

The History of Dining at MIT

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The history of dining at MIT's Cambridge campus goes back to when the new campus was being planned. When the new campus was first being planned in 1913, a commission was set up to plan out student life on the new campus.¹ MIT wanted to build two separate facilities: a large dining commons and the Walker Memorial, a gentleman's club.² The dining facilities were to be built a short walk away from the Walker Memorial and be connected by a walkway. The facility was to be large and centralized, in order to save money and bring people together.³ This was unlike some other schools, such as Harvard, where each House had its own dining hall. There should have been a large dining room, as well as smaller rooms for groups, such as fraternities, to eat together. It was thought that students would generally eat lunch together, while eating with one of the small groups they were part of for dinner. In addition, there should have been a lunch counter as well as a place for students to heat meals that they brought from home. Even at this early stage the planners realized that MIT presented "difficult and puzzling problems" such that plans implemented at other universities may not work at MIT.

Meanwhile, the Walker Memorial was to be like a gentleman's club, except "a man of limited means" would be able to "participate in the real privileges of Institute life." It was to be

1 Designing MIT: Bosworth's New Tech p108

2 Letter by H. W. Tyler '84 in Technology Review 1913 p 7

3 Letter by Frank L. Locke '86 in Technology Review 1913 p 34

named after Francis Amos Walker, the third president of MIT who had championed student life from 1881-1897. In addition, the faculty pushed for a Grill or a nicer dining hall where they could bring guests.⁴ However, budget cuts combined the dining room and the gymnasium into the Walker Memorial. Throughout history, the Walker Memorial had Morss Hall a full service facility on the ground floor and the Pritchett Grill on the second floor which was open longer hours and served snacks such as burgers. Both facilities were open as late as 1999 and the Pritchett Grill finally closed in 1997.⁵⁶

The facility was to be economical, and break even.⁷ However, should the operations cost may go over income, the deficit should be made up by alumni donations, and not be taken from the endowment.⁸ This shows that at the very earliest days the Institute wanted the dining facilities to break even. This has been the case more or less for the history of the system. At points in time, the administration increased the system to improve student life. For a short time during the 1990s they offered the profits of the system to the highest bidder.

4" Letter by Alfred E. Burton in Technology Review 1913 p 11

5" http://web.mit.edu/vrtour/n3_index.html

6" The Tech V 127 N 16

7 Letter by Frank L. Locke '86 in Technology Review 1913 p 34

8 Letter by H. W. Tyler '84 in Technology Review 1913 p 7

The Walker Memorial was the only choice for dining until Senior House, today Baker House was opened in 1949.⁹ Dining in Baker alleviated the crowding in Walker. In addition, Baker was the first dorm on west campus and the Walker Memorial was far away. Baker was also seen as significantly more luxurious than other dorms at the time at MIT. The undergraduate dorms that existed were either built with MIT's campus (East Campus and Senior House), or were temporary barracks built for the war. When the Baker opened, it brought with it a mandatory meal plan that required that Baker residents to buy 15 meals a week from Baker's dining hall at \$10/week. From the Tech's editorial page there were no complaints about the mandatory plan, only complaints that the institute wanted to make a 3% profit on construction costs from the students in the rent.¹⁰

The 1956 Ryer Commission report was a landmark report in student life and it set the stage for house dining and all of the subsequent trouble.¹¹ It recommended that west campus become the center of student life. A student center was to be built on west campus. In addition, it recommended that each dorm have a dining hall, as well as simple kitchen facilities on each floor. Dorms that were temporarily without dining halls should not be on a mandatory meal plan because students were not interacting in Walker. The Ryer report wanted to create houses of no more than 200 students, each with its own dining hall. That

9" The Tech V 69 N 16

10" The Tech V 69 N 15

11" The Tech V 76 N 30 starting at page 5 at <http://tech.mit.edu/V76/PDF/N29.pdf>

meant that it proposed that Burton House be split in two and that one dining hall should be built for each House.¹²

Only one dining hall was added a few years later to newly split Burton-Conner House for “the social benefit of communal dining.”¹³ The students were generally pleased that the new dining hall would be built. The other facilities suffered from overcrowding and the residents were looking forward to the additional lounge space. The students were more or less pleased with the new facility when it opened in 1961; however they complained that the facility was not ready to go on day 1.¹⁴ Instead, dinner had to be served early because lights had not yet been installed. Elsewhere on campus, students generally resented the implementation of mandatory Commons.¹⁵

The Ryer report was not economically sound. It recommended removing many beds from each house, and unnecessary renovations to split Burton House. House dining halls are by their nature more expensive. MIT students have always been price sensitive, even if they had financial aid. In addition, they created competition between the house dining halls, central facilities in the Student Center and Walker, and kitchens where students could cook for themselves. Lastly, the Ryer report recommended the removal of mandatory meal plan for

12" The Tech V 76 N 30 starting at page 5 at <http://tech.mit.edu/V76/PDF/N29.pdf>

13" The Tech V 76 N 31

14" The Tech V 81 N 17

15" The Tech V 90 N45

student life reasons without considering the effect on the bottom line of the dining facilities. Although the authors of the Ryer report may not have known, they were trading break-even edict for an improvement in student life.

In October of 1965 the Student Center opened.¹⁶¹⁷ The facility further tried to alleviate crowding in Walker by proving a facility in west campus. However, Robert Holden of the administration wanted the facility to not be just a dining hall.¹⁸ He wanted the facility to “merchandize” in order to create demand for the students to use it. It would have a nice grill room, Twenty Chimneys, which would have sit down service. The grill should compare with restaurants in Boston. Lastly, the facility should break even. However, from the very beginning the facility had trouble turning a profit.¹⁹ This was despite 80% participation, on par with peer schools such as Harvard.²⁰ Reports from two years after the Student Center

16" The Tech V 85 N 18

17" The Tech V 85 N 17

18 Letter from Robert H. Holden Letter Jan 10 1968. Institute Archives AC 115 Box 9 folder “Student Center: Dining Services, 1967-1968”

19" The Tech V 87 N 29

20 Letter Feb 21 1967 Institute Archives AC 115 Box 9 folder “Student Center: Dining Services, 1967-1968”

opened showed that the facility was also struggling with limited equipment and staffing. Soon after it opened, Twenty Chimneys was turned into a student-run late night option.²¹

In 1957, Stouffer's began managing the 2 dining facilities in the Walker Memorial.²² The firm was in control of planning the menu and ordering food. The servers would still be employed by MIT. The firm was chosen because they were the only ones doing research into food, especially frozen food. This was Stouffer's first contract for college food service.²³ The reaction to the firm was mixed. In 1966, a student opinion in The Tech, a student questioned why MIT used Stouffer's as an external contractor.²⁴ The student thought that it would have been better to bring in external vendors from the community to campus. However, this was not uniform. In 1957, students in Baker boycotted their dining hall in order to get Stouffer's to manage their dining hall.²⁵ 230 students skipped dinner in Baker and went to Walker instead where they believed the food was better. The boycotted a second night when the cafeteria planned to reheat the food that they were originally supposed to serve. When the

21 Letter from D. K. Cantley Institute Archives AC 115 Box 9 folder "Student Center: Dining Services, 1967-1968"

22" The Tech V 77 N 1

23 Letter by Robert J Holden Associate Director of Student Affairs April 5, 1963 Institute Archives AC 115 Box 9 folder "Student Center: Dining Services, 1967-1968"

24" The Tech V 86 N 10

25" The Tech V 77 N 8

administration was planning the Student Center, they were hesitant to give the contract to Stouffer's due to their poor reputation on campus.²⁶ They wanted a different operator to make the Student Center seem special and keep competition. However, this discontent was not solely when a contractor was used. Students complained about the low quality of the food and the high prices in Walker in 1946.²⁷

Mandatory Commons from the Ryer Report continued until 1971.²⁸ The 1963 Committee on Student Environment strongly endorsed mandatory and the construction of dining halls in new dorms. The reasoning given by the administration were good health and indirect educational advantages, although the students thought that finances was the real reason. The administration told the students who boycotted against mandatory Commons to move to a dorm without Commons if they did not like the situation. MIT did not want everyone to subsidize the dining service, only the people who used it. In 1969, the administration let students pay \$145 to receive a discount on a la carte items. However, the students pointed out that even if you fully used the plan you would still lose money. Still the students fought mandatory Commons. 80% of McCormick residents said that they favored closing their dining hall in return for voluntary Commons.

26 Letter by Robert J Holden Associate Director of Student Affairs April 5, 1963 Institute Archives AC 115 Box 9 folder "Student Center: Dining Services, 1967-1968"

27" The Tech V 76 N 52

28" The Tech V 90 N 45

In 1971, mandatory Commons was dropped.²⁹ MIT implemented a small yearly fee for residents in dorms with dining halls and an additional penalty for not choosing Commons.³⁰ The Institute was losing money for several years on a mandatory Commons plan and it thought it could make more money with voluntary Commons and the new fee. However, it did not work out that way at all. In subsequent years, the system lost money because only 750 people signed up for a voluntary meal plan. As a result, the Institute cut the dining room in McCormick to lunch only in 1972 and closed down the dining room in Ashdown completely. In 1974, MIT dropped Stouffer's and started managing the dining halls themselves. MIT's management style was more decentralized than Stouffer's highly centralized style. However, the students did not notice many changes.

In 1980, the Committee on Campus Dining restarted mandatory Commons.³¹ The plan was hated by students, who protested it strongly.³² In the negotiations the plan was subsequently expanded to also include a la carte items, seconds, and Kosher options and make it more flexible. The plan wanted dining as a focal point of community. It also sought to crack down on unauthorized hot plate usage and renovate over crowded student kitchens. It reopened the dining halls in Burton, Ashdown, and McCormick. Before the plan, about 40% of all

29" The Tech V 94 N 26

30" The Tech V 91 N 1

31" 1980 Committee on Dining Report Institute Archives AC 19 Box 8

32" The Tech V 99 N 25

students opted in to the Commons system when it was voluntary.³³ Participation rates in Baker were 70%. At Lobdell and Morss half of the customers at lunch were not students. However, only 25% of the MIT community used the dining services.

It was at this time that the Institute ran the most extensive dining system in its history, and had an extremely complex meal plan to maximize flexibility.³⁴ Students received a 19 page brochure explaining the options. The administration even said that “in actual practice the system will be easy to use.”³⁵ The dining halls in Baker, McCormick, MacGregor, and what would be called Next House were called “Commons” and served food at a single price for going through the line. Lobdell food court in the Stratton Student Center was also open for a la carte on weekdays and Commons on weekends. Twenty Chimneys, was open as a grill and snack bar until midnight. In the Waker Memorial, Morss Hall served Commons on weekdays and the Pritchett Grill upstairs served snacks weekdays until midnight.

Residents of the dorms with dining halls were forced to purchase a minimum amount of meals. Freshmen had to purchase \$559 worth of meals per term with the amount declining each year. Dinner in the Commons cost 3 points, lunch 2 points, and breakfast cost 1 point. The first 160 points that one purchased cost \$2.03 and after that each point cost \$1.17. The meals in the a la carte cost their listed price. There was also a provision to buy the rights to go through the line for seconds for the entire term.

33" Draft 2 of Report Institute Archives AC 19 Box 8

34" MIT Food Service Guide 1982-1983

35" Plan marketing materials Institute Archives AC 19 Box 8

A report from the Arthur D. Little consultancy said that MIT had a basic responsibility to provide reasonably priced food service as part of a high quality residential program.³⁶

However, MIT ran the previous plan at break even and the results showed. It chided the Institute for not having clear goals for the program.

While the students were not complaining about mandatory vs voluntary meal plans, they were complaining about a la carte vs all you care to eat “Commons” system. Whenever one system existed, someone would complain about the lack of the other system. During much of the history, a la carte was in some locations while all you can eat was elsewhere. For example in 1984, Baker went a la carte on Fridays and saw a tripling of the number of students using it.³⁷ Also in 1984, a girl from McCormick complained that Commons should be men “only, since men only, because women in general eat less than men.” However in 1990, only Baker had an all you can eat system and the manager at the time was looking to expand the system to more houses.³⁸ In 1993 as part of the move to voluntary and as other dorms closed their dining halls, Baker House switched to a la carte.³⁹ In more recent history during the 2000s several locations tested all you can eat.

36" Report from May 15, 1980 Institute Archives AC 19 Box 8

37" The Tech V 104 N 59

38" The Tech V 110 N 9

39" The Tech V 113 N 7

In 1986, MIT switched to ARA, which is today called Aramark for better management of their locations.⁴⁰ ARA was well known, even at the time, for relying heavily on slick design and marketing. ARA believed that by 1991, dining at MIT could become profitable. At the time, MIT was losing almost \$1 million dollars a year. ARA started by reforming Lobdell to follow ARA's "Restaurant Collections" concept with multiple stations and introduced a bagel wagon to sell around campus. The students constantly complained about ARA, more than any other period in the Institute's history. Students complained that ARA wasted money on ice sculptures, had poorly trained employees, misran special events, in addition to the constant complaints of bland food.⁴¹

In 1988, ARA made even more changes to the student center putting in Networks, a seafood restaurant with table service and selling wine and beer.⁴² That change was very short-lived. In 1991, Networks reopened to be an informal diner that would be open late.⁴³ It was originally scheduled to be called "Hackers' Haven" and was designed as a place for students to "hang out," watch television, and play board games.⁴⁴ The walls would display pictures of

40" The Tech V 106 N 29

41" The Tech V 107 N24

42" The Tech V 108 N34

43" The Tech V 111 N34

44" The Tech V 111 N27

famous MIT hacks. However one student derided the plan as gimmicky. He thought that the plan was better suited for a big Midwestern university where students “have time to sit around, eat French fries, and watch TV.” Students still thought that ARA was failing to provide “decent food and hours that match the way MIT people live.” Still Networks was the third time that MIT tried to open a fancy restaurant only to quickly replace it with a late night student hang out before eventually closing it. The other times were the Pritchett Grill in 1916 and Twenty Chimneys in 1956.

In 1991, MIT renewed its contract with ARA.⁴⁵ The new contract gave ARA any profits it could make and made it responsible for losses.⁴⁶ This profit and losses contract was believed to be the first of its kind for a university. Lawrence E. Maguire, director of housing and food services claimed that, “ARA now has incentive to respond to the market. You're going to see salesmen out there now.” The Institute switched back to a focus on profits. It was no longer willing to subsidize the system’s hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses and it handed ARA the ability to do something about it.

At this point in time, both the house dining halls and the large central dining hall were open - with the house dining halls losing half a million dollars a year. In 1992 the dorm dining halls were on the chopping block.⁴⁷ Initially the House Dining Committee planned to keep house dining open since their survey showed that 38% of students said that dining contributed “a

45" The Tech V 110 N 9

46" The Tech V 111 N 27

47" The Tech V 112 N18

great deal” to their dorms’ culture. Initially, the committee planned to charge students living in dorms with dining halls \$1,300 per year for 35% of the retail price of food. However, this proposal was met with strong criticism and was immediately revised.⁴⁸ The new plan would have everyone living in institute housing pay \$100 and students living in the dorms with dining would pay an extra \$400.⁴⁹ This too was met with skepticism, because the students who did not use house dining did not want to pay to keep it alive. Next, the administration proposed a \$1,150 plan which provided 5 dinners a week only in the house dining halls.⁵⁰ This mandatory program was rejected as well after “intense” criticism. Many students said that they would rather have their dining halls closed than pay for the mandatory meals.

In 1993, the Institute gave in again and dining would be voluntary again.⁵¹ McCormick and MacGregor would be closed. The administration admitted that the plan was risky. However Maguire said that he lost money with a mandatory plan, and he will probably lose money with a voluntary plan as well. The students widely approved of the plan, even the students at the dorms with dining halls that were closing. Maguire described the move to voluntary as a “new mind set” and that it followed student input.⁵² He also described it as “a gamble we’ll have

48" The Tech V 112 N 19

49" The Tech V 112 N 19

50" The Tech V 113 N 15

51" The Tech V 113 N15

52" The Tech V 113 N 7

to take”. Alan Leo, the ARA manager praised the plan, “We will change the meal plan to suit whatever anyone wants. It's obviously in our best interests to have what the customer wants.”

However, one student complained that much of the food service disappeared with the mandatory requirement.⁵³ In addition to McCormick and MacGregor, Pritchett closed and Walker cut its hours later that year.⁵⁴ The students got what they wanted - eating at ARA locations was now voluntary and as a result hours were cut. However, the Institute did not get what it wanted; the changes did not do much to cut losses. In 1994, the dining deficit was \$900,000.⁵⁵ The voluntary plan continues to this day; however the changes after 1995 will not be covered in this paper.

Over time, the dining program grew as administrators wanted to improve student life and shrunk as break-even was sought. Mandatory programs were implemented when a well-meaning administrator desired them and removed after long student protests. Large central dining halls were built, along with house dining halls only a few hundred feet away. Student kitchens were encouraged from time to time. Dining rooms switched between all you can eat Commons and a la carte every few years. Financial self-sufficiency was a constant dream, but always was out of reach, some years more than others. The Ryer report created the problem by expanding the system far beyond what was sustainable.

53" The Tech V 113 N 43

54" The Tech V 113 N 40

55" The Tech V 114 N 14

Afterword

When the Baker dining room was going to be shut down by a contractor chasing profit, the students of Baker House banded together to take control of the dining hall. Baker was scheduled to be shut down in 1993 because it was losing \$10,000/month.⁵⁶ However, the students of Baker House advocated for the dining hall, fighting with Aramark's manager to make improvements. For example, the students advocated strongly to have a Sunday brunch. Aramark initially helped them, but then realized it cut into their Lobdell business. MIT ordered Aramark to keep the dining hall open and the students started to look for alternative companies to Aramark, including the current company Bon Appetite or local chefs. The dining hall opened in 1994 under student management. Though positive word of mouth from students, it inched close to breaking even. Baker students even voted to self-impose a meal tax to support the hall. However, in 1995, Baker was folded into Aramark again and remained open along with Next House.⁵⁷

56" The Tech V 116 N 25

57" The Tech V 115 N 16