Today’s university student demands choice and flexibility with their dining experiences. At Northern Kentucky University, the Norse Commons Renovation addresses these demands by transforming what felt like a high school cafeteria into a contemporary dining hall for a university with a maturing brand.

Prior to the renovation, spaces were segregated, circulation was confusing, and daylight was secondary. Cleary defined design solutions addressed these issues, while still meeting the limitations of a small budget and schedule that was restricted to the summer.

Casual, interactive, quiet, and communal dining experiences are defined through aesthetic and experiential changes. Lighting, acoustics, and volume transform between spaces while diverse seating options add variety. A shift to presentation style cooking provides additional transparency while suggesting freshness to students who dine at the Commons as much as 4 times a day, 7 days a week.

Walls and rooms were removed to create spaces that interact and optimize daylight. Perforated metal sliding doors continue transparency throughout during off hours and the minimal material palette emphasizes the impact of daylight. Ash siding salvaged from emerald ash borer infested trees adds warmth at select locations and a perforated ‘NKU’ sculpture separates communal and quiet dining. Intended to evolve over time, students are encouraged to post objects on this metal canvas sculpture to build a ‘Norse’ tradition.

The renovated Commons has been well received and is now included on campus recruitment tours.