

TRINITY COLLEGE AND THE COMMUNITY

Does Moral Obligation Stop at the Doors of the Campus Dining Halls?



“...we have a profound sense of obligation to Hartford and we intend to honor it... It would be morally bankrupt for Trinity to teach the liberal arts on our campus and ignore what is happening across the street. How can we call our students to leadership if we lack the courage and vision to lead? How can we speak of the pursuit of truth if we turn our back on the truth that is our neighborhood? How can we encourage individual responsibility if we as an institution behave irresponsibly?”

—Evan Dobbelle
President of Trinity College, 1995-2001¹

Maribel Román has lived all of her 27 years in the City of Hartford. She is a single mother who for the last three years has supported her children Richy and Joselyn by working in Trinity College’s subcontracted food service department, currently operated by Chartwells.

The pay is better than most of the other jobs Maribel has held, but she still struggles to make ends meet on \$11.95 per hour.



Like many service sector jobs, Maribel’s position is well below 40 hours, giving her a net weekly income of around only \$270. With rent and all the costs of caring for a family of three, \$270 per week is hardly enough.

“It doesn’t pay all my bills,” Maribel says. “I have to struggle at the end of the month. I can’t afford what I want to buy, but I’ve been doing it.”²

Finding affordable healthcare for herself and her children is one of the major difficulties of living on such a low salary. Because the cost of her employer’s family health insurance is not easy for her to pay, Maribel has enrolled her family in

Connecticut’s taxpayer-funded Husky Plan.

With such a low income, she and her children cannot afford to live in a private apartment. Instead, they have to live in a public housing complex in the city’s North End. Maribel often worries about raising her family in the environment where they live. “I want to move,” she says. “I want my kids away from the violence. I want to be able to send my kids to the store and I don’t got to be worrying about something happening to them.”

Maribel’s poor financial situation is not unique. Virtually all of the food service workers at Trinity make wages below the minimum necessary to live decently in a city with a cost of living as high as Hartford’s. Their wages and benefits, too, fall far below those of their counterparts at Trinity’s peer institutions in the greater Hartford area: the University of Hartford, Wesleyan University and Central Connecticut State University. Nearly all of the food service workers at those schools earn \$2 to \$3 more per hour, and they receive free health insurance.

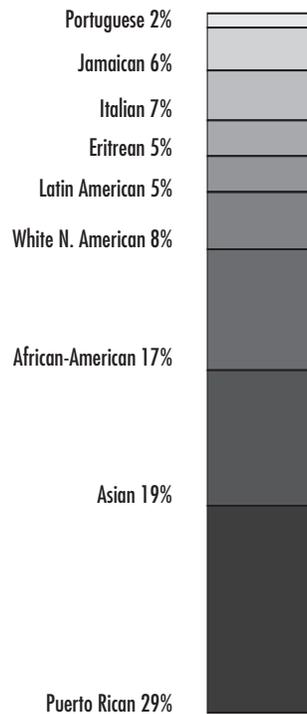
These facts stand in stark contrast to the atmosphere of wealth that surrounds the workers. Trinity has grown tremendously over the past decade. When one considers the number of campus construction and renovation projects, the expansion of the College’s endowment and the increase in the salaries of top officials, it is clear that Trinity’s wealth greatly increased in recent years.

The workers, their families and their communities are keenly aware of such disparities. As Maribel notes, “Sometimes I get frustrated. Why aren’t we paid enough? We work hard enough. At other colleges they pay more, but we’re doing the same thing.”

Struggling to Get By

More than 60% of the Chartwells food service workforce at Trinity College lives within the city of Hartford.³ They represent a broad swath of the area’s racial, ethnic and national diversity. In addition to the large contingents of Puerto Ricans, African Americans and Vietnamese; Jamaican, Italian, White North American, Eritrean,

Food Service Workers at Trinity



Mexican, Chinese, Ecuadorian, Guyanese, Peruvian and Portuguese workers are also employed in Trinity’s kitchens and dining halls.

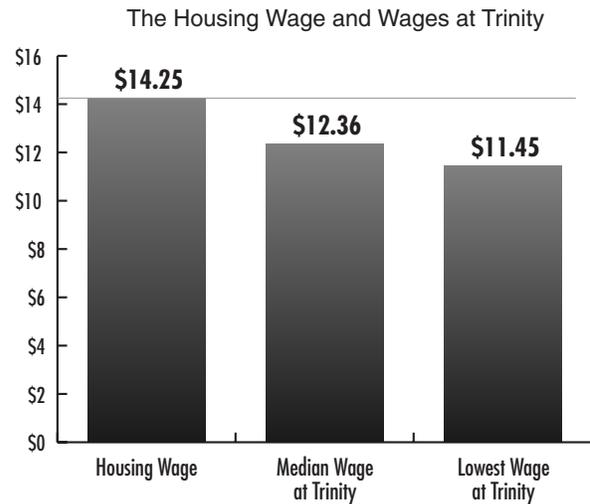
They are not unlike the greater Hartford-area workforce: low-income and mainly racial and ethnic minorities. The majority of them are women.

As Maribel’s situation shows, it is very difficult to earn a decent living in the food service department. What’s more, Maribel’s wages are not the lowest; dishwashers, line-servers

and other general workers earn only \$11.45 per hour.⁴

Although such wages are considerably above the state’s minimum wage, they provide incomes that fall far short of the minimum necessary for a person to live and

support a family in the Hartford area. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s annual report titled *Out of Reach*, the hourly wage needed to afford the Fair Market Rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in the Hartford-New Britain-Middletown area is \$14.25 per hour.⁵ Of the more than 100 workers in the food service department, fewer than 10 earn wages above this “Housing Wage.” The graph below illustrates the gap between the “Housing Wage” and wages at Trinity.



The lowest-paid workers’ wages are nearly \$3 per hour below the “Housing Wage” for the Hartford area. In terms of annual income, someone who works 40 hours a week for the entire academic year at the lowest wage of \$11.45 makes \$3,696 less than she needs to afford a two-bedroom apartment.⁶ In other words, many of the food service workers cannot afford to work there.

Does It Have To Be This Way at Trinity?

The situation of the Chartwells food service workers at Trinity recalls a familiar story. As our report *Good Jobs, Strong Communities* showed, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of unionized, high-paying manufacturing jobs left Connecticut and were replaced by mostly non-union, low-paying service sector jobs.⁷ Incomes declined, poverty increased, and Connecticut's urban communities began to decay.

This historical trend - which sometimes seems impossible to change - raises an important question: are all of Hartford's service sector workers destined to fill the ranks of the working poor?

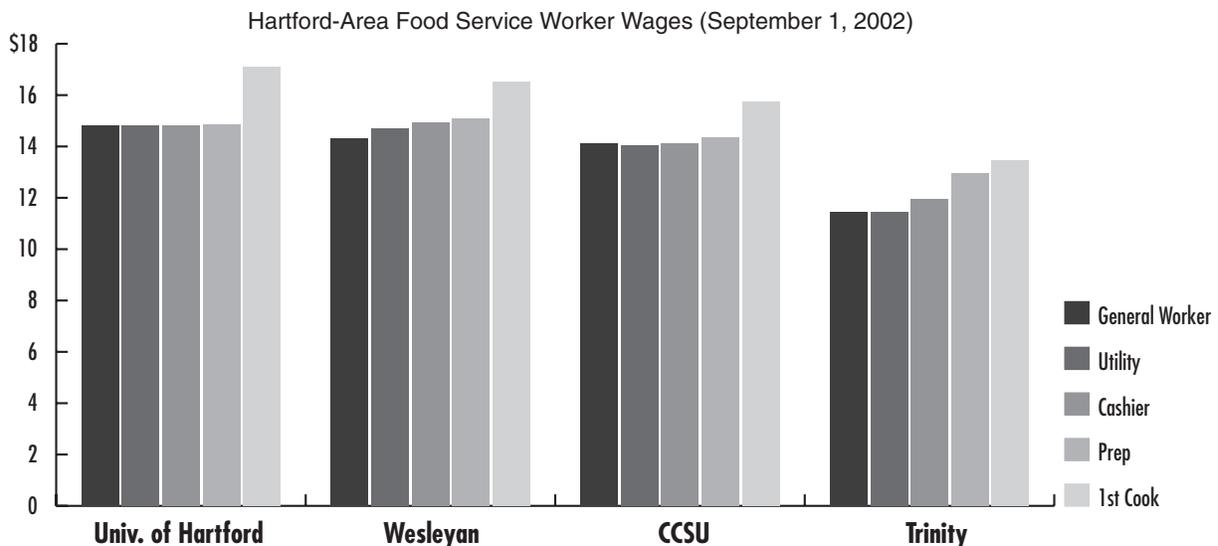
Wages Fortunately, one can look to several of Trinity College's peer institutions for a hopeful answer. At the University of Hartford in West Hartford, Wesleyan University in Middletown and Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in New Britain, the unionized food service workers are compensated at a much higher level than their counterparts at Trinity. The graph below compares wages in several job classifications at the four institutions.

Two things are evident from this graph. First is the drastic difference between the wages at Trinity and the wages paid by food service contractors at the other schools. In fact, the smallest gap - between

utility workers at Trinity and CCSU - is \$2.60 per hour. A Chartwells utility employee at Trinity working 40 hours per week during the complete academic year earns \$3,432 less per year than her colleague at CCSU. The difference between general workers' annualized incomes at Trinity and the University of Hartford is even more striking: \$4,462.

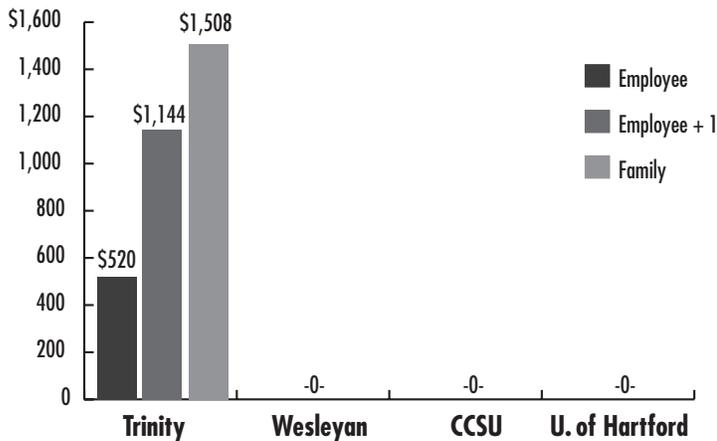
Second, in contrast to the wages at Trinity, the wages of nearly all of the food service workers at the other schools range from just below to well above the region's "Housing Wage" of \$14.25. Clearly not all service sector jobs in the Hartford area leave workers with incomes disproportionately below the region's cost of living.

Health Insurance The differences in compensation between Trinity, the University of Hartford, Wesleyan University and CCSU extend to the area of medical insurance as well. Because many service sector employees like Maribel and her co-workers work only part-time hours, employers commonly raise the hours of work required for insurance eligibility above the levels worked by most employees. In the food service department at Trinity, for example, an employee must work 25 or more hours per week to qualify for the least expensive health insurance option.⁸ At the other three institutions, however, an employee needs to work only 20 hours per week to qualify.



In addition to the fact that Chartwells' Trinity employees must work more hours at lower wages to qualify for medical insurance, the cost they incur is much greater. While the food service workers at Trinity pay weekly for insurance for themselves

Employees' Annual Cost for Medical Insurance



and their families, food service workers at the other three schools pay nothing.

A 40-hour general food service worker at Trinity who needs medical insurance for her family spends \$1,508 more per year on insurance premiums than does her counterpart at the University of Hartford.⁹ If one takes into account the significant difference between their two salaries, the difference in total compensation between the workers at Trinity and the University of Hartford is \$5,970 per year.

Why are the food service workers at Trinity so much worse off than employees who perform the same work at the University of Hartford, Wesleyan and CCSU? All four schools are within the same general labor market, all face similar costs of living and of doing business, and all hire sub-contractors to manage their food service operations. In fact, Trinity and CCSU both contract with Chartwells to run their campus' dining halls.

How Committed Is Trinity to the Workers and Their Communities?

That food service workers' wages and benefits are so low is stunning relative to

Trinity's great wealth. In the late 1990's, the College experienced enormous growth under the leadership of President Evan Dobelle. President Dobelle worked tirelessly to raise the school's national profile, its involvement and its stature in Hartford - and its endowment. By the end of Dobelle's tenure, Trinity's endowment had grown from \$208 million in 1996 to over \$343 million in 2001.¹⁰

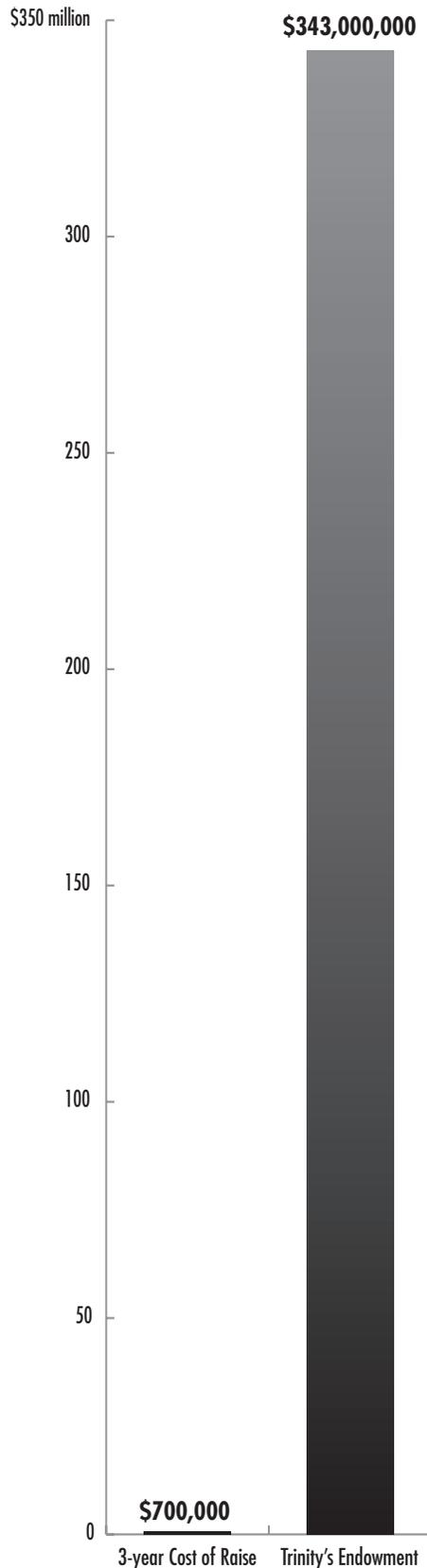
Trinity has put its increased endowment to many uses. The school has spent tens of millions of dollars on its "Campus Master Plan" - an ambitious vision for campus renovation and construction. As of July 2002, Trinity had completed seven projects, had two under way (including a \$32 million library) and had more than ten future projects planned.¹¹

Additionally, Trinity spent and raised millions of dollars for community development and revitalization programs and projects in Hartford, particularly in the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the College. The cornerstone of these endeavors was Trinity's support for construction of The Learning Corridor, a massive education complex just beyond the school's gates.

For all of these efforts and successes, Trinity rewarded its president handsomely. According to The Chronicle of Higher Education, from 1995 through 2000, the president's salary increased by over \$48,000 to \$218,400.¹²

There can be no doubt that Trinity has made valuable contributions to Hartford. But what about Trinity's commitment to the food service workers, their families and their communities? Despite the College's community involvement, workers like Maribel - who earns less than 5% of the president's salary - still must live in publicly-subsidized housing. They still must accept publicly-funded insurance for themselves and their children. They still struggle to make ends meet. The low compensation prevents the workers from investing substantially in their communities and causes them to drain further the shrinking tax

3-Year Cost of a \$1/hour Raise Compared to Trinity's Endowment



base.

Can Trinity afford to remedy the situation? Using wage data provided by the workers' union, we calculated that an increase \$1 per hour for each of the food service workers for the coming year would cost approximately \$116,000.¹³ Put in perspective, just over 100 workers would share a raise which amounted to only .03% of Trinity's \$343 million endowment. Such a raise over three years would cost approximately \$700,000, or .2% of the school's endowment.

Even including the uncertain cost of providing free medical insurance, the total increase in labor cost would be inconsequential in relation to Trinity's wealth. The school has an unquestionable financial ability to elevate its food service workers wages and benefits to the levels of its peer institutions.

The only question is whether Trinity has the institutional will to invest directly in the Hartford community members who work in the College's dining halls. Will it continue in the tradition of leadership that President Dobbelle established? Or will it be a follower in the low-wage service sector economy?

Notes

1 See the web site “Trinity, It’s Neighbors, and Hartford,” <http://www.trincoll.edu/pub/heights/backcover.htm>.

2 Interview, August 21, 2002. All personal information about Maribel in this report came from this interview.

2 The remainder live in the surrounding towns of East and West Hartford, Bloomfield, Wethersfield, Windsor, New Britain, Rocky Hill and Manchester, with one worker residing in Waterbury. All demographic information in this report was provided by the labor union which represents Chartwells food service workers at Trinity: Local 217 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE).

4 Collective Bargaining Agreement between Chartwells and Local 217 Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union at Trinity College, expired June 30, 2002. All collective bargaining agreements and wage and insurance information referenced in this report were provided by Local 217 HERE.

5 See *Out of Reach 2001: America’s Growing Wage-Rent Disparity*, <http://www.nlihc.org/oor2001/>. According to the report, the housing wage assumes that households spend 30% of their income on housing. Fair Market Rents are calculated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; more details are available in the Appendix to *Out of Reach*.

6 All annual incomes and the costs of raises in this report are calculated based on a 33-week academic year work schedule.

7 See *Good Jobs, Strong Communities: Creating a High-Wage Future for Connecticut*, Connecticut Center for a New Economy, December, 2001.

8 Per the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the employees’ union and their employer, Chartwells, the employee pays 15% of the monthly insurance premium when scheduled for 25 or more hours. Employees scheduled for 20 or more hours but less than 25 hours pay 50% of the monthly premium - a costly option which no employees had selected at the time this report was written. All insurance information was provided by Local 217 HERE.

9 Employees pay a weekly premium each of the 52 weeks of a calendar year: \$10 for the employee only, \$22 for one dependent and \$29 for family coverage. Also see the collective bargaining agreements between Local 217 HERE and Chartwells at CCSU and between Local 217 HERE and Aramark at Wesleyan and the University of Hartford.

10 See “Facts and Figures” on The Chronicle of Higher Education website, <http://chronicle.com/stats/endowments/>. The 2001 figure was the most recent available during our investigations for this report. The 1996 endowment level was in a New York Times article available on Trinity’s website: www.trincoll.edu/pub/new/trinfocafe.htm

11 See “Campus Master Plan” at the website http://www.trincoll.edu/pub/about/master_plan.html.

12 See “Facts and Figures” on The Chronicle of Higher Education web site, <http://chronicle.com/stats/990>.

13 This amount does not account for hours worked by the few employees who staff the dining halls during the summer months.

THE CONNECTICUT CENTER FOR A NEW ECONOMY

The Connecticut Center for a New Economy (CCNE) is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to improving the economic and social well being of working families in Connecticut's urban centers by initiating and supporting efforts to raise wages of the working poor, improve public education and training, and preserve affordable housing.

To that end, we are demanding responsible economic development in the urban centers of Connecticut. We are reducing working poverty by advocating for those who seek self-determination and the right to bargain with their employers for better wages and working conditions. We are initiating public policy to preserve affordable housing and build strong communities for Connecticut's working families.

CCNE brings together various institutional partners, including faith-based organizations, labor unions, civil rights organizations and immigrant advocacy groups.

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