

**MIT Dining Program Review**  
**Phase I: Data Gathering (Winter-Summer 2016)**

# Summary of Findings

**Dining Data Review Working Group Members**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Dining Data Review Working Group was charged with reviewing existing data and collecting new data on the MIT Dining program, and to write a summary report to inform future discussions about program enhancements. Over the course of six months, data were examined from a variety of sources and major findings were identified in six areas: flexibility, options, food quality, staff-student connections, social experience, and community building. Data reveal a need to increase flexibility and options as well as improve quality without substantially increasing cost. Additionally, data show the need to preserve the positive aspects of the program, including student-staff connections, and opportunities for socializing and community building.

The working group's process and main findings are detailed in the following sections.

## APPROACH

The Dining Data Review Working Group initially took an organic approach to the data collection process, allowing the emerging data trends to drive the conversations, analysis, and report structure. A variety of data were sourced with the intent of collecting unbiased and comprehensive data points. This group reviewed the principles set forth by the 2010 House Dining Advisory Group, which was charged by the Dean of Student Life to address financial and service problems in the house dining program, but did not use the principles as a definitive guide for data gathering.

Existing data were reviewed and gaps were identified. The working group pursued three additional data collection actions: a benchmarking study, focus groups, and additional survey questions. Data were reviewed as they became available and observations were recorded. The following summary of findings consists of those observations grouped into categories that align with aspects of the current dining system.

## DATA SOURCES

- **MIT System Data** was sourced from MIT Dining's billing and point of sale systems. Systems data is primarily related to enrollment, usage, and utilization.
- **Survey Data** consist of undergraduate and graduate student surveys administered by MIT Institutional Research since the early 2000s, such as the Undergraduate Enrolled Student Survey, Graduate Enrolled Student Survey, and Senior Survey.
- **Focus Group Sessions** were held in April 2016 and consisted of four groups of volunteer student participants. The groups were: Mandatory meal plan holders (7 participants), voluntary (opt-In) meal plan holders (8 participants), on-campus/no meal plan (7 participants), and off-campus/no meal plan (5 participants).
- **Dining Program Benchmarking Data** was collected from seventeen peer universities, including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford, through website reviews and phone conversations.

## FINDINGS

### FLEXIBILITY

The data suggest the need for greater flexibility in three areas, and potential action steps:

- **Meal plan structure:** Data suggest that students are dissatisfied with the flexibility of the current meal plan structure and desire greater flexibility in terms of when, where, and how they can use their meal plan swipes.  
Potential action: ***Reducing restrictions around how meal swipes can be used may increase satisfaction in this area.***
- **Dining locations:** A consistent finding across data sources was that a student's current location or next destination is one of the most important factors influencing where students choose to eat. Breakfast and dinners are primarily eaten in students' homes or home dining halls. Lunch location choices varied greatly, with many students choosing to eat lunch near their classrooms, which often puts them close to the east side of campus. The absence of a location for meal plan holders to use swipes on the east side of campus is evident.  
Potential action: ***The integration of meal plan compatible dining options east of Mass Ave may increase satisfaction in this area.***
- **Dining hall hours:** Focus group participants and themes from open-ended survey questions suggest dissatisfaction with current dining hall hours and call for expanded hours, both on weekday and weekend mornings, and late night during the week. Quantitative data were more mixed; 63% of undergraduate students "agree" or "strongly agree" that dining halls have "convenient hours of operation" (Undergraduate Enrolled Student Survey, 2015).  
Potential action: ***Campus Dining should work with Bon Appetit to expand the hours of operation on a limited basis to evaluate student demand.***

### OPTIONS

Students express dissatisfaction with options in four main areas:

- **Options within a dining hall vs. options across the dining hall system:** At first glance, the five on-campus dining halls appear to provide a plethora of options for students. However, a recurring observation across data sources is that students tend to eat primarily in their home dining hall or the dining hall closest to their residence (with the exception of lunch). This behavior creates a perception that options are limited to what is available in their home (or close to home) dining hall. For example – a student who lives in Maseeh primarily eats meals in the Howard Dining Hall and consequently may feel limited to offerings in that dining hall.  
Potential action: ***Student satisfaction may benefit from improved options within each dining hall rather than individual options across the system.***
- **Options for students with dietary needs and restrictions:** Qualitative data suggest that students with dietary restrictions/preferences (vegetarian, vegan, kosher, halal, and gluten-free) feel that the options available to them in dining halls are limited. There may be a relationship with the prior observation of limited options within each dining hall. Potential action: ***The data suggest that future inquiry into options for students with dietary restrictions/needs is warranted.***

- **Healthy options:** Healthy food options are available, however, as mentioned previously, options within each dining hall may be limited. Additionally, qualitative data suggests that food preparation methods and perceived low quality of these offerings make them less attractive to students, and sometimes eliminate them as options altogether. Potential action: ***Improving the quality of these offerings might increase the perception of an abundance of healthy options among students.***

## **FOOD QUALITY**

Data reveal low satisfaction levels regarding quality of food preparation and food presentation. Only 30% of respondents to the 2015 Undergraduate Enrolled Student Survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that their dining hall “consistently serves high quality food.” Focus group and survey data also indicates a notable perceived difference in food quality between dining halls. Focus group respondents specifically noted that the quality of food was improved during Campus Preview Weekend. Potential action: ***In conjunction with the current dining partner, Campus Dining should identify the causes of the low and inconsistent food quality and the perceived difference in quality between dining halls.***

## **STUDENT-STAFF CONNECTIONS**

A consistent pattern across data sources was that students’ favorite part of their dining experience is the dining staff, especially the servers and line cooks. According to the 2015 Undergraduate Enrolled Student Survey, almost 80% of students “agree” or “strongly agree” that the dining halls have “helpful staff working there.” Qualitative responses from students entailed mention of specific staff members that had a positive impact on their experience, or that they had a connection with. It is clear from the data that relationships with staff are positive aspects of the current dining system that should be preserved. Nonetheless, in qualitative comments, some students expressed dissatisfaction with dining hall managers and discussed dissatisfaction with and distrust of food preparation. This suggests that while students like the staff members, there are concerns around consistency of cooking skills across the dining halls. Potential action: ***MIT’s current dining partner, Bon Appetit should make line staff training and customer service a focus.***

## **COST**

Another consistent theme across data sources was cost. According to the 2016 Senior Survey and our dining focus groups, students report that cost is one of the main factors that influences their choice of where and what they choose to eat. This finding was consistent with MIT Systems data, which revealed that students tend to choose the least expensive meal plan available to them. This working group also examined cost alongside perceptions of value; only 15% of respondents to the 2015 Undergraduate Enrolled Survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that the house dining plan “offers a good value for the cost of the plan.” Potential action: ***Future discussions of enhancements to the dining system should involve considerations of how to maintain costs to students while increasing value.***

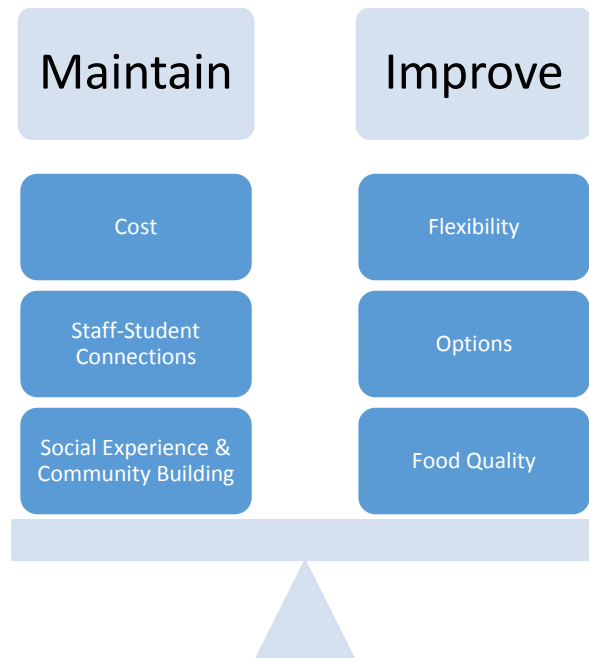
## **SOCIAL EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING**

Data from multiples sources suggests that dining creates opportunities for socialization and can be an

important aspect of the residential experience for both dining dorm and cook-for-yourself residents. Almost 80% of undergraduate students “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement: “I have the opportunity to socialize with other students when I eat my meals” (Undergraduate Enrolled Student Survey, 2015). This sentiment was echoed loudly in our dining focus groups. Benchmark study interview participants also agreed that dining halls provide opportunities for socialization and community building. Potential action: ***future conversations of enhancements to the dining system should involve consideration of how to preserve this important feature of the MIT dining system.***

### CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

As described in this summary, new and existing data on dining suggest a need to increase flexibility and options as well as improve quality without substantially increasing cost. Additionally, data suggest the need to preserve the positive aspects of the current program, including student-staff connections and opportunities for socializing and community building. Future conversations about improvements to the dining program will likely involve **balancing** the various considerations elucidated in this report, as depicted in the following image:



Striking the ideal balance will be challenging. We hope that this summary of findings will be helpful as the Division of Student Life considers next steps. In the forthcoming months, the Division of Student Life will share this report with the House Dining Advisory Committee and a second group of students, faculty and staff. Additionally, the Division of Student Life will hire a consulting firm to review this report and gather even more input from students, faculty and staff with the ultimate intention of re-envisioning dining at MIT.