

Learning to Eat

Who knew the Ivory Tower had a kitchen?

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I don't know about you, but I left college with an appreciation of two foods: coffee and beer. Times have changed. Since the *Princeton Review* started rating dining programs, residence halls and other college amenities, there has been increased attention paid by prospective students—and, therefore, administrations—to the once-lowly cafeteria.

If you read the press releases, beating the competition with restaurant-style dining, wood-fired pizza ovens, espresso machines and organic vegetables is one of many ways for colleges to attract and hold the best and brightest.

It also seems that fond food memories fuel alumni associations, which increase attendance at reunions and boost giving.

But is it just an arms race with escalating levels of gourmet ingredients? Or can a dining program make a legitimate contribution to the educational environment? At Bowdoin College, we think it can, and does.

Many factors contribute to the strength of the Bowdoin dining program: the intimate size of the campus and student body (1,700), the New England winters that encourage people to linger longer in the warmth and light of the dining halls and the college's traditional commitment to a strong residential community built on rich relationships—relationships reinforced over discussions and fellowship at the dining tables.

From their first day on campus, Bowdoin students experience a positive association between good community and wholesome food, one that sets many students on a lifelong path of healthy eating. First-year students arrive with diverse backgrounds and varied exposure to food. Many have survived the hyper-scheduled years of secondary school on grabbed meals of pizza and Pop-Tarts. The traditional sit-down meal with family was often sacrificed in the pursuit of a winning curriculum and extracurricular activities.

In the dining halls, first-year students find a haven from the confusion and dislocation of orientation week, knowing they can find friends and something great to eat each time they walk through the doors. Over time, the dining halls become a dependable source of comfort and community. College experiences start to add up and, little by little, the students realize they have stumbled into a place where everyone is looking out for them. They may be in rural Maine, but the food is world-class (#2 in the *Princeton Review*). The staff knows not only their names but their food preferences

and routinely anticipates their orders. This is especially true for the increasing number of students with special dietary needs who must develop a higher level of trust that the food is safe and healthy for them.

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Undergraduates can spend four years with their heads a little bit in the clouds. Disconnected from structures of home and not yet subject to adult responsibilities, they are free to pursue their interests. Sometimes, this freedom leads to bad habits and poor self-care. In many ways, dining imposes a healthy rhythm on students who may be burning the candle at both ends. Bowdoin students report through comment cards and advisory committee discussions that having a dependable source of tasty, healthy food helps them concentrate on learning, studying and athletics. An overheard remark at the beginning of the school year is, "I'm so glad to be back at school. I haven't had a home-cooked meal all summer."

For many students, college offers development of a sometimes-overlooked asset: taste buds. How can they not become more adventurous when everyone at their table is enjoying the sweet and sour tofu and the kimchee, especially if their Korean roommate helped the chef perfect the recipe? If every day, students have the choice of four soups made from scratch with fresh ingredients, how will canned soup taste after that? After four years, their taste buds develop a new benchmark for what constitutes good food.

Not just an amenity, the cafeterias serve as an important gathering place where people from different disciplines can exchange ideas in an informal, relaxed environment. The largest dining hall at Bowdoin, Thorne Hall, has soaring ceilings, avant-garde lighting, wooden refectory tables and views of the tall pines that tower over the campus. At dinner time and during the late-night meal called SuperSnack, Thorne takes on the feeling of a noisy block party. Music plays, and young people chat and move among tables. Because students spend most of their day in intense classes or in front of their laptop computers, they look forward

to the opportunity to mix and mingle. Many students say that after graduation they will miss the feeling that every night, they can just walk into a place and know there will be friends to sit with—a sense of community they fear will be largely absent in post-academic life.

Some companies are doing what they can to create more community. High-tech firms in Silicon Valley try to replicate the flavor of the college experience—an intellectual community, verdant quads, exercise facilities and gourmet cafeterias—because they know these surroundings stimulate creativity.

In addition to existing as the hub of the campus, the food operations help ground students in the local community. Each year, the dining department recruits approximately 25% of the first-year class to work in the dining halls and cash operations. Many stay on throughout their four years and have a good start on their working resume. Even those who don't stay form relationships with dining employees that personalize their daily visits to the dining halls and connect them to the local culture.

At Bowdoin, employees stand out as people, not functionaries. Mother Nature usually throws two or three whopping snowstorms at the Maine campus each winter. These storms blanket the quads with deep drifts, and hazardous driving conditions keep most employees home. Dining employees, though, are considered “essential” to the daily operation of the college, and they come to work and stay through howling blizzards and power outages to make hot chocolate and comfort foods for the students. Students show their appreciation with thank you cards and sometimes standing ovations.

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The dining operation is often used by faculty to illustrate the “real” world for the students. The organic chemistry class may make bread in the bakeshop. Plant physiology students might be on their knees in the dirt in the organic garden. Sociology students will sit down with cooks and dishwashers to measure their happiness quotient. Art students paint a cubist homage in the cafe. Making these connections allows students to broaden

their knowledge and pull their heads out of their books, and brings dining employees even closer to students. At Bowdoin, it isn't just that dining service employees know the students as people and not just as customers, but that they are, in turn, known by the students as more than servers, but members of a community.

There is a real effort to connect Bowdoin students to their Maine “home away from home.” The campus Outdoor Leadership Center provides guided adventure outings to every corner of the state. The Center for the Common Good provides opportunities to volunteer for local nonprofits, and local “friends” of the college take students under their wing and into their homes. You can't get much closer to Maine than working at the college garden, where students' sustainability ideas find fertile ground.

The organic garden supplies vegetables, fruits, herbs and flowers to the kitchens, with excess harvest donated to local hunger-prevention efforts. The gardeners plant common veggies like cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, peas and carrots, but also push the culinary envelope with radicchio, arugula, husk cherries, beet greens and celery root. On Fridays in February, local farmers who supply the college with blueberries, apples, tomatoes, poultry and other foods are invited to join faculty, staff and students for lunch and conversation about varied topics, further personalizing the food they eat.

The dining program has a strong emphasis on local cuisine. A Bowdoin education includes an appreciation of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Longfellow, but also Downeast standards like lobsters, creamy fish chowder, baked beans, anadama bread, hermits and whoopie pies. Truly, the Maine experience wouldn't be complete without lobsters, which are pulled from the sea just down the road off Harpswell Neck. Bowdoin kicks off each academic year with an authentic lobster bake, and graduating seniors say their final goodbyes over lobster, corn and blueberry cake.

If the goal of a liberal arts education is to prepare students to make thoughtful life choices from a broad base of information, then it seems appropriate to have a dining program with aspirations to expose students to a life of healthy eating habits, a variety of foods from all different cultures, the integrity of a local community and the importance of sharing quality time with friends. If, in the process, a lot of delicious food is consumed and new favorite dishes are found, that's all the better.

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