

Sociology 1104: Higher Education: Institutions, Inequalities and Controversies
Final Paper

After School Snacks: Student Food Establishments in Undergraduate Housing

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Abstract [aprx. 250 words]

Harvard College undergraduate housing hosts six student food establishments within the Houses. These food establishments consist of five grilles and one cafe. Students manage each of these establishments with the aid of administration, though the extent of that support varies distinctly. Operating as late-night dining for undergraduate students, the food establishments are spread throughout the campus so as to allow access to students in all Houses, not just those with food establishments contained within. Student and administrative goals for these spaces are similar: the establishments are not intended to be profitable but rather to be important spaces for social and academic engagement among students. In addition, a lack of late-night hot food from dining services and spaces in which to socialize and study led to increased student demand and the creation of the student food establishments. Administrators also lauded the opportunity for student managers to develop entrepreneurial and business skills. Interviews and ethnographic research points to the networks that student managers and employees form with other students in the House as successful outcomes. In addition, video evidence from five of the food establishments indicates that the hoped-for interaction among students within the House happens fairly often, though more research throughout the course of the semester should be taken to avoid biases from the timeline of collected evidence.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code:

Aidan Connaughton

Introduction

Harvard University, much like other elite colleges, is willing to spend large sums of money (sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars) in order to create communities for its students. To varying degrees, these communities generate group identities and facilitate network formation among their members. Among the communities that I have seen with the strongest social cohesion are those that allow students to adopt those communities as part of their identities. At Harvard, these communities often take the form of the undergraduate Houses for all students, whether students like it or not. Physically contained within these Houses are the student food establishments, late-night eateries managed by students but provided with support from House administrators. I believe that these undergraduate Grilles and Cafe serve as mechanisms to strengthen House communities as non-exclusive third spaces on campus. As an employee and now manager at Dunster Grille, I have seen firsthand how pride in Dunster Grille and the inherent openness of the space has created an important community and concept for Dunster identity to center on. While Dunster tends to struggle with participation in intramural sports or HoCo events, Dunster Grille consistently has enough employees and customers to run every day of the school year and turn a profit, frequently collaborating with HoCo and other House organizations for events.

For my research, I examined why administrators believe student food establishments merit the support that they are given, the extent of this support across establishments, and the outcomes of the student food establishments on House communities. I hypothesize that these food establishments serve as important “third spaces,” or places that are neither public nor private where students may congregate with already existent communities and strengthen them in the process. In the process, student food establishments facilitate the creation of new social networks between employees and customers.

Furthermore, I was deeply interested in the administrative incentives and motivations for supporting these student food establishments. None of the establishments pay rent, and all are recognized businesses where students are allowed to pay with BoardPlus, a fickle College-specific currency that is unusable at many University-run dining establishments and

cafes. Besides yearly costs that the university would incur should the establishments not turn a profit, the establishments themselves were built and paid for by Harvard College. What administrative incentives allowed for the creation and maintenance of the student food establishments? What benefits do these student food establishments grant to the university?

My research questions are as follows:

1. What purpose do student grilles serve at Harvard?
2. Are student grilles profitable for the House/university?
3. If student grilles serve as a community-building mechanism, do they succeed, and why or why not?
4. What is the purpose of the student grilles according to students, and do these ideas align with administrators' ideas?

Literature Review and Hypotheses

There is very little literature on this topic. The closest analogues are with library and university cafes and the benefits of living-learning communities, a potential descriptor for undergraduate Houses at Harvard. I will explore each topic separately below.

In the course of my research, I found three articles that detail two different types of university cafes and the effects on student outcomes. The first is the opening of Cafe Gelman at George Washington University in 1994, an attempt to open up the Melvin Gelman Library as a social space to create “connections of scholars and students to one another through gatherings and events” (Masters, Arneson, and Lutton 1994, 388). Rather than an imposing academic institution, the library cafe served to make the institution a more “inviting and welcoming space.” While these cafes were not actual physical institutions but rather events where food and drink was brought into the cafe, the goals would likely be similar to the goals of student grilles at Harvard. The second consisted of similar events called “Science Cafes” meant to establish interdisciplinary connections among scholars at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Rather than trying to establish connections between the university and the students, these cafes were meant to bring together scholars in “informal venues” specifically off campus to explain their research findings with each other and with the community as a whole (Scaramozzino and Trujillo 2010). While both of these types of events inform and to some extent mimic how student grilles operate in that

they recognize the importance of informal, food-oriented spaces for intellectual growth, neither of these examples is as institutionalized or as constant as the student food establishments at Harvard.

My analysis is also informed by research on living-learning communities and the renewed focus on their development in US higher education. Living learning communities' main goals are to "foster an inclusive learning and social environment for students outside the classroom" in an attempt to create communities for students and enrich their educational experiences — in essence, to increase student involvement (Linsenmeyer 2017, 29-30). At University of South Florida, administrators recognized the importance of residential life on student outcomes and created living learning communities in order to provide "smaller communities" in an effort to "[make] connections, [build] community and [find] one's place both academically and socially at an institution of higher education (Hernández 2011). Of course, the exact design and implementation of living learning communities varies drastically (Dunn and Dean 2013), but some include "study spaces" that function more as social spaces where student bonds can be formed. This phenomenon fits in well with Kerr's conception of a multiversity, or a "whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board, and related purposes" in which these student food establishments serve an important function as a forum for creating these smaller communities within the undergraduate Houses (Kerr 1995, 1). I believe the undergraduate Houses at Harvard are modeled in the style of living-learning communities, held together by a common identity to create the multiversity.

I hypothesize that student food establishments at Harvard are an important part of the living learning community system at Harvard. Due to their localization and ties to specific Houses, they even help to form common identities among students that ties them to their living learning community (their House). By serving as a third space between the public and the private, student food establishments allow for students to interact with one another and enrich each other's educational experience. I hypothesize that these informal settings are important as a foil to the highly rigorous academic settings at Harvard. Indeed, these spaces serve in stark contrast to formal dining at Cambridge University. Whereas formal dining serves as an "organizational ritual" that helps to transmit and reproduce knowledge and maintain institutions,

the type of dining at the student food establishments is anything but ritualized (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey 2010, 1393). While dining at the student food establishments may help to institutionalize the establishments themselves, it is far from the complex rituals of social order at Cambridge.

Research Methods

I used a variety of research methods and data types to conduct my research. Primarily, I used targeted, structured, open-ended interviews in an effort to build a theory of the grilles. I originally planned to conduct one interview with one student manager from each student food establishment, one house administrator or resident dean from each House with a student food establishment, and one interview with a university administrator with more information on the grand plan for House Renewal (in which Dunster Grille was renovated and Winthrop Grille was created). Ultimately, I conducted seven interviews with four student managers, two House administrators, and one university administrator out of the six student managers, ten House administrators, and one university administrator I contacted for interviews. The interviews covered four out of six student food establishments. These interviews were recorded, and I used the answers to address my hypotheses and build a theory for the purpose and effectiveness of student grilles on campus as part of a living learning community (See Appendix A and B for sample interview guides). While the interviews did not cover each student food establishment individually, there was enough variation among the sampled establishments and enough information from the university administrator to allow some inference for the unsampled establishments. Due to time limitations, the interviews were not entirely transcribed, but selective transcriptions were used to support my assertions. My interview with the university administrator serves as an expert interview, even more so than my other interviews. As someone with more knowledge of long-term plans at Harvard, she had much more insight into the process of starting and maintaining the student grilles at Harvard, especially through the House Renewal project.

In addition, I videotaped and took ethnographic notes at all but one of the student food establishments during their open hours in order to gauge firsthand the effectiveness of the student grilles at creating third spaces for community development. All identities were obscured in this

footage by speeding up the video, due to the difficulty of obtaining waivers for every student at each establishment. The main focus of this ethnography was to gauge the proportion of students who come to the food establishments with at least one other student (thereby strengthening community) vs. those who come alone, as well as to investigate the potential topics of conversation and goings-on at the food establishments. For example, do students primarily work on homework together or socialize at the food establishments?

I am primarily interested in this project because I have a direct investment in the student grilles as one of two co-managers for Dunster Grille. Though holding this position has lent me certain insight into what questions might be helpful to ask interviewees, it could potentially lead to biases in my research. In order to maintain the academic integrity of this research, I had to increase my skepticism about my role in the research, especially data that I collected about Dunster Grille. I purposely tried to phrase my questions in a very open-ended manner in order to ensure that respondents could answer truthfully without any leading on my part. In addition, I consciously focused only on objective facts during my ethnographic note-taking rather than attempting to divine meaning from the goings-on at the food establishments.

With regard to confidentiality, I edited videos to mask all identities in my videotapes of the student food establishments, and I had all interviewees sign waivers that gave me permission to record. In order to protect privacy to the best extent that I can, I will refer to interviewees only as a student manager, a House administrator, or a university administrator.



Clockwise from top left: Quad Grille, Dunster Grille, Cabot Cafe, Eliot Grille, Winthrop Grille, and Quincy Grille

Findings

Motivations

Through my interviews, I identified five primary motivations for the creation and maintenance of the student food establishments at Harvard. These motivations were mentioned by multiple interviewees in the course of my interviews. Though most of the motivations were asserted by both student managers and administrators, the opportunity for students to gain entrepreneurial and business experience was only identified by administrators as a potential motivation.

First and foremost, every interviewee identified the student food establishments as important for community building. As Harvard administrators have moved toward a re-centering of social life on campus back to the Houses, student food establishments have served as an important “opportunity for community” (University Administrator, 0:38). As House administrator B put it, “the goal is not for it to make lots of money... the grille is about the intangibles it provides, which is community value to the House” (House Administrator B, 1:10).

If the undergraduate Houses are to serve as smaller communities within a multiversity, they need these spaces to serve as places where community can be built.

Second, this space is a non-exclusive social space. Mostly mentioned by students in reference to the sanctions on unrecognized single-gender social organizations on campus, the student food establishments are open to all students, including students from other Houses. As one student manager put it, “people from wherever they are can come and gather together... and that’s where the grille lies... for me” (Student Manager A, 1:25). This student manager even mentioned that in this regard, working at the student food establishment is like a public service job, providing a space for all students, regardless of background. The student food establishments “facilitate interactions between students... in a manner that you wouldn’t get in any other space” (Student Manager B, 0:31). As a non-exclusive social space, student food establishments welcome all students, likely mitigating any in-group vs. out-group dynamics that might be present in other organizations.

Third, the student food establishments serve as just that: food establishments. With an undergraduate dining plan that closes dinner at 7:15pm in most Houses, there is a distinct lack of hot food in the Houses. Without the student food establishments, students’ only options would be in and around Harvard Square, a grueling trudge in the winter (especially for students in the Quad) and likely an expensive venture. Student managers and House administrators from the Quad specifically mentioned this reasoning as part of the creation of Cabot Cafe six years ago. As important sources of late night food for students — as well as some of the only places that accept BoardPlus on campus — student food establishments serve as crucial food providers on campus for students. Furthermore, there is high student demand, another important facet for administrative support. The students find value with these food providers and spaces, so administrators continue to support student food establishments.

Fourth, student food establishments provide spaces for academic engagement. Specifically mentioned by administrators, student food establishments could serve as spaces for “intellectual development” and academic discussion (House Administrator A, 0:40). Students would have the opportunity to use these spaces for discussing classes, collaborating on group projects or problem sets, and creating networks among intellectual peers. Much like the science

cafes at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, student food establishments are much more casual spaces in which students can engage in intellectual discussion without the stricter social trappings of a conventional classroom. Student managers did not identify academic engagement as a mission of the student food establishments beyond serving as a space in which students could do homework.

Finally, a motivation only identified or referenced by administrators was the potential value for student managers as they build their resumes. Though Harvard students often joke about how people only ever seem to take on leadership roles to pad their resumes, this is a case in which no student manager identified this motivation, but two administrators did. Having these establishments gives “an opportunity to learn how to run a business” to student managers (University Administrator, 0:36). Students have the opportunity to shape the space how they please, with some administrative guidance. With “experience owning their [own] operation,” student food managers could develop their leadership skills in a low stakes environment, safe from the financial and organizational pressures of starting and running an actual business (House Administrator A, 1:35). The amount of House oversight appears to vary across Houses; some student food establishments have a lot of flexibility in experimenting with their business model, while others are subject to tighter oversight.

Among these five primary motivations for having the student food establishments, there is a notable absence of discussion of profit. While every interviewee indicated that a small profit would be the most ideal outcome for the student food establishments, all said that the profit is not an important factor in having the establishment. Rather than making money, the establishments are more about the community value they confer onto a House and/or neighborhood. At every student food establishment I interviewed, the House budget would cover any shortfalls at the end of the year should there not be a profit. This process was more institutionalized at Cabot Cafe than at Eliot Grille, for example, but in each case the House was willing to commit to that potential cost.

Additionally, my interview with the university administrator lent insight into the grand plan for the student food establishments. Though the conversation focused mainly on grilles, the university administrator indicated that due to House Renewal, there was a concerted push to a neighborhood model of the Houses rather than the atomized version of the Houses that had

existed before. In this model, Houses would share resources with each other, filling in gaps that other Houses might have. Because of the immense effort needed to run a student food establishment, university administrators decided that each of the four House neighborhoods should have a grille (Quad, Eliot, Quincy, and Dunster). In addition, with the construction of Beren Hall during House Renewal, Winthrop House would have a grille in order to provide a communal space that it lacked. Under this plan, the student food establishments would be well located so as to be separated from one another and serve students from all Houses. As House Renewal has continued, Dunster Grille has been renovated and Winthrop Grille has been constructed. The university administrator indicated that their facilities and operations would be standardized through House Renewal, as most grilles had been started independently of each other with different operational procedures, including the process for submitting payroll and paying invoices. This standardization does not seem to be a priority for administrators, as significant variations in hours, wages, menu items, and administrative oversight were present between all student food establishments, including between the two renovated grilles, Winthrop and Dunster.

Outcomes

In order to test success outcomes, I focused primarily on characterizing and measuring the outcomes of the community-building motivation for the student food establishments. Student manager interviews and ethnographic data provided the bulk of the data for these findings. In particular, I attempted to characterize the operations of the student food establishments from the perspective of student managers as well as from the perspective of customers.

One of the most encouraging signs that the student food establishments actually contribute to House community is the unanimous assertion from student managers that they feel more closely connected with their House community because of the food establishment. Most cited the fact that they now know administrators and other students by name simply because they are the managers of an important community institution. One student manager said they “already loved... being in the House... but [being an employee] definitely gave [her] a more definitive place in [the House]... [The House] has this group of leadership within the community... and being a manager puts you in that group” (Student Manager B, 20:10). Another said that “working

at [the Grille] had made me learn a lot of names of people in the House and I'm more comfortable because I know more people because I'm forced to interact with them while I'm working" (Student Manager C, 12:15). All student managers indicated that they grew closer to their own House community as an employee and then even closer as a manager. By forcing interaction with others in the House, employees seem to become more connected to the community.

Furthermore, all student managers agreed that they have "regular" customers who come in everyday and know many of the employees, and most of the people who come in to the student food establishment come in groups. For example, one manager said that one of these "regulars" texts the House-wide GroupMe every night to see if there is lemon poppyseed cake (Student Manager D, 14:45). Another manager talked about blocking groups that would often meet up at the student food establishment. They might come individually, but they always knew that someone else in their blocking group would already be there (Student Manager B, 16:55). All student managers indicated that a majority of students come in groups rather than individually, and a majority of students stay and eat their food in the student food establishment rather than getting their food and leaving immediately. Though this may only serve to reveal some bias on the part of the managers, all of them indicated that their student food establishment was popular, though some indicated that was only true within the House, while others indicated that it was a neighborhood-wide resource.

These effects seemed to be borne out in the ethnographic research I conducted. By my count, the vast majority of all customers at each of the student food establishments I visited would come in groups of at least two and stay to eat their food. At each establishment, there was a mix of students working on schoolwork and socializing, with a slight majority socializing. At each establishment, there would be at least one customer who knew the employee working and would stay and chat with the employee while waiting for food. While some establishments were far busier than others, most had some students there who did not order food, coming instead just to socialize. Topics of conversation included school work, job searches, books and TV shows, and other friends. At two separate student food establishments, I witnessed friends introduce their friends to each other after running into one another, creating more connections.

Each of the student food establishments indicated that they try to collaborate with other student groups on campus to host and cater events. These events range from a Hawaiian themed night to student band performances to fundraising events for student-run service organizations. These events likely bring in students from across campus to mix with other students, forming networks outside of the House. Nevertheless, all student managers indicated that the primary customer base came from within the House, with the rest of the customers coming mostly from other Houses nearby.

Discussion and Conclusion

In considering the five motivations for having these student food establishments, it is clear that the establishments form an important part of the living-learning communities created in the Houses. My findings support my hypothesis that these establishments aid in forming living-learning communities by providing third spaces, non-exclusive spaces for communities to form through socializing. Networks of employees and customers were important outcomes, especially for the student managers. Administrators' goals aligned fairly closely with students' goals, which largely fit into the model of living-learning communities.

Nevertheless, more research may be needed in order to address the student perspective on student food establishments, particularly the perspectives of non-manager employees, student customers, and students who do not frequent these establishments. A follow-up survey or interviews could be helpful in clarifying the outcomes of these establishments beyond the perspective of student managers. Indeed, two of the student managers I interviewed were from the same establishment, and they disagreed anecdotally on how many students come in groups or by themselves (one said 50-50, one said 75-25). These are pretty significantly different estimates, so a more comprehensive research project could provide more insight into the actual outcomes for students in the House.

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Appendix A

House Administrator Interview Guide:

1. What do you believe to be the goal(s) of [HOUSE] Grille?
2. What does a successful run of [HOUSE] Grille look like?
3. Who should [HOUSE] Grille serve, ideally?
4. What is the history of [HOUSE] Grille, if you have any information? Why was it created?
5. Does [HOUSE] Grille make profit? If yes, where does that profit go? If no, who covers the loss?
6. What are the wages for student workers at [HOUSE] Grille? Who sets them?
7. Is [HOUSE] Grille popular among [HOUSE] students? Students from other Houses?
8. How does [HOUSE] Grille fit into the larger administrative structure of [HOUSE]? Who oversees [HOUSE] Grille?
9. Is there any interaction between [HOUSE] Grilles and other student grilles?
10. How do you see [HOUSE] Grille fitting into the broader Harvard community?
11. (For Dunster and Winthrop Grilles) How was [HOUSE] Grille incorporated into the House Renewal? Were there discussions specifically about [HOUSE] Grille, and if so, what were the issues discussed? The conclusions?

Appendix B

Student Manager Interview Guide:

1. What do you believe the goal of [HOUSE] Grille is?
2. What does a successful run of [HOUSE] Grille look like?
3. Who should [HOUSE] Grille serve, ideally?
4. What is the history of [HOUSE] Grille, if you have any information? Why was it created?
5. Does [HOUSE] Grille make profit? If yes, where does that profit go? If no, who covers the loss?
6. What are the wages for student workers at [HOUSE] Grille? Who sets them?
7. Is [HOUSE] Grille popular among [HOUSE] students? Students from other Houses?
8. How does [HOUSE] Grille fit into the larger administrative structure of [HOUSE]? Who oversees [HOUSE] Grille?
9. Is there any interaction between [HOUSE] Grilles and other student grilles?
10. How do you see [HOUSE] Grille fitting into the broader Harvard community?
11. Who is the typical customer at [HOUSE] Grille?
12. Who is the typical worker at [HOUSE] Grille?
13. In your experience, do people typically come to [HOUSE] Grille in groups or by themselves?
14. Do customers usually stay and eat by [HOUSE] Grille, or do they get their food and leave?
15. Do you have “regular” customers? Do they tend to come in groups or by themselves?
16. Do you feel that your relationship with [HOUSE] has changed because you work at [HOUSE] Grille? If so, how?

Appendix C

List of Interviewees:

ID	Date	Form
House Administrator A	11/2/18	In person
House Administrator B	11/8/18	In person
Student Manager A	11/26/18	In person
University Administrator	11/29/18	In person
Student Manager B	12/2/18	In person
Student Manager C	12/3/18	In person
Student Manager D	12/3/18	In person

List of places recorded:

Place	Time	Date
Quincy Grille	10:30-11:00pm	11/27/18
Cabot Cafe	9:15-9:45pm	12/3/18
Winthrop Grille	11:15-11:45pm	12/5/18
Eliot Grille	10:15-10:45pm	12/6/18
Dunster Grille	11:15-11:45pm	12/6/18