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## Student forum tackles recent housing policy changes

**Utsav Gandhi**  
CAMPUS EDITOR

Generations of IIT students, especially undergraduates have gone up from living in MSV or SSV for their freshman year to pick an apartment in Gunsaulus or Carman Halls on campus, and part of this transitional “growing up” experience has been the ability to be able to care for yourself and grow independent of the school dining services.

Last week, however, as students were getting ready to sign contracts for on-campus housing for next year, they were in for a surprise as rumors on Facebook emerged of proposed changes instituted by Housing services wherein all students living in on-campus dorms, regardless of whether the unit contained a kitchen facility, would be required to have a minimum of a new meal plan, with 50 meals and 50 bonus points for the semester. Understandably, there was a furor over these proposed changes and students took to Facebook and angry emails to vent their frustration.

The Student Government Association (SGA), spurred by almost 500 viral votes on the issue's VoteBox page (<http://sga.uservoice.com/forums/136665-sga-votebox/suggestions/3823397-repeal-the-decision-to-require-meal-plans-for-all>), jumped into action in order to mobilize the student voice and initiate a healthy discussion to bring genuine student concerns and feedback surrounding the issue to the higher authorities.

On Thursday, April 11 2013, Elizabeth Pinkus-Huizenga (Betsi), the Director of Housing and Residential Services and Katie Murphy Stetz, the Dean of Students held an extremely valuable and brutally honest discussion to try and satisfy the growing student unrest regarding the unpopular decision. This was an open forum for students to come vent their frustrations as cordially as possible and for the administration, made out to be the clear villains in the whole situation, to explain reasons behind why the policy change was implemented in the first place. Betsi said that she met with Rani Shah and Raghav Girijala, the SGA President and Exec VP respectively, amidst a volatile Facebook environment to work out some possible changes as recommendations.

The primary reason they reiterated throughout the night for having decided to institute the change was because university administration saw it best to want and push the overall on-campus experience to another level altogether by having more Gunsaulus and Carman residents enjoy a greater eating experience in the Commons.

Not having a meal plan during very busy times often makes students feel stressful, and they felt that having a meal plan might directly correlate to student wellness and would help them do better academically.

Addressing the biggest grouse against the decision, the “crappy timing”: they owned up to their mistake and mentioned that sometimes in real life this poor communication does happen. Lessons had definitely been learned from the poor transfer and spread of information as well as the unfortunate timing of the proposed change. However, to make sure they were allowing students to make an informed decision whether to accept the new terms and conditions, they had decided to extend the deadline to accept contracts until May 31.

Addressing the other issue with the decision wherein graduate students would be treated differently, in the sense that they would be exempt from this policy, Betsi explained that traditionally they have always been treated differently on campus and even with this policy this would continue to be done so.

However the first real occasion for the ball to land in the students' court came in when it was announced that students who had already been

living for a year or more in a residential unit with a kitchen would be “grandfathered in” being exempt from taking up the meal plan mandatory as well. The new clause for the mandatory meal plan would then just affect those students who would be moving in for the first time into an on campus residential unit with a kitchen.

Immediately there was an apparent heave of relief in the room, literally nobody spoke for the next twenty seconds. Then, individual cases started springing up.

A 30 year old student, who clearly seemed like they could take care of themselves should they be required to do so, explained the sheer redundancy in having to eat at the Commons even in the presence of a kitchen unit at home. A non-traditional student put in a strong plea to be considered or even consulted when such decisions were being taken for the general undergraduate student body. A student from another culture who has been cooking since she was thirteen and who had been taught to cook by herself urged the administration to factor in the diverse backgrounds of IIT's many student communities in implementing such crucial decisions.

Both Betsi and Katie indicated that they are willing to take individual conversations such as these forward in order to be most fair and just to specific cases. Betsi then went on to answer a very legitimate question about the pricing of the new meal plan: she said that it was priced keeping in mind the competition from the five meals per week meal plan: though it resembles more of an anytime blox. There are fewer meals but more flexibility, and the pricing has been determined keeping in mind recommendations from the university's Chief Financial Officer, the Dean of Students and the new Sodexo General Manager.

The next legitimate question to come up was to make the Commons a more enjoyable experience if it really was going to be the new proposed epicenter of student interaction and community engagement. Suggestions thrown forward were the option to stay open until 8 p.m. (to accommodate those who have class until 7:40 p.m.), with enough quantities of food to ensure they didn't run out quickly like they sometimes do.

A ‘grab and go’ option for a pre-packed meal is also being considered and a major push was made by the SGA Executive VP Raghav to reinstitute the Food Advisory Board, a subsidiary student body which made recommendations to Sodexo on improving the on campus dining experience but was dissolved due to student disinterest (please email [iitsgaexecvp@gmail.com](mailto:iitsgaexecvp@gmail.com) if you wish to be more involved with this crucial endeavor in sustaining the student voice). The Dean stressed that the whole point behind this endeavor is to really challenge Sodexo in making or breaking the on campus residential student experience – it was also a huge gamble on her part. The heart of the new policy is building a community centered around the Commons experience as one of the ingredients for a more inclusive environment.

Other welcome policy changes announced throughout the course of the night were to make laundry free for all campus residents next year, to review the cable plan, replace the spot coolers in Carman and Gunsaulus and provide free installation of ACs and cooling units – many little things which will improve the student experience.

Other legitimate student concerns brought up were the loss of the experience of taking away the independence of taking care oneself; those who had severe dietary restrictions and for whom the Commons simply cannot accommodate (one girl even went on to explain how her stomach took to the Commons food unfavorably to the point that she was puking right in front of the staff, but still when she went to ask for contract termination she was asked to present proof of sickness.)

A student who co-ops at an establish-

ment with Sodexo catering indicated how she could not wait enough for the summer because their catered food at that location was unbelievably and incomparably healthy and need-addressing. She questioned why Sodexo wasn't even trying to improve their game here when they clearly have the potential and even the feedback from the surveys they sent out. Students brought up the point that such a forum, while invaluable in starting a dialogue, should've been called for before the policy was decided to be implemented.

There should be clearer information on the website and even the suggestion for a Sodexo forum was thrown out. A student expressed the inability to move into Gunsaulus now due to affordability issues, with tuition also going up and the students being unable to control expenses of things they didn't need. Another student brought up the fact that the Commons is not equipped to manage so many people, and \$750 is much more than money than they need to feed themselves for a semester.

The big question cropping up was how we as students paying for a service and an administration looking to best serve student needs to hold Sodexo more accountable to their commitment to quality and customer service.

One stop solutions such as recommending their vegan diet (no matter what the student concern is), severe and sustained categorization (are the athletes, the Caribbean students, the architects, the Doctor Who fans really going to segregate following the new policy to promote community integration? Is the Commons really the most practical vehicle to tackle this problem in the first place?), an incredible amount of red tape in canceling the meal option even if there's a legitimate concern – such inherently intricate issues need to be tackled more holistically and with more serious thought at the root of the problem. Has this approach of a mandatory meal plan worked at other universities? Can we invite more local establishments to serve as guest cooks in the Commons here and then to promote flexibility, variety and novelty into the doldrums menu? Can we reach out to more local pizza places to deliver (to which Betsi said very matter-of-factly that companies have been known to stop deliver because of students not tipping delivery men enough)?

As the discussion drew to a close, as suggestions were getting more impassioned and agitated, one thing was certain: it is crucial to keep the conversation going.

The Student Government urges invested members of the student body to join the Food Advisory Board in making their concerns heard directly where and when they matter the most. We need to see if the Commons improves: and for this things need to work in a certain sequence the way we want them to work, for this the forty five minutes that the one student spent filling out the IIT Dining Survey need to be worth more than just shrugged shoulders and an apparent apathy to student opinion.

If the quality of discussion at this forum was anything to go by, then one can definitely hope that a Sodexo forum will be announced and held as soon as possible to address the real root problem holding our university student experience from being the best it can be.

More power to the students, more power to the student voice, more power to the press bringing to you this dialogue, more power to the student government and definitely more power to the university administration that are clearly invested in improving this experience for us.

The forum ended with an overwhelmingly positive appreciation for Katie and Betsi in taking this initiative to own up to a few mistakes made and lessons learned, to elucidate by example how administrators really have the best interests of students at heart and how we can all engage in productive dialogue to ultimately make this a better experience for everyone involved.

## Relay for Life events last 12 hours

**Katie Peters**  
STAFF WRITER

Are you looking for something to do this Saturday night that will not only let you have fun and bond with your classmates, but also raise money for a great cause? Well, this weekend is the second annual Relay for Life on IIT's campus, and it's coming back better than ever! The Relay for Life committee has been working hard since December to fill all twelve hours with fun activities and fundraisers which will keep participants excited and looking forward to the next event. And just as a disclaimer: you don't have to run or even walk, just come and hang out and bring donations to participate in the activities they have planned. The Relay for Life teams has already raised over \$4,000 and are well on their way to their goal of \$12,000, but they need your help! You can still sign up to participate at Relay and raise money from your friends or family, or donate to any of the teams or at the event to help reach our goal.

In addition to the great events during Relay for Life, this week is Paint Your Campus Purple Week, leading up to the big event Saturday 27th April. The committee will be decorating as much of campus as possible with purple items, and this week even the Man on the Bench will be sporting his Relay pride. Also, on the bridge the team will be selling raffle tickets to win a signed Chicago Bulls basketball, so bring money during the week to buy raffle tickets or Luminaria to honor your friends or family who have fought cancer. Keep an eye out on IIT Relay for Life's Facebook page for a photo contest, and follow @IITRelayForLife on Twitter and use the hashtag #paintIIT-purple to tell us how you are raising money for Relay or supporting it through purple pride!

The week's events culminate on Saturday with the Big Event philanthropy options and the Hawks Purple Out baseball game at noon. At 2 pm on Saturday IIT's dance group New Velocity is kicking off the event with their second annual mini-showcase in Keating. At 6:30 pm the Relay for Life Opening Ceremony begins at Man on the Bench Park with opening remarks by Provost Alan Cramb. The first few festivities will be outside in the park, and the Luminaria Ceremony and the events following will be inside the Hermann Hall Expo. The schedule of events for the night is as follows:

**6:30 p.m.:** Opening Ceremony, Man on the Bench Park  
**7 to 9 p.m.:** Photo Booth  
**7 to 9 p.m.:** Vandercook Jazz Band  
**9:30 to 10 p.m.:** Luminaria Ceremony with the X-Chromotones, Hermann Hall Expo  
**10 to 12:30 a.m.:** Band Performance: Way to Fall and Midwest Skies  
**10:30 p.m.:** Root Beer Pong Tourney  
**11 p.m. to 2 a.m.:** “Weddings”, Face Painting  
**2 to 2:30 a.m.:** Fight Back Ceremony  
**2:30 a.m.:** DJ, Trivia game  
**3:30 a.m.:** Raffle winners announced: win a signed Chicago Bulls basketball and White Sox baseball tickets!  
**4 a.m.:** Zumba  
**4 to 5 a.m.:** Photobooth, “Weddings”, Face Painting  
**5 a.m. Power Hour:** Frozen T-shirt, Track Lap  
**6:30 a.m.:** Closing Ceremony  
Throughout the event there will be opportunities to donate to the cause to bring us closer to our goal of \$12,000, so be sure to bring your loose change to support cancer research! If you have any questions, please email [iitrelayforlife@gmail.com](mailto:iitrelayforlife@gmail.com).