Letters to The Tech

Student views

(Copies of these letters, detailing some parts of the controversy regarding the possibility that Compulsory Commons in Baker House will be in the near future become compulsory. They are reprinted with permission from the To the Dean of Student Affairs Office.)

It is with some mild trepidation that I write this; I would much rather drop in person and air my views. However the press of a week-long illness prevents me from doing so. This is in response to the rumors I have heard from several sources regarding the possibility that Commons in Baker House will be in the near future become compulsory. This is of great concern to people whose reliability I do not question. The fact that the matter is still being debated on urges me to let you know my view.

I support compulsory Commons for several reasons. One of them is that my experience at MIT, and notice the fact that so few people sign up for it in the first place, where to one I suspect we are not a love lost to the students. There are three basic reasons:

- Quality. This is not so bad as you make out. As a rule, the food is edible, with far too many delicious options. As far as quality goes, I suppose every morning is a bit meh. Because I can eat it at, as indeed I did for the first term of my freshman year, and a few times since.
- Price. This is a killer. There is now no way which I will spend $42 a week for food -- or even $35 (a la carte full programs, respectively). My usual expenditure is around $52, which includes snacks and all the making of balanced meals.
- Time. Also another lethal aspect. Other times, I can go away from the laboratory until about eleven, or from, when I get done with Monday night hour of 7am. I have never observed any eating hall open at those hours.
- To cement my case a bit further, there is one more aspect. One of the advantages which people mention regarding compulsory Commons. Please keep in mind that I do not claim to speak for all or any group of people, save myself.

I must claim that it has been claimed that requiring residents to sign up with Commons would drop the price. The stated reason is due to economies of scale. However, whereas, that the same effect may be accrued by forcing CSR, self-service, and faculty to eat here, or better still, all of Cambridge! Ludi- crose! Of course, as is the idea of making Commons more economical by forcing more people into it, people who don’t work as evidence by current refusal to buy it. Such gains are small; and in the worst case could be eaten up by a mismanagement.

A slightly less serious claim is that it would increase social interaction within the house. This argument seems to be the concern of the various political types about the house; few others take it very seriously. This is understandable, for who would want to eat in private, for less than market price. The fact is, there are an incredible number of other options. It is not a matter of Commons or not, thanks to the nature of the institution and of the House. The aspect to be taken by comparison.

Compulsory Commons becomes an even greater advantage.

- Social interaction - cooking tends to be a, a personal change from the day’s activity. Either advice or group meals increases this effect. It provides a cheap way to entertain guests of all kinds. I hope this presentation of views was reasonably coherent, and will have some effect. If there is anything I can offer as

Ken Forbes

Compulsory Commons?

Let me start with a small point - as you read on. I hope this letter does provide much more freedom. The Dining Service buys its food for its whole system, and so I doubt that adding a few hundred people to the system would make a difference in food cost per pat- (ponent, (the economics of scale in the purchase of supplies and labor and fixed costs).

The claim that compulsory Commons has any effect on the social interaction in the house is not a serious one. I have a major disagreement with you here. There is no doubt that there are opportunities for social interaction at Baker, and compulsory Commons has a very minimal impact on the House. However, having lived a dorm at MIT when there were compul- sory Commons, I know that the interaction among people in the dining room is not as much of an impact. You do meet and have a chance to talk with people from elsewhere in the house. It is relaxing and enjoyable to see people and talk with friends, and of course, after dinner. You must admit that the outdoors do not make particularly comfortable dining rooms. Nor, once again, the physical plant does not offer much comfort. The last miss is the most im- portant. The physical condition of Baker has deteriorated noticeably over the years, and the deterioration is continuing. I am sure no one deliberately pours large amounts of grease or food down their drains. If you think about it, you will realize that it is inevitable that small quantities of grease end up in the sink every time you wash up a pan from cooking bacon or hamburger, etc. This grease builds up and has caused and will continue to cause problems with Baker’s plumbing -- more severe problems than caused by hair. The grease and oils from the food cause damage to the bricks in many areas. Once this happens, the bricks will crumble. The only way to stop this problem is to eliminate cooking anywhere except in your own apartment. There are some of the cooking appliances. The damage is not easily or cheaply repairable. The situation will only get worse as the electrical situation, any rewiring must be done by li- censed electricians.

I can at least add on a good note by saying that all of the advantages to cooking that you list are reasonable. You can have variety and number (through a number of students know no- thing about nutrition and do not eat sensible meals). It is less expensive than Commons and does prevent you from being free from Commons. And cook- ing can be a great activity.

I hope this does not seem too negative, but I feel the need for taking the time to write. There have been too many decisions made on this issue, and I feel that there certainly be considered along with many other we receive from Baker.

Please call if you would like to talk. Thanks for your letter.

Nancy J. Weatley

2223-105

Letters to The Tech

Compulsory Commons controversy

Dear Ken:

On behalf of the Dean’s Office, thanks very much for taking the time to put your views on compulsory Commons in writing. Your letter is very thoughtful. I’m sure you put an awful lot of time into it, and it deserves a thoughtful answer from us.

You raise some good points, many of which we have consid- ered. Some I agree with others I don’t. I’ve eaten the food on occasion over the last few years. Also, I was student here a few years ago, and I do think the food has changed too much since then. So I do have some first-hand experience with what to respond to you. I should say also that while I do not think compulsory Commons will win the “good idea of the year” award, it does have some advantages. Remember that this is what you read on. I hope this letter does sound like and completely reject your thoughts be- cause I do believe they are im- portant. Even the best Commons plan will not work unless it is acceptable to students.

Your first comment is on the quality of the food — edible but starchy, I guess you are right on that. Although there are small every night so you can primary reason for suggesting compulsory Commons in Baker at this time is not because of the social benefits.

The last miss is the most im- portant. The physical condition of Baker has deteriorated noticeably over the years, and the deterioration is continuing. I am sure no one deliberately pours large amounts of grease or food down their drains. If you think about it, you will realize that it is inevitable that small quantities of grease end up in the sink every time you wash up a pan from cooking bacon or hamburger, etc. This grease builds up and has caused and will continue to cause problems with Baker’s plumbing — more severe problems than caused by hair. The grease and oils from the food cause damage to the bricks in many areas. Once this happens, the bricks will crumble. The only way to stop this problem is to eliminate cooking anywhere except in your own apartment. There are some of the cooking appliances. The damage is not easily or cheaply repairable. The situation will only get worse as the electrical situation, any rewiring must be done by li- censed electricians.

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