

Late Night Nibbles: Student Worker and Community Priorities at Dunster Grille

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Sociol 1130

Abstract: Student food establishments at Harvard (including Dunster Grille) serve an important function in the living-learning communities of the undergraduate Houses. How are student managers empowered or disempowered in their work at Dunster Grille, and what areas of improvement exist to help Dunster Grille better achieve its goals of fostering House community and providing a fun and enjoyable work and social environment? Using interview data with other student food establishment managers and administrators, an employee feedback survey, and a community feedback survey, I create a more detailed description of the student-administrator partnership at Dunster Grille as one in which student managers must negotiate the priorities of three different groups: administrators, student employees, and customers. When these priorities are at odds, it is critical that administrators take student concerns seriously. I also propose seven recommendations for the next Dunster Grille managers. Of these recommendations, the most important is that managers must continue to solicit feedback from employees and the community to empower them to make the best decisions for the community. This data may also empower managers to have their voices heard by administrators.

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

Signed: Aidan Connaughton

Executive Summary

After conducting two semesters worth of research, I have compiled a list of seven recommendations to better empower student managers and make the grille run more efficiently. These recommendations draw from interviews with other student food establishment managers and administrators, a Dunster Grille employee feedback survey, and the inaugural Dunster Grille community feedback survey.

1. *Move manager turnover to winter break rather than summer break to help preserve institutional memory.* This recommendation has already been accepted and will be implemented next year. Additionally, a manual for grille managers will help to preserve institutional memory and is currently in the works.
2. *Return to two person shifts and do away with solo shifts.* Rather than cutting back on employees, student managers should focus on bringing in more business through a variety of tactics including better advertising in Dunster and other Houses, implementing a rewards program for frequent customers (as supported by over three quarters of Dunster students), or selling grille merchandise such as hats or shirts.
3. *Move weekday hours one hour earlier.* This is a move supported by student employees and customers alike.
4. *Continue to increase the grille's presence in specialty events, including HoCo events and tutor study breaks.* As a large source of revenue, these events can drive new business at the grille and are popular among the community.
5. *Introduce new weekly or monthly special menu items.* The community data provides a list of new menu items that customers would like to see, and changes to the menu might bring in more stable business.
6. *Create a discount for sophomores or DeWolfe students and foster loyalty to the grille early on.* By bringing in sophomores and students from DeWolfe, the grille can integrate new Meese and foster a more cohesive Dunster community that is welcoming to all Dunster students.
7. *Continue to solicit employee and community feedback.* Even if the surveys are not distributed again next year, an institutionalized system of feedback will help managers make more informed decisions.

Introduction

As one of two co-managers at Dunster Grille, I have been able to see how it facilitates connections in a living-learning community and provides students with late night food in an area that lacks affordable options. Through my research last semester into student food establishments at Harvard, I was able to identify administrative and student manager goals for these facilities as spaces for social engagement and community building, intellectual engagement, and provision of late night food. I was also able to see how student food establishments generally seem to accomplish these goals by conducting ethnographic observations of the student food establishments during their opening hours. The alignment of administrator and student manager motivations was strong, and all of my interviewees pointed to a general feeling that the grilles were successful at accomplishing those goals through a wide range of partnerships with various members of the community.

Nevertheless, that research was confined to the leadership of the student food establishments without exploring beyond. While student managers and administrators pointed to the success of student food establishments, their answers come from anecdotal evidence rather than empirical or comparative data. Furthermore, these actors have a motivation to present their student food establishments as successful because their success is tied to these actors' success. In addition, my research was intended to be descriptive rather than normative, identifying how the student food establishments do operate rather than providing recommendations for how they should operate.

In my action research for this semester, I attempted to put together recommendations for next year's Dunster Grille managers based on feedback from an employee survey and a survey of Dunster students about what improvements they would like to see from the grille. In addition, using my interviews from last semester, I proposed changes that Dunster could implement that have seemed to be successful at other student food establishments. I focused my research on two main questions: how can Dunster Grille better accomplish its goals and serve Dunster residents better, and what do Dunster students and student employees want to see from the grille that they are not seeing currently?

Ultimately, the beneficiaries of this knowledge are the grille managers for next year and the administrators who work with Dunster Grille. However, ideally these recommendations will benefit employees and customers alike, helping to make the grille a more enjoyable place to work and a facility that corresponds better to student desires from Dunster students specifically.

By making grille leadership more responsive to student and employee wishes, it can maintain its popularity and continue to achieve its goals of creating community. While my findings may not be directly applicable to other student food establishments, they could also potentially benefit from this information as a list of best practices.

Literature Review

There is very little literature on the topic of student food establishments specifically, but I believe that Dunster Grille is an important part of a living-learning community at Harvard. With its goals of fostering community among students in a casual third space within the dormitories, Dunster Grille forms a pillar of the living learning community within Dunster House.

In the course of my research from last semester, 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 informed primarily 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, but some include “study spaces” that function more as social spaces where student bonds can be formed (Dunn and Dean 2013). 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 students to interact with one another and enrich each other’s educational experience. Through my research, I found 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, such as 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). Instead of providing a rigid environment, the student food establishments allow students to learn socially, engaging with their peers in a low stress environment with food and music. 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. Instead, the student food establishments help students to create informal social networks among themselves.

Methods

In order to explore how Dunster Grille can be improved by managers to fit the needs of student employees and customers, meeting its stated goals, I used data primarily from two surveys. The first survey was distributed to student employees and the second was distributed to customers, using Dunster students as a proxy for the majority of the customer base at Dunster Grille. In addition, I used my interview research from last semester to identify potential best practices from other student food establishments that are not currently used at Dunster Grille.

At the beginning of the semester, I sent out an optional and anonymous survey to employees about how to improve the grille and to get their feedback on changes we have already implemented. There was no incentive to fill out the survey, but still nine employees responded out of approximately seventeen active employees, a response rate of over 50%. For the survey questions, see Appendix A.

The more useful data, however, came from a survey to Dunster students. While students from other Houses are welcome to and often do come to Dunster Grille, the primary customer base is within Dunster House, so I believed that Dunster students would be the most relevant proxy for the average Dunster Grille customer. In this survey, I collected data that helped to assess the effectiveness of Dunster Grille currently as well as create actionable improvements to help Dunster Grille better achieve its institutional goals. Among the topics I investigated were opening and closing hours, menu item changes and favorite menu items, how often people visit the grille and whether or not they visit by themselves or in groups, and the extent to which the grille is a place where students feel comfortable. See Appendix B for a draft survey. In order to incentivize responses, I raffled off three free grille items of the respondent's choice to random respondents. The survey was promoted over the House social list as well as the House GroupMe. In total, I received 74 responses from students of all class year and entryways within Dunster. I think it is probably likely that this group is somewhat representative of the House, though likely there is a bias in favor of people who like grille food because of the free grille food incentive. This might skew responses toward more positive opinions of the grille.

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 survey respondents, it could potentially lead to biases in my research, especially toward reforms that I would like to see implemented. In order to maintain the academic integrity of this research, I had to increase my

skepticism about my role in the research. I purposely tried to phrase my questions in a neutral manner in order to ensure that respondents could answer truthfully without any leading on my part. In addition, I tried to ask questions about reforms that have been proposed but that I do not view as particularly beneficial to the grille.

Though I collected emails at the end of my survey in order to raffle off the free grille items, I made it an optional question and did not associate those email addresses with any survey responses. In addition, I did not believe any demographic information apart from entryway in the House and class year would be useful or important to collect, so I did not collect any other personal information.

Data

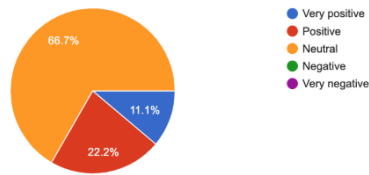
Employee Survey Data

At the beginning of the spring semester of 2019, my co-manager and I consulted with our House Administrator and our Grille Tutor during our monthly finance meeting and realized that we needed to make some changes to our staffing in order to avoid losing a significant amount of money. Though our employees and customers generally seemed to be happy, it was clear that the House was concerned about our finances, and we were advised to cut back on employee hours to save money. Whereas before we had been open from 9:00pm-1:00am on weekdays and 10:00pm-2:00am on weekends with two employees on each shift, we began to be open from 10:00pm-12:30am on weekdays and 10:30pm-2:00am on weekends with one employee on weekdays and two employees on weekends.

These changes seemed to be poorly received by our employees, and my co-manager and I were initially very skeptical of these reforms. In order to gauge the popularity of these changes as well as to gauge opinion from our workers, I developed an optionally anonymous feedback survey for employees. In the end, I received 9 responses out of roughly 15 active employees, a 60% response rate.

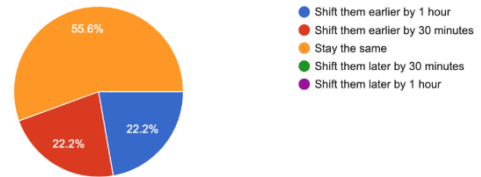
Weekend shifts are now from 10pm-3am (open from 10:30pm-2am). How do you feel about this change?

9 responses



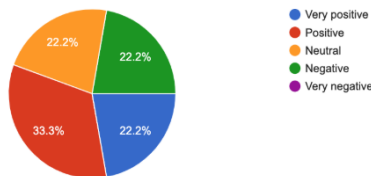
If you could change the times of weekend shifts, would you shift them earlier, later, or stay the same?

9 responses



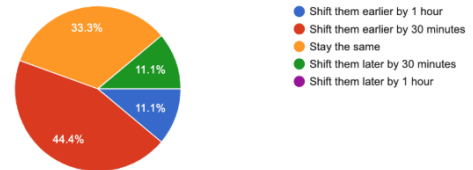
Weekday shifts are now from 9:30pm-1:30am (open from 10pm-12:30am). How do you feel about this change?

9 responses



If you could change the times of weekday shifts, would you shift them earlier, later, or stay the same?

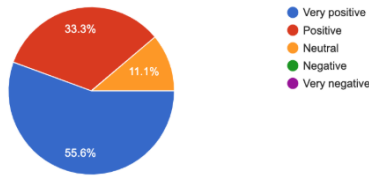
9 responses



When looking at the data, it's clear that the hour changes were mostly neutrally received, with some vague positive feelings toward the weekend shift changes and mixed reviews on the weekday shift changes. What is also clear, however, is that about half of employees feel that shifts are too late in the evening. From my own experience working shifts at the grille, I know how disruptive the late hours can be to a person's sleep schedule, especially with classes that start at 9:00am or 10:30am. When we shortened shifts, much of the shortening happened at the beginning of the shift rather than at the end, but our employees might have been better served by having earlier shifts.

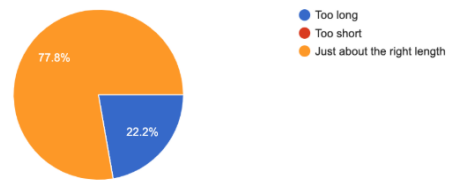
In general, how do you feel about working the Grille?

9 responses



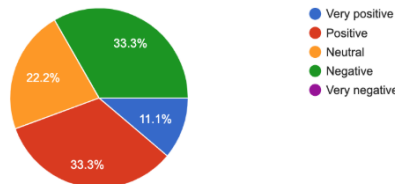
Do shifts generally feel too long, too short, or just about the right length?

9 responses



How do you feel about 1 person shifts on weekdays?

9 responses



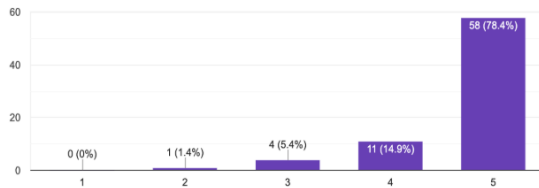
Employees seemed to have mixed views on the one person shifts on weekdays, with four out of nine indicating positive or very positive views but three out of nine indicating negative views. This survey was distributed during our slowest month (February), and I expect this approval to have diminished significantly in the past few months as employees who were working solo shifts became overwhelmed on busy nights. Indeed, though a large majority indicated positive feelings about working at the grille, these overwhelming shifts became frequent throughout April and would probably have inspired less positive feelings today. Over the past month, many of our employees refused to sign up for shifts in the past month, explicitly citing the overwhelming nature of working an unpredictably busy shift alone. During the fall semester, we only had to close a total of two days due to staffing issues. During the spring semester, we had to close thirteen days due to staffing issues. In an effort to help offset the unpopularity of one person shifts, we raised employee wages on weekday shifts from \$13/hr to \$14/hr, but this has done little to improve morale. Many nights, either I or my co-manager would get called down to help an overwhelmed employee stave off a rush of people, sometimes for up to an hour.

Employee morale is critical for ensuring the success of the grille as a space for fostering community, and if the grille isn't open, we can't make any money. For this reason, employee morale and expectations must be set clearly early on in the year to ensure the health of the grille.

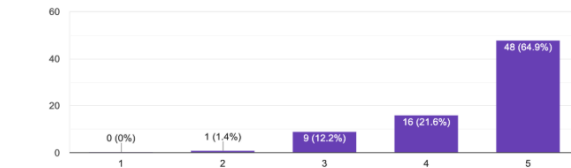
Community Feedback Survey Data

As essential as employee morale is to the grille's functioning, customer opinions (especially Dunster student opinions) on the grille are the most important gauge of the grille's success, especially when considering the administrative motivations behind having grilles in the first place. Rather than focusing on specific grille procedures, the survey I distributed in April had a broad scope, measuring success metrics of the grille such as how often students come, whether they come with other people, and how important the grille is for the Dunster community.

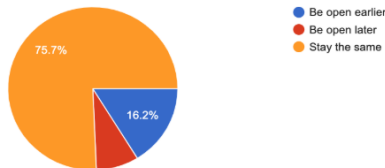
How comfortable do you feel at the Grille?
74 responses



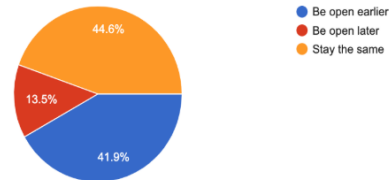
When thinking about the Dunster community, how important is the Grille for that community?
74 responses



The Grille is generally open on weekends from 10:30-2:00. Would you like to see the Grille be open earlier, later, or stay the same on weekends?
74 responses

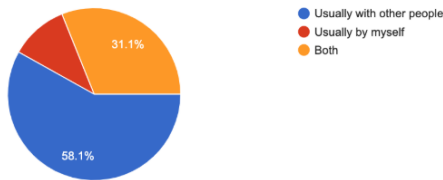


The Grille is generally open on weekdays from 10-12:30. Would you like to see the Grille be open earlier, later, or stay the same on weekdays?
74 responses

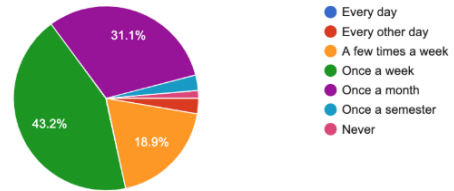


I sent out the survey to Dunster House students, offering a chance at free grille food. With 74 responses, it is possible to sketch out some patterns in public opinion on the grille. As shown above, the vast majority of Dunster students feel comfortable at the grille and believe that the grille is important for the Dunster community. Interestingly, while the community largely prefers for our weekend hours to stay the same, over 40% of students would prefer the grille to be open earlier on weekdays. I expect that many athletes are in this camp, especially if they have morning practices and try to get to sleep early.

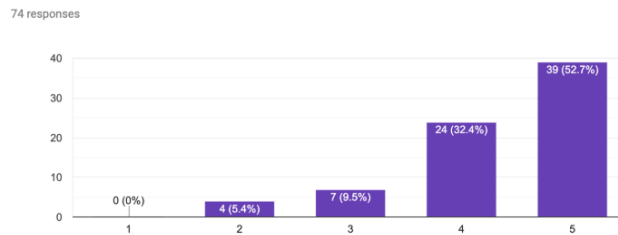
When you visit the Grille, do you usually come with other people or by yourself?
74 responses



About how often do you visit Dunster Grille?
74 responses



How do you feel about the Grille in general?
74 responses



With this data, we can clearly see that community perceptions of the grille are very positive, with a clear majority viewing the grille positively and over 60% of respondents visiting the grille at least once a week. The grille seems to be accomplishing its goals of fostering community and serving as a social space, as a majority of students come to the grille with other people. Community demand for grille food in other spaces is also high; 72% of respondents wanted grille food at HoCo events, 68% wanted grille food at their Tutor study breaks, and 52% wanted grille food at their student organization's events.

One question intended to gauge the impact of increased grille closures seemed to indicate that what mattered more than staying open 7 days a week was having a consistent schedule. The uncertainty of the grille being open was very unpopular, and 53% said it was "very important" for the grille to have a consistent schedule compared to 20% who said it was "very important" for the grille to be open 7 days a week.

Survey responses covered all entryways in Dunster and all class years with a slight bias toward seniors. Differences between DeWolfe and Dunster proper students were minimal, as were differences between class years.

Discussion

The data presented here leads me to a more conclusive description of the responsibilities of the student managers as well as a list of seven recommendations for next year's managers. These recommendations are drawn from my research last semester as well as this semester. Student managers of Dunster Grille are responsible for a variety of tasks required to keep the grille open including scheduling shifts, submitting food orders and payroll, hiring and training new employees, tracking the grille's finances, and maintaining the grille's facilities. Aside from these responsibilities, student managers are also student administrators, serving as liaisons between administrators, employees, and the broader Dunster community.

Administrator and student priorities can be at odds; in these cases, student managers must negotiate between the two groups to find appropriate solutions, advocating for both administrator and student employee priorities. This semester, employee revolt against the solo shift policy led to negative outcomes. In order to avoid this issue in the future, it is critical that student managers and administrators create a system of resolving these conflicts early on, setting norms, goals, and expectations for the grilles. In addition, the partnership between student managers and administrators must allow student managers to be empowered to advocate for student employees and have their concerns be taken into consideration. A more robust system of feedback from employees could go a long way to making their voices heard with administrators.

Recommendations

1. *Move manager turnover to winter break rather than summer break.* This is how manager turnover is conducted at Cabot Cafe, and it is the easiest way to preserve institutional memory, as senior grille managers will continue to be on campus to help transition new managers. In addition, this will ensure that senior managers are not writing theses during their term as manager. This recommendation has already been accepted and will be implemented next year. Additionally, a manual for grille managers will help to preserve institutional memory and is currently in the works.
2. *Return to two person shifts and do away with solo shifts.* Rather than cutting back on employees, student managers should focus on bringing in more business through a variety of tactics including better advertising in Dunster and other Houses, implementing a rewards program for frequent customers (as supported by over three quarters of Dunster students), or selling grille merchandise such as hats or shirts. If administrators refuse to

budge, shifts should be assigned for the entire semester rather than having new signups every week. This will prevent scheduling issues we encountered this year. Aggressive advertising has been successful at Winthrop Grille and weekly shifts have largely been successful at Cabot Cafe.

3. *Move weekday hours one hour earlier.* This is a move supported by student employees and customers alike. It may also help to bring in business from athletes who go to bed early because of early morning practices, a potentially new source of revenue for the grille that could offset expenses from two person shifts. Weekend hours seem to be well-suited to both employee and community preferences.
4. *Continue to increase the grille's presence in specialty events, including HoCo events and tutor study breaks.* As a large source of revenue, these events can drive new business at the grille and are popular among the community. This semester, five tutor study breaks brought in \$250 in revenue and the Grille Crawl, a campus-wide grille collaboration, brought in \$783 in revenue as compared to the \$433 in revenue on an average Friday night. These events accomplish two goals in one by fostering community at the same time that they bring in more revenue for the grille. By using this survey data, it will be easy to convince Tutors and HoCo to put funds towards using grille food at their events.
5. *Introduce new weekly or monthly special menu items.* The community data provides a list of new menu items that customers would like to see, and changes to the menu might bring in more stable business. Special nights at Winthrop Grille have also seemed to be successful, and our own experience with special grille items was successful.
6. *Create a discount for sophomores or DeWolfe students and foster loyalty to the grille early on.* By bringing in sophomores and students from DeWolfe, the grille can integrate new Meese and foster a more cohesive Dunster community that is welcoming to all Dunster students. Eliot Grille cites their sophomore discount as an important foundation for their loyal customer base.
7. *Continue to solicit employee and community feedback.* These surveys provided a rare insight into how these two constituencies view the grille and helped create a set of very actionable recommendations. Comparison data will provide even more insight if the surveys are distributed again in the future. Even if the surveys are not distributed again next year, an institutionalized system of feedback will help managers make more

informed decisions. One area to explore could be adding questions about the grille to the annual House Life Survey, allowing managers access to what might be more representative data from the House.

The main conclusion from the community feedback survey, however, should be that the grille, by and large, is accomplishing its goals of providing food and a social space for community building in a living-learning community. Approval of the grille is very high, and most respondents indicated that the grille is important for their experience of Dunster community. While a few policies should be revisited (especially those related to employee morale), the House strongly approves of the grille as it stands.

The recommendations from above are not to be taken as gospel, but should rather be critiqued and revisited by future managers. They are reflections of my research and experience as manager this year, and their implementation could go a long way toward allowing the grille to do an even better job of fulfilling its institutional purpose as an important part of the Dunster House living learning community.

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Appendix A

Below is the Dunster Grille Employee Feedback form

<https://goo.gl/forms/JIki1ECYLD0kcv0K2>

Appendix B

Below is the Dunster Grille Community Feedback form

<https://goo.gl/forms/Ox1bpsiZd5c7WcMG2>