

Report on Professor Meals

*Jackson Willis, BK ‘19*

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Introduction

As an undergraduate college committed to a liberal arts education, Yale College’s mission, and its realization, are based on the fundamental relationship between students and professors. These unique, instrumental, and mutually beneficial relationships can be fostered in a variety of ways, including interaction outside of the classroom. All tenured professors teach undergraduates and hold office hours at Yale, providing valuable time to foster relationships outside of class. Beyond class time and office hours, however, there are rarely formal opportunities for more lengthy discussion in a casual environment, but this kind of conversation is no less significant for the development of faculty-student bonds.

A simple and useful way to address this lack of opportunity is the creation of a program to organize meals for professors and students. This would provide an ideal setting for students and professors to engage outside the classroom, where they could pursue academic discourse, explore intellectual interests, and share life experiences. These conversations could strengthen students’ relationships with their professors, professors’ connection to their students, and the College’s commitment to undergraduate teaching. Research shows similar programs are encouraged and supported at Yale’s peer institutions, while no such program exists at Yale.

A Survey of Professor-Student Meal Programs at Peer Institutions

The vast majority of Yale’s peer institutions support and encourage interaction between undergraduate students and faculty members over meals by offering at least one professor-meal program. Examples of these programs include:

 a.) Reimbursement for off-campus meals up to $25/person (M.I.T.)

 b.) Reimbursement at specific restaurants up to $25/person (Harvard)

 c.) Voucher-program for sharing a meal at a specific location (Dartmouth)

d.) Student-faculty meals arranged among several students and professors with specific shared interests or backgrounds. (Princeton and Harvard)

One of the most popular programs at Dartmouth is its “Take a Faculty Member to Lunch program.” The program’s website includes enthusiastic student feedback attesting to the meals’ value and popularity. One student said, “Unlike office hours, which are ordinarily time-restricted due to the number of students vying for time to meet, this allowed [my professor] and me to let our conversation wander, largely unchecked by time restraints. The freedom to discuss campus issues, personal lives, and long-term ambitions significantly deepened our relationship.” Another added, “We spent most of the time discussing the [professor’s] academic interests and research specialty, which I found thoroughly fascinating. So fascinating, in fact, that I plan on helping him do research this spring. The Take a Faculty Member to Lunch program set that opportunity up for me and for that I am sincerely grateful.”

The Pre-Shopping Period Professor Meals Program

This report recommends the development of a student-professor meal program at Yale. However, tenured faculty are already able to have meals with students without charge in residential college dining halls, so there is no need to create a formal program in the style of those at MIT, Harvard, or Dartmouth. That said, few students take advantage of the opportunity to ask a professor to lunch in a residential college dining hall. Most students are unaware that this is a possibility, and those that are often feel uncomfortable approaching a faculty member without a particular question or interest they want to discuss with the professor.

Instead, we advise the creation of the Pre-Shopping Period Professor Meals Program. A few times per semester, 1-2 professors will gather with a group of students in a private residential college dining hall annex and discuss the professors’ academic and research interests, as well as their future course offerings. These meals will be outside of the classroom and regular office hours, and therefore will provide that missing form of faculty-student interaction that other universities have used meal vouchers to foster. And they will capitalize on a another Yale institution: shopping period. Because shopping period tends to be a frenetic, stressful two weeks, students tend to find it useful to receive information about future course offerings as early in the previous semester as possible. Therefore, this meal program will feature professors who are planning to teach in the next semester to talk to students about the subject of their courses. Students can then “shop” these classes before the semester even begins. At the same time, they will meet a professor, hear about a course or discipline perhaps unfamiliar to them, and engage in lively academic discourse.

In particular, professors may be excited about this opportunity if they are planning to offer new or infrequently offered seminars in less popular subjects. The Y.C.C. will invite students to sign-up online for the meals - all interested students will fill out a Google Form, and when the deadline passes, ten to fifteen students will be randomly chosen. Such a program may increase interest in these classes, provide students access to new faculty, and reduce stress for students once shopping period begins.

One possible enhancement to this program would be to hold a meal where a few professors are present to discuss a theme that their courses each treat in different ways. For example, a dinner conversation could be organized around the idea of “power” or “freedom.” Then, a professor offering a seminar on Nietzsche could talk about these subjects, alongside a professor offering a seminar in ancient Chinese philosophy. These thematic dinners (or lunches) with a few professors could spark student interest and introduce them to a few seminars in different subject areas all at once. Perhaps a student is enthralled by Nietzsche, but had no idea that she would also find Chinese philosophy interesting; at this dinner, she comes for Nietzsche, and leaves excited to take the Chinese philosophy professor’s course the following semester. This would expose students to new courses and departments before shopping period even begins, encouraging them to be more daring in their course selection and showing them the value of new and otherwise unexplored fields.

Professors in departments that typically do not see many non-majors shopping their seminars may be particularly interested in holding these meals. Professor Paul North is teaching GMAN 357/LITR 443/PIHL 225 *Nietzsche and His Readers* in the Spring 2016 semester. In discussing the possibility of a professor-student meal program, Professor North wrote, such a program would be “immensely helpful to me and I hope to students to talk outside the context of a seminar about their ideas and life experience, and to share mine. We also have a pretty severe P.R. problem in the humanities and in the smaller departments. So I would support the idea fully, and I would be happy also to participate in it, if the opportunity arises.”

Beyond the advantage to departments, professors are also supportive of the idea as a way to inspire conversation among professors and students outside of the classroom. Professor Margaret Homans is teaching WGSS 426/ENGL 446 *Virginia Woolf* in the Spring 2016 semester. In an email, Professor Homans explained, “I appreciate that students might prefer meeting faculty through a group event such as a meal, rather than through attending a professor’s office hours.” Professor Homans proceeded to voice her support for the program and her willingness to participate.

There is one main logistical challenge that may arise with the execution of this program: professors would have to use the dining halls with students, and so would need swipe access. However, all tenured professors at Yale have access to dining halls, so this would not pose any challenges to them.

In the interim, YCC will cover the cost of the meal for non-tenured professors if they request reimbursement. Lunch costs $11, so this would not be a hefty price for YCC to pay.

However, as this program becomes institutionalized, the YCC recommends that individual departments cover the cost of meals for professors. As these meals are partly inspired by a desire to increase student interest in and knowledge of different departments, they provide a service to academic departments. Therefore, it is the individual departments that professors who participate represent, rather than another administrative body like the Yale College Dean’s Office, that should cover the cost of these meals.

Conclusion

One of Yale College’s key strengths is the engagement of faculty with undergraduates: all tenured faculty teach undergraduates and hold office hours, and they are almost always quite receptive to speaking with any interested student. However, the professor-student relationship can be bolstered by accompanying discussions after class or during office hours with more informal, small group residential college dining hall meals. These meals would present opportunities to discuss course material, research, jobs, or other intellectual topics that are central to the professor-student relationship that defines a liberal arts education. While students today can meet with professors at restaurants or over coffee, those interactions are at a cost to the student. Other universities have understood the pedagogical imperative of incentivizing students and professors to meet outside the classroom at no extra cost to either party, and Yale College should adopt this model, as well.



http://www.dartmouth.edu/~upperde/take\_faculty\_to\_lunch.html