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## Section 2: Focus Group Findings

## SECTION 2: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Please find listed below a summary of the themes that were discussed during the focus group and interview sessions that occurred on November 29-30, 2007. Since participants were informed that the discussions that occurred during the sessions would remain confidential, their comments are summarized below by topic and campus constituency.

### TYPICAL DINING PATTERNS

Focus group participants were asked to describe their typical weekly dining patterns.

#### Graduate Students

- Tend to eat breakfast in their room or at home
- Rely on “free food” options and indicated that approximately 50% of their meals are free meals
- Food is a motivating factor to get students to attend programming events
- Some bring food from home
- Food trucks are convenient and perceived to be cheaper
- One person spoke highly about the Whitehead Institute dining venue
- Students who cook expressed they had more time to shop/cook in the first year than they do now – so they don’t do it – they rely on what’s convenient or what’s free
- Graduate students expressed concern for Freshman not eating a balanced diet/no one showing them how

#### Athletes

- Breakfast varied by individual – some skipped, some prepared and ate at home, some purchased a muffin, donut or cereal on campus
- Lunch varied by individual – some prepared and brought a sandwich from home, some purchased a sandwich at La Verde or Au Bon Pain, others rely on free food
- For Dinner, some ate a Baker two to three times a week, while others cook (pasta or frozen dinners) for themselves, order in, or rely on free food.
- One student indicated that they do not purchase meat when they buy groceries to cook for themselves.
- Sometimes do not eat dinner because of “office hours”
- Order on-line through Campus Food

#### House Dining Students

- Skip breakfast or eat cereal in their room
- Tend to eat lunch in the Student Center since that is the “only thing around” (closest to their residence hall)
- One student eats dinner regularly with their friends in one of the house dining halls

#### Other Students

- Eat breakfast at home or in their room
- A few students said they tend to skip breakfast: not convenient, no time, or sleeping in as late as possible
- Eat lunch at LaVerde or the Cambridge Grill, but find them really expensive, especially fruits and vegetables
- Order on-line from Campus Foods
- Purchase cereal, pasta, frozen dinners when they cook for themselves
- Do not buy meat to cook for themselves
- Students say nutrition is important, but when money is tight they eat what’s cheap or free

### DINING PROGRAM FEATURES

Focus group participants were asked to indicate the features of the dining program that they appreciated and did not appreciate. The discussions primarily focused on suggestions on how to improve the dining program and included the following requests and comments:

Graduate Students

- Convenient, affordable, healthier food options – there are not enough fruits, vegetables, vegetarian options
- Sustainable options – offer local and organic foods
- Use of disposable ware at the on campus dining venues is wasteful; why not use real china and silverware?
- Offer soy milk, as well as low-fat and fat free milk in smaller containers to consume with meals
- Offer a salad bar
- Central Dining Hall, similar to Baker, but not in residence hall would be nice, especially for lunch
- Need a coffeehouse – Starbucks atmosphere, but not necessarily a branded concept
- LaVerde is perceived to be expensive
- Offer smoothies for a quick, healthy meal option
- Market the services dining offers on campus (comprehensive list with hours)
- Very little communication about the options that are available

Athletes

- Offer an All-You-Care-to Eat (AYCE) option from 11:00a.m. – 2:00p.m.
- Offer a later dinner option – until 9:00p.m.
- Offer better options for vegetarians
- Offer better home-style options
- Offer “breakfast to go”, especially during finals week
- Stata does not accept credit cards and some do not have Tech Cash

House Dining Students

- The lack of take-out options at McCormick
- Need multiple vegetarian options
- Miss the Sandwich bar at Baker
- Continuous dining from 7:00a.m. to 7:00p.m.
- Longer operating hours
- An AYCE dining venue would provide more variety (diet / nutrition)
- Possibly rotate an AYCE location among the dining halls
- Baker should offer lunch from 11:00a.m. to 3:00p.m., and brunch on the weekends
- Cost is an issue; perceive pricing to be high in the retail units
- One student suggested that MIT should provide dining as a “service”
- They like that the menus vary from facility to facility
- The desire for continuous dining was mixed – some want it, some don’t
- Is there a possibility to offer breakfast, lunch and dinner or an “all-you-care-to-eat” (AYCE) program?
- A few students indicated a desire individual serving of soy milk
- More vegetarian and kosher options

Other Students

- An AYCE option at the Student Center or Baker
- More fruits and a tossed to order salad bar
- There are no real breakfast food options available (Eggs, french toast, fruit and yogurt bar)
- Better weekend and late night options (variety)
- LaVerde is advertised as 24 hours seven days a week, but it really isn’t on the weekends
- Can Stata offer breakfast?
- Perceive the old Lobdell was better (in 2004) – Could pick up food from different stations and it had a good sandwich place
- Why is there a Subway on campus when there are five of them within one mile of campus?
- Students are too busy to eat – should there be a designated dining time?
- Dining halls feel too far away to consider for a meal
- Feels ‘weird’ to go to a dining hall where you don’t live – barrier to entry
- There is a desire for use of local produce
- Want variety and quality
- Want a Mini 7/11
- Need smoothies
- Need convenient, healthy options

## HOUSE DINING MEMBERSHIP

Focus group participants volunteered the following comments about the House Dining Membership:

### Athletes

- One needs to eat dinner every night in order for the membership to pay for itself.

### House Dining Students

- “The preferred dining plan does not pay for itself”
- Dislike the mandatory Meal Plan
- Is it possible to lower the membership fee?

### Other Students

- Perception of a poor value
- Student feel ‘locked in’
- ‘You’d have to eat every meal served and you still wouldn’t save the \$300 it cost’
- ‘Nothing mandatory’ – want living/dining options

## OTHER COMMENTS

Focus group participants also mentioned the following comments, relative to the campus-dining program:

### Graduate Students

- Dartmouth’s dining hall was a destination for late night and offered continuous dining and lots of variety
- ‘Food should be a service not a source of revenue’
- Grocery expenditures varied from \$20/week to \$50/week
- ‘MIT is criminally liable for my condition – we’re starving’

### Athletes

- People are cheap (do not want to spend money on food)
- “There is something wrong with you if you don’t take advantage of the free food”

### House Dining Students

- Students would like to spend \$4 - \$8 per meal (‘\$5 to fill up, \$10 for decent meal’)
- Want late night to be open until 2-3am
- Late night serve: Sandwich, Soup, Snacks, Yogurt, Caffeine, Fresh Fruit, Pasta
- Have a ‘food fair’ to demonstrate the foods that are available
- Offer a later option, maybe until 8:00pm
- After 9:00pm LaVerde and Campus Food (on-line delivery service) are the only options
- Keeping Kosher is hard at MIT – ‘my eating habits are so screwed up’

### Other Students

- Need a cooking course/class
- A healthy mind and body is more important today
- Students are aware that the typical free food (pizza, subs, chips, cookies) are not necessarily healthy, but the overriding factor was that it was ‘free’
- ‘There is something wrong with you if you don’t take advantage of the free food’
- Want late night to be open until 2-3am
- A late night something on East Campus
- The late night options have not been successful - but they did not offer a grill
- Late night serve: Sandwich, Soup, Snacks, Yogurt, Caffeine, Fresh Fruit, Pasta
- ‘Vegetables are hard to find’
- ‘Lots of starches’
- ‘Too busy to eat’ or forget to eat
- Include food as part of cost of going to school here

- Want healthy foods priced attractively (incentive) while unhealthy foods would cost more (disincentive)

#### FAVORITE OFF CAMPUS DINING LOCATIONS

##### Graduate Students

- Cosi
- Sebastian's
- Café Ameriposa

##### Other Students

- Cosi
- Uno's
- India Quality
- Thailand Café
- 1369 Coffeehouse
- Middle East
- Bertucci's

#### COMMENTS REGARDING SPECIFIC VENUES

- Steam Café
  - Graduate Student - 'Asian gloppy food that's tasteless'
- Food Trucks
  - Graduate Student - Cheap, convenient food
  - House Dining Student - '1/2 the cost of food at Stata Center' and quality is comparable
- Student Center
  - Graduate Student - 'Food is not good'
  - Other Student - Too far – food not good
- Stata Center
  - Other Student - Needs a salad bar
  - Other Student - Keep it open late
  - Other Student - Need pre-packaged fruit cup, carrot/celery sticks
  - Other Student - Have Kosher fruit cups – Rabbi would spot check 'knives/cutting boards' to make it happen
  - House Dining Student - 'Not good – not cheap'
- LaVerde
  - Graduate Student - 'Low quality' – prepared foods
- Café 4
  - Other Student - Good salads
  - Other Student - Need pre-packaged fruit cup, carrot/celery sticks

## INTERCEPT COMMENTS

Due to the “no-show” at one of the focus group sessions, intercept surveys were conducted at Baker Hall.

### House Dining Students

- McCormick has a more limited menu than Baker
- McCormick is difficult to get into the dining area
- If one of the dining halls were AYCE, might try different foods, knowing that they would not have to pay extra
- Tend to spend \$10-\$15 a day for meals / food on campus
- Would like to see a “grab-n-go” breakfast available but may not use it everyday since they currently eat Breakfast in their room on certain days

## STAFF COMMENTS

Interviews were conducted with Student Life administrators, including Dean Benedict, Karen Nilsson, Senior Associate Dean for Residential Life, Graduate Resident Tutors, Housemasters, and representatives from the Health Promotion and Wellness Team. The discussion focused primarily on their vision on how the campus-dining program could be improved. Some of their comments follow.

- Students do not like change and are accustomed to lots of options and very few requirements
- It is important to offer students housing options – including cooking for themselves and offering dining halls
- There are very few complaints about quality, but a lot about pricing
- There is a desire to build community around dining
- The current housing dining membership plan is not meeting the needs of the students or the University
- More than 60% of the students receive financial aid and use their dining allocation as discretionary money rather than spending it on food
- Emphasis on a healthy mind and body is starting to be more of a focus, although healthy dining is not practiced on campus
- Healthier grab and go options that are affordable
- Should breakfast, lunch and dinner be offered in the dining halls or an AYCE option
- Should first year students have a mandatory meal plan
- The residential dining halls are often perceived as “off-limits” or not inviting to other campus community members that do not live in that house
- Need to address special dietary needs – vegetarian, vegan, Kosher, Halal
- Should the House Dining program be subsidized?
- The current program is not serving the students well overall
- Current dining system is hiding the severe restriction behaviors and eating disorders of students
- Recent studies have indicated that poor and inadequate nutrition diminish brain function and concentration
- ‘Like high performance athletes, the MIT “Olympic” minds need adequate nutritional support to optimize performance’
- Should MIT take a social justice approach to nutrition, where students are offered the same level of nutritional support, regardless of socioeconomic status – similar to the program that is offered at Harvard?
- Free food phenomenon begins with offering free food during orientation week / first two weeks of school
- Create a forum where housemasters and dining administration can communicate about issues
- Housemasters would like to see the residential dining transaction counts (participation)
- Should there be a concept on the infinite corridor?
- MIT ‘does not offer a lot of sustainable options’
- What kind of message does it send when food is sold from food trucks and served on Styrofoam?
- Should one of the Dining Halls be open during the summer?
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In addition, Housemasters indicated that the communication to the campus community could improve regarding what is available and when. They would like a forum in which they could speak directly with Rich, Karen and

Marietta regarding House Dining issues, where together they could “divide and conquer”. They also indicated that they would appreciate monthly transaction reports so that they have a better understanding of how many students are actually using the dining halls each night or week.

### **FOOD SERVICE OPERATORS**

A meeting was conducted with managers from Bon Appetit and Sodexo and the discussion focused on some of the operating challenges that occur on campus. The operators realize that their target markets are students, researchers, faculty and staff, where students comprise 25% of the campus population. Student participation in the dining halls is lower than they would like to see but realize students are cost / price sensitive and rely on the free food that is offered as an incentive to attend meetings or they have kitchens readily available to them. They were also concerned that freshmen are on campus one to two weeks when dining halls are not open. What message it that sending? Questions arose regarding breakfast and if a ‘grab and go’ breakfast should be offered.

Pricing the menu items to be competitive can be challenging, especially when they use Union employees that may start at \$15.00 per hour have a 55% benefit factor charged for every dollar paid, while other tenants on campus are not required to use Union employees and may pay only minimum wage. Union representatives are also requesting \$1.00 per hour increases for future contracts. As a result, many of the campus dining venues are difficult to operate on a “profit and loss” basis and the contractors are not interested in servicing these venues.

The other challenge is that many of the dining venues do not have adequate production or storage areas to produce the meals, and the equipment that they do have can limit the menu offerings. For example, the Stata staff only has convection ovens / steamers to produce the menu options, and the production space is significantly undersized for the number of customers this location is serving. Other dining venues also have limited equipment or the equipment is in need of replacement.