The History of Dining at MIT

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Dining has a long and torturous history at MIT. While planning the new Cambridge campus, MIT’s administrators realized the need for a dining hall, both as an essential part of a residential system, and as a place where faculty and students could gather. Ever since then, the Institute has struggled with whether dining was just a service, or if it serves other purposes. When MIT had more money, the system grew to achieve more social goals. When money became tight, the system was pared back in order to break even. MIT over-built the dining system in the 1960s, and it remains startled between centralized dining halls and house dining. In the 1980s, MIT installed kitchens in east side dorms, providing an alternative to the dining hall. As MIT became more diverse, student’s vision for the dining service became more diverse as well. Some favored unlimited buffets, while others saw it as a waste of money when they eat so little. To attempt to reach profitability, MIT has bounced between making aspects of the system mandatory and meeting student’s demand that programs remain voluntary. MIT remains torn between its house dining halls, central dining facilities, and student kitchens, continuing them all due to diverse student demand. But the demand for dining remains fixed, thus leading to constant strife, committees, and reports that attempt to get the system to break even while maintaining options.

The history of dining at MIT’s Cambridge campus goes back to when the new campus was being planned. A commission was set up in 1913 to plan out student life on the new campus.[[1]](#footnote-1)MIT wanted to build two separate facilities at first: a large dining commons and the Walker Memorial, a gentleman’s club.[[2]](#footnote-2) The dining facilities were to be built a short walk away from the Walker Memorial and be connected by a walkway. The dining hall was to be large and centralized, in order to save money and bring people together.[[3]](#footnote-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” and that plans implemented at other universities would not work at MIT.

The Walker Memorial was to be similar to 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 named after Fransis Amasa 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 in Walker, where they could bring guests.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, budget cuts forced the Institute to combine the dining room and the gymnasium into the Walker Memorial. Throughout its 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 fast food, such as burgers. Both facilities were open as late as 1999 and the Pritchett Grill finally closed in 2007.[[5]](#footnote-5)[[6]](#footnote-6)

The facility was to be economical, and break even.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, should the operation’s costs go over income, the deficit was to be made up by alumni donations, and not be taken from the endowment.[[8]](#footnote-8) This shows that at the very earliest days the Institute wanted the dining facilities to break even. This question remains to this day; should dining facilities just break even, or is there social value which is worth subsidizing? Should the cost be borne only by the users or the community in general?

The Walker Memorial was the only choice for dining on campus until Baker House was opened in 1949.[[9]](#footnote-9) Baker was the first new dorm to be built on west campus. The Walker Memorial was seen as far away and it was over-crowded. 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 on the rent.[[10]](#footnote-10) There was also no mention of the Institute trying to use dining to build a community in Baker House. Indeed, many Burton House residents crowded the Baker dining hall.

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]](#footnote-11)The Ryer report was released at a time when the west campus was becoming built up.[[12]](#footnote-12) MIT was rapidly expanding its residential offerings in the post-war period as its reputation took off. The Ryer report recommended that west campus become the center of student life. They felt that a student center should 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. It recommended that Burton House be split in two and that one dining hall should be built for each House.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Only one dining hall was added to newly split Burton-Conner House a few years later for “the social benefit of communal dining.”[[14]](#footnote-14) 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 Burton Conner dining hall had problems on day one; dinner had to be served early because lights had not yet been installed.[[15]](#footnote-15) Elsewhere on campus, students generally resented the implementation of mandatory Commons.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Ryer report was not economically sound. The renovations to split Burton House were costly and decreased the number of beds. By implementing the Ryer report, MIT created competition between the house dining halls, central facilities in the Student Center and Walker, and kitchens where students could cook for themselves. The Ryer Commission did want the services to break even with no hidden subsidies.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, they did not consider the long term costs or potential revenue of their plans. They offered too many choices and since then the locations always struggled to make money. The different options had to remain price competitive with each other and with cooking, but there were just too many locations for the number of customers. House dining halls are by their nature more expensive. MIT students have always been price sensitive, even if they had financial aid. When students had a choice, they found the cheapest option. Even when the use of the house dining halls was mandatory, the locations struggled to make money. The mandatory system was never large enough and concentrated enough to make money.

In 1957, Stouffer’s began managing the two dining facilities in the Walker Memorial.[[18]](#footnote-18) 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.[[19]](#footnote-19)It was also the first time MIT hired a contractor for food service. 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.[[20]](#footnote-20) The student thought that it would have been better to bring in external vendors from the community to campus. When the administration was planning the Student Center, they were hesitant to give the contract to Stouffer’s due to their poor reputation on campus.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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.[[22]](#footnote-22)There is one case where students did want a traditional food-service operator. In 1957, students in Baker boycotted their dining hall in order to get Stouffer’s to manage their dining hall.[[23]](#footnote-23) 230 students skipped dinner in Baker and went to Walker instead where they believed the food was better. They boycotted a second night when the cafeteria planned to reheat the food that they were originally supposed to serve.

In October of 1965 the Student Center opened.[[24]](#footnote-24) 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.[[25]](#footnote-25) 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. He wanted the grill to compete with restaurants in Boston. Once again, MIT planned that the facility should break even. However, from the very beginning the facility had trouble turning a profit.[[26]](#footnote-26) Reports from two years after the Student Center 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.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Mandatory Commons from the Ryer Report continued until 1971.[[28]](#footnote-28) The 1963 Committee on Student Environment strongly endorsed mandatory Commons and the construction of dining halls in new dorms. The 1963 Committee wanted mandatory dining for the health and indirect educational advantages, but the students saw the decision as purely financial. 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 said here that they did not want everyone to subsidize the dining service, only the people who used it. Students still companied. In 1969, the administration attempted to answer the protests by allowing 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. The students continued to fight mandatory Commons. 80% of McCormick residents said that they favored closing their dining hall in return for voluntary Commons.

In 1971, the Institute bowed to the pressure and mandatory Commons was dropped.[[29]](#footnote-29)MIT implemented a small yearly fee for residents in dorms with dining halls and an additional penalty for not choosing Commons.[[30]](#footnote-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 substituent years, the system lost money because about 40% of all students opted in to the Commons system when it was voluntary.[[31]](#footnote-31)Participation rates varied greatly from dorm to dorm. For example, participation in Baker was about 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. As a result of the continued loss of money, 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.[[32]](#footnote-32)Once again, the Institute felt that a mandatory plan would make the system break even. The Institute always seemed to believe that the other plan would make more money. Once again, the plan was hated by students, who protested it strongly.[[33]](#footnote-33)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 saw 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 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]](#footnote-34)Students received a 19 page brochure explaining the options. The system was so complicated that the administration had to say that “in actual practice the system will be easy to use.”[[35]](#footnote-35)The dining halls in Baker, McCormick, MacGregor, and what would be called Next House operated all-you-can-eat “Commons.” Lobdell 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 each and after that each point cost $1.17. There was also a provision to buy the rights to go through the line for seconds for the entire term, adding another level of price complexity. Although the mandatory system included all of the students living in dorms, it had too many locations open.

In 1983, MIT gave students another choice for dining. Kitchens were installed in East Campus and Senior House.[[36]](#footnote-36) MIT was planning on renovating the dining hall kitchens in Walker, but it would have cost several million dollars. Adding student kitchens was cheaper. The East Campus and Senior House students welcomed the changes with open arms, with over 75% of residents supporting the kitchens. MIT knew that the new kitchens would compete with their operation, and they were prepared to close Walker for dinner. The problem was that the Institute never followed through with closing Walker.[[37]](#footnote-37) It gave students an alternative to eating on campus, spreading the same number of customers over more choices, further weakening the long-term stability of the system.

Students were split as to an 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.[[38]](#footnote-38)Also in 1984, a girl from McCormick complained that Commons should be 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.[[39]](#footnote-39) In 1993, as part of the move to voluntary, Baker House switched back to a la carte.[[40]](#footnote-40) Whatever was available at the time, there were always students who wanted the other option; no system could meet the diversity of wants.

In 1986, MIT went back to a contractor for better management of their locations.[[41]](#footnote-41). They choose ARA, today known as Aramark. ARA was well known, even at the time, for relying heavily on slick design and marketing. At the time, MIT was losing almost $1 million dollars a year; ARA believed that by 1991, dining at MIT could become profitable. ARA started by reforming Lobdell to follow ARA’s “Restaurant Collections” concept with multiple stations and introduced a bagel wagon to sell bagels 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, and misran special events, in addition to the constant complaints of bland food.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In 1988, ARA made even more changes to the student center putting in Networks, a seafood restaurant with table service and alcohol.[[43]](#footnote-43) That change was very short-lived. In 1991, Networks reopened to be an informal diner that would be open late.[[44]](#footnote-44) 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.[[45]](#footnote-45)The walls would display pictures of 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.” Separately, 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, dining was still losing money. MIT decided to renew its contract with ARA, but this contract would be different.[[46]](#footnote-46) The new contract gave ARA any profits it could make and made it responsible for losses.[[47]](#footnote-47) 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 was just trying to break even again. 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 in Baker, MacGreggor, McCormick, and Next, and the large central dining hall were open – with the house dining halls losing half a million dollars a year. In 1992, with the renewed focus on breaking even, the dorm dining halls were on the chopping block.[[48]](#footnote-48) Initially, the House Dining Committee planned to keep house dining open in those four houses since 38% of students surveyed said that dining contributed “a great deal” to their dorms’ culture. The committee wanted 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.[[49]](#footnote-49) The new plan was that everyone living in Institute housing would pay $100 and students living in the dorms with dining would pay an extra $400.[[50]](#footnote-50) 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.[[51]](#footnote-51) 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 to student demand and dining became voluntary again.[[52]](#footnote-52) As part of the plan, 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.[[53]](#footnote-53) He also described it as “a gamble we'll have 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.[[54]](#footnote-54)In addition to McCormick and MacGregor, Pritchett closed and Walker cut its hours later in 1993.[[55]](#footnote-55) 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.[[56]](#footnote-56)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. Students always needed somewhere to get food as part of living in a dorm. But in 1956, the Ryer Commission added too many locations. It built house dining halls to create community, and then built a large central dining hall only a few hundred feet away. Student kitchens were encouraged at that time, and again later. The capacity and variety of the system increased faster the number of students. Students were sometimes forced to eat at the house dining hall, but even this could not make the system break even. 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. Ever since then the system has struggled to maintain all of the options. The tension and strife from the constant losses led to a constant series of commissions, reports, and changes. The right answer was not to be found. The system did manage to build one community at least: a community of students fighting for a system that met their needs and was in line with their bank accounts.

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