

## Introduction

The Dining Proposal Committee was created six weeks ago by the Undergraduate Association Senate. We were charged with the following goals:

- Examine the current dining system at MIT, including menus, hours, locations, pricing, perceived value, sustainability, etc;
- Review all available data on students' current dining habits and dining preferences;
- Assess the impact of retail operations and other external factors on residential dining;
- Recommend a comprehensive program that meets the needs of the MIT community.

We accomplished these goals by working together as peers and sharing as much information as possible. We posted meeting minutes, data, and analysis summaries on our web site. We created a public mailing list so others could participate in our discussions. And we responded thoughtfully to all ideas and concerns brought forth by members of the MIT community.

## Summary of Recommendations

- Short Term
  - Sponsor a grab-and-go breakfast program; let participation and implementation be decided by each living group
  - Move food trucks closer to main campus
  - Offer quality sandwich/salad bar with weight-based pricing
  - Close the dining hall in McCormick
  - Replace House Dining with a discounted declining balance program; participation still mandatory for residents of dining hall dorms
- Long Term
  - Echo short term recommendations
  - Create a central dining hall with more variety, longer hours, and AYCE dinner option
  - Close the dining halls in Baker and Simmons, leave Next and NW-35 open
  - Make declining balance program optional for everyone
  - Reclaim control of the dining system from third party vendors

## **Peer University Comparisons**

We evaluated the current dining system at MIT against three universities. We chose to assess dining programs at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton Universities because of similarities in the size of the undergraduate student body, stature in the academic community, and region of the United States (for resource price comparison). Our research included compiling all of the available dining options, prices, facilities and hours of operation, and comparing these different plans to the House Dining program at MIT. We concluded that, while there are aspects of these plans that are worth consideration, none of the dining systems at the aforementioned universities would meet the needs and wishes of the student body at MIT.

### ***Harvard***

The Harvard University Dining System (HUDS) is a self-operated food service, which serves 25,000 meals per day to the Harvard community with a staff of 650. HUDS consists of 13 AYCE residential dining facilities, plus a Kosher kitchen and 14 on-campus retail options. In general, Harvard dining halls are open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day of the week, with additional “brain breaks” on school nights (S-R), which are late-night self-serve snack bars. With the exception of freshmen, who must eat in Loker Commons or Annenberg, residents can eat at most dining halls for most meals. All students that live in Harvard dormitories are required to be enrolled in the meal plan, which includes 21 meals per week at a cost of \$4982 per year [cite]. The meal plan also includes \$65 of BoardPlus, which is a declining balance that can be used at participating on-campus restaurants or for additional meals in the dining halls. A student cannot purchase more BoardPlus, and unused BoardPlus does not transfer to new terms. Students can use Crimson Cash, similar to TechCash, at several retail facilities both on and off campus.

A system similar to HUDS would not meet the needs of the MIT community. MIT students want the ability to cook for themselves, eat at FSILGS, frequent off campus restaurants, or utilize the dining halls, and a mandatory meal plan does not satisfy the diverse needs of the community. The Harvard meal plan is also substantially more expensive than the cost of cooking for oneself [cite].

## ***Yale***

The Yale University Dining System (YUDS) is also self-operated, since the university chose to discontinue their contract with Aramark in 2008 [cite]. YUDS offers 12 residential dining halls, Commons Dining (a central dining location), student-run butteries, and 6 on-campus restaurants. Yale dining facilities are open for breakfast and lunch Monday through Friday, with a brunch option on the weekend, and dinner is offered every night. All on-campus residents must choose one of the 5 offered meal plans, though freshmen are required to purchase the Full or Anytime meal plans, which offer unlimited or 21 meals per week, and are priced at \$5122 and \$4860 per year, respectively. The Kosher meal plan, also \$4860 per year, offers 21 meals per week. The Any 14 and Any 10 meal plans allow students to eat any 14 or 10 meals per week in the dining facilities, and are priced at \$4860 and \$3780 per year, respectively. For off-campus students, Yale also offers a 5 meal plan, at \$1430 per year, which allows students to buy lunch at the Commons dining hall only. All YUDS meal plans offer Flex Points to be used at select local retail venues, and also allow students to transfer board meals to on-campus retail facilities at variable transfer rates. Similar to MIT, Yale also offers Eli Bucks, usable at dining or retail facilities, and Campus Cash, usable at on-campus retail locations.

Though YUDS offers much more variety than the Harvard plan, this system would still fail to meet the needs of MIT students, as meal plans are mandatory and students do not have the option to eat at FSILGs or cook for themselves without incurring losses. The YUDS plans are also more expensive than the average cost of an MIT student's annual estimated food consumption [cite]. We do believe, however, that the option to apply meal plan benefits (at MIT, the House Dining discount) to on-campus retail venues would be popular among students.

## ***Princeton***

The Princeton University Dining Services (PUDS) is also operated by the university. PUDS offers 4 residential dining halls, university-managed cooperatives, private eating clubs, and 5 retail facilities on campus. Dining halls are open for breakfast/brunch and dinner every day of the week, and for lunch Monday through Friday. Meal plan options for students vary by class year and housing: freshmen and sophomores must live in one of 6 residential colleges and

participate in one of 3 meal plans. PUDS offers underclassmen unlimited meals at \$5340 per year, 235 meals per semester at \$5127 per year, or 190 meals per semester at \$4913 per year. Upperclassmen have the option of these three meal plans, a 95 meals per semester plan (\$2937 per year, plus an additional 30 meals per semester free), cooperatives that range from \$1000-1200 per year, cooking for themselves in kitchens (known as “independents”), or joining a privately run eating club. Eating clubs cost on the order of \$7200 per year [cite], but also include use of house facilities.

Again, we find the variety offered at Princeton to be closer to the desires of MIT students, but the system of mandatory meal plans for freshmen and sophomores would simply not be suitable at MIT. Not only do students of all class years want variety and options, but independent living groups and fraternal organizations also use house dinners as an integral part of the recruiting process. Neither Yale, Harvard, nor Princeton has university-recognized Greek organizations, so mandatory dining is not as big of a problem. At MIT, however, mandatory meal plans would significantly weaken FSILG communities. We cannot recommend that any of the compared plans for implementation at MIT.

## **Overview of MIT's Current System**

MIT does not have a traditional dining system. Unlike many schools, MIT does not offer programs that give students a fixed number of meals per week to be used for breakfast, lunch, or dinner at various dining halls. Instead, students generally cook for themselves in dorm kitchens, eat in Fraternities, Sororities, and Independent Living Groups (FSILGs), or eat in one of four dorm-based dining halls (Baker, McCormick, Next, and Simmons). All of MIT's dining halls are located on the west side of campus. House Dining membership (hereafter abbreviated HDM), which offers a 50% discount on meals purchased in a dining hall, costs \$300 per semester<sup>(1)</sup>. HDM is mandatory for students who live in a dorm with a dining hall; other students may enroll voluntarily, but HDM is not required for purchasing meals.

Dorms without dining halls (and McCormick) are equipped with full kitchens within each basic living group (which may be an entry, a floor, or some similar division). Dorms with dining halls generally have very limited kitchen facilities.

## Problems With the Current System

The biggest problem with MIT's current dining system is the House Dining program. Students tend to view the \$300 mandatory House Dining membership fee as exorbitant. In fact, based on the average of 2.7 meals per week (Table 16), the average price (including 50% discount) of \$5 per meal (Table 49), the \$300 per semester HDM fee, and a 15 week semester [cite], we estimate that House Dining members pay an average of \$2.41 more per meal than they would without HDM [cite]. This brings the actual average price to \$12.41 per meal for House Dining members. Yet, even with this high cost, the campus dining system struggles to maintain financial sustainability.

The dining halls create a total deficit of about \$500,000 per year. Half of that deficit is subsidized by more profitable aspects of the dining system, such as catering and retail operations. The other half is passed along to students via the HDM fee [cite].

Other issues with the current MIT dining system include lack of variety within dining halls and no conveniently located "All you care to eat" (AYCE) option.

## Interesting Statistics

The following information is based on data from a campus-wide dining survey that was conducted by the Blue Ribbon Committee on Dining in April, 2008.

- Only 10% of students indicated that they do not think about health and nutrition when eating, illustrating that the remaining 90% of the student body cares about nutrition. However, only 25% said they eat balanced meals throughout the day (Table 58).
- The majority of students who cook for themselves generally purchase the necessary ingredients off campus; Star Market and Trader Joe's combined make up 66%, whereas LaVerde's and MacGregor Convenience combined make up 7% (Table 24).
- Of undergraduate and graduate students, 52% prepare dinner for themselves two or more times per week; 21% of students get dinner from House Dining or an FSILG two or more times per week; 20% of students get dinner from an on-campus café two or more times per week; and 14% of students get dinner from an off campus restaurant or

convenience/grocery store two or more times per week (Table 15).

- Of students who prepare their own dinner, 82% do so because of costs (Table 18). The primary reason students purchase dinner on campus is convenience (Table 44). Students buy food off campus for improved quality and variety (Table 34).
- While 49% of students think MIT should offer an AYCE option (Table 66), only 7% would prefer to get all their meals from an AYCE facility (Table 68). This suggests support for a facility that offers both AYCE and *à la carte* meals.

## Principles

### ***Mandatory Dining***

MIT students are perfectly capable of making their own decisions regarding how, where, and when they want to eat. Therefore, we strongly emphasize that there should be absolutely no mandatory plans when it comes to dining. There should certainly be meal plans available to students who want them, but they should be optional.

We understand that many parents want their children to be on a meal plan and this presents motivation for a mandatory meal plan. However, we believe that MIT should let students and their parents decide together what is best and whether to opt in or out - there is no need for MIT to take away a student's freedom by requiring something simply because parents insist.

It is worth mentioning here that we consider all classes to be full members of the MIT student community. As such, we oppose any meal plan that is mandatory for freshmen, and we oppose any meal plan that requires varying levels of commitment based on class year.

### ***Kitchens***

Even if MIT is able to establish an ideal dining system, there will still be times when students want to prepare their own food, regardless of whether they are on a dining plan, in a dining hall dorm, or off campus. MIT students would like to always have the option of preparing their own food in kitchens. There should be sufficient kitchen facilities provided in every living group that wishes to have them. Providing substandard or insufficient kitchen facilities is not

acceptable. We define sufficient kitchen facilities as the following items shared among a maximum of 20 people:

- 1 microwave
- 1 large refrigerator
- 1 oven
- 1 stove with at least 4 heating elements
- 15 sq. ft. of counter space
- 1 kitchen sink with food disposal

### ***Sustainable Food***

Students are concerned about the environmental and social impacts of MIT's food system. Given equal or lesser costs, we would like to see MIT choose locally-grown food and food that meets environmental and quality standards like organics, fair trade, and Marine Stewardship Council-certified fish and seafood. Food service-related waste should be minimized, with composting instituted campus-wide and food packaging avoided whenever possible.

## **Short Term Recommendations**

### ***Breakfast***

Do not open residential dining halls for breakfast. People would not travel to other dorms for breakfast, so the operating cost would be roughly equivalent to that of dinner, with less revenue.

Instead, have Campus Dining sponsor a grab-and-go breakfast program. This would provide a fast, nutritious, cheap breakfast for students on their way to class. It would be the responsibility of Campus Dining to provide an infrastructure that dorms and living groups could purchase. This infrastructure would include:

- Physical devices to store and present the food at appropriate temperatures and sanitation levels

- Fresh food, which should be ordered remotely and delivered to the dorm/living group

Food delivery would be coordinated through Campus Dining (preferably via a web interface).

A variety of options should be available for delivery, including but not limited to:

- Fruits
- Healthy snacks
- Bagels
- Yogurt
- Cereal
- Milk
- Orange juice
- Apple juice

Each living group would need to decide:

- If they will offer a grab-and-go breakfast program at all
- Whether the program will be optional or mandatory for its residents
- What types of breakfast food will be ordered
- Whether breakfast food will be offered as AYCE, single visit unlimited, *à la carte*, or some other limit per meal
- Hours of operation and the staffing of the breakfast program to provide organization and cleanliness (this might follow the format of desk workers, or it might follow the model of dorm facilities staff)

The living group would be responsible for collecting revenue from its residents and using it to pay Campus Dining for the food delivery service.

## ***Lunch***

Do not open residential dining halls for lunch. Over 70% of students are in Zone 3 (main academic buildings) before eating lunch (Tables 11,12), so residential dining halls would not receive enough business to offset the extra cost of being open for lunch.

Move the existing food trucks to a more central location (i.e., next to Stata) . Given the location of students during the lunch hour, this would improve access to variety and low-cost options.

Add a salad/sandwich/fruit bar with good quality and weight-based pricing in the Student Center. A good example to follow would be Damon's in the Kendall food court, which has a \$0.35/oz salad bar.

### ***Dinner***

Close the residential dining facility in McCormick Hall. This facility is rumored to create the largest deficit of any dining hall on campus; the nearest neighboring dining hall (Baker) is a very short walk away; and kitchens are already available, allowing residents to prepare their own meals. Closing the dining hall in McCormick would ease the financial strain on the current system while still providing the opportunity for its residents to eat in a conveniently located dining hall. It would also reduce the number of students who are required to buy a meal plan they may not even use.

Replace the House Dining program with a declining balance program (Dining Dollars). Dining Dollars would be available for purchase only at the beginning of each semester and would not be rolled over or refunded. Residents of dorms with dining halls would be required to purchase a minimum of 300 Dining Dollars per semester. As an incentive for further commitment, add a bonus to the Dining Dollars account based on how much students purchase (see table below). One advantage this offers over the current system is that it does not require menus with separate prices.

<b>Dining Dollars Purchased</b>	<b>Bonus Received</b>	<b>Total Dining Dollars</b>
\$800	\$200	\$1,000
\$750	\$150	\$900
\$675	\$75	\$750
\$400	\$20	\$420
\$300	\$0	\$300

The three highest bonuses are based on estimates of the discounts realized by students with HDM who currently eat five, six, and seven meals per week in a dining hall.

## **Long Term Recommendations**

To be clear, unless explicitly stated otherwise in this section, all short term recommendations apply to the long term as well.

### ***Open***

Create a large, centrally-located dining hall in either the Student Center, W-1, or a new building to be constructed in the space behind Kresge Auditorium that is currently a parking lot. Any displaced vendors that still appeal to students (e.g., potentially Subway) should be relocated. If the dining hall is constructed in W-1, it should not require the removal of kitchens anywhere in the dorm.

### ***Close***

Close the residential dining facilities in Baker House and Simmons Hall. Leave NW-35 and Next House Dining open to serve the needs of NW-35, Next, and Simmons residents who are normally in their dorms during dinner hours.

Allow the residents of McCormick, Baker, and Simmons to determine how they will use the space previously occupied by their dining halls. Popular options might include converting the space into a lounge, creating or expanding a community cooking area, or setting up student-run late night cafés similar to the Butteries at Yale [cite].

### ***Dining Dollars***

Allow all students, regardless of residence, to purchase any amount of Dining Dollars they see fit (including zero). Accept Dining Dollars as a method of payment at the Forbes Cafe in the Stata Center. Restructure the bonus system to better match the number of meals available and the discontinuation of mandatory commitments. This would create incentive for students in dorms without dining halls to participate, but they would retain freedom of choice.

## ***Hours***

At a minimum, the central dining hall should be open for breakfast (8:30am-10:30am), lunch (11:30am-2:30pm), and dinner (6pm-10pm) on weekdays. Those are the hours we consider to be optimal in conjunction with class schedules, athletics, and students' nocturnal tendencies. The dining hall should also be open on weekends, with similar but shorter hours.

## ***Options***

All meals at the central dining hall should be available *à la carte*. "All you care to eat" (AYCE) meals should also be available during dinner. Students tend to skip lunch more than they skip dinner (Table 15), so if an AYCE option is added in a central location, it should be available for dinner rather than lunch.

The central dining hall should offer ethnic diversity and a wide variety of options, including a sandwich bar, salad bar, pasta bar, grill, stir-fry, etc. Prepared dishes should be healthy, balanced meals with an ample selection of halal, kosher, vegan, and vegetarian foods.

## ***Impact***

There was once a dining hall in the Student Center, which was ultimately shut down [cite]. Should we expect that the proposed central dining hall would meet a similar demise? No. The old Lobdell cafeteria was competing directly with several residential dining halls. Because of the locations of the dining halls in the proposed system, the central dining hall would be a consolidation aimed at reducing costs, not a conflict with existing options.

A centralized dining facility should reduce operating costs and expand the customer base, making the dining program more sustainable. It would be able to offer better quality food at lower prices, a wider selection of options, and more flexible hours, thereby addressing most of the current complaints with MIT's dining system. It would also create more opportunities for faculty-student interaction and campus-wide social engagement.

## **Valuable History**

In 1998, the MIT Institute Dining Review requested the creation of the Office of Campus

Dining [cite]. The following were some of its goals:

- Dining hall hours will be changed. In general, the halls will serve dinner seven nights a week during 2.5-3 hour time blocks, including during IAP (a few halls would be kept open during the summer, as well).
- Support for Personal Cooking
- Meal plans will be made available to the MIT community. These plans will offer packages of meals at significant savings over the regular a la carte prices. To further relieve financial burdens on students, vendors will be required to offer low-priced "value meals." These meals will include an entree, side dishes, and a beverage. They will be full, healthy meals (not "junk food") and will cost under \$5.00. Mandatory, system-wide meal plans will not be implemented. The residents of a house certainly may require meal plans to build a house dining program, however.
- Meals will be available to students 24 hours a day, either through open facilities or through delivery services.

Ever since, there have been countless committees and resources focused on solving the dining problem. The Office of Campus Dining has achieved some of its goals, but dining halls are not financially sustainable and the concept of "value meals" was lost somewhere along the way. It is surprising and unacceptable that in all this time the Office of Campus Dining has not managed to find a dining system that is sustainable, healthy, and affordable to students.

Over the last 50 years, MIT has tried most of the suggestions that will come out of any report that this committee or the Blue Ribbon Committee on Dining could publish. None of these seem to have provided a sustainable and agreeable solution to the dining issue. This raises the question of whether there is something wrong on a more basic level. Prior to 1957, MIT had a self-run dining system. In 1957, the Institute signed a contract with Stouffers as a third party dining service, and it has been signing deals with third party vendors to run campus dining ever since. Maybe it is time for MIT to revisit the idea of self-operated dining. Although this would add logistical overhead costs, it would cut a lot of operating costs – possibly enough to keep dining halls from going into the red.

Many of the problems with the current dining system are passively dismissed by the Office of Campus Dining because they cannot control the operations of third party providers. Having a

self-operated dining system would enable MIT to have full control over when, where, and how dining options are provided. We urge the Institute to consider this as a long term strategy.

## Citations

Table numbers refer to the tables of data from the Blue Ribbon Committee's 2008 dining survey. The survey data can be found in various formats at <http://ua.mit.edu/dpc/>.

(i) <http://web.mit.edu/dining/plans/membership.html>

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)

(v)

(vi)

(vii)

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