

Sodexo: What Is Really Going On?

by Carl Wendorff and Kaitlin Harnett

Upon entering college, many of us are accustomed to home-cooked meals. We take this for granted because it's all we've ever known. But at college we eat food that is mass-produced and not prepared the way that we have been used to for most of our lives. And so almost absent-mindedly we complain about the food at Concordia. But are our complaints justified?

As students we are the ones that pay for and eat the food. According to those who eat in the Dining Hall, sometimes the food is good and sometimes the food is bad, but mostly bad. When we think that the food is bad we find something to say about it. Sometimes our criticism is passed on to the food service provider without much thought about the people that are actually working in the kitchen. However, comments like, "the food stinks" are not going to solve much. Just recently in "Fibs & Fables," the other student publication on campus, Eric Goodrich, the general manager of the food service at Concordia, said that comments like that are only detrimental to the student-food service relationship. Maybe if we knew more about the food service, we would understand more why the food served at Concordia has a reputation for not reaching the expectations of students.

Sodexo is a multi-national food service provider that has a contracted deal with Concordia. They are contracted by businesses, schools, and even the military. Sodexo started a 10 year contract in 1994 with Concordia and was revised and extended in 2001. Last year another 10 year contract was approved. Goodrich said that, "When Sodexo makes an investment, it is amortized for a 10 year period but it can be extended, revised, or nullified at any time."

Goodrich also explained what is done with the money that they receive from the board meals. It is Concordia that owns the equipment, maintains the building, pays for the insurance

and utilities as well as a number of other factors. Sodexo provides the employees and the food. Sodexo uses the money that they receive from the contract to pay for the costs included in operating the food service provider on campus.

Many people say that if they pay \$30,000 to come to Concordia, the food should be better. Well, the money that students pay for board meals (\$1,442 per semester) is paid to Concordia and then Concordia contracts Sodexo to run the food service of this campus. The revenue that is provided through the contract is what Sodexo has to work with to provide the food. If you have a 19 meal plan and there are 110 days in a semester on which you can use board meals, you pay approximately \$3.62 per meal. Students pay about \$4.58 for each meal on the 12 meal plan and about \$7.55 per meal on the 7 meal plan. The meals that you do not eat cannot be used if you have any meals left at the end of the week.

This is money that Sodexo receives from each meal and is budgeted for different purposes. The \$3.62 for each meal on the 19 meal plan is divided up in a way that covers the cost of operation for Sodexo.

Eight and a half percent goes toward things like taxes, licenses, and workers compensation. Six and a half percent goes toward cleaning supplies, paper products, replacing stolen and broken equipment, and uniforms. Forty-six and a half percent goes toward wages and benefits for the employees and the management, federal taxes, and insurance. The rest of the money is left for purchasing the food products. This operation is making about 5 cents per dollar for profit on the entire account. This may not seem substantial, but Sodexo makes their money by catering to events on campus.

The tenure of the employees averages around 5-6 years. This is exceptional when the average for typical food service providers is only a few months.

Manager Bob Wright has at least 15 years of experience in the food service business. The majority of the employees work 8 hour shifts and a few work 10 hour shifts for 4 days a week. Sodexo is currently employing 10 student workers with the majority of them working in the Commons Café. Whitney Pitra has been working at the Commons Café since December and has been doing catering work since October. She said, "I think a lot of people don't realize how much hard work and dedication that the Sodexo employees put into one day. They are trying their best to improve the quality of the food for the students of Concordia."

Sodexo has a board of a dozen college students that organize the standard menu used by its food service providers. Depending on the region, different varieties of food are prepared. Menus also fluctuate depending on what the students recommend.

There are still complaints about the food, however. Freshman Megan Fulton said that she felt the fruit and the vegetables are hardly ever fresh, and the meat hardly ever looks like it is okay to eat. She also said that she feels there are not very many choices and that, most of the time, the food just looks greasy.

Year-round training for the employees is a huge part of maintaining a high standard of service. Employees are trained in areas such as food safety, chemical safety, and human resources. The management team also goes through training in order to develop the staff.

This year there has been a huge focus on being proactive in trying to improve the food service as much as possible. The food service has proven this by being awarded a double-gold rating in food safety, occupational safety, and health audits. There was a surprise inspection performed earlier this year and this operation passed with a 100 percent. Other achievements include the Management Staff being certified in Genuine Leadership for 2007 and the Sustainability Award in 2005 and 2006 from Food Alliance Midwest. Mark Mueller, a junior, also said that it is difficult to eat healthy because of the lack of options, but that it has definitely improved since he got here

almost three years ago.

Despite all this, students are still feeling like they are not getting the quality of food they are paying for. Even some Sodexo employees (who chose to remain nameless because they feared repercussions), said that they will not eat in the Dining Hall because of the poor quality of not only the food, but the lack of cleanliness in the kitchen and the dish-washing room. One employee said that when ingredients for certain dishes are not available or run out, they'll "just mix anything." It was described as "nasty."

Samantha Dorr, a former Sodexo employee, said that she refused to eat in the Dining Hall because the quality of the food up there is not what it should be. Among the grievances listed was the lack of freshness in the food. Both the anonymous employee and Dorr said that hardly any of the food is ever fresh like it is supposed to be. The deli meat, which is supposed to be sliced fresh daily, is sliced fresh weekly. Clean plates are stacked on filthy carts. On the catering trays, fruit that is supposed to be fresh is prepared days in advance.

One reason for this that students may not realize, however, is the fact that the account at Concordia is about one-fifth the size of a school like Bethel, where Dorr said that the food is "much better." Students also may not realize that, according to Goodrich, CSP had been a "mess operationally and financially for about a decade" before he arrived three years ago. In his first year, more profit was made in that year than in the last three years combined." Operating at a small school like Concordia and the number of students has an impact on how much money Sodexo makes, which in turn leads to what they are able to provide. But these are things that students know already. They know the food is not what it should be according to Sodexo employees and their own stomachs. Many also say they feel that small numbers should not be an excuse for lack of quality.

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