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Community kitchens and sustainable cooking at the College

Introduction

Williams College prides itself on its sustainable initiatives. The College established one of the first environmental studies programs at any liberal arts college in 1967, when the Center for Environmental Studies (CES) came into being. The College’s institutional sustainability center, the Zilkha Center for Environmental Initiatives, was established in 2007, and houses the College’s Sustainable Food and Agriculture Program. For a school so uniquely located in a region of natural and agricultural treasures, it is no wonder sustainability is promoted so heavily in ethos. In practice, the administration and the Zilkha Center have identified many areas of the College’s operations in need of environmental improvement; for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on one area in particular: Dining Services.

By the standards set by the Real Food Challenge organization, founded by Anim Steel ’94, Dining Services currently serves 13.11% real food, as calculated by Eirann Cohen ’15 in the summer of 2012 (Eastburn, 2013). The so-called “real food” standard requires that a food item fulfill one of four categories, which are local/community-based, ecologically sound, fair practice, and humane (Real Food Challenge: Calculator). Thus approximately 87% of the food the College serves is not local nor ecologically sound, which is very much an environmentally unsustainable purchasing policy. The current conventional farming system in the United States relies on large-scale monoculture, heavy
pesticide and antibiotic use, factory-like meat and poultry operations, and vast environmental and ecological waste and degradation. According to the United Nations, modern agriculture contributes to 14% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with land use changes (i.e. conversion of forest to farmland) contributing to another 19% (UN News Centre, 2013). Under the directorship of Robert Volpi, Dining Services, has made an internal commitment to achieve or surpassing 20% real food by 2020, with an especial emphasis on supporting more local farms (Eastburn). This is a laudable goal in terms of how the purchasing power of the College affects real change in the community, but it does nothing to fulfill a core tenet of the College’s statement of sustainability principles: education. The College’s “greatest contribution” to sustainable initiatives, according to its sustainability policy,

is through educating our students, who will go on to become environmental stewards through their many roles as scientists, lawyers, investors, politicians, manufacturers, writers, advocates, artists, teachers, parents, consumers, and citizens. We do this through our teaching, research, and co-curricular offerings, and by demonstrating and embracing sustainable practices in the development and operations of our campus (Williams College: Sustainability).

Perhaps it can be argued that by purchasing more real food the college is demonstrating sustainable practices, which students will then choose to replicate beyond graduation when they actually have to cook for themselves. But given that a number of studies have shown that direct experience best influences changes in behavior, how can students truly learn and internalize sustainable concepts that will influence their choices later in life?

There is a clear need on campus for a space where students can easily cook for themselves,
and providing such a space would open up an opportunity to institutionalize a sustainable model for eating at the College. The establishment of a community kitchen and pantry at the College would allow students to truly engage with and internalize sustainable culinary practices.

**Dodd House and the current on-campus cooking situation**

Dodd House, the anchor house of Dodd Neighborhood and the former home of Dodd Dining Hall, presents the ideal location for a community kitchen and pantry. Before Dodd Dining Hall was decommissioned after the 2009-2010 school year, along with Greylock Dining Hall, it was the smallest of the five dining halls at the College.

![Figure 1. Dodd House; view from Dodd Circle (Dodd Neighborhood image)](image)

After the shutdown the kitchen was dismantled, and many of the appliances and other cooking implements were moved to Whitman’s Dining Hall in Paresky Student Center in order to expand its culinary output. Brent Wasser, Sustainable Food & Agriculture Program Manager at the Zilkha Center, estimates that given that the basic professional kitchen infrastructure remains intact, the former kitchen could be brought up to its previous standard in a week or so. Though a commercial kitchen is already established in the
American Legion, which is owned by the College, the Legion’s location at the bottom of Spring Street is extremely inconvenient. Dodd House is at the center of a hub of student housing: Goodrich, Hubbell, Parsons, and Sewall House are all a stone’s throw from Dodd, and Lehman Hall, Mission Park, and Thompson House are a two-minute walk away. Dodd House also retains the homey booths and dining hall-feel it inherited from the Williams Inn, making it a prime spot on campus to house an activity that will foster a sense of community and a great degree of social interaction.

![Dodd Dining Hall](image)

Figure 2. Former Dodd Dining Hall; view towards kitchen (Centerline Architects image)

Each housing unit at Williams is equipped to some degree with the vague trappings of a real kitchen: Morgan Hall has a refrigerator, an oven and an induction stovetop; Prospect Hall has a refrigerator, a stovetop and a microwave; Williams Hall has a fridge and an oven that does not work. The size, cleanliness and quality of each kitchen space varies by the building, and the amount of cooking utensils in each entirely depends on what intrepid student cooks choose to bring. My own struggles to consistently cook a simple breakfast of eggs and toast in Morgan—which has a good reputation as far as dorm kitchens go—is indicative of why the vast majority of students at Williams do not even
attempt to cook for themselves. I have found myself without the simplest ingredient—salt—necessary to make eggs in a satisfactory manner. I’ve found my bread taken from the freezer, half-eaten and left to mold. Dishwashing soap is hard to come by, and paper towels or cloths are never present, an especial problem when a party in Morgan basement the previous night has left the kitchen in a fetid state. My non-stick pan simply disappeared one day. At this point in the year, it’s far harder for me to figure out how I’m going to make eggs in my dorm than it is to justify spending $6 on a breakfast sandwich at Papa Charlie’s.

My frustrating dorm-cooking experience is by no means unique. It is nigh upon impossible to rationalize the extraordinary amount of effort that cooking for oneself requires, keeping in mind the struggles I faced above, when a quick, thoughtless meal is available for a mere swipe of the ID card at one of the three dining halls at the College.

Use, organization, and management

A community kitchen in Dodd could easily accommodate 10-15 students at a time, and would be available for group sign-ups for dinner cooking slots, while individual students could use it on a first-come basis when the space is not reserved. There could likely be two dinner slots available per night for potential reservation. Certain nights of the week could be consistently reserved by groups such as the Sustainable Growers, Real Food, or Thursday Night Grassroots, among others, who currently plan and cook larger meals for the wider campus community on occasion, and could do so with much more frequency in a community kitchen. There is currently significant interest in utilizing the Dodd Dining Hall space for dinners: in the month of April 2013 alone, there were 28 reservations to use the space by groups such as Student Life, Lehman Council, the Debate Team, and for Life After Williams dinners (Dodd Dining Hall bookings, Sept. 2012-May 2013). Dodd dinners are
currently catered-in, the kitchen merely used as a staging ground for serving the food. But there is significant student interest in cooking meals based on student meal plan data.

Table 1. Student meal plan statistics, fall 2012 (pub. Williams Record 9/26/2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Around 10% of the student body elects not to purchase a Dining Services meal plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 students are registered for the five-meal plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>34 are registered for the 50-block meal plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>47 students dropped down from the 21-meal plan to the 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>120 fourth-year students allowed to live off-campus, with 120+ entering lottery every year</td>
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Table 1 shows that there is a significant contingent of student who do not support their dietary needs in the dining halls alone. The five-meal plan and 50-block plan students live off-campus, and likely have access to their own kitchens in their houses or apartments. More than 120 rising seniors attempt to live off campus each year for a variety of reasons, but food independence is certainly a factor in many students’ decisions to live off-campus; many of the students who do not purchase a meal plan cook entirely for themselves off-campus. The most important number is the 47 students who drop from 21 to 10; these are primarily rising second-years who eschew the 21-meal plan required of them as first-years and, if they are like me, don’t have a place they can rely on to consistently eat the meals they don’t get in the dining hall. I go to Log Lunch and Shabbat dinner on Fridays, but then usually find myself spending lots of money on Spring Street when I realize I’m out of meals come Saturday—even earlier if I go to snack bar during the week. Many students on the 10-meal plan go to Log Lunch and Shabbat as well, which are prepared by students in the Log and Jewish Resource Center kitchens, respectively, and serve about 40-50 students each
every week. The students who attend these meals on a regular basis help cook them as well. These meals serve an established niche on campus: for students who want a fresh, local meal cooked by their friends (and themselves!). If larger meals such as these were to occur regularly in a community kitchen, whether organized by students or student groups, there is established demand that would rush to contribute to and consume these projects.

Any vision for a successful community kitchen must include a supply of necessary kitchen utensils that would be in any professional kitchen, in addition to basic appliances and storage spaces. Since the idea for a truly convenient community kitchen rests on the fact that most, if not all, of the ingredients a student would need to cook a meal would be provided in the kitchen, the pantry would include bulk goods like flour, salt, sugar, grains, beans, etc. The community kitchen as a whole would receive weekly Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) share deliveries from Mighty Food Farm, which offers a year-round produce share, and Cricket Creek Farm, which offers a meat, dairy, and egg CSA share that would supplement the vegetables in the kitchen.

Table 2. Example of weekly CSA share deliveries and pricing, 2013.

<table>
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<th>Mighty Food Farm:</th>
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<td>2 heads lettuce, 2/3 pound salad mix, 2 pounds tomatoes, 1 bunch carrots, 1 bunch beets, 2 pound new potatoes, 1 dozen eggs, 1 cantaloupe, 1 bunch sweet onions, 1 head fresh garlic.</td>
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<td>$1625, 34 weeks</td>
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<th>Cricket Creek Farm:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Raw milk as needed, 1 pound of cheese and butter combined, 1 quart of buttermilk per week, 1 quart of whey per week, 1 loaf of bread, ground beef as needed, eggs as needed</td>
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Based on an estimated use for the community kitchen of 5-7 nights a week for 20 students per night, the College would likely have to purchase four shares from each farm to fully stock the community kitchen, in addition to produce supplied by the sustainable garden. The CSAs would give students the opportunity to truly engage with local food and local producers. And by purchasing these shares the College would be lending its institutional support to local farms, which rely on CSAs in order to pay down the pre-growing season costs associated with small-scale, community-based farms.

The management structure of a community kitchen would have to include significant administrative oversight, given the safety and sanitation concerns associated with cooking in a professional-caliber kitchen. But for the kitchen to be truly community-based, the management structure would be comprised of students, a salaried student director providing the chain-of-command link to Dining Services via the student Dining Services Committee. The director would then find or select six students to help manage the kitchen on a volunteer basis, and each student would then be responsible for the operations of one day per week of the kitchen. These responsibilities would include setting the schedule, managing stock levels in the pantry, reporting lost or stolen items, and ensuring that students properly clean and sanitize the space when they are done. A previous student project (“A Proposal for the Establishment of the Williams College Sustainability Dining Center,” Davidson 2009) estimated that the operating costs for a more sustainable Dodd Dining Hall would be approximately $130,000 after the first year, in addition to the existing base costs for running a dining hall. Steve Klass, VP for Campus Life,
pinned the cost of a full Dodd House kitchen restoration in the high five-figures to low six-figures. So a community kitchen in Dodd would cost far less than a fully functioning dining hall, with the majority of the costs up-front for refurbishing and stocking the dining hall with the necessary cooking implements. Starting the kitchen up would likely cost the College about one-year's worth of Dodd Dining Hall's previous operating budget, with an additional $9,900 per year for the CSAs and an estimated $2,000 per year to maintain the pantry.

**Psychological basis for cooking at the College**

A number of studies have investigated the psychological basis for action, and Kolmuss et al. focus especially on why or why not people act on their knowledge of environmental issues. The authors found that there is a clear societal gap "between the possession of environmental knowledge and environmental awareness, and [the display of] pro-environmental behavior." In their study, the authors pinpoint lack of internal incentives and old behavior patterns as two main barriers to acting sustainably: “If we want to establish a new behavior, we have to practice it ... We might be perfectly willing to change our behavior but still not do so, because we do not persist enough in practicing the new behavior until it has become a habit,” (Kolmuss et al., 2002). Thus if students truly are to be prepared not only to cook for themselves post-Williams, but also to do so in an environmentally-conscious way, a community kitchen is an ideal way to really instill this positive behavioral habit.

**Sustainable education**

Given that performing actions help determine future habits, lessons learned through cooking in a community kitchen would come to bear later in life for Williams students who
utilize it. The College prides itself on preparing its graduates for the ‘real world’, but in the realm of practical things like cooking, our school does a woefully inadequate job. To that end, Dining Services and the Zilkha Center would play an important role in facilitating cooking workshops in the community kitchen. Cooking introductions for the wider student community, organized in conjunction with groups like Williams After Dark and various academic departments with a cultural interest in cuisine (i.e. Asian Studies and French) would be instrumental in getting more students involved in the kitchen. Cooking for oneself focuses the mind on where food comes from, and the amount of energy—both human and resource-wise—that goes into producing even simple dishes. Students utilizing the community kitchen will come to appreciate the quality of local, ecologically-sound produce and animal products, and will become cognizant of how to limit food waste, something that is rarely considered by students when they are free to select pre-made meals in a dining hall. In addition, the community kitchen would enhance enthusiasm for and the usefulness of the sustainable garden. The Williams Sustainable Growers currently tend two on-campus gardens: Parson’s, in Dodd Circle, and the Presidential Garden, behind the President’s House. Dozens of students attend garden work parties, held every week during the growing months, but only a handful actually collect the bounty to use on a regular basis in their own cooking—generally the students who live off-campus and have access to personal kitchens. If students who work on the garden do so knowing that they can take some of the harvest and actually be able to use it for cooking, it is likely that more students would get involved and that the garden could expand with expanded student interest, which would truly further the educational mission of the community kitchen.

What are other schools doing?
Carleton College recently established a community kitchen that, while not emphasizing sustainability, has created a positive social, community-like atmosphere in the dorm where it resides (Schnoebelen, 2013). This community-building aspect is something the College emphasizes to a huge degree—in fact, it is the reason behind the establishment of the neighborhood system in the first place. A community kitchen in Dodd House would entice students who might otherwise move off campus in order to have more food independence to stay on campus. It could also make Dodd Neighborhood more enticing for rising sophomores to pick into, since it lacks the proximity to Spring Street and the heart of campus that Currier, Spencer and Wood Neighborhoods currently enjoy.

In the NESCAC conference, Middlebury and Bowdoin both share the College’s bucolic isolation and commitment to sustainability, and both illustrate the degree to which students similar to those that attend Williams take the opportunity to cook local, sustainable meals when and if they can. At Bowdoin in 2005, 40 students organized themselves into an unofficial cooking co-op with a plan to cook for around 50 people four times a week in a special sustainable house. Their plan was thwarted by the administration due to its restriction on theme houses, so they decided to meet once a week to cook delicious, locally sourced meals at an alternate location (Marotta, 2005). The students are now reorganized as the Bowdoin Food Co-Op, where they still meet once a week for three to four students to cook a local, organic meal for about 20 other members of the group in an off-campus house (Colbert, 2012). At Middlebury, the college touts the existence of Weybridge House, which is a successful application of the 2005-era Bowdoin co-op vision in which 8-10 students live in a cooperative house, cooking meals for the campus community Monday-Thursday using expressly ingredients grown or made within 100-
mile radius of campus. The house is also committed to purchasing at least one CSA share per academic year (Weybridge House blog). Establishing a community kitchen would improve on the Bowdoin and Middlebury co-op model by institutionalizing the College’s commitment to sustainable education, giving students interested in environmental issues an ideal forum in which to come together and form a community of like-minded individuals, while still ensuring the students remain part of the campus community at large. All of these goals fulfill elements of the College’s mission and ethos, and would certainly make it more competitive in a field of similar, more environmentally-conscious small liberal arts schools among prospective students interested in sustainability. An enormous barrier to the fulfillment of this vision would obviously be the cost, especially if more salaried staff members would have to be taken on in janitorial or managerial roles within Dining Services, a factor I do not foresee but one that cannot be ruled out indefinitely. Perhaps a community kitchen could be funded by a class donation similar to the class of 1966’s fundraising initiative for Kellogg House, though at a fraction of Kellogg’s cost. But though according to Steve Klass the College currently does not plan to renovate Dodd kitchen for student use, it would certainly still be prudent to conclude that existing funds within Dining Services and the Zilkha Center should be allocated towards cooking education. A good start would be to expand Winter Study offerings related to sustainable cooking; this past January, Brent Wasser taught Elementary Cooking Techniques, which focused on farm-to-table French cooking in a professional kitchen environment. After three weeks of cooking classes, it was clear that the act of engaging with local and sustainable ingredients instilled in the students a heightened awareness of the environmental impact of their food; said Rebecca Lewis ’16, “[The class] made me realize the need to regain mindfulness about our eating habits—the
need to consider not only the pleasure and energy we get from food, but also the labor, artistry, and natural resources required to put food on our plates,” (“Student Learn,” 2013).
References Cited


