

Dining and Meal Plan FAQ

March 9, 2020

Is MIT committed to the house dining program? The 2010 House Dining Advisory Group used a basic premise to shape MIT's original house dining program: "Meals present powerful opportunities to foster community and enhance student development."¹ For ten years, house dining has operated on this essential concept.

MIT recognizes the importance of the house dining program and acknowledges changes made over the years to provide plan subscribers with more value and flexibility have complicated the house dining program and eroded its founding tenets. As a result, the Meal Plan Working Group proposed simplifications and improvements to house dining based on their program review and analysis.

What are the problems? Students continue to report low satisfaction with the quality and variety of food options available across the five dining halls. Additionally, high operating costs and limited participation rates (caused by MIT's policy that only students in residences with dining halls are required to subscribe to a meal plan) contribute to the house dining program's significant annual financial deficit.

What are the working group's goals? Please see the Meal Plan Working Group page on the DSL website at <https://studentlife.mit.edu/about/goals-mission-and-organization/meet-suzy-nelson/key-matters/meal-plan-working-group>.

What is causing house dining's operating costs to be so high? There are three contributing factors. First, Boston-area labor costs are high, and MIT's contract with dining partner Bon Appetit ensures that all dining staff members earn a living wage. Second, the program operates five—soon to be six—dining halls. In essence, each one is a freestanding restaurant featuring menus comprised of multiple dishes customized to each location and served two or three times a day. That drives up food costs, which are also high in the Boston area. Third, MIT and Bon Appetit work together to ensure that house dining meets or exceeds industry best practices for sustainability. The extra labor and infrastructure required to meet those sustainability goals also increase overall costs.

Are there other issues that exacerbate house dining's operating deficit? Yes. The most challenging of those additional issues is a low revenue base compounded by two factors. First, MIT requires that only students in residences with dining halls subscribe to a meal plan, significantly limiting potential revenues. Second, the current plan structure minimizes the number of meals that upper-level students are required to purchase when living in a dining dorm. In combination, these factors reduce top-line revenues that are needed to support a robust and high-quality house dining program.

Why is an operating deficit a problem? Can MIT subsidize house dining? An underfunded dining program, or one that operates consistently at a deficit, inhibits innovation, hinders quality improvement, hampers updates to facilities and equipment, and limits efforts to combat food insecurity systemically. Additionally, program subsidies could fund other DSL or MIT priorities.

¹ Campus Dining. *Final Report on the 2010 House Dining Review*. MIT Division of Student Life, August 31, 2010, Page 27.

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Over the last few years, MIT's house dining program subsidy has grown to be financially unsustainable, which does not reflect the Institute's expectations for responsible program management. Taking steps to close the gap between costs and revenues is critical to house dining's long-term viability and success.

What actions does the working group recommend to start closing the deficit? The working group recommends stabilizing revenue by creating a consistent, rational meal plan structure to be phased in over the next four years. The proposed new plans will comprise increases to the minimum plan commitment level each year, starting with the Class of 2024.

It is important to remember that MIT calculates financial aid based on the double-room rate in a Tier 1 building and the most comprehensive meal plan available. For the 2020-21 academic year, the most comprehensive meal plans are the Any-19 Plan or the Block 225 Plan + \$150 dining dollars, which both cost \$6,320 for the year. Additionally, financial aid packages increase annually to cover typical growth in attendance costs.

Figure 1. 2020-21 Draft Meal Plans

	Dining Residence Hall	Meal/Week	FY20	FY21	Difference
A	Any 19 Weekly	19	\$5,962	\$6,320	6.00%
	First Year Choice OR Block 225 + \$150 Dining Dollars/Term	14	\$5,962	\$6,320	6.00%
B	Optional for Upper Level Students	12	\$5,688	\$5,499	-3.3%
C	Upper Level Minimum	8	\$4,130	\$3,800	-8.00%
Voluntary Plans					
D	Available for any non-dining residence hall student	Block 90	6	\$3,052	\$2,836 -7.08%
		Block 60	4	\$2,396	\$1,936 -19.20%

Will any current students be affected by these changes? No. The changes will be phased in as the Class of 2024 progresses through their time at MIT.

Why will the plans be implemented in phases? The working group believes the phased approach will give MIT Dining ample time to advise students of changes well in advance of when they go into effect.

Figure 2. Students by Class Year Plan Requirements

Year	2020-21 Plan	2021-22 Plan	2022-23 Plan	2023-24 Plan
1	225	225	225	225
2	125	190	190	190
3	125	125	160	160
4	125	125	125	160

Why are dining dollars not a part of the 125 and 190 plans? Students told the working group that the plan prices were too high. By making dining dollars optional, the top-line prices of the 125 and 190 plans decrease by 8-9% and 3%, respectively. Students may still buy dining dollars if they wish.

Will optional dining dollars still receive the 5% discount? Yes. Students using dining dollars in on-campus eateries, TechMart, and LaVerde's will still receive the 5% discount. Only food items sold in LaVerde's are eligible for the discount.

Why is the Any-19 plan the only remaining weekly plan? Students generally use fewer meals with weekly plans than they do with block plans. But, the Any-19 is the most popular plan among first-year students and athletes, providing subscribers with a full complement of healthy, nutritious meals weekly.

What is the rationale for the new commitment levels for sophomores, juniors, and seniors? Actually, these were the plan commitment levels two years ago. The working group recommended reverting upper-level student plans to the levels in place until spring 2018. Reinstating the 190 and 160 plans (providing 12 and 10 meals per week, respectively) ensures that house dining remains an integral part of a student's experience in their residence, delivers a food-secure plan and a base level of nutrition each week, and helps stabilize the program financially.

How was student input obtained? The working group members included students, faculty, and staff. Before its first meeting, MIT Dining and the Division of Student Life (DSL) staff met with the House Dining Committee to share working group goals and constraints and to gather input. Subsequently, all meal plan subscribers received a working group email update in October, which contained a link to an online form where community members could share ideas and give feedback.

In November, *The Tech* ran a letter to the editor by Mark Hayes from MIT Dining and Peter Cummings from DSL, which also contained a link to the idea box (which contributed almost 70 suggestions to the working group's discussions). Mark gave another update on the working group's progress to *The Tech* in mid-November.

As their work progressed, group members met with heads of house and residents, DormCon, and officers from the Undergraduate Association and Graduate Student Council to share progress and preview recommendations. The final step was a community forum on March 2, where Mark and Peter shared the working group's recommendations and previewed the new plan structure.