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5/16/13
GEOS 206 Final Project

Improving Sustainability at the Center for Development Economics Dining Hall

Introduction

Background

The Center for Development Economics (CDE) is a one-year economics graduate program at Williams College that enrolls students from developing nations with public sector experience in their home countries. The program's mission statement, as taken from its brochure, is twofold:

1. To help those already working on public policy issues in developing countries to acquire the ideas, tools, judgment, and critical thinking skills to be effective leaders in policy-making in their home countries.
2. To create in the Williams community a greater awareness and understanding of issues and ideas that prevail in the world beyond US boundaries and how they bear upon our collective well-being.

The first component explains the CDE's commitment to a rigorous academic curriculum for its fellows. Like Williams undergrads, students take four courses a semester - one of which is a required tutorial - to deepen their exposure to theoretical and practical economic concepts. The aim is that fellows will take the new perspectives gained in the classroom back to their positions at home to spur productive policymaking and leadership. Indeed, Williams and the CDE succeed in fulfilling the program's academic mission, as graduates have returned home to become top ambassadors, finance ministers, and prime

ministers. The motivation behind this project relates to the second part of the CDE's mission: the relationship between the CDE and the greater Williams community. While the CDE represents a fantastic opportunity for its students to study with leading economists and gain valuable insights from classmates, it is less successful at interacting with the undergraduate portion of Williams.

Setting/Project Description

The CDE operates in a college-owned building on the corner of Rt. 2 and South St. (see Fig. 2), but the program itself is autonomous; it has its own budget and admissions process. This places it somewhat outside the regular purview of day-to-day college operations. Undergraduates and other non-CDE community members generally have no reason to enter the building, since its main purpose is just to serve the program's fellows. As such, initiatives on "campus" are rarely linked with the CDE. While this may serve a practical purpose in some instances, the CDE dining hall lags behind in terms of the sustainability progress made recently in the other three main dining halls.

The CDE dining hall is open Monday-Friday and serves breakfast and lunch. Meals are open to any student or faculty free of charge, in addition to the 30 CDE fellows that are on a 21-meal plan. Currently, the CDE presents trays to meal-goers, offers only paper cups for both hot and cold drinks, and does not have a recycling or composting system at the food clearing station. Making improvements in all of these areas is feasible, and in some cases already underway. Because Williams takes so seriously its commitment to sustainability in dining practices, this topic is particularly salient and worthy of consideration. This paper will introduce, examine, and analyze, as well as propose avenues of change to align practices in the

CDE's dining hall with those of other Williams dining halls. I believe the CDE could eliminate the use of trays, go paperless by introducing a fleet of reusable cups for both hot and cold beverages, and improve upon the existing waste system to increase its commitment to sustainability.

Method

The nature of this project was much more about observation and conversations with administrators/dining staff than data collection or experiment-running. My goal was to obtain support from both the CDE and Williams dining to unite the two on this issue. Because the college had already supported similar changes in three other dining halls, my task was to draw their attention to the CDE's lack of sustainability practices. At first, I relayed my observations to Stephanie Boyd and the CDE's director, Tom Powers. I connected with Bob Volpi (director of Williams Dining Services), Molly O'Brien (Manager of Driscoll and CDE dining halls), and most importantly, Sue Landry (Head CDE chef). I used my meetings with Tom Powers to learn about the CDE's history and the current structure of CDE dining. Bob Volpi provided information on current Williams dining initiatives and the best ways to go about instituting similar ones at the CDE. Molly O'Brien relayed her hands-on experience with Driscoll and how that could be applied to the CDE. Finally, Sue Landry elaborated on day-to-day CDE dining life, and possible challenges/constraints to the ideas I proposed.

In the remainder of the paper, I will address and analyze each of the three issues in depth, as well as offer my suggestions for a more sustainable solution in the near future.

Trays

The Current Story

When you get in the buffet line for a meal at the CDE, the first option presented is a stack of trays. This seems odd given the few food options that are available. The buffet line is directly adjacent to the two, long, mess-hall style dining room tables (Fig. 5), meaning you do not have to travel far with your food before setting it down. Other Williams dining halls are different because of the array of food options and competition for seating space; you must carry your food a long ways since few tables are available during peak hours. Despite this, neither Mission nor Driscoll offers trays. Given these factors, one would expect that the CDE should be able to follow that mold. Sue Landry raised an important concern unique to the CDE. She has decided to keep trays because they streamline the clearing process. The clearing station (Fig. 3) is a cramped area because it shares space with the milk dispenser, microwave, and toaster. That counter top shown in Fig. 3 thus serves a dual purpose: it is used to prepare food, as well as to help clear food. In keeping trays, Sue believes that cross-contamination is avoided since students wont be placing used cutlery directly on the surface. Instead, they can simply set their trays down beside the clearing window while they dispose of their waste, and then put their dirty serviceware neatly in the window.

Discussion/Proposal

Were it not for the contamination concerns in the clearing space, trays would not exist at the CDE. Yet I propose that their removal would provide numerous benefits, and contamination could still be avoided. First, eliminating trays would actually free up a lot of

space at the clearing station. The entire lower shelf is devoted to trays, so the actual space for other dirty serviceware would double. Staff could devote the time previously spent on cleaning trays towards other dining demands, and there would be large savings due to water use reduction. There are other positive externalities associated with tray removal. Trays encourage students to take more food than they need because there is more space to put menu items. Without trays, students are limited to what they can hold with two hands – usually nothing more than a plate of food and a drink. And, because the dining room is so small, if students truly need more than they can carry, the food is so close to the tables that a second trip would be quite feasible. Staff also benefit because they do not have to tote heavy stacks of trays from the kitchen to the buffet line. As a final point, going trayless would put the CDE on par with Mission and Driscoll. This move would connect the CDE to the undergraduate community, thereby affirming its commitment to sustainability.

The issues related to contamination do present a challenge. One solution would be to move the milk dispenser and microwave/toaster into the main dining space as a way of opening up space on the counter top to clear dishes. This idea lacked support because the CDE does not want to appear overly institutional. Tom Powers feared that moving cooking materials into the dining space would take away from the sit-down dining experience for the fellows. Though this option cannot be pursued, I do not think the contamination threat is large enough to keep trays in the program. Students would be responsive to messages and signs in the clearing area that instructed them how to go about clearing in a healthy manner. Staff could also use the time previously spent cleaning trays to wash/wipe the service counter down every so often to further guarantee a sanitary space.

Tray removal thus positively impacts many areas of sustainable dining; financial and resource savings, staff time, reductions in food waste, and institutional continuity would all be achieved if this policy were pursued. While the contamination concerns are not dismissible, small alterations to existing practices could be made to ensure the service counter remain sanitary.

Paper Cups

The Current Story

Paper cups are the only option for drink containers at the CDE. These are stacked next to both the coffee (Fig. 1) and cold drink (Fig. 4) stations in the dining room. On the most basic level, paper cups represent a continued, constant economic cost to the CDE. According to Dining Services' records that Bob Volpi obtained (Williams dining has access to CDE dining budgets even though they are run separately), last year the CDE spent \$2,400 on paper products. While this might capture items other than paper, it is still a nontrivial amount that does not even capture the more significant environmental costs paper cups bring along.

The CDE does have some experience with reusable drinkware. Recently, it phased out the china (used for coffee/tea) it owns in favor of paper cups. CDE staff found that students did a poor job of returning the china to get washed, such that there routinely was a shortage of hot beverage drinkware. Additionally, because there are no lids for the china, there were concerns over the frequent spills on the wood and carpet throughout the building that kept occurring. Paper cups with lids were the easy solution to these two shortcomings of the china set.

Other barriers to a paperless system that Sue mentioned involved space constraints (stacking and at clearing window) and limited capital for acquiring a reusable cup fleet. Paper cups are convenient because they are easily stacked, and fit into the small space next to the pitchers of cold drinks. Further, there is no issue with clutter at the clearing window because meal-goers just dump their cups into the trash can rather than put them alongside other washable serviceware in the window. Lastly, because the CDE dining budget is limited, Sue believed additional financial resources might be needed to acquire the necessary materials.

Discussion/Proposal

Even though paper cups are the only option for drink containers at the CDE, I believe that the dining hall could go paperless despite all the concerns presented in the information section.

First, for cold drinks, paper cups should be abandoned in favor of plastic ones, much like those in the other dining halls. Given the space constraints of the cold drink station, one requirement for new cold drinkware is stacking ability. The plastic cups in Paresky are stacked (very high, too) next to the fountain sodas, so there is already a successful model in place that the CDE could work from. It is true that adding reusable drinkware would make cleaning more difficult, since paper cups are currently just put into waste. However, there would be added space in the clearing window due to the absence of trays. The CDE also owns cup racks for the dishwasher from their old china set so that investment in new cleaning accessories would not be necessary. Because Molly and Sue responded especially well to this issue of reusable cups, they have already coordinated a pilot program for the remainder of the year to observe student

preferences for paper versus plastic. The CDE will offer plastic cups alongside the paper ones to see which get chosen and/or what the demand for new drinkware is like.

Transitioning away from paper cups for hot drinks present a greater challenge. I think a reusable mug system, much like the Driscoll program from this spring, is the best method of approach. The keys to this system are to wash dirty mugs quickly enough so that there is never a shortage, create an attractive design encouraging students to use the mug, and make sure none of them get lost. The Driscoll program has struggled because of shortcomings in all three of these measures. Bob Volpi referenced a prototype recently implemented by Bates (his previous employer) that was stainless steel, flashy, simply designed, and contained a message relating to savings and sustainability as a result of using the mug. The CDE could prevent the scattering/disappearing of these mugs if it set up collection areas throughout the building (similar to the ones in libraries) and created a cool enough design to get students invested in the idea of using their mug. Time for washing could come from the time gained by not having to clean trays. Another option to explore would be to hire a student (CDE or undergrad) worker using the savings from going paperless. Bob estimated that 70% of the \$2,400 paper cost came from paper cup purchases, meaning \$1,680 could be saved yearly by going paperless. Assuming the CDE dining hall operates 32 weeks a year, 5 days a week, with a student worker making \$9/hr, there would be enough money from those savings to employ someone for one hour per day to assist during the peak hour of 12:30-1:30 when lunch is served. The biggest remaining hurdle to going paperless for hot drinks is getting money to stock the CDE with a proper number of reusable mugs. This would be achievable given that the Zilkha Center can allocate money specifically for the purpose of campus sustainability projects.

Going paperless is quite achievable. Progress is already underway to replace paper cups with plastic ones for cold drinks. More work must be done to remove paper from the hot drink area, but the CDE can learn from the Driscoll pilot program to design an effective reusable mug.

Composting

The Current Story

The final glaring unsustainable practice at the CDE dining hall relates to its waste policy. At the clearing station, students are directed towards a pair of big trashcans. There is no compost or recycling option; all the waste - whether it is plastic, food, or paper - gets put into the waste bin. The waste is then pooled with the other CDE trash and placed in the dumpster outside. There is no effort made to link food waste from Williams dining to food waste from the CDE. Once again, the biggest constraint to composting comes from the constrained clearing space. The current design does not allow for separation of dining waste, so the easy solution is to provide big waste bins and speed up the clearing process.

Discussion/Proposal

Improvements to the CDE's waste system are feasible. While the clearing space may not be suited to incorporate a sophisticated composting design, slight changes to staff and student behavior could make composting possible. Bob Volpi said that composting grows naturally out of the pre-meal/menu decisions. The first step is to eliminate what he called "post consumer" waste items, such as sugar packets or plastic yogurt containers. Students would not

have these waste items on their plate if sugar was offered in a jar, cream offered in a big pitcher, and yogurt served in a large bowl. The kitchen would also have noncompostable waste from food containers and packaging, among other things. Excluding those items, which could be combined as general trash, virtually everything could be composted. There would be no problem with collection, as Bob said that he could assign the compost collection team to the CDE as part of their standard dining hall route. The CDE could instruct students by placing signs above the waste bins that emphasize composting, and what should and should not be composted. I don't think it would be hard for CDE students to latch onto a composting system because they get experience with it at the other dining halls when CDE meals are not served. Thus, it would only require some cosmetic changes to existing practices at the CDE for a new composting system to take hold.

Conclusion

Looking at sustainability in CDE dining more broadly, there are two reasons why my proposed changes should be seriously considered. The first deals with institutional continuity. Even though the CDE and undergraduate campus are run separately on a day-to-day basis, they are both components of Williams College. If the CDE were to adopt the suggested changes, it would align itself with the other dining halls. In turn, the college would be able to deliver a stronger message on its commitment to sustainability because it would have applied its initiatives to all dining spaces on campus, despite their varying circumstances. The second reason is that the CDE is the perfect place to test new dining initiatives. It operates on a smaller scale than the other three dining halls, so there would fewer financial consequences if programs falter because less investment would be required. Further, new CDE students would

never know that the new programs represented a change from old practices, so their behavioral response should simply be to accept what the current practices are. Graduate fellows are also conscious of environmental issues, and should be responsive to these changes anyways. Since they grew up and work in developing nations, they experience firsthand how conservation and sustainability can save money and improve standard of living.

In sum, my proposed policy recommendations for the CDE dining hall are achievable, if not already under way. If trays were removed, washable cups for cold and hot drinks phased in, and a system for composting implemented, the CDE would observe great environmental and economic benefits. Despite its separation from the undergraduate portion of campus, the CDE could still make a strong statement in the Williams community by committing to the same sustainable improvements as the other three dining halls on campus.

Image Appendix:

Figure 1: Hot Drink Station at CDE



Figure 2: CDE Building; corner of Rt. 2 and South St.



Figure 3: Clearing station (window is shut), waste container, and service counter



Figure 4: Cold Drink Station (desserts served on R table; drinks placed on L table w/ stacked paper cups beside)



Figure 5: CDE dining room



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