

Welcome to the New School of Convenience

Our Lady of the Lake University in Texas boasts a first-of-its-kind on-campus convenience store *By Danielle Romano*



The Cyber Café opened in fall 2017 as a traditional convenience store. It began offering cashierless service in spring 2018.

COLLEGE STUDENTS TODAY are no different than those of yesteryears in that their busy, on-the-go lifestyles demand ease and convenience. What is different, however, is how their perspectives on ease and convenience have evolved, with students today demanding more from their on-campus experience and the way convenience is delivered to them.

Enter Cyber Café, a first-of-its-kind on-campus convenience store developed through a partnership between Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) in San Antonio and Chartwells Higher Education, a company dedicated to reinventing the on-campus dining experience.

Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the 1,200-square-foot OLLU Cyber Café is unique in that it is completely self-service, offering busy students a cashierless experience.

“Students tell us that they really like the variety available in the store and they appreciate the 24/7 access because it fits with their schedules,” said Shaun Comeaux, director of dining services for Chartwells Higher Education.

Of Chartwells’ 24 higher education accounts in Texas, Cyber Café is the first to provide 24/7 cashierless service, according to Comeaux.

A New Take on Tradition

The idea for Cyber Café arose when a new apartment-style residence hall with full kitchens opened on the OLLU campus earlier this year. Armed with the knowledge that students were seeking a store that offers extended hours to accommodate their schedules and an expanded assortment of grocery items for those who frequently cook for themselves, OLLU and Chartwells came together to convert the space that would eventually become Cyber Café.

It took six months to bring the concept to fruition. Members of OLLU and Chartwells’ IT staff worked together using technology already deployed on-campus to outfit the c-store. Swipe-card access technology, security cameras and cashier terminals used in other campus operations were modified for use in the new self-serve retail environment.

The six-month conversion process also included time to maximize and optimize the space, and install and test the in-store technology. The Cyber Café opened in fall 2017, but did not offer cashierless service until spring 2018.

Now, students access Cyber Café via a swipe-card access system using their OLLU ID. Once they’ve selected their items and



At a Glance Cyber Café

Location: Our Lady of the Lake University, 411 S.W. 24th St, San Antonio

Size: 1,200 square feet

Unique features: Self-service, cashierless experience; an expanded assortment of convenience, grocery, personal hygiene and cleaning products

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have their shopping lists ticked off, they scan and swipe their debit, credit or university dining card to pay.

While the self-service system goes by the honor system, Cyber Café is equipped and monitored with security cameras. Additionally, the store is managed by a Chartwells employee, who handles the inventory, orders, stocking and keeping the convenience store clean.

Meeting the Needs of Students & Faculty

“The students love it. It’s very close to all the dorms. You walk out your front door, grab whatever you need and go back to your room,” Comeaux commented. “There are almost 500 students in the OLLU residence halls who access the store. In addition, many of our commuter students and faculty and staff purchase items from the store.”

Serving approximately 2,500 students a week, Cyber Café carries everything a traditional convenience store would — from candy to snacks to packaged beverages — plus a few grocery additions. Packaged grocery items include in-house produced salads, sandwiches, fresh-cut fruit and healthy meal options. For those students who prefer to cook, they have their pick of fresh produce, meal kits, bacon, eggs, tofu and other fresh foods.

With the university’s new residence halls designed like small apartments — many with private bathrooms and kitchens — students can also purchase necessities at the store, such as personal hygiene items, beauty products, medicines and cleaning supplies.

According to Comeaux, some of the most popular products at Cyber Café are:

- Dasani bottled water;
- Smart Water;
- Flamin’ Hot Cheetos;
- Totino’s Pizza Rolls;
- Tofu;
- Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal; and
- Febreze air freshener.

Describing Cyber Café as “convenient, abundant, easy-to-use and high-tech,” Comeaux shared with *Convenience Store News* that Chartwells Higher Education is working on a similar store model at a few of its other 23 partner universities. **csn**



To pay, Cyber Café shoppers simply swipe their debit, credit or university dining card.