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Dining Town Hall puts emphasis on customer service, student feedback

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TECHNEWS WRITER

The vast majority of resident students at IIT eat in Sodexo locations for most of their meals due to the fact that the company has exclusive rights to serve prepared food on campus and that meal plans are built into the fabric of the school's housing contract. This level of mandated participation brings with it inevitable levels of dissatisfaction: when somebody eats in the Commons for two meals each day, they're bound to see Sodexo staff and their products at their best and their worst, and to witness long-term patterns in food services that they wish to see changed.

On a Tuesday evening in the MTCC Welcome Center, IIT's Student Government Association (SGA) briefly opened a new avenue for students to directly communicate their concerns on the topic of dining, holding a town hall-style meeting featuring open input and discussion between a group of about two dozen participating students and a panel composed of individuals from Sodexo, IIT's Office of Campus Life, Residence and Greek Life, Student Affairs, and the Food Advisory Board.

While such a meeting could easily have been standoffish and counterproductive, this particular occasion actually went rather smoothly, and many in attendance say they left with a better understanding of IIT's Dining Services than they had in the past, if not necessarily a higher opinion thereof. Students spoke passionately on topics ranging from specific complaints about certain menu items to stories of poor treatment by staff in various Sodexo locations, and for the most part, those comments were addressed by the staff members present.

A number of major themes came about during the course of the town hall event, but perhaps the most consistent issue wasn't the most obvious one at the beginning of the meeting. There were a number of times when students spent significant time behind the microphone speaking about a lack of certain options, only to find out that those options had actually been recently expanded. This same phenomenon was echoed when discussing

some recent changes to hours in the Commons, which is now open until 2:30 p.m. for lunch on weekdays and has weekend breakfast hours. Many of the students present, who were arguably those who cared most about Dining Services, were completely unaware of such new policies or options from Sodexo. One of the core takeaways from the town hall seemed to be that a large part of the dissonance between students and Sodexo comes down to a failure on the latter's part to properly communicate, as evidenced by the fact that programs like Meal



Photo by Reno Waswil

Exchanges and Express Meals only became widely known within the last month, despite the fact that they had existed for a semester prior.

Through partnerships with SGA and Residence Hall Association, which both send representatives to Food Advisory Board meetings, Sodexo will hopefully be able to disseminate information about their new programs in a more effective manner going forward, helping to improve public opinion of their responsiveness to student input as they implement changes.

Along with outward communication

from Dining Services, another major point of the town hall was to share strategies for more regular student input. Ricky Stevenson, the organizer of the Food Advisory Board, took the opportunity to introduce the organization to the public, welcoming any students to join their open meetings every other Friday at 3:30 p.m. in the Pritzker Club, meetings which include half a dozen individuals from Sodexo's management. The Food Advisory Board has traditionally been responsible for making major dining decisions (such as the addition of

The meeting was about more than just methods for submitting feedback, though. Students did not sit through two hours of discussion just for the purpose of learning where to direct their input; instead, they were there to voice their concerns right that instant about Sodexo locations and staff. This is where audience members were at their most animated and even angry, actively venting their frustrations directly to those they held responsible.

Many students were dissatisfied with general cooking quality, especially when it came to basic dishes like rice. More specifically, a significant contingent of those present agreed that Sodexo staff members seemed to lack care about the quality of the food they served, particularly on weekends. Staff training came up more than anything else in the meeting, touching on sanitation issues as well as customer service. Students shared stories of being rudely told not to use their phones while waiting for omelets to cook and of having their concerns about mislabeled non-vegetarian menu items completely dismissed and the behavior repeated. When it came to staff issues, Ferenc and others on the panel stressed the importance of noting a specific time, place, and staff member for each such situation and addressing an email to Dining Services on the subject, since they tend to address such issues on a case-by-case basis. In response, students noted that staff inside Sodexo locations seem to be poorly trained in customer service, and that more general, thorough action is needed to fix many of the problems caused by the behaviors of certain people among the front-line staff.

Throughout the course of the town hall, the consistent crowd learned a great deal about how Sodexo makes its policy decisions, and the professional staff responsible for food decisions seemed to take away a few important points from their audience. It remains to be seen what changes will be made and whether those changes will be properly communicated to the customers of Dining Services, but along with other methods of feedback, this town hall seemed like a good place to start.

ice cream to the Commons), and is the most direct, consistent source of student input to Dining Services.

In addition to Food Advisory Board, Sodexo General Manager Chris Ferenc strongly encouraged students to fill out the feedback cards which are available in most dining locations on campus, and clarified that those cards are directly discussed daily in administrative meetings. Finally, Ferenc stressed that managers inside the Commons are trained to take in immediate concerns, and that Sodexo's email address is open to any concerns as well.

Union Board opens executive nominations

Melanie Standish

TECHNEWS WRITER

Illinois Tech's Union Board is opening up nominations and applications for three open positions for their Spring 2016 executive board.

Nominations can be suggested through the Google form found at tinyurl.com/UB2016App or by emailing president@ubiit.org. Applications for the positions will open on Hawklink on November 12 and will close on November 19.

Union Board is an event programming board, developed in 1938, to enhance life on campus for Illinois Tech students. Union Board has brought the IIT student body big events such as Homecoming, MTCC

Late Niite, and Spring Formal, along with smaller events like monthly movie screenings, discounted ticket sales, and biweekly coffeehouses.

Three positions will be available for Union Board's Spring 2016 executive board. The three positions available for applications include our Off Campus, Music, and Marketing Chairs.

Union Board's Off-Campus Chair programs events such as ticket sales, often of the sports or Broadway variety, along with popular off-campus events such as wing crawl. Specific questions about the position can be directed to the current chair, Chris, at offcampus@ubiit.org.

Union Board's Music Chair programs music-related performances such as

Hawks Coffeehouses, Center Court performances, and All the Riite Moves, a dance series. Specific questions can be directed to the current chair, Shireen, at music@ubiit.org.

Union Board's Marketing Chair promotes Union Board through flyers, posters, giveaways, and anything that puts the Union Board name out into the public. Specific questions can be directed to the current chair, Sany, at market@ubiit.org.

All students are encouraged to apply. A student does not need to have prior experience with Union Board; however, other experience with programming events, or with other student organizations on campus, is highly recommended.

Serving in one of these positions is a great chance to join a really fun team of

school-spirited people who love Illinois Tech and want to make others love it too! Union Board gives students the autonomy to choose what they want to see on campus to enhance the overall student experience. It's an opportunity you won't want to miss out on!

All interested individuals can attend Union Board general body meetings every Thursday in E1 Room 258 during the lunch hour. Students can also like Union Board at Illinois Tech on Facebook or follow @iitunionboard on Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. Union Board highly encourages you to check us out, and if you have any general questions, reach out to president@ubiit.org.