

MIT Blue Ribbon Committee on Dining April 2, 2009 Meeting Summary

In attendance:

Anne Wilson
Benjamin Epstein
Chris Hoffman
Donna Denoncourt
James Torres
John McDonald
Kate Delaney
Kathryn Beaudry
Mike Bennie
Nan Gu
Noah Jessop
Rich Berlin
Suzanne Flynn
Josh Kastorf (taking minutes)

The Committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

UA DPC Update

A Committee member who is also a UA officer updated the BRC on the UA Dining Proposal Committee. He said they have received the survey data in a usable format from Denoncourt and the consultants. They were looking through the data and planned to meet that night to discuss. A BRC member asked if the DPC appreciates the factors other than the survey data that have gone into the BRC's decision-making. A UA-BRC member replied that he felt they appreciate the whole process.

Draft Report

Denoncourt reminded the Committee that at the previous meeting, members had agreed to draft portions of the final report organized around the themes and statements that the Committee had established. She received drafts from some but not all members. She asked the Committee to discuss the missing sections and come up with 3-5 points that could be incorporated into each.

Theme: Location and Availability

Members suggested that this section discuss:

- The geographic "zones" and the need to increase coverage of campus with dining venues. A member noted that the survey showed nearly equal demand for an AYCE facility in zones 2 or 3.
- The need for more late-night options, especially for athletes. A member noted that the survey showed interest in both breakfast and late-night meals, but more interest in late-night. The Committee discussed the need to provide "real meals" late-night, not just fast food, and ideas for how to accomplish that.

- The possibility of adding a new dining facility in the long-term.
- The need for more total venue capacity (which could mean dining halls or retail.)
- The concern that students are reluctant to eat in dining halls that are part of a dorm in which they don't live.

Theme: Community

A member who was working on drafting this section noted that it will be a major piece of the report. She said a lot will hinge on how the Committee defines “community”. MIT not only has a diversity of communities, it has a diversity of definitions of community.

The Committee discussed the need for spaces that facilitate “impromptu interaction”—ie, places where community members may run into someone they know, and where overlap between communities will take place. They discussed the importance of faculty and students eating together, and noted the current lack of venues on campus that seem appropriate for this type of interaction.

A member suggested that W1 could be a venue for this type of interaction. Another member pointed out that existing dining halls could facilitate this type of interaction if the dining areas had separate entrances from the residential areas, and there were systems in place to provide security for the residences. He felt that Simmons may have been designed to be used in this way.

One member explained that she felt there needed to be a balance between mixing communities and strengthening existing communities—she did not want to “sacrifice depth for breadth.” Another commented that the senior leadership may be more interested in developing the community as a whole.

A member discussed the statement “the system should recognize and plan for diversity,” questioning what it means to “plan for” diversity. Members suggested alternate wording such as “support” or “facilitate”. Denoncourt asked the group to focus on providing points for each section, and discuss wording when the first draft is ready.

Members discussed the idea of “financial diversity,” noting that what is affordable for individuals may vary based on their habits (eg, cooking vs. dining.) One member stated that she felt accommodating diversity implies choice.

Statement: “Food should be available on a schedule that matches customer schedules.”

The Committee noted that there is already fast food available at most times, and discussed a wording that would specify “real food,” or “full meals.” They

discussed recommending more “real food” specifically on the central part of the campus during late-night hours.

Members discussed the need for better communication to let students know what options are already available, noting that there is a high demand for breakfast but in fact breakfast is already available in some venues.

A member expressed concern that “accommodating schedules” could be taken to mean that everything must be 24-hours, and suggested being more specific. Other members pointed out that although students are often up very late, they rarely leave their residences after 2am, and they could be held responsible for getting themselves food before 2am. They discussed specifying that a “full meal” should be available during “reasonable hours.”

The Committee discussed the idea that one venue can be kept open during later hours than others, and it will attract customers from other residences, using the example of Baker House dining, which is open on Friday and Saturday nights. They discussed the idea of staggering the hours that various venues are open in order to increase the range of hours overall. They noted the limitations on this idea—usage will still peak at meal times, and residents may object to their own dining halls opening later.

Theme: Quality and Price

Denoncourt introduced the theme of “Quality and Price,” but the member in charge of consolidating the report noted that she had already received good content for this section from the member who volunteered to draft it. She and Denoncourt reiterated the importance of members submitting draft sections as they had agreed to do.

Statement: “Opportunities need to exist to allow students to participate in the system and be a part of the system.”

A member expressed concern that “the system” was vague. Another questioned whether this statement was based on the data. Denoncourt reminded him that this statement came from the Committee’s discussions regarding an “omnidirectional” review process. She also suggested there may be data in the focus group findings to support this.

A member pointed out that people who work in the system are more likely to support it. Others noted that the statement originally included “employment,” but that was removed because it was too specific, although the Committee seemed to support the employment concept.

A member suggested that feedback should be solicited not only by the Dining department but by retail vendors. A member representing Dining responded that this is already part of retailers’ contracts.

A member brought up past discussions about recommending regular reviews of the system. The member responsible for drafting the “Evolution” section said her draft discussed three-year and five-year reviews. The Committee discussed mentioning in the report the many student committees that currently exist to review dining, as examples of the kinds of review bodies they would like to see continuing into the future.

A member noted that there are currently good feedback systems in place to represent the interests of students in dorms with dining, but not the non-dining students. Members discussed the difficulty of finding non-dining students who would consistently commit their time to reviewing dining. This led to a discussion of incentivizing student dining representatives. Several student members noted that undergraduates tend to be wary of incentivizing student government positions because they are concerned people will be attracted to the positions for the wrong reasons and will not be reliable. Members representing Dining suggested creating positions in their department for students, who would be compensated with free or discounted meals. Student members said they could support this idea so long as the process for selecting these representatives would be an open process.

Statement: “The Institute has a vested interest in building community around meals.”

One member questioned the importance of this statement. Others responded that community-building was part of the BRC’s original charge. One pointed out that any recommendations that contained community-building aspects were more likely to be supported and funded by senior administrators.

Timeline

Denoncourt reiterated the importance of Committee-members drafting their assigned portions of the report. She noted that the Committee had previously planned on having their final report ready by April 30, but questioned whether that would allow time for the community forums. She suggested that they try to have a draft done by the following week; she would send it out ahead of time to discuss at the meeting. That would allow the Committee to prepare talking points and handouts for the community forums.

A member asked if the community forum participants would have access to the draft, and she responded that it could be made available online. She also noted that the Committee-members attending the forums would have talking points prepared, so they could all be on the same page. She said feedback gathered at the forums would be incorporated into the final report.

The Committee discussed the scheduling and format of the forums. They discussed several informal forums involving two BRC members visiting a dorm, as well as a larger and more formal forum with the UA. One member suggested that Ashdown should be among the dorms visited. A member who is a UA officer suggested that

the UA forum come first, because it would attract a lot of people and give the Committee an opportunity to promote the subsequent forums. The Committee discussed the UA Public Relation's Committee's offer to help organize the forums—what their involvement would be and how it would be perceived. UA-BRC members explained that this would be part of a larger effort to organize more informal meetings between students and administrators.

Denoncourt asked whether the UA DPC still planned to have their report done by April 30, and a UA/BRC member said they would likely push that back, especially if the BRC pushes back its deadline. The Committee discussed April 30 as a date for a discussion involving representatives from both committees.

The Committee discussed dates for forums and meetings. They agreed to schedule additional meetings in late April. Denoncourt said the BRC would also have closed meetings with the Housemasters and finally with the Deans.

New Short-Term Meal Plan Proposal

A member introduced a proposal for a meal plan that he felt would begin to solve several of the problems with the current meal plan, but would move forward in an incremental way that would be acceptable to the community.

He introduced the plan by discussing the problems with the current-discount based plan. Under the current plan, it is difficult for users to know how much value they are getting for the money they spend, and in fact very few are getting full value. When Dining venues post two prices for each meal (the standard price and the price with the discount plan,) students often perceive that the standard price is inflated and the discounted price is the “real” price. In actuality, the cost to the Dining department to provide the meal is actually higher than the standard price. He said that he would prefer a system in which “the price is the price.” He noted that the consultants attempted to solve these problems by proposing declining-balance plans, but the prices of the plans were much higher than the price of the current plan, so they were not well-received by the community.

He proposed a plan in which residents of dining dorms would pay a specific minimum fee at the beginning of the semester, and they would be entitled to spend that amount of money on dinners via a declining-balance plan. Leftover money at the end of the semester would not be refundable—this would allow vendors to know at the beginning of the semester how much money they had to work with.

Users who chose to commit more than the minimum fee would have additional value added to their plan. Prices for dinners would be lower for those who purchased a higher-commitment plan than for those who purchased the minimum plan.

He also suggested offering an optional plan for non-dining dorms, which would work the same way but with a lower minimum commitment. In addition, he

proposed a similar plan that would provide meals over IAP, and users' leftover money from that plan could be rolled over into the spring semester declining balance. He also suggested a breakfast plan that could be added on to the minimum dinner plan.

A Committee-member pointed out that if different prices are posted for users with standard plans and users with additional commitments, that would not solve the problems caused by posting two prices for the same meal. Another pointed out that the non-discounted prices for dinner would be higher than students expect to pay for dinner.

The Committee questioned and discussed the plan, focusing mainly on the price of the minimum commitment. The proposed minimum price would be significantly less than the prices of the plans proposed by the consultants. However, it would be significantly higher than the initial price that students in dining dorms currently pay for the discount-based meal plan. The member who put forth the proposal argued that the price of the plan would be only slightly higher than the total that the average student currently pays under the discount-based plan (if you add their initial fee to the average amount they spend out-of-pocket on the discounted food.) He felt the many benefits of his proposal would justify this slightly higher price, and that the plan would be an incremental way to implement a system that would be sustainable.

Other members argued that it did not make sense to compare the price of the proposed plan to the mean average that students spend under the current plan, because many students buy the current plan only because it is required, and do not use it. So, the higher initial fee would force them to spend significantly more on a plan they do not use. In general, the student leaders on the Committee felt that it would be difficult to build support for the plan within the student community at the proposed price. The Committee discussed various ways of adding value to the plan, or altering the structure of the fees, to make it more attractive. One member asked for more detailed data on usage of the current plan.

Wrap-up

Denoncourt said she would put the proposal online so members could continue to give feedback. She also agreed to discuss dates for meetings and community forums offline, and reminded each other to draft their assigned portions of the final report.