The “B Healthy” Healthy Campus Initiative at Binghamton University in New York is a cross-divisional and multi-departmental effort to make health and wellness an ingrained part of the campus community. “The ‘B Healthy’ idea started through some conversations as part of the university president’s Road Map to Premier Strategic Plan process,” said Cindy Cowden, senior associate director of Campus Recreational Services and chair of Binghamton’s Healthy Campus Initiative. “In one of the subcommittee meetings in 2012, the idea was thrown on the table about how to turn Binghamton University into the healthiest campus. Out of that Roadmap conversation, a committee was formed. The idea behind it was that the group would meet on a regular basis and pull all of the entities on campus that had some vested interest in increasing the visibility of health and wellness for students, faculty and staff, in a way that would make health and wellness part of the values of the institution.”

The Steering Committee comprises 15 different departments, from the Employee Assistance Program to Sodexo, the campus foodservice provider, to Residence Life and Housing. “Basically, we act as a collective to understand what is happening on campus in terms of promoting health and well-being; but it is also as an opportunity to brainstorm and talk about what issues or problems there might be, and how we can work together to solve them,” she said. “One of the things that we put out quite frequently about the Healthy Campus Initiative is that the initiative itself is not a programming group, meaning we don’t usually put out our own programming. What we try to do is provide assistance to or augment programs that are happening within the content areas on campus.”

The committee has worked with various entities across campus to make health and wellness part of the values and mission of the university itself. “By doing that, we want to reach students across the time that they are at the university, from the time that they are prospective students to the time they are graduating and leaving the university and moving on,” said Cowden.

The school was an early participant in the Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA), and is one of 38 colleges and universities who have signed on to its Healthier Campus Initiative. This initiative challenges campuses across the country to adopt guidelines around nutrition, physical activity and programming. The Healthier Campus Initiative was started in 2014 as part of PHA, which was created by First Lady Michelle Obama. Each college or university partner has committed to meet 23 guidelines — developed by PHA in collaboration with some of the nation’s leading nutrition, physical activity and campus wellness experts — around nutrition, physical activity and programming on campus.

“I always think that it is important to let people know that our ability to participate in PHA, and be where we are in terms of moving forward, is directly related to Sodexo’s willingness to work with us on that and make changes,” she said. “Without a foodservice provider that is willing to do that, I don’t think schools would be able to do the PHA. There is just too much.”

As expected, dining services on campus is a big part of the health and wellness message, and the university has worked closely with Sodexo to make the initiative successful.
A major part of the initiative is the recently introduced Plus1 program. “It is a pledge campaign where we are asking students and faculty and staff, but primarily students, to add one healthy option a day to their behaviors,” said Cowden. “That one healthy option could be adding one of our wellness meals, adding a fruit, veggie or whole grain to their current diet, or increasing their water intake. We have been doing a lot with the Plus1 campaign in terms of marketing it, helping students make pledges to do that.”

Sodexo used the PHA guidelines to help develop the wellness meals. “We have implemented those in all four of our resident dining halls at all meals seven days a week,” said Alexa Schmidt, registered dietitian with Sodexo. “It is highlighting making the healthy choice the easy choice for everyone who eats in those dining facilities, and that it is easy to create a wellness meal. You are choosing a whole-grain, a lean-meat or a lean-protein source, and adding a fruit and dairy beverage to create that balanced meal for optimal health and energy.”

To help students make the right choices, a wellness meal of the day is featured in the facilities and on a website. “The website highlights the wellness meal of the day and shows with a picture what it will look like when you go into the facility and build it on your own,” she said. “The wellness meal is always the first three or four pans on that entrée line so that they always know where they can find it. They can find a fruit of the day and maybe a glass of skim milk. It identifies that it is available in the dining hall. It is one wellness meal option, but they can also create their own.”

Health and Wellness Ambassadors are also on hand in the dining facilities to promote the meals and to help students create their own.

Another part of Plus1 is promoting fruits, vegetables and whole grains. “We have done a lot of programming and educational sessions about how you should increase your intake of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and where you can find them in our dining facilities,” said Schmidt. “Throughout all four resident dining halls we have clings that highlight where those items are available. The ambassadors play a big role by being in the dining halls five days a week trying to highlight what those items are. As we do our programming across campus, we are always trying to include fruits, veggies and whole grains in that campaign.”

She continued, “We recently did an ‘Are you Green?’ event and had a huge display of a variety of unique green vegetables and highlighted the benefits and gave everyone an opportunity to sample those items. We showed them different ways to cook these vegetables.”

The Plus1 Water campaign is the third aspect of the program. “In all of our dining facilities, we have our infused water of the day,” said Schmidt. “It has really become a popular place for people to fill up their water bottles and take them on the go. The flavor is always changing in all of the facilities every day. That is something that we are trying to promote in all of the resident dining facilities throughout campus to encourage them to avoid sugary beverages.”

The program is popular with the students. “By word of mouth, starting out since September until now, a lot of people are talking about the wellness meals and how they like that it is always available every meal,” she said. “They like that they can go to the website and see what the meal is ahead of time. Because they have been so well received, we are looking into expanding that into one of our retail facilities.”

Dining had always had a variety of healthy options available, but the B Healthy program allowed it to showcase them more. “This really gave us an opportunity to highlight it in a fashion that was making the healthy choice the easy choice,” said Schmidt. “We’ve always had lean meats and whole grains and fresh fruit and dairy, but it did give us a chance to add more variety. We took a look at what healthy items we offered, like whole grains and some of the lesser-known varieties.”

The health and wellness message is being sent out in many other ways beyond dining. Students — and their families — are learning about it even before they have decided to attend the university. “We have connected with the Admissions Department so the tour guides give pedometers to new families who are visiting the campus,” said Cowden. “They track their steps while they are touring the university. At the end of the tour, they talk about the Healthy Campus Initiative and look at how many steps were covered in that period of time. It sends a message to those prospective students that health and wellness is important at Binghamton University.”

The program is not just for students. “Campus Recreational Services developed a walking program called ‘Steps to B Healthy,’ open to students, faculty and staff, although it tends to be used more by faculty and staff,” said Cowden. “We run walking contests on a monthly basis where people keep track of steps and send them into the office and are eligible for individual awards, or they are vying for a larger gift certificate. We also do team contests on a regular basis where the team can win a healthy catered meeting that Sodexo sponsors. That has been really successful. In the first eight to 12 months, we had 195 faculty and staff who registered.”

What makes the program work well is the help from each department through the Healthy Campus Agents program. “We are recruiting faculty and staff from other departments on campus who are willing to be the healthy campus agent in their area,” she said. “That person acts as the liaison between the Healthy Campus Initiative committee and their department. They are the ones who are bringing the information to the people they work with most closely, providing health and wellness resources to their folks. They are also able to provide feedback to the committee on what faculty, staff and students in their area are most interested in seeing more work being done on. It has been a good liaisonship across the 158 departments on campus.”