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The Social Code in Food Spaces on Campus

At many of the recent Haverford events centered around issues such as race and socioeconomic differences on campus such as We Speak and We’re Not Here to Say Thank You, the topic of disrespect for food spaces on campus has been raised numerous times. Many of the concerns raised were regarding the messes left in the Dining Center and Coop as well as the power dynamics that exist between those who work at these establishments and the students who dine there. While some of these issues were discussed at these events, the topic does not generally receive much attention. Yet, there are only a few food spaces on campus, so they play a vital role in shaping the Haverford community. The dynamics in these spaces are heavily influenced by the specific roles of student workers and the staff in the Dining Center and Coop, the demographics of those who work food jobs on campus, and the public image of the food industry.

While Haverford’s community centers itself around the Social Code’s pillars of trust, concern, and respect, these values are occasionally neglected within food spaces. Tania Ortega, class of 2019, works at the Coop and expresses how “the times when [the social code] is not followed” is “when people are disrespectful,” which she attributes to students being “entitled.” She explains how when individuals or groups of students enter the Coop, occasionally they will “demand that they get their food right away,” and “the way that they act or carry themselves in a space assumes they’re going to be cleaned up after.” To Ortega, this is a result of Haverford being “primarily a school that has a lot of kids that come from money.” In her opinion, students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds tend to congregate, so “if they’ve all grown up in the same environment, grown up without having to pick up after themselves, then they’re all just going to vibe off each other,” thus creating a space where students fail to hold each other accountable for the messes they create. “We have the honor code and the social honor code,” explains Ortega, so entering Haverford she “expected that people wouldn’t do stuff like that, but that’s not the case.” While Ortega’s view of the treatment of food spaces by students reflects that of many student workers, not all who work in the dining services share the same opinion. Ezra Hollander, class of 2018, is a student worker in the Dining Center and describes the relationship between those who work there and the students who come through as “generally pretty positive.” He explains how “people are generally very polite,” but recognizes that he does not “know if politeness is the same thing as being respectful.” To Hollander, the majority of the social issues within the Dining Center stem from comments made about the Dining Center between students who do not work there. He often sees “a lack of respect in terms of what people say when they aren’t around the staff there…about the space that the staff keeps up and that the staff takes pride in maintaining.” Recently, this has appeared in the form of “aggressive napkin notes going up of people just saying mean things,” such as one note that stated, “the soups are nasty, why do you always ignore them.” While Hollander acknowledges the frustration students might feel towards the Dining Center, he feels “napkin notes are there to offer comments for things that can be fixed or say nice things so people who work there feel good.” Therefore, notes such as the one addressing the soups comes across as unnecessarily hostile, so he “feel[s] like that is in some ways a breach of the Social Honor Code.” So, whether the Social Honor Code fails during student worker to student interactions or in the conversations that happen between students regarding the Dining Center, it is apparent that students who work in dining services on campus feel a general level of disrespect of the spaces they occupy by the student body.

While many students working the Dining Center or the Coop may occasionally feel tension with students who dine at the establishments, a difference exists between the view and experiences of students working in these spaces and the staff. Though Ortega and Hollander describe instances of students violating the Social Code in food spaces, Jeff Gladney, a staff member of the Dinning Center, voiced no complains about the treatment of the Dining Center by students, but simply expressed his desire for some of his coworkers to “be a little more outreaching” when it comes to having conversations with students. Furthermore, Gladney does not view the messes left by students as an issue, for the Dining Center hires “folk that are assigned to come out to clean tables and things like that,” so while “some [students] leave their stuff,” he believes the students “maybe [are] forgetful.” Gladney “like[s] to think that’s the case…so [anger does not] really play a part where someone has a thought” regarding the messes.

The differences between the students’ opinions versus the staff’s perspective of the interactions of workers with students is possibly due to the power dynamics that exist between students serving their peers versus those between the staff and students as well as the way in which each group approaches working in these spaces. When it comes to how student’s approach their work, Hollander explains how “[w]hen you’re a student worker, there’s an informal relationship with the work space,” to which Gladney concurs, stating, “[working it the Dining Center] is not their profession, it’s more ‘okay I have a job, I have to do this, this is my assignment, there’s my friend so and so.’” The causal relationship between student workers and their jobs on campus allow them to view the students they serve more as their peers rather than customers whereas the staff in the Dining Center and Coop approach their jobs as their professions. This creates a more formal work environment for the staff. Thus, Hollander does not believe “students who work in the Dining Center would ever conflate themselves with the people who work there full time because it’s a very different job,” for while he “work[s] four hour shifts,” the staff “work 8 hour shifts five days a week.” Furthermore, Ortega explains that the “difference between adult workers and student workers is that…[she] won’t hesitate as often to call someone out” for disrespecting the space, whereas “adult workers can’t do that.” She admits that she “[does not] know if it’s because there’s more at stake” for the staff if they were to confront a student, “or because when they’re working their supervisors there.” However, she believes her willingness to address issues that arise stems from the facet that she is “serving people that [she] go to class with, [and] that [she] see[s] on the halls” of the dorms. Her experience at Haverford contrasts her experience working at a Dairy Queen her senior year of high school where “people were so rude [and]…so disrespectful” to her, but where she “never once addressed it in the same way [she does] now as a student worker at the Coop.” At Dairy Queen, Ortega approached her job with the mentality, “I’m the worker, I’m serving them, they’re paying for the service we are providing” so “there’s already that power dynamic” between the server and customer. However, when working in a setting where she is serving her peers, Ortega feels students “treat[ing] [her] the same way” as customers at Dairy Queen is “not okay, especially at Haverford, because of the Social Honor Code.” The difference between Ortega’s approach to her job at Dairy Queen versus at Haverford lies in her relationship with the people she serves. Whereas at Dairy Queen the natural power dynamics that exist in the food service industry between server and customer force her into a more passive role, her view of those she serves at Haverford as her peers and equals causes her to expect a higher level of respect from those who come to the Coop. Since the staff who work in the food establishments on campus may view their jobs in a formal manner, much like Ortega viewed working at Dairy Queen, they may feel less inclined to address students who disrespect the spaces they work in. Furthermore, the staff at Haverford are not bound by the Honor Code, so they are not encourage to approach issues that arise in the same confrontational manner required by the Honor Code. Thus, the personal relationships the student workers have with both the students they serve and Haverford’s Honor Code create an environment in which they feel more personally affected by the mistreatment of food spaces and workers as well as feel more comfortable confronting students about issues that arise more so than the staff.

In addition to the affect personal interactions play in food spaces, there are many beliefs about the food industry and misconceptions about the food establishments at Haverford that play into the dynamics created between students and those working in the Dining Center and Coop. Both at Haverford and for the general public, many assumptions about the food industry revolve around the belief that the food industry is a “lesser” job. Hollander expresses how he feels “there’s very much this attitude like ‘why would anyone work [in the DC] if they didn’t have to,’” which he “take[s] offense to because [he] find[s] it pretty enjoyable.” While some view working in the Dining Center as an unappealing job, Hollander explains his choice to work there, stating, “I would rather work there and interact with the people who work there, the real people who work there, not just students, than sit behind a desk because that’s what work means for me.” Like Hollander, Ortega agrees that the public views “The food industry…as something lowly” which “plays into who is more willing to take those jobs.” In the context of Haverford, this often is seen in the assumption that students in food jobs are on work study. Ortega herself admits, “I just kind of assumed that the people who are working were on work study.” While she recognizes that not all student workers on campus are on work study, she believes that for those not on work study, “their job isn’t at the coop, isn’t at the DC, it’s at the OAR, it’s at the Dean’s Office,” so they do “desk work, like more paper work, not cooking or cleaning or stuff like that.” Though this is not necessarily true for all student workers, the assumption that Ortega describes certainly exists. Though Hollander explains, “I’m not on work study,” he agrees with Ortega’s stance, explaining, “I think people do assume through passing comments that I am on work study.” This common misconception that student workers in food services are all on work study is heavily linked to the view of jobs in the food industry as lowly due to the manual labor involved and the belief that positions require less formal training. People often view those working in the food industry as less educated and of being less economically secure. This mentality subconsciously then carries over into how students view workers in Haverford food spaces, so students might assume that student workers are on financial aid. Furthermore, this assumption may also cause people to believe the staff is not well trained. However, Hollander explains how “the chefs who work in the back are highly trained people as are a lot of the people doing prep work.” In fact, according to Hollander, much of the staff has attended “some very god culinary schools” and “talk about other restaurants they’ve worked at, where they’ve worked as line cooks,” and “managers talk about where else they’ve managed.” There is an appreciation of the staff who work in the Dining Center and Coop by the student workers which stems from their understanding of the level of work that goes into running these types of establishments. Hollander recognizes, “working at the DC I have this perspective of how much work goes into trying to feed 800 people a day and how that’s a really difficult thing to do,” but “If you don’t work there, you don’t understand the struggles of it.” Due to this understanding, he expresses that as a student worker one might “feel like you have more of a sense of responsibility.” So, as Hollander has worked in the Dining Center for longer, he has become more active about “step[ing] into conversation when people are talking about the DC, especially talking shit about the DC.” Though student workers are privy to the insights of the Dining Center and those who work there, the general student population may only see the food that is being served in the Dining Center and may not appreciate the level of work and training put into feeing Haverford’s student body day in and day out.

At Haverford, creating the most welcoming and pleasant environment for both students and workers begins with getting rid of biases towards those who work in food spaces. Communication, exposure, and self-awareness are the greatest tools in breaking the misconceptions and stereotypes of people who work in food services. Once students who go to the Dining Center and Coop gain a better appreciation of the effort and training of the workers in these spaces, perhaps they can better appreciate both the service and the food on campus as well as build closer relationships with those who work there. This is vital in maintaining the community’s values of trust, concern, and respect as lined out by the Social Code.

The staff and workers place a great deal of effort into creating a hospitable environment where students can congregate over a meal. Mr. Gladney takes joy knowing that for students, the Dining Center’s role goes beyond “just having an eating place,” and into creating a space where students “know there are people…that actually give a damn.” He has put forth a significant amount of effort to form a “rapport with a good number of students where if something were to come about negative or not positive…it would be shared with [him]” so he may be “able to assist in whatever way.” Mr. Gladney demonstrates how the small scale of Haverford’s community makes the single Dining Center an integral part of the experience of everyone on campus. This is a uniquely Haverford experience, and the community should actively strive to uphold the Social Code to create a more respectful, enjoyable space for everyone to thrive in.

Works Cited

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