

The Bulletin

Community Reflects On One Year Without Lord-Saunders Lunch

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This semester marks the one-year anniversary of Afrikan Heritage House lunch no longer being served in Lord-Saunders Dining Hall. The decision from AVI Foodsystems, Oberlin College's contracted dining service, sparked discussions about AVI's treatment of students of color. These concerns were also voiced at a community meeting in the beginning of the 2023 fall semester where members of ABUSUA and A-House brought up several concerns about AVI policies, mostly asking for respect from the dining service and fellow students. In October, signatures were collected on a petition sent out by the Student Senate to demonstrate that A-House lunch was something widely wanted by students. In an email to *The Oberlin Review*, Resident Director for AVI Foodsystems Joe Jacobs discussed the reason for the end of A-House lunch.

"The reason A-House lunch was discontinued starting in the fall semester of 2023 was that we had reached the end of the pandemic," Jacobs wrote. "A-House lunch was born out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic to spread the student population out among 10 separate dining locations to keep contact to a minimum on campus and help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 at Oberlin."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Lord-Saunders did not consistently have lunch service, and in fall 2023, there was a return to the original contract between AVI and Oberlin College.

"As we have moved past the pandemic, we have gained valuable insight on student dining needs across the entire campus, which will help us make more informed, intentional, and equitable decisions in regards to the upcoming Campus Dining Master Plan that the College is developing," Jacobs wrote.

The petition asked AVI to "Save Lunch," and encouraged students to spread the word about the dining in Lord-Saunders. The petition was published in *The Oberlin Review* as well as on other platforms, such as Facebook,

to gain awareness. The petition urged students to read the official statement as well as sign the petition.

"Especially for upperclassmen, the loss of this dining option was a surprise and a huge loss," the petition reads. "South Campus houses various dorms, and is also home to many minority groups on campus. At the moment, A-House only serves dinner five days a week and the majority of the dining services that are offered are closer [to] or on North Campus, leaving a large population on campus having to find other dining options most of the time."

Eight hundred and twenty-seven signatures were collected over the first and second semester of the 2023–24 school year. The data spans all class years, with 25.7 percent of signatures from first-years, 32.3 from second-years, 21.1 from third-years, and 20.8 from fourth-years. The petition also asked about students' favorite lunch at Lord-Saunders, and, based on the 460 survey votes, it was pulled pork sandwiches.

"It is really nice to see how students supported the petition," College third-year Mia Knox, a current Residential Assistant at A-House, said. "Hopefully we can use that data when advocating not only to bring lunch back but that the community cares about what is happening in A-House."

Students also brought attention to the fact that the removal of A-House lunch was not communicated with A-House or ABUSUA staff. Students highlighted that previously, there was strong communication between College administration and A-House administration. When the petition was posted, ABUSUA highlighted conversations with AVI and Student Involvement Business and Operations Coordinator Cristal Ramos, OC '24, who served as housing and dining representative on the Student Senate for the 2023–2024 academic year.

"Students feel like they are losing more things, but there aren't alternatives," Ramos stated in a document detailing the concerns posed toward AVI. "In addition, we have heard from your office that you have asked student opinions when making changes, but we, campus wide, are confused who those students were. You have to be intentional about reaching out to students and hearing their opinions. It may be more work, but it's a part of the job!"

Besides the petition, residents of A-House



The Pan-African flag displayed in Afrikan Heritage House.

Photo by Erin Koo, Photo Editor

raised other significant concerns. One is students not tapping in and using their meal swipes for lunch. Due to employment shortages, there wasn't enough staff to ensure students were tapping their ID. ABUSUA also highlighted that staff are tasked with longer working hours focused on cleaning because there is a limited number of employees who can help. Many longtime AVI workers not only work hard in the dining hall but also participate in the A-House community and engage with students.

"[Employees] are overworked, and because of that, we as students get the short end of the stick!" a document addressed to AVI states. "We are hoping that you would consider giving A-House more Black staff such as Ms. Erica and Mrs. Katreena. We know that the process for picking is seniority; however, in a safe and intentional space, we are asking for staff members who look like us and understand the food that is being served! Also consider giving Mr. Eugene a raise or a higher title because he has been pivotal in the community, ensuring that we are happy and getting the things that we need."

ABUSUA also called attention to the lack of dining options for South Campus in general and the availability of food since lunch was taken away. Stevenson Dining Hall is 0.5 miles away — around a 15 minute walk — and Clarity and Heritage are smaller dining halls which experience long lines during lunch time that are not accessible to students. Without

A-House lunch, many students feel unable to get lunch without having to go across campus.

"I think, in general, it's very important to have a consistent dining space in A-house because there is no large dining area on South Campus except for A-House," Melissa George, current lecturer and director of Afrikan Heritage House, said. "I think the fact that there is no lunch in A-House is really an accessibility issue, especially for students who can't go somewhere else for lunch."

In the future, students in A-House hope to continue having conversations with AVI on ways lunch can be brought back or how students' dining needs can be met. Members of the A-House administrative team specifically are discussing reinstating lunch at A-House, having a more accurate menu of what is offered during dining times, staffing A-House sufficiently, and more effectively honoring the dining space as a cultural hub.

Ramos, spoke to the *Review* about resources for students with questions and concerns about on-campus dining. Ramos specifically highlighted the AVI Dining Advisory Committee, which first and second-year students are welcome to apply to by Sept. 27.

"There's a dining committee that meets once a month with AVI, College staff, [and] students," Ramos said. "That's a great way for students to get involved and have direct input in anything dining-related on campus."



A-House residents gather as a community in Lord-Saunders Dining Hall.



Photos courtesy of Afrikan Heritage House