

# Students, housing officials debate meal systems

By Mary Ellen Behne

Since the Division of University Housing has started accepting housing contracts for the 1982-83 school year, many students living in the residence halls are trying to decide whether to return to the halls or to move off campus.

Although several factors may influence their decision, cost is the main consideration for most students. In comparing the cost of renting an apartment and buying their own food with next year's room and board rate of \$1,825, some students find

themselves wishing that UNL offered room only contracts or different meal plans in addition to its one room and board rate.

Currently, all students wanting to live in the halls must sign a contract for both room and board. The contract includes 20 meals per week.

For some students, especially those who rarely eat in the halls, having to pay room and board based on a 20-meal plan can seem a waste of money.

At least, that's what Mary Colbert, a freshman who lives in Pound Hall, said

when she and four other students were asked about the system.

## Not economical

Colbert said it's not economical for a student who rarely eats in the halls to have to pay more than \$210 a month for room and board.

Colbert, a business major, said more students would stay in the halls if UNL offered room only contracts.

Dianna Sleigh, a journalism major who lives in Abel Hall, agreed. She said students should be able to get room and board separately, and choose between a variety of meal plans. She said she only eats about one meal per day in the halls.

Sleigh said other colleges such as Kearney State offer a variety of meal plans, and UNL could do the same.

Sara Brunken of Smith Hall agreed. "I wish we had a system like Wayne State or Kearney State," she said. In these schools, Brunken said, students pay a certain amount for room and choose between different board plans with either 10, 15 or 20 meals per week.

Brunken said students decide when they want to eat their meals. Students have meal cards that are punched into a computerized system like that used at UNL that records when they eat. The system is programmed with each student's meal plan so that once a student has eaten the maximum number of meals he has paid for, the computer will reject his card.

## Reasons may be good

Brunken said she realizes there may be good reasons why UNL does not offer various meal plans, but said students should have more of a choice than they now have.

Not all students, however, are dissatisfied with the system. Dennis Mattox, who lives in Burr Hall, said he finds it convenient to eat his meals at the East Union, where meals for students living in residence halls on East Campus are served. Mattox said some students may think a variety of meal plans would be better, but he said, "It seems OK the way it is."

Another student, Schramm resident Greg Hokanson, said that although the current system works for him, different meal plans would be a good idea for students who don't regularly eat breakfast, dieters, and those who work and don't eat in the residence halls.

Housing officials, however, are not likely to change plans. They are opposed to changing the current system for the same reasons that some students want it changed — economic ones. They say that offering room only contracts and various meal plans would result in higher, not lower, costs for the many students who would still choose the 20-meal plan, and would not save the other students as much money as they think it would.

## Administratively impossible

Gary Partridge, assistant director of housing for business services, said there is a "good reason" why UNL traditionally has offered only the 20-meal plan. He said that if students were offered a wide variety of meal plans, the room and board program would become "administratively impossible to manage." Housing would have to

hire more staff members to keep track of which students had which plans, and the cost of the extra labor would be passed on to the students, he said.

Director of Housing Douglas Zatechka agreed that the current system keeps costs for students down. He said housing's goal is to spread costs out among students in order to make room and board rates "as low as possible for most of the students most of the time." There are two ways to do this — fill the halls to their 5,400 capacity, and have all students pay room and board based on the 20-meal plan, he said.

## Budget dependent

Zatechka said housing relies on income from students' room and board fees to pay its budget expenses. The director said that if students could choose room only contracts or had a choice between various meals plans, then fewer students would eat in the halls and housing's income from board would decrease. Yet housing would still have to pay its mortgage payments and other expenses. It would do so by using income from students — especially by raising board rates for the students who were still eating in the halls.

"We'd have to compensate by raising prices for the fewer students that were eating here," he said.

Zatechka said requiring students to pay one room and board fee enables the housing staff to predict its yearly income fairly accurately. However, he said, if several different plans were offered, a lot more uncertainty would be involved in predicting income. Since it would be hard to know how many students would be taking room only contracts or any of the various meal plans, housing would have to pad its projected budget to make sure it would be able to meet expenses. The extra money needed to do this would come from charging students higher room and board rates, Zatechka said.


"If we changed to a pay-as-you-go system, costs would rise appreciably for all students," he said.

## Not money saving

Because of the uncertainty inherent in a system with different meal plans, students choosing a 10- or 15-meal plan would not save as much money as they might expect to, Zatechka said. He said students at Oklahoma State found this out two years ago when their school started giving them the option of 15- or 20-meal plans. Since students with the 15-meal plans were getting 25 percent fewer meals than other students were, they expected to pay 25 percent less, Zatechka said. But this did not happen. The cost per year for 20 meals was \$724, while for 15 meals it was \$660 — only a 9 percent difference, he said.

Zatechka said Oklahoma State assumes that students taking the 15-meal plan eat all 15 meals, and charges them accordingly. UNL, however, assumes that students will miss some meals, and does not charge them for all 20, he said.

Partridge said past years' statistics have shown that on the average, students eat only 1.7 meals per day. Housing bases its board fees on this average, he said. This means that although students can eat up to 20 meals per week, they only have to pay for about 12 meals.



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