

## ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY WATTERSON COMMONS NORMAL, IL



The renovation of Watterson Commons, completed in August 2023, revitalized the largest dining center at Illinois State University, serving over 8,000 students daily. Originally prompted by a flooring replacement effort, the project quickly expanded into a comprehensive overhaul aimed at improving customer flow and operational efficiency. Designed and implemented over three phases—spanning two summers and a winter break—the dining center remained operational throughout the project.

The redesign addressed major flow and operational challenges left unaddressed in a prior renovation. To create better circulation, walls were removed, and serving stations were repositioned to balance traffic and reduce bottlenecks during peak times. A diverse and strategic mix of new concepts, including a visible burrito station with ample queue space and a separate allergen-friendly “neighborhood,” provided students with more accessible and popular options. Other self-sustaining concepts, such as salad and deli stations, were placed near the entrance for convenience, supported by walk-in refrigeration. 10 main serving platforms with fresh bakery and dessert stations offered variety while improving the overall student experience.

### Details

Opening Date: August 2023  
Equipment Cost: \$2,000,000

Peak Meal Volume: 8,000 students daily; 3,500 at lunch  
Project Size: 12,000 SF

### Scope

The renovated Watterson Commons features automated entry gates, diverse serving options, allergen-friendly area, and strategically placed self-sustaining stations to enhance efficiency and flow. Streamlined operations allow the dining center to handle increased volume without additional staffing.

Watterson Commons introduced several unique features to enhance its functionality. Automated entry gates, allowing students to tap their ID cards for seamless access, cut down entry lines during peak hours and reduced the need for cashiers. Ventless equipment, including high-speed sandwich presses, streamlined food preparation and increased throughput, while backloaded bakery stations ensured staff could restock efficiently during busy periods. Despite serving even more students post-renovation, staffing levels remained consistent, showcasing the operational efficiency achieved through thoughtful design.

The project emphasized sustainability through efficient delivery and packaging solutions. Furniture and equipment were delivered with reduced materials, minimizing waste and expediting installation. These conscious efforts, paired with advanced equipment and deliberate design choices, allowed Watterson Commons to not only meet the rising needs of Illinois State’s student body but to do so with a lasting and responsible footprint.

