

## Committee on Student Life

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During 2023-2024, the Committee on Student Life (CSL) focused exclusively on concerns regarding the MIT dining program, with special emphasis on food insecurity. We took a deep dive into this problem by:

- Reviewing sources of data available
- Interviewing multiple stakeholders
- Collaborating with student organizations focused on food insecurity
- Gathering input from program administrators and a hired expert consultant; and
- Conducting extensive discussions within the committee.

We concluded that MIT needs to make campus dining one of the top student life priorities, considering the seriousness of the existing challenges (in priority order):

- 1) **Affordability:** At a price point of \$17-19 for a single meal, the program is exceedingly expensive. This is the root of all the other problems.
- 2) **Accessibility:** Students cannot easily eat on campus because of inadequate locations and times of service, especially at lunch time.
- 3) **Quality and quantity:** Food is frequently of an inconsistent quality, has insufficient healthy options, does not properly accommodate dietary restrictions, and more than occasionally runs out.
- 4) **Choice:** Students prioritize choice at the expense of points 1-3 above.

As pointed out in last year's report, CSL firmly believes that a fundamental change is needed to improve access to quality food and to eliminate food insecurity.

Food insecurity exists because:

- Our plan is optional (and unattractive) for students in non-dining dorms. MIT's meal plan subsidy through dollars rather than swipes has resulted in many students saving the money instead of buying food. Our peers have eliminated food insecurity by mandating and subsidizing meal plan participation by all undergraduate students.
- Many students skip breakfast and lunch due to lack of time and the distance to the dining halls during the day.

Our dorm-based dining program increases costs but also plays a fundamental role in the educational experience of our students: it promotes interaction with peers and faculty, as well as reducing isolation, both crucial given the academic demands of MIT.

Providers of campus food services work well in centralized massive cafeteria-style operations where they can achieve economies of scale. Repeatedly and despite significant interventions, they have proven to be ill-prepared to meet our unique needs, resulting in high costs, low and inconsistent quality, food shortages, staffing, and hygiene issues.

CSL therefore makes the following recommendations from the core assumption that the committee should be bold and aspirational as we prepare for the future of dining at MIT. Concomitantly, the committee respects and supports the expertise and actions of our campus dining experts to optimize and improve the dining program within its current constraints.

#### Recommendations:

- Reduce the price point of a meal to around \$10. This will make the meal plan attractive to students, increase enrollment, and help achieve economies of scale. This will require substantial additional investments and subsidies, until the program becomes more self-sustainable.
- Study the benefits and costs of replacing an external vendor with an in-house campus-wide dining operation managed by MIT.
- Consider moving to mandatory participation in the meal plan for all undergraduate students as is done by several of our peers to eliminate food insecurity, while recognizing the significant impact this will have on students heavily invested in cook-for-yourself dining options. Work with student stakeholders to explore mitigation strategies.
- Consider the creation of a central cafeteria (e.g. at Walker Memorial) to address food access issues at lunch time when there is no time to go back to the dorms.
- Consider a study of a neighborhood-based dining program, with an additional large dining hall in West Campus to help achieve economies of scale.

CSL proposes that these recommendations be seriously considered in conjunction with those of content experts. We acknowledge that tradeoffs and significant financial commitments will be needed to solve these problems.

Finally, CSL and MIT Dining will need to address the dining necessities of graduate students, postdocs, staff, and faculty on campus, which pertain primarily to space and affordability.

Next year will be important for campus dining as the contract with the current vendor expires and the program goes out for rebidding. CSL intends to participate intimately in this process. We wish to collaborate with the MIT Dining team on short term implementation while partnering on long term recommendations that will once and for all address the core priorities noted by CSL.