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Shenandoah University secures \$100K grant for commercial kitchen

Star staff report

Jun 11, 2026



The facility will be established in Shenandoah University's "Buzzzins" dining location — the site of a former restaurant — in Vaden Campus Commons, and will also provide hands-on educational opportunities for Shenandoah's students.

Provided photo

Shenandoah University has been awarded a \$100,000 Growth and Opportunity for Virginia (GO Virginia) grant to begin planning a commercial kitchen and culinary hub to support entrepreneurship and growth in the Northern Shenandoah Valley's food and beverage industry, according to a media release from the university.

The project, led by Shenandoah University Director of Nutrition and Dietetics Tammy Wagner and developed in collaboration with area localities, "will provide vital infrastructure and business support, lowering the barrier to entry for small-scale food and beverage entrepreneurs through a shared-use, licensed kitchen facility," the release states. "This will enable small producers to scale their operations beyond direct-to-consumer sales and create jobs to strengthen and diversify the regional economy."

The facility will be established in Shenandoah University's "Buzzzins" dining location — the site of a former restaurant — in Vaden Campus Commons, and will also provide hands-on educational opportunities for Shenandoah's students.

A feasibility study related to the project, which engaged 37 industry professionals and surveyed 141 stakeholders — including local farmers, restaurants, distributors and business owners — highlighted a need for a facility that addresses challenges like fair pricing, consistent volume and distribution logistics, according to the release. Notably, 94% of farmers expressed interest in collaborating with a new food hub, and nearly 50% of food businesses want to use a commercial kitchen.

Shenandoah's planned commercial kitchen and culinary hub will be enhanced by the university's Hub for Innovators, Veterans and Entrepreneurs (HIVE), which will provide services such as programming, mentoring and networking opportunities "to help ensure the

success, growth and sustainability of small farms and businesses and alleviate the pressures of marketing, sales, distribution and regulatory compliance," the release states

In addition to engaging local businesses and support organizations, Shenandoah University will work with a consultant over the 12-month planning period, culminating in a detailed, data-driven strategic business plan and HIVE curricular plan to outline future steps in the facility's launch.

An advisory council of individuals from the Winchester Economic Development Authority (EDA), Frederick County EDA, Shenandoah County Tourism and Economic Development, Warren County Administrator's Office, the Shenandoah Community Capital Fund, Aramark (Shenandoah University's dining services partner) and two area businesses — Sexi-Mexi in Winchester and Flour to Fork in Woodstock — will facilitate input from stakeholders, ensure cohesion across the Northern Shenandoah Valley, and help avoid duplicating the efforts of similar initiatives in other parts of the region.

The \$100,000 planning grant awarded to Shenandoah University was part of more than \$15.3 million in GO Virginia funding that Gov. Abigail Spanberger announced in April. Collectively, the GO Virginia grants will fund initiatives that will train over 6,000 Virginians and create more than 600 new jobs, according to a press release from the governor's office.

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