

Reinventing the YSU Store as a Retail Powerhouse and Hub of Community Pride

As a center of opportunity and community pride, Youngstown State University needed a college store that would serve as a vibrant gathering place and deliver the retail experiences today's students, parents, alumni and fans crave. The university transitioned bookstore operations to Barnes & Noble College (BNC) in 2016, partnering to build a branded mecca in a central location on campus. The reinvented store and its refreshed selection of branded apparel and general merchandise create a sense of community, drawing people in to shop, study and spend time with friends. For recruiting tours, the pops of red and visual display of Penguin pride also make the store a can't-miss stop. By FY20, the store saw an 86% increase in GM, café and convenience sales from prior to its transition to BNC.

CHALLENGE

Youngstown State University (YSU) sits in the heart of downtown Youngstown, a dynamic presence in northeastern Ohio and a source of pride for the local community. Known as an “institution of opportunity”—on campus and beyond—it offers not just academic degrees and career preparation, but athletics and events the entire community rallies around.

President Jim Tressel spent 15 years at YSU earlier in his career before returning in 2014 as the university's ninth president. In the intervening years, the university began to see changes in its student population, serving a growing number of residential students in addition to commuters. President Tressel quickly assembled a diverse group of students to discuss how YSU could better meet their needs and revitalize the campus. The students identified three key priorities: fix the streets, offer more apartment-style living and bring more retail and amenities to campus.

Barnes & Noble College (BNC) offered President Tressel and YSU a meaningful opportunity to expand the university's retail and amenities, bringing a rich history, strong brand recognition and unmatched retail expertise. In addition to delivering affordable, accessible course materials, BNC would transform the YSU college store into a vibrant, spirit-filled hub offering a comfortable, convenient place to gather. The new store, complete with Starbucks café, would be the ideal destination to study, meet up with friends and shop the store's expanded selection of branded apparel and general merchandise (GM).

In its reimagined role, the YSU college store would deliver the retail experiences today's shoppers crave, create a unique environment to support recruitment and inspire students and community members alike to spend more time on campus.

“We listen to our students, and they were looking at other schools, asking ‘Everyone else has a Barnes & Noble, why don’t we have one? Everyone has a Chipotle.’ All communities enjoy their unique neighborhood spots, but they also want national brands with quality names. I think these additions have been a positive boost for our campus. It began as the students’ idea, and they’ve really enjoyed it.”

– President Jim Tressel, YSU

SOLUTION

YSU transitioned bookstore operations to BNC in 2016, and in 2017, the partners completed construction of the new, 18,000-ft² college store. The new space and refreshed e-commerce site have helped YSU deliver on student priorities and offered exciting ways to engage alumni, parents, fans and the entire Youngstown community.

Reimagined Store Experience

The new YSU campus store is a branded mecca in the heart of campus, celebrating Penguin Pride at every turn. In addition to an infusion of new, YSU-branded apparel and spirit gear, the store offers a wide variety of school supplies and convenience items, as well as a café for fueling up and community spaces to meet, study or just relax. It delivers the fun and exciting retail experience today’s shoppers expect while serving as a destination to unite the campus and community.

“Refreshing the store has been great from the top down. With our expanded general merchandise, we now offer YSU apparel and gear people have wanted for years, down to decorative items and desktop accessories, featured in pop-up shops that drive traffic through the store. You see pops of red everywhere!” said John Young, Executive Director–Auxiliary Services, YSU.

A more accessible location was important for the university; its previous facility was convenient for anyone already on campus, but parking was a challenge, and it was difficult to make a quick visit. The new store sits at a strategic crossroads on campus, adjacent to student housing as well as athletic venues and facilities. The location is conducive to foot traffic – on game days and school days – and offers easy access to parking and public transportation.

“The café has been well received, and people are drawn to the inviting outdoor patio space. We don’t have a Starbucks on every corner, so it was a welcome addition for everyone in Youngstown,” said Young. “People stop in for coffee, and they can grab snacks, toiletries or cleaning products while they’re there. There are just so many reasons and opportunities to engage students, alumni and the community in this space.”

Athletics

The new YSU college store also serves as a resource for the university’s athletics programs and a vital recruitment tool.

“In recruiting, impression is everything. We want our recruits to visualize their experience at YSU. That’s why one of our first stops on recruitment tours is the new college store. You won’t find more Ys and penguins anywhere else on campus – it really embodies the pride in our school,” said Jerrod Calhoun, Head Coach, Men’s Basketball, YSU.

“Our stop lasts for 10 or 15 minutes, talking about the school, our program and even the store itself, where we have events for players and fans. We want those recruits and their families to really feel the passion and the importance of YSU, and you get that feeling at the college store.”

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

- **Founded:** 1908
- **Enrollment:** 12,756
- **Location:** Halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh
- **Penguin Athletics:** 4 NCAA football championships + 27 other conference titles since 1995



The same sense of pride draws alumni and fans into the store when they return to YSU. The new space allows the school not only to deliver the branded apparel and spirit gear these audiences crave, but also to reinforce and strengthen their connections to the university.

“Our Penguins fans are diehard. In the first year on campus, we went to the national football championships for our division. The outpouring of support was amazing—we were overrun with people placing orders from down the street to Las Vegas to Hawaii,” said Heather White, Store Manager, YSU. “Here in the store, we see some families who come in every week, and then we’ll see entire families or groups of friends who are coming back for the first time in years, so excited to watch their Penguins play. You can tell when it’s their first time in the new store—they’re just blown away. Everyone’s a kid on Game Day!”

Off the field, the college store team takes pride in supporting student-athletes’ entire YSU experience, not just from a spirit standpoint, but academically as well.

“Last fall, we had the entire football team order their course materials through our website, then we delivered the orders to the Athletic Office. The players’ course materials were in their team lockers when they reported for training. It was one less thing they had to worry about, because all of their time is spoken for. We want them to succeed academically, so we want to make the course material process as easy as possible,” added White.

“The college store is now a showpiece. It’s right next to where everyone tailgates, so people come through the college store. Whenever people come to campus to reconnect with the school and their friends, we’re now part of that experience – by virtue of proximity and the beautiful place we built.”

– John Chaump, Regional Manager, BNC

RESULTS

The new YSU college store has received rave reviews since it opened, with increased traffic in the store’s new location – and increased revenue. In the first five years after transitioning to BNC, the store saw an overall 86% increase in GM sales. This includes online sales, which grew YOY by 19% in FY19 and 6% in FY20 with the store’s upgraded e-commerce site.

The college store is only one part of the continued revitalization happening on campus, which includes ongoing work to reduce traffic on the street where the store is located. Ultimately, the street will be an attractive, pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare with green space and an autonomous shuttle that will make it even easier to visit the college store and other campus locations. Even as YSU continues making improvements, the store has established itself as a lively presence and begun building a greater sense of community.

“We always said that Youngstown was a city that happened to have a university, but now Youngstown State is a university that is contiguous with its city,” said President Tressel. “The college store has transformed the campus. It’s a stopping point – I bump into people there all the time. It’s really turned into a destination.”

“Partnering with Barnes & Noble College has been a great thing for us.”

OVERALL SALES GROWTH

FY15–FY20

86%↑

ONLINE SALES GROWTH

FY19

19%↑

FY20

6%↑

For more information visit www.bncollegesolutions.com