



TOP TAKEAWAYS

October 15th - 16th, 2025

Hosted by: Vanderbilt University

Meeting Summary

On October 15th-16th, 2025, 140 attendees representing 67 MCURC member institutions, sponsors, and research organizations gathered at Vanderbilt University for the 12th Annual All-Member Meeting. Over the course of the two and a half day meeting, [members](#) and [sponsors](#) gathered to discuss past and current MCURC research, literacy-building initiatives, dining innovations, and sourcing practices rooted in this year's theme, **"GROW: Growing Impact, Growing Our Future, and Growing Innovation."** It was a powerful gathering with a range of case studies, 6 new multi-site research project proposals, an **unforgettable breakfast creatively prepared by MCURC Executive Chefs**, and a myriad of best practices shared across institutions. MCURC members enjoyed a tour of the beautiful campus and a progressive lunch that impressed us all, and an entertaining pre-meeting tour featuring farm visits and a rollicking downtown Nashville food hall experience!

The dynamic keynote by visionary chefs [Michel Nischan](#) and [Sean Sherman](#) revealed how culinary platforms serve as powerful vehicles for systemic change, inspiring members to continue to transform dining spaces into learning environments while advancing equitable sourcing. They outlined actionable strategies for building resilience, including using institutional purchasing power to influence distributors, creating advance-pay and guaranteed contracts for small-scale farmers, and integrating Indigenous foodways into the mainstream dining sector through reputable resources and initiatives like [NATIFS](#) (the nonprofit organization Sean leads).

Throughout the meeting, members shared tangible research-based examples of the business case, local farming impact, and student interest in Menu of Change-aligned menus and initiatives on campus. Key themes throughout the meeting included taking small risks without getting too far ahead of your diners when starting new initiatives, and investing in your workforce through culinary and sustainability education to enact change on menus, sourcing, and food waste reduction.

Key Resources:

- MCURC's New [Research Portfolio!](#)
- 2025 [Annual Meeting Presentations](#) (member portal password: MCURCmember!)
- 2025 [Annual Meeting Schedule](#)
- 2025 [Annual Meeting Participant List](#)
- [MCURC Current Member Roster](#)
- 2025-2026 [Engagement Calendar](#)

Save the Dates!

- **November 12th: MCURC Day** - We invite every member institution to [participate](#) in this new annual program, created by the MCURC Executive Chefs group, in which we'll serve the same MOC-aligned,, trend-inspired dish. Stay tuned for details about how to participate and how to help amplify through marketing and social media efforts on your campus.
- **December 4th: Collective Impact Insights Exchange** - 12pm PST/3pm EST
Zoom Link [here](#).

Top Takeaways from the Meeting:

- **Recognize and Celebrate Your Culinary Workforce:** Investing in paid, on-the-job training – exemplified by the Vanderbilt Culinary Academy and recent MCURC employee engagement projects like FoodWISE – shows how culinary skills and knowledge directly address the professional development and retention challenges many operators face when implementing plant-forward menus and waste reduction efforts.
- **Small Local Sourcing Shifts Create Big Impact:** Even a small percentage of total purchasing spend dedicated to local food can create a significant economic impact in the region and make all the difference in a small farm's long-term financial stability. To support small farmers, institutions must acknowledge administrative hurdles and prioritize relationships over strict certifications, while considering food hubs to simplify logistics.
- **Improving Diet Quality through Diet Diversity:** The current MCURC multi-site research project focuses on operational and communication strategies to encourage students to adopt healthier, **plant-forward eating habits** by increasing the variety and consumption of **biodiverse, regional ingredients**. The diet diversity panel discussion highlighted successful models for marketing new ingredients in familiar formats, addressing procurement barriers through farmer relationships, and leveraging student engagement programs to break students' habitual eating habits and improve diet quality through dietary diversity.

- **The Power Plant Dining Model Yields Financial & Environmental Returns:** Vanderbilt's specialized dining hall, The Power Plant (Top-9 Allergen-Free, Plant-Forward) serves as a successful model for all MCURC members, showing that a Menus of Change-aligned dining model cut food costs by 26% and reducing animal protein usage by 38%. Importantly, the change to plant-forward increased total meals served by 73%, indicating strong student acceptance!
- **Data-Driven Behavioral Science is a Winning Nudge:** When assessing why a plant-forward dish does or does not get frequently selected by diners, it's essential to recognize what might be that dish's competition: What dishes are served next to or in the same meal period? The SNEAK Study demonstrated a novel behavioral economics approach that uses a "mathematical competition" model to build menus that drive healthy, sustainable choices. This method subtly and successfully reduces the carbon footprint and saturated fat content of menu offerings by nudging students toward healthier, more sustainable options through modeling what menu options to serve together.
- **Menu Simplicity Resonates with Gen Z:** Insights from the MCURC-Datassential Co-Creation Stage and the live student focus group confirmed that for new menu items to trend and resonate with Gen Z diners, simplicity is key. Bowls were identified as a winning platform to introduce new global flavors without overwhelming students with too many unfamiliar ingredients. The winning bowl concept will roll out on November 12th across campuses; sign up [here](#) to participate!
- **Operational Differentiation Drives Participation and Savings:** Vanderbilt found that differentiating dining hall concepts and operating hours, rather than offering one broad menu across all locations, led to substantial cost savings and dramatic increases in student participation in specialized concepts, such as a 900% increase in student participation after they transformed a regular residential dining hall into a dairy-free, Halal dining hall.
- **Closing the Research-Action Gap:** The core of the MCURC research pipeline is closing the gap between academic findings and operational implementation. Whenever campus dining professionals are introducing new initiatives (such as toolkits for changing menu descriptions or for changing the choice architecture in a dining hall), it's essential to engage staff and clearly share the 'why' behind the work with frontline teams, to ensure research successfully translates into real-world impact.
- **Students are the Best Messengers:** The Student Fellows Showcase highlighted the value of enlisting students as researchers. They serve as trusted messengers to their peers – the dining customers – and are key allies for campus research

projects and food literacy education initiatives.

- **Integrate Climate Education and Literacy:** Building student food literacy through classroom-based interventions is a powerful tool to change long-term eating habits. Storytelling about familiar foods can be an effective way to communicate how climate change impacts their immediate lives.
- **Leverage Existing MCURC Resources to Get Started:** As the new [MCURC Research Portfolio](#) illustrates, there is a treasure trove of toolkits, actionable research-backed strategies, and inspiring crowd-sourced culinary resources published throughout the past 12 years of work across MCURC members. Panelists shared how they continue to use MCURC operational resources on campus to drive change, encouraging member institutions to start small, introduce the initiatives at the beginning of a semester or term, and get cross-functional buy-in on campus before beginning to maximize impact and success.

For more information about the 2025 Annual Meeting, contact [Valentina Córdoba](#).