The team has hosted food drives, collecting 161 pounds of food to support the regional food access organization Philabundance, and in 2018 and 2019, employee volunteers created hundreds of craft kits in partnership with Project Sunshine for children receiving treatment at local hospitals.

Aramark has also aligned its Aramark Ignite program, funded by Aramark Corporation and administered by The Urban League of Philadelphia, to support Drexel’s goal of providing high-

quality education opportunities and career pathways to West Philadelphia K-12 students. The program, now entering its second year, provides workforce skills through school-based workshops around college prep and career-readiness. Aramark Ignite is coordinating with Drexel to provide additional resources specifically to students at West Philadelphia High School.

#### *Technology Development and Research Initiatives: Drexel Food Lab*

The integration of the Drexel Food Lab into Drexel's relationship with Aramark is another example of generating outcomes on multiple levels, in this case supporting both student learning and student health. This aspect of the collaboration responds to student customer demand and is an extension of Aramark's initiative with the American Heart Association to provide "plant-forward" menu components. Led by Jonathan Deutsch, professor of culinary arts and food science, the Food Lab engages culinary arts students in food product development and culinary innovation. Under the guidance of culinary arts faculty and professional chefs, Food Lab students develop recipes and cooking techniques with the goal of creating customized food products for clients.

For its collaboration with the Food Lab, Aramark developed a creative brief that shaped the syllabus for a culinary arts course. Aramark then invited the students to the company's Philadelphia headquarters to work in the Innovation Center development kitchen where Aramark chefs shared their standard development process with the students. From providing hands-on opportunities to developing new recipes to spending time in a commercial kitchen, the chefs and students were deeply engaged in the learning process. This provided an enhanced learning experience for the students while also generating a deep and meaningful impact with the development chefs by giving them the opportunity to connect with new perspectives and to share their expertise and experience.

One graduate-level product development course created a set of menu items that have since been rolled into Aramark's vegetarian and vegan portfolio, becoming part of Aramark's larger effort to satisfy an increasing demand for plant-based meals. As a result of this partnership, three vegetarian sandwiches developed by Drexel students were piloted in Drexel's dining hall, a buffalo cauliflower wrap, a grilled Portobello mushroom sandwich, and a roasted beet salad and goat cheese sandwich, which are now also part of Aramark's menu database for their higher education, healthcare, and business dining clients.

#### *Drexel Co-op and Aramark*

Drexel is known for its co-op program, which enables students to explore career options and to gain real-world, paid experience in their fields ahead of graduation. During 2019, there has been significant effort by both organizations to identify a set of co-op opportunities throughout the

Aramark system. Given Aramark's scale and complexity as an organization, they are poised to become a key strategic partner for Drexel in this area.

Aramark currently employs two student co-ops onsite at Drexel's campus, and are looking to expand that number at their global headquarters. The goal is to add up to 10 positions in departments throughout the organization, including information technology, marketing, communications, accounting, and other areas. The positions support the corporate team and help develop future talent in Philadelphia. Aramark wants students to walk away from the experience with potential employment contacts in its college hire program, which offers resources like career counseling and resume advice, and hands-on experience in projects that are vital to the day-to-day functioning of Aramark's workplace.

Through this co-op arrangement with Aramark, one of the largest local employers in the Philadelphia market, Drexel is able to demonstrate the ways a traditional supplier relationship can be expanded and integrated with the different strategic institutional priorities. The benefits extend beyond student training: the university has a deeper array of co-op positions available to their students while Aramark gains access to a well-prepared local talent pipeline.

## **Conclusion**

For universities ready to move beyond direct institutional purchasing in their anchor strategies, this account offers a model for deepening a local anchor strategy in a way that also supports some of the institution's core priorities around teaching and research. For Drexel, the opportunity to collaborate on a mission with Aramark has helped launch a high-profile student and alumni-driven food insecurity project. Incorporating this major supplier relationship into the anchor strategy for local economic investment has netted access to a swath of new campus jobs for West Philadelphia residents, and has generated substantial spend with local food entrepreneurs. The relationship enriches student training through Aramark's work with the Drexel Food Lab while offering student diners a new array of healthful menu choices that have been developed by their own peers. Finally, the student co-op connections that are being established with Aramark offer a boost to student learning experiences and opportunities.

In the process of fostering a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the Drexel team, Aramark has observed that the company has been able to broaden the depth and breadth of its impact in Philadelphia by adding employment and purchasing opportunities and expanding on its community engagement and volunteerism activities. The work to support Sharing Excess adds value to Aramark's own food insecurity efforts. Aramark has benefited from the innovation of Drexel students, such as rolling new recipes into their menus, and it anticipates that developing a talent pipeline with Drexel will have consistent future payoffs. Finally, the process of building

out a mission-focused contract with Drexel has created an important template that Aramark can use with other university clients.

This analysis is limited to one university and one of its suppliers, and while this represents a powerful example, there is much potential for broadening the area of research. Comparative studies that consider different types of institutions would offer much to the anchor-mission movement. Drexel is a private university with the advantage of a great deal of agility in adjusting its purchasing policies, whereas state and state-affiliated university systems often have significant legislative constraints on purchasing. There is also a place for exploring the implications of this work with corporate suppliers who may not come to a university contract with a well-articulated corporate social responsibility or sustainable supply chain management agenda. In this scenario it will be important to ask: what is the capacity, and what tools are needed for achieving a meaningful contribution to an anchor strategy?

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