

Changing the Plan *Rethinking the Meal Plan Offered at Olin College*

The purpose of this case study was to evaluate Olin College's current foodservice operation and determine if it is meeting its goal of providing the best dining experience possible to its customers. Olin's foodservice is managed by Sodexo and provides students with a continuous dining experience by offering unlimited access to Olin Dining Hall seven days a week. Students are offered one meal plan, "The Blue Plan" which consists of 19 meals per week for \$2,500 per semester.

The problems with Olin's current dining program is that participation is mandatory, the majority of students don't use all 19 meals, it only offers limited facilities to din at and does not give students choice and flexibility. The current dining program does not take into account the desires of college students which are flexibility, late night meal options, cash and declining balance and off-campus spending opportunities where they can use debit dollars. Schools such as Babson College, Assumption College and Curry College offer students multiple meal plans, different locations to eat, all-you-can-eat and retail service along with declining balance. In order for Olin to compete with these schools and please students they should offer three different meal plans that consist of different number of meals per week and flex dollars that can be used at all Babson dining facilities.

Current research has found that access driven meal plans have a positive effect on foodservice such as decrease food waste and increase revenue and customer satisfaction. Many schools have seen positive results from making changes in their dining program. Oregon State University, Northeastern University, University of New Hampshire and Purdue University all made changes focusing students wants and needs and ended up with a foodservice program that gave students more flexibility and options resulting in increased meal plan participation.

Many changes at Olin would have to take place if changes in the meal plan were made. Draw backs would include expensive reconstruction of Olin Dining Hall and the possibility Olin College could lose money with different value meal plans. However, Olin College should make the

appropriate changes to their dining program to compete with other school and attract future students, to increase the value of their foodservice operation and to enhance customer satisfaction.

Overview of Foodservice Operation

College and university foodservice operations have provided a variety of food options to students in many different ways and are continuing to grow and develop their services to meet the needs of the current college students. These foodservices operations have changed from traditional straight-line cafeteria in each dorm to multiple retail venues including, food courts, grab-and-go dining facilities and retail stores. New physical layouts of the facilities are totally changing the way students are serviced. Foodservice operations are now focused on sustainability, convenience and providing food for all types of food preferences and needs. Among these multiple changes occurring in college foodservice dining is the continually evolving meal plans. The traditional broad meal plan is being replaced with declining balanced meal plans, which allow students to pay for only the food eaten that day (1). Many college and university foodservice operations are providing students greater flexibility by offering them extended hours, off campus spending opportunities and take out or delivery services.

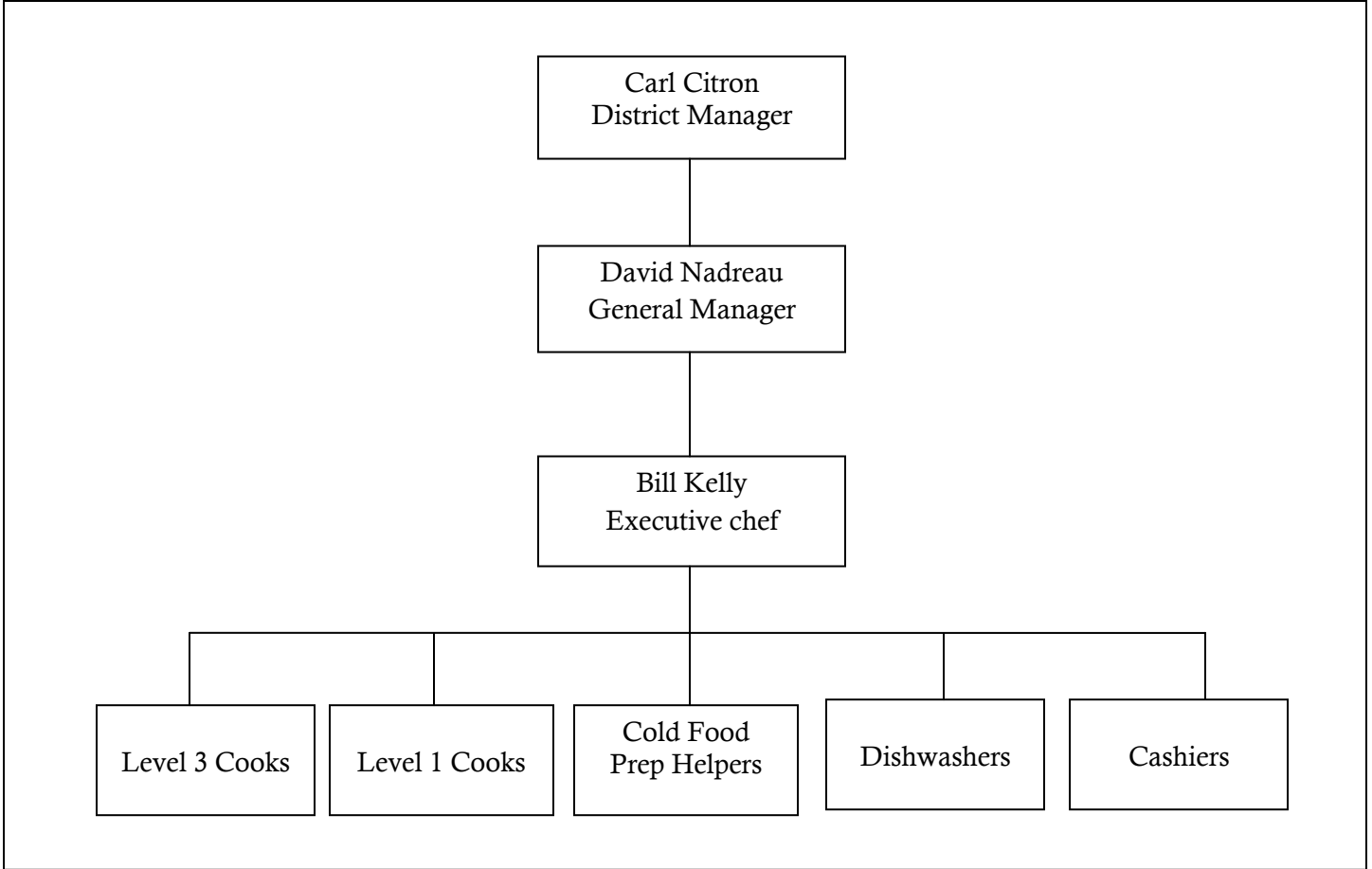
Olin College of Engineering is no exception when it comes to making changes to improve their foodservice operation and customer satisfaction. Olin College offers students a continuous dining experience. Students eat at Olin Dining Hall and have unlimited access seven days a week. All meals are served in an all-you-can eat setting and they practice “just in time cooking” which allows them to offer many items to order. There are several different stations such as the grill, the brick oven, the exhibition and salad bar that provide students with a verity of food.

Olin College foodservices operation is managed by Sodexo. Sodexo’s philosophy is to design, manage and deliver comprehensive service in order to create an outstanding experience for the people they serve. Their goal is to drive greater satisfaction by keeping in mind their fundamental believes of diversity, sustainability, wellness, and fighting hunger. This organization is

commitment to “making every day a better day for us all (2) ”. These goals and ways of thinking is continually pushing them to provide a better experience and service to their customers.

Carl Citron is Sodexo’s district manager who is responsible for overseeing both Babson’s and Olin’s foodservice operations. David Nadreau is the general manager of Olin College foodservice and works closely with the executive chef, Bill Kelly, to produce high quality food and service. The staff consists of varying level cooks, prep helpers and support staff. There are a three level three cooks who are responsible for the majority of the food preparation. They are expected to follow the recipes and delicate other kitchen staff to assist them in completing their meals. They have advanced culinary skills, much experience with kitchen equipment and extensive knowledge of food preparation. There are also level one cooks who are responsible for preparing and cooking foods that require short preparation time and perform fast food cooking duties during serving. They have basic culinary skills, are familiar with the kitchen and equipment and have good knowledge of food preparation. The staff also consists of a few cold food prep helpers whose primary responsibility is preparing salad items and fruit for the salad bar. They also offer additional support to cooks by peeling, chopping and cleaning vegetables and fruits needed for recipes. There is also support staff, which includes dishwashers and cashiers. Figure 1 is the organizational chart of Olin’s foodservice operation. It represents the structure, reporting relationships and authority within this operation.

Figure 1. Organizational Chart of Sodexo Account at Olin College



What’s the Problem?

All Olin students are required to purchase the meal plan. Only one plan is offered, “The Blue Plan” for \$2,500 per semester and provides students with 19 meals per week. It entails continuous dining by offering unlimited access seven days a week. The foodservice hours of operation are 7:30am-7:30pm Monday thru Thursday, Friday’s 7:30am-7:00pm, Saturday’s 9am-2pm and 5pm- 7pm and Sunday’s 9am-2pm and 5pm- 7:30pm. During the week they service breakfast, lunch and dinner and on the weekend they have continental breakfast, brunch and dinner. Olin has cross-registration agreements with Babson College and Wellesley College, which allows Olin students to use their meal plan at either of these institutions dining facilities.

The issue with this current meal plan is that participation is mandatory, many of the students do not use their 19 meals, upper classman have kitchen units and refrigerators available to them in their dorms and hot food is not continuously available to students in between meals. Due to the mandatory participation students have high expectations of the foodservice. This leads to decreased satisfaction because their expectations are not being met. In order to comply with Sodexo's goals Olin's foodservice should be making the appropriate changes to provide students with outstanding experience and service. Rethinking the meal plan offered at Olin needs to be addressed in order to accomplish this goal.

The Solution

In order to increase student satisfaction and the value of the foodservice, Olin should offer students different meal plan options. Table 1 shows the suggested meal plan options which Olin College should offer their students. Freshmen and sophomores would be required to choose from the Gold or Silver Plan while juniors and seniors would be allowed to choose from any of the meal plans or simply use Olin dollars. All students are allowed to add Olin dollars to their cards to be used at Olin Dining Hall or all Babson's dining facilities.

Table 1. Suggested Meal Plan Options at Olin College

1. The Gold Plan
 - \$2,500 per semester
 - Unlimited entry to Olin Dining Hall seven days per week
 - Includes 19 meals per week
 - Students will be able to use this meal plan at Babson's College main dining facility Trim

2. The Silver Plan
 - \$2,350 per semester
 - 14 meals per week at Olin Dining Hall
 - \$175 Flex dollars to be used at Babson's dining facilities including Trim, Reynolds, Pandini's, Jazzman's and Dunkin' Donuts
 - Students can use flex dollars to bring a guest to a meal at Olin Dining Hall

3. The Bronze Plan
 - \$2,175 per semester
 - 10 meals per week at Olin Dining Hall
 - \$100 flex dollars to be used at Babson's dining facilities including Trim, Reynolds, Pandini's, Jazzman's and Dunkin' Donuts
 - Students can use flex dollars to bring a guest to a meal at Olin Dining Hall

All students are permitted to add Olin dollars to their cards which are accepted at Olin Dining Hall and all Babson's dining facilities.

Justifications for the Change

Olin College is a very small school of only 325 students. In order to compete with other colleges and universities and attract future students, Olin needs to be on the same level as their competitors. Schools are now looking to the foodservice program to make them stick out among schools and as a key selling point to attract future students. Many schools are doing this by having multiple meal plans and allowing their students to choose the plan that fits them best. Table 2 shows the meal plans offered at Babson College, Assumption College and Curry College.

Table 2. A Look at Other College Meal Plan Options

Babson College Meal Plan Options

1. The Platinum Plan
 - \$2,289 per semester
 - Unlimited meals at Trim Dining Hall
 - \$175 flex dollars
 - 25 meal exchanges per semester from defined combo meals at Reynolds
 - 20 meals per semester at Olin College
2. 19 Meals per week Plan
 - \$2,284 per semester
 - 19 meals per week at Trim Dining Hall
 - \$175 flex dollars
 - 25 meal exchanges per semester from defined combo meals at Reynolds
 - 20 meals per semester at Olin College
3. 15 Meals per week Plan
 - \$2,136 per semester
 - 15 meals per week at Trim Dining Hall
 - \$125 flex dollars
 - 25 meal exchanges per semester from defined combo meals at Reynolds
 - 20 meals per semester at Olin College
4. 10 Meals per week Plan
 - \$1,951 per semester
 - 10 meals per week at Trim Dining Hall
 - \$75 flex dollars
 - 15 meal exchanges per semester from defined combo meals at Reynolds
 - 20 meals per semester at Olin College

All students are allowed to add Munch Money to their accounts to use at all dining facilities.

Assumption College Meal Plan Options

1. 19 Meal Plan
 - \$1,865 per semester
 - 19 meals per week at Taylor Dining Hall
2. 14 Meal Plan
 - \$1,865 per semester
 - 14 meals per week at Taylor Dining Hall
 - \$100 meal points that can be used a Charlie's or to bring a guest to a meal at Taylor

3. 13 Meal Plan
 - \$1,865 per semester
 - 13 meals per week at Taylor Dining Hall
 - \$100 meal points that can be used a Charlie's or to bring a guest to a meal at Taylor
 - 8 Bonus Meals that can be used to bring a guest to a meal at Taylor
4. 10 Flex Meal Plan
 - \$1,655.50 per semester
 - 10 meals per week at either Taylor or Charlie's
 - \$60 meal points that can be used a Taylor or Charlie's
5. 6 Meal Plan
 - \$1,655.50 per semester
 - 6 meals per week at either Taylor or Charlie's
 - \$250 meal points that can be used a Taylor or Charlie's

All students are allowed to add campus cash to their accounts which can be used at Charlie's or Taylor Dining Hall.

Curry College Meal Plan Options

1. The 17 Option
 - \$5,680 per year
 - 17 meals per week at the dining Marketplace*
 - \$150 flex points per semester to be used at the dining Marketplace, Hafer snack bar, Kennedy snack bar and Smart Market Café
2. The 14 Option
 - \$5,140 per year
 - 14 meal per week at the dining Marketplace
 - \$ 75 flex points per semester to be used at the dining Marketplace, Hafer snack bar, Kennedy snack bar and Smart Market Café
3. The 10 Option
 - \$3,920 per year
 - 10 meals per week at the dining Marketplace
 - \$37.50 flex points per semester to be used at the dining Marketplace, Hafer snack bar, Kennedy snack bar and Smart Market Café

*The dining Marketplace is a retail style dinning. Meals consist of one entrée menu item plus four side menu items or a total of five side menu items.

All students have the ability to add Auxiliary points to their existing meal plan account to supplement dining plan flex points.

As one can see by looking at Table 2 these three colleges are offering students different level meal plans to fit the needs of all their students. Olin needs to take into account that upper classman have access to kitchen units and refrigerators, that the majority of them have cars to get off campus and most do not use all their 19 meals per week. All three schools offer additional “points” which students get to decide where they want to spend them. This allows more variety and decreases the chances that the student will become bored of the food offered on campus because they have more places where they can eat. Olin students would benefit greatly from different meal plan options. It would allow them more flexibility, increase their satisfaction because the students would have the power of decision and decrease their unrealistic expectations of Olin’s foodservice.

Researching the Best Plan

Every college and university is different, which means every college and university’s foodservice operation is different. Finding the best fit for Olin that will satisfy the student’s needs, produce a profit and work with the existing staff and environment is the challenge. Current research has investigated different types of meal plans to see how well accepted they are by students and how profitable they are for the foodservice program.

David Porters author of “Consumption vs. Access Driven Meal Plans: Which is Right for Your Campus?” argues today’s operations are moving away from consumption driven meal plans and moving towards access driven meal plans. Access driven dining programs provide unlimited access during extended operational hours of venues that offer all-you-can-eat service. Olin College foodservice falls into this category. Students simply swipe their cards and come and go as many times as they wish. Unlike meals-per-week or declining plans students don’t feel as though they need to “get their money’s worth” which tends to cause students to take too much food and leads to increase food waste. Access driven meal plans are attractive to parents because they do not have to worry that their child will run out of meal plan money. Research has found that these plans have a

positive effect on the foodservice budget due to decrease food waste and less labor needed during slower hours. It has also been found that schools that offer access driven meal plans have increase cash revenue and increased customer satisfaction (3).

Mike Buzalka author of “An Evolving Change of Plans” raises some important questions when considering which meal plan works best for each school. One issue he discusses is that of mandatory meal plans. Forcing students to participate in the meal plans has been seen to work for Ivy League universities and small private schools but can create problems among the students. Because students have no choice in weather they purchase a meal plan this leads to unrealistic expectations of the foodservice and students feeling entitled to the very best. When the foodservice operation fall short of these demands students get upset and are dissatisfied with their dining experience. Making plans mandatory for freshman has been accepted among students and parents. Most first year students don’t have the change to get off campus or have access to kitchens so they don’t seem to mind having to purchase a meal plan. In addition this decrease parents anxiety that their child will not get enough to eat or run out of meals (4).

Buzalka also points out that the service style is a huge factor in deciding on what type of meal plans schools should offer. The current college students are moving away from the traditional board plans and want flexibility, late night meal options, cash and declining balance and off-campus spending opportunities where they can use debit dollars. Oregon State University switched to a debit system in 1997 because they felt that all-you-could eat was not the best option for them. They believed that a debit system gave the students more decision making abilities which would have a positive impact on students making smarter choices and eliminating food waste. It has been found that the debit system does tend to work better in larger schools because there is more flexibility (4).

An example of where a change to a debit based meal plan succeeded is at Northeastern University. Northeastern University foodservice has a great deal of competition surrounding them, with Back Bay just blocks away from campus and many factors working ageist them such as voluntary meal plans after freshman year, upper classman have kitchen units in their dorms and a

large number of students do not live on campus. Despite all of this the foodservice operation has made \$25 million in foodservice sales with more than 40% of sales from retail and voluntary meal plans. Their success can be attributive to their continually evolving facilities and offerings and their mission of commitment to continuous improvement and to represent students' interests in respect to the dinning program. Over the years they have made many changes to the type of service and facilities but co-directors Maureen Timmons and Micheal Vigna says flexibility is the key. They provide much flexibility by offering their students block plans, which is a pre-paid option that are good for 25-110 meals over the course of a year at select eateries. They have seen sales of them increase ever since they were introduced in 1999. "Husky Dollars" allow students additional debit card cash credit and can be used anywhere on campus and at 100 on and off-campus locations (5).

An article titled "10 Ways to Boost Meal Plan Participation" offers tips for schools on changes that can be made to meals plans to increase student satisfaction and participation. Research has found that one of the biggest complaints from college students is that they can't consume all the meals their plan entitles them to. Students at Olin are experiencing this problem, which makes them dissatisfied and frustrated because they feel as though they should be getting what they paid for. Allowing them to choose how many meals they have per week would eliminate this issue. Another suggestion offered in this article was adding a guest meal option which is an easy and inexpensive and adds value to the foodservice program. Keeping dining facilities and meal options appealing to students is important when creating a successful meal plan. By offering multiple dining facilities where students can use their meals increases variety and decreases boredom and dissatisfaction. If Olin College allowed students to eat at all Babson dining facilities students would have more selection in their food options (6).

When University of New Hampshire changed to continuous service in 2004 with an all-you-can-eat board dining plan they were expecting increased cost because students were inhaling unlimited offerings from morning to night. However, UNH Hospitality Services Executive Director David May says that this change was the best thing they could have done. It eliminated the

unhappy students who claimed they got ripped off when they did not use up all their meals or felt like they were not getting the value they paid for. UNH also found that students were not coming to the dining hall any more than they use to when they had the traditional meal plans. With this new program students now had flexibility and the comfort in knowing that they could come as many times as they wanted. This took away their urge to “pile up” on food which tends to lead to increase food waste. As a result of the change UNH found that both food cost and food waste decreased. Even more impressive is that 7,200 out of the 13,000 enrolled students at UNH participate in their meal program, with 2,400 from voluntary purchases. That means over one half of their student population has a meal plan, even if they don’t live on campus. Many attributes these numbers to not only the unlimited dining option but also because of the renovated off campus meal plan. It offers maximum flexibility in choosing between block plans and dining dollars cash debit program or a combination of the two. In addition to student participation UNH sold over 200 faculty meal plans which generated revenue of \$10,000. Altogether, UNH dining is headed for almost \$20 million in sales and expects meal plan participation to continue to increase (7).

Purdue University in Indiana is a great example how foodservice can make the right changes to fit their school’s environment, foodservice operation and student’s needs. The old dining program made students eat in the housing units which they were assigned, had limited meal choice and offered short and inflexible mealtimes. Current students were disappointed with the campus dining options and incoming students expected more freedom of choice to eat where, when and what they wanted. Sarah Johnson, director of dining services, knew it was time to make a change and to create a dining program that would increase flexibility and meet student’s expectations in food choice and meal plans. Today’s college student is accustomed to eating in restaurants and focus on quality, food choice, hours and location. Students want choices and did not mind traveling a reasonable distance to access those choices. It was important that Purdue University’s new program kept these factors in consideration which made Johnson decided to move away from the traditional college cafeteria and provide food and service similar to commercial marketplaces. The new

renovations resulted in a dining program that consisted of five dining locations that offered all-you-can-eat where food is prepared in small batches or cooked to order and five retail locations that provide students with many grab and go options. Johnson found that these changes had to be made in order to maintain high standards, increase participation in their meal plans and adjust to what their customers wanted. Their success has been seen through their increase revenue and customer satisfaction (8).

Taking Action at Olin

Taking in account the current research, Olin College needs to make appropriate changes to their dining program to provide their students with the best dining experience possible. However, making changes to the meal plans would mean many changes have to take place to the design of Olin Dining Hall. Major reconstruction to the physical layout would be necessary to control the number of swipes per student. Currently there are seven different entry ways into the dining hall. This would need to be changed and limited to one in order to prevent students entering the dining hall without swiping their card. Upstairs doors would need to be locked and the two glass exit doors would need to be removed. Walls would need to be put up to block off the dining hall completely. Cost of reconstruction is estimated at \$75,000.

The Conclusion

After looking at current research, meal plans offered at other schools, and current college students wants and needs it can be determined that Olin College needs to make changes to their dining program in order to achieve their goals of providing the best dining experience possible. The current dining service has many positive factors such as it access driven and offers all-you-can-eat services but draw backs include mandatory participation, limited off campus locations and little flexibility. Providing students with choice after sophomore year, adding Olin dollars, guest options and more dining locations would increase flexibility and customer satisfaction. These changes

would not be easy to make and Olin College could lose money in the form of their meal plan override. However, in order to provide current and future students with a dining experience that would meet their needs and satisfy them and compete with other colleges these changes are necessary.

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