

A Brief History of the Development and Evolution of the Eating Club System at Princeton University

EARLY DINING AND SOCIAL OPTIONS

For the first 100 years after the College of New Jersey's founding in 1746, student life was spartan. From 1756 until 1803, Nassau Hall was the College's only structure, so students lived, studied, prayed and ate in one building. The trustees strove to spend as little as possible on food, and by the 1840s student revulsion to the bare bones provisions had become so intense that they were no longer required to eat their meals in college facilities. When the fire of 1855 gutted much of Nassau Hall, the College discontinued food service entirely, forcing students to make their own arrangements to dine in town, usually at boardinghouses.

In this early era, extracurricular activities were prohibited except for Whig and Clio, which encouraged the intellectual engagement of their membership. The collegiate Greek-letter fraternal movement began in the 1820s and reached Princeton in 1843 with the founding of a Beta Theta Pi chapter. Though these groups remained unofficial, within a few years 12 fraternities had Princeton chapters. Wary of their small size (unlike the literary societies), cliquishness, and (in this pre-Civil War era) their increasing division of the student body along sectional lines, the trustees and faculty voted to ban fraternities in 1853. Beginning in 1855, all undergraduates were required to pledge they would not join one while at the College. Despite the ban, a few fraternities operated in secret until 1875, when the identification and suspension of 50 fraternity members effectively eliminated remnants of the system.

THE FIRST EATING CLUBS

In 1855, faced with a simultaneous lack of campus-sponsored dining options and a prohibition on fraternities, students from all four classes began taking their meals in boardinghouses in town. These arrangements came to be known as eating clubs, and by 1876 there were 25 of them, although few lasted more than a few years. In 1879 a group of students rented a building on Mercer Street (Ivy Hall) and began a more formal kind of eating club, one perpetuating beyond one student generation. Four years later they incorporated and built a house on Prospect Avenue for the club. Ivy was followed by Cottage in 1886, then in the 1890s by Tiger Inn, Cap and Gown, Colonial, Cannon, and Elm. By the turn of the century about a quarter of juniors and seniors were eating in clubs. Responding to the increase in size of the student body from 603 to 1354 between 1888 and 1902, seven more clubs were added in the first decade of the 20th century—Campus, Charter, Quadrangle, Tower, Terrace, Key and Seal, and Dial Lodge. By the end of that decade, two-thirds of juniors and seniors were eating in 14 clubs.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of freshman and sophomore eating clubs had faded. The college had acquired the short-lived University Hotel (on the corner of Nassau Street and University Place) in the mid-1870s, renamed and converted the building to "University Hall" and began to serve regular meals in "Commons." All freshmen ate their meals on this site by 1906, joined two years later by all sophomores. The undergraduate student government issued an edict abolishing freshman and sophomore "waiting clubs" that had grown up as pipelines to the eating clubs.

OPPOSITION DEVELOPS

In 1907, University President Woodrow Wilson, Class of 1879 – fresh from successes reorganizing the University's curriculum, creating the preceptorial system, restructuring the academic departments, and

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diversifying the Board of Trustees – attempted to revise the social life of the students as what he considered a necessary corollary to his academic and administrative reforms. He proposed to eliminate the eating clubs and replace them with undergraduate colleges, a proposal that became known as the Quad Plan. He envisioned a system in which a group of dormitories with a central dining hall and other social facilities would be self-governed and presided over by a master with resident preceptors, and allowed that some of the club buildings recently constructed on Prospect Avenue could be converted to participate in this plan. Alumni and the faculty were deeply divided about the wisdom of the plan and, fearing a significant drop in financial support from outraged graduates, the Board of Trustees rejected Wilson's proposal.

New clubs continued to form—Arch Club in 1911, Cloister Inn in 1912, and Gateway Club in 1913—even as some students and alumni began to express opposition to the expansion of the club system, disliking the increasing focus on social competition that had begun to have a negative effect on undergraduate academic activity. As early as 1907, the *Daily Princetonian* reported a “social crisis” on campus as students debated how to respond to a growing sense of selectivity in the clubs. By 1914, the “election” of students to club membership was governed by a new system, establishing a period in late February of sophomore year of “bickering” – a term whose official interpretation was “any talk, argument or discussion designed to induce any man to join any club.”

In 1917, ninety sophomores (more than 25% of the class) boycotted bicker, causing unrest on campus that led the *Prince* to write a series of editorials proposing the University acquire the club buildings and operate them as dining halls with no membership restriction. The advent of World War I and a depleted student body caused the University and the clubs to retrench, and, in a retreat to tradition after the war, club life resumed in relative calm.

RETRENCHMENT BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

The Roaring 20s and the Great Depression, while hugely influential on American society, had a relatively small impact on the clubs. Two new clubs opened in the years after WWI (Court Club in 1921 and Arbor Inn in 1923), bringing the total to 18. Prohibition led University President Hibben to come out against drinking on campus and alcohol consumption fell, but it was not eradicated in the clubs. The administration and the clubs reached a “Gentlemen's Agreement” under which the clubs were permitted to police themselves as long as their behavior remained within reasonable bounds. House parties became a regular custom each spring in which clubs vied with each other to have the best band. Two of the newer eating clubs (Arbor Inn and Gateway) could not sustain themselves financially during the Great Depression and closed, but the rest of the system was largely unfazed and clubs continued to be the primary center of social activity for upperclassmen, with 90% of them joining clubs (compared to 75% in the 1920s).

Sporadic protests, revolts and boycotts questioned the value and human costs of bicker, as the clubs' selection process became known. The early 1920s saw the creation of governance structures to assist the clubs and the University with their interactions, such as the Graduate Inter-Club Council and an Undergraduate Inter-Club Association (later the Inter-Club Council), and their charges included supervision of bicker and recommendations for its improvement. Some of the suggestions made in this era included the abolition of bicker week, the establishment of a system of lot drawing for club

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selection, the removal of dining facilities from the clubs, and the creation of a University Club on campus. However, a majority of students were satisfied with the existing system and only minimal changes were implemented. For instance, after Gateway Club closed in 1937 the University operated it as a non-selective club with a faculty master until World War II. The clubhouse was then taken over by the new Prospect Club, which tried to operate as a co-op from 1941 to 1943 and again after the war, until its eventual closure in 1959.

POST-WAR “DEMOCRATIZATION” EFFORTS

During WWII, most of the clubs suspended operations as the University, like the country, mobilized for war. When it concluded, the clubs reopened and, due to an influx of returning veterans, had class sections nearly double the size of what they had been prior to the war, averaging 49 in 1948. The changed nature of the student body (including larger numbers of public school graduates) and a widespread “democratizing” spirit in the country again called into question the nature of the club membership selection, as students themselves protested the existing practices. In an era in which sophomores bickered all the clubs and could receive bids from multiple clubs, over 600 sophomore members of the Class of 1952 (75%) signed a petition declaring they would not join clubs unless every sophomore who bickered received a bid to at least one club. This concept of “100-percent bicker” continued into the 1960s with one notable interruption – the so-called “Dirty Bicker” of 1958, in which 23 students, more than half of whom were Jewish, were not chosen for membership in any club. This incident exposed the clubs’ ambivalence to the 100-percent bicker concept, as many students and grad board members argued that club membership procedures should not be constrained. By 1962, the Interclub Council abandoned attempts to guarantee at least one bid to every sophomore who bickered.

The 1958 Dirty Bicker brought about renewed calls for alternative dining and social facilities for students who did not join clubs either by choice or from lack of a bid. The University’s Commons (underclass dining facility) in Madison Hall was temporarily the home of the Woodrow Wilson Lodge, established in 1957 by a group of upperclassmen not enrolled in a club, but this group moved to the new Wilcox Hall in 1961 and founded the Woodrow Wilson Society. Before the end of the decade Wilcox Hall was remodeled and subsequently served as the dining and social center for the first residential college named for Wilson. Another option started in the fall of 1969 with the creation of the Madison Society, in which upperclassmen were able at lesser cost to have breakfast in Wilcox, lunch at Commons, and dinner in New South’s top floor cafeteria.

In 1966, President Goheen expressed his dissatisfaction with the “brutal and unsatisfactory” bicker system and suggested that students should assume responsibility for instituting reforms. Ten student leaders (including the heads of the student government, *Daily Princetonian*, Chapel Deacons, Whig-Clio, and Orange Key) took up his challenge and proposed a change in the way the eating clubs would select their members so as to remove “a competing ethos to the values implicit in the University itself.” The group suggested that all sophomores who wished to join a club could apply for membership individually or with a small group of friends. These applications would list their first three club preferences and then applications would be placed in random order and assigned in the order drawn. Once space limitations prevented the honoring of preferences, assignments to clubs would be made on a random basis until each club had been assigned approximately the same number of sophomores. The student leaders

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strongly recommended this plan be implemented by the club members themselves, as “it is we students who administer the present bicker system and must accept primary responsibility for its reform.” Campus, Key and Seal, Colonial, and Terrace supported the recommendations, while the other clubs opposed. The following year, concerned about attracting an adequate number of students, Terrace did away with bicker, announced an open membership policy, and extended bids to all sophomores; this led club officials to proclaim a 100% bicker year with over 700 sophomores participating. But in the egalitarian and protest spirit of the late 1960s, some students resigned their club memberships, including the president of the senior class, and 20 members of Colonial threatened to resign unless the club adopted a random selection process, which it did shortly thereafter.

NADIR AND EVOLUTION

Decreasing membership proved fatal for several struggling clubs. Court Club closed in 1964 and Key and Seal shut its doors in 1968. Only 540 students (70% of the sophomore class) bickered the clubs in 1968, and this decreasing trend continued; the low point of club membership was reached in 1971 when only 838 juniors and seniors (fewer than half) belonged to clubs (compared to 1388 in 1964). The University created the non-selective Stevenson Hall on the grounds of Court and Key and Seal as an alternative dining and social facility open to all juniors and seniors with a faculty master, and in 1972 membership was extended to sophomores and a kosher kitchen was added, which remained until the opening of the Center for Jewish Life on the site of the former Gateway Club in the 1990s. The University provided funds in 1969 to renovate Terrace Club and assumed management of its operations from 1970 to 1972. Dial Lodge, which sold some of its land to the University in 1962, closed in the spring of 1969 but reopened in the fall with 48 non-bickering sophomores. For several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Elm and Campus joined forces and advertised they were the only non-University owned or operated club that was truly non-selective. Cloister Inn was closed in 1972 and operated for a few years as a non-selective social facility for underclassmen and as an alumni center for those whose clubs had ceased operations before reopening as a club in 1977. Cannon Club closed its doors in 1975.

When undergraduate coeducation began in 1969, the clubs needed to decide whether to allow female classmates to join. In November, Colonial (in its second year as a non-selective club), announced it would admit women. In December 1970, Campus-Elm, Charter, Cloister and Dial announced they too would become coeducational, followed a week later by Tower, Cap and Gown, and Quadrangle. Cannon held out as a men-only club until it closed in 1975, leaving three clubs as all-male – Cottage, Ivy, and Tiger Inn. By the late 1970s, Cap, Cottage, Ivy, Tiger Inn and Tower were the only clubs employing the bicker process for membership selection. By this point, the old system of sophomores waiting to hear from all of the clubs as to whether they would be given one or more bids had given way to a new method under which sophomores chose which clubs they wanted to bicker and participated in on-site programs at the clubs during the bicker process, although with the understanding that if a student did bicker at all clubs, he or she would be guaranteed at least one bid, known at the time as a “hat bid.” Club admission procedures were revised again in 1978 with the introduction of a sign-in and lottery system that was employed by the seven open clubs. By the end of the 1970s there were thirteen clubs, five of which were selective and eight non-selective.

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NEW RESIDENTIAL, SOCIAL, AND DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

Campus social and residential patterns on campus continued to evolve. The Princeton Inn was acquired in 1970 and renamed the Princeton Inn College, establishing a second residential college (joining Wilson) in which freshmen, sophomores and a few upperclass students could reside, dine and engage in social activities. In the late 1970s, President Bowen established a Committee on Undergraduate Residential Life (CURL) to reconsider Princeton's dining and social options. The result was a 1979 recommendation to establish five two-year residential colleges to house, feed, and provide social facilities for all freshmen and sophomores. Money was quickly raised and the creation of the new colleges began shortly thereafter, with Mathey, Rockefeller and Butler Colleges joining Wilson and the newly-renamed Forbes (Princeton Inn) College. CURL also put forth recommendations about improving club life for upperclass students – to preserve the clubs, provide improved building maintenance, and strengthen financial positions – through University involvement, but on the condition that participating clubs be open to all students in a non-selective admission process. The clubs' desire for autonomy overrode the potential benefits of the plan, and the recommendations were not accepted by a majority of the clubs.

In 1979, Sally Frank '80 filed a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights against the three remaining all-male eating clubs, arguing that in view of their historical relationship to the University they were public accommodations and therefore could not discriminate against women. All three clubs contested the law suit until Cottage Club reversed its stance and decided to admit women in 1986. Tiger Inn and Ivy fought on for another five years until the NJ Supreme Court ruled that Ivy and Tiger Inn could not deny membership to women. Ivy immediately complied, but another year passed before Tiger Inn agreed to accept female members (and only after the U.S. Supreme Court refused to entertain an appeal).

The adoption of the residential college system for freshmen and sophomores reduced the number of meal options for upperclass students and club membership grew again during the 1980s. This period also witnessed the return to campus of Greek-letter fraternities. Though the required commitment not to join fraternities had been discontinued in the late 1930s, it was not until the 1980s that the Greek organizations staged a comeback. In 1982, William Robinson '51 wrote a PAW column advocating for the return of fraternities; he worked with Robert Bradford '85 to organize a Council of Fraternities at Princeton and, shortly thereafter, three organizations (Phi Kappa Sigma, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and Zeta Psi) together attracted 30 students as initiates. One year later, two more fraternities and one sorority had also founded Princeton chapters. Their advocates emphasized that these organizations were smaller than eating clubs and open to membership from all four classes, encouraging interaction across the divide of residential college and upperclass life. The University declined to grant the organizations official recognition, but by 1993, 18 unofficial Greek organizations claimed about 15 percent of the student body, a number that has remained fairly constant. Fraternities and sororities were initially thought to be of particular interest to students who were unfamiliar with Princeton's social structure and traditions, but in time it became clear that they were attracting students who entered Princeton with a desire to join a particular eating club with which a particular fraternity or sorority was associated. Thus, in much the same way that certain sports teams and campus activities came to be associated with particular eating clubs, so too did some of the fraternities and sororities become known as pipelines to membership in some bicker clubs.

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RECENT ERA

In 1988, the graduate board of the defunct Cannon Club merged with the financially-troubled Dial, and a year later the merger expanded to include Elm, creating an entity known as Dial-Elm-Cannon (DEC) located in the Dial and Elm facilities. The joint club struggled and eventually folded in 1998. An agreement was reached between the University and the DEC graduate board under which Dial and Elm would become University properties (now the Bendheim Center for Finance and home of the Carl Fields Center and Community House respectively) and Cannon would revert to ownership by DEC. For more than a decade, Cannon Club has been planning to reopen in its former building; this reopening is now predicted for the 2011-2012 school year.

In 2005 Campus Club, suffering from low membership and an inability to meet the costs of maintaining its building, closed its doors. The graduate board presented the club to the University to provide recreational, social and meeting space open to all undergraduates and graduate student. Campus Club reopened after needed renovations in the fall of 2009 as a non-dining student-programmed facility.

Two other important changes to student dining and residential patterns have occurred in the past few years. The first was the opening of the Frist Campus Center in 2000, after nearly a century of calls for the creation of such a facility. Its extensive cafeteria and multifunctional social, performance and meeting spaces offer community members recreational and dining options open to all, along with such services as mailboxes, parcel shipping, and ticket purchases. The second change was the opening of Whitman College in 2007 and the new Butler College dorms in 2009 that completed the creation of a four-year college system in which juniors and seniors can choose to remain in one of the three four-year colleges (Whitman, Butler and Mathey). All of the eating clubs offer at least some of their members the option of having a joint meal plan that allows them to eat some of their meals in the club and some in one of the four-year residential colleges. Under the four-year college system, even juniors and seniors who do not live in the colleges or have joint meal plans are permitted two meals per week in the colleges at no additional cost and all juniors and seniors receive non-departmental academic advising in their college.

The closing of Campus Club in 2005 brought the total number of eating clubs to 10. Half of them admit members through a non-selective sign-in process, and half admit members through a bicker process early in February. Since the late 1980s, sophomores wanting to bicker have been permitted to apply to only one club at a time. The bicker clubs typically accept 50-70 percent of their bickerees; if students do not receive an invitation to join their desired club they have the option to join a sign-in club that has not already filled its membership, to bicker again in the fall, to become "independent" (prepare or obtain their own meals), join a co-op, or purchase a University dining contract. In the most recent senior survey (Class of 2009), 72% of the class said they had club meal contracts in their junior year and 66% said they had club meal contracts in their senior year. In most years, clubs range in size from about 120 members to more than 200. Nearly all of the clubs have cafeteria-style service for most meals, except on special occasions. Financial soundness varies among the clubs, with some well capitalized and others not. Given the age and nature of their buildings, the clubs incur significant costs for major maintenance, and extensive renovations can trigger requirements to bring the buildings into compliance with more stringent building codes.

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RECURRING THEMES

Over time, there have been several recurring themes in discussions about the eating clubs. One has to do with cost. There has always been a price differential between club membership and a University dining contract. In the 1920s and 1930s, the club tab was double; by the early 1970s, there was a difference of about \$300-400 per year. By the turn of the century, club membership ran at least 30 percent more than a dining contract and the University's financial aid award did not cover the difference, leading many students with fewer financial resources to either refrain from joining a club or drop out. In 2006, the University changed the way it calculated financial aid for juniors and seniors so that a student's assumed dining cost is set at the level of an average eating club dining contract. This change was intended to provide sufficient aid to allow students on financial aid to afford the costs of club dining contracts.

A second recurring theme has to do with the impact of the club system on the academic life of the campus. Woodrow Wilson's major complaint was that the clubs were "hostile to the spirit of study." Over the years efforts have been made to lessen the chasm between the educational mission of the University and the social nature of the clubs. In the late 1950s, the graduate board of Tower Club studied ways to introduce certain educational programs to Prospect Avenue. The implementation of several of the proposals led to the 1961 creation of a 501(c)3 nonprofit educational corporation, the Princeton Tower Foundation, which allowed for tax-exempt fundraising for the eating clubs to "promote the literary and scientific improvement and education of voluntary societies and associations of Princeton University students" through the establishment of scholarships, fellowships and awards, the furnishing and maintaining of study and library facilities to supplement the University's educational programs, and the sponsorship of lectures, courses, and other methods of academic and social interchange between undergraduate students and members of the university faculty and administration. By 1969, the organization's name was changed to the Princeton Prospect Foundation and other clubs were invited to join. Eight clubs were associated with the Foundation by the 1980s, with the others eventually joining as well; Tiger Inn was the last to join the Foundation, in 2000. Over the years, the Prospect Foundation has raised millions of dollars that have funded a variety of club projects, including the wiring of club computer clusters for Internet access. Today, several of the clubs also have seminar rooms in which University classes are held.

The third recurring theme has to do with the nature of the membership selection process. The selection process has changed considerably over time, especially with the introduction of sign-in procedures at what became known as "open" clubs in the 1970s. The bicker process has evolved from a time when sophomores were given little or no opportunity to visit the various clubs prior to bickering and were ordered to stay in their rooms every evening during one or two bicker week(s) at the start of the spring semester to receive a series of delegations from the clubs. In that era no bickering students were permitted at any club until they received a bid. Also, students were able to bicker more than one club. By contrast, in recent decades the interactions between club members and bickerees have become more informal, with room visitations being replaced by open-house visits to the clubs for interviews and games. Students today can only bicker one club at a time or choose to sign-in to a non-selective club.

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CONCLUSION

The Task Force on Relationships between the University and the Eating Clubs would welcome comments and corrections to this brief history as it pursues its charge to review current relationships and ways they and the club experience can be improved for the mutual benefit of the clubs, the University and students.

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