With 620 members, the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association (OSCA) is Oberlin College’s largest student organization. OSCA is an alternative to College sponsored dining and housing, and provides meals for its members, 175 of whom also live in a residential co-op. OSCA sponsors 9 dining facilities (Old Barrows, Fairchild, Third World, Harkness, Kosher Halal, Brown Bag, Tank, Pyle Inn, and Keep Dining Co-ops), 4 of which have residential co-op connections (Keep, Tank, Harkness, and Old Barrows Housing Co-ops). OSCA is the second-largest student cooperative in the country, and Oberlin has the highest percentage of students participating in a co-op of any college or university in the nation.

OSCA is a cooperatively-run organization, meaning that each member takes part in the decision making process of the corporation. At the end of each financial year, any leftover money is refunded to the membership.

For the 2009-2010 school year, OSCA charged $1380 per semester for dining, and $2061 per semester for a double room. By dining in OSCA, members saved $2440 per year over the College’s board program; the housing costs represent a savings of $1328 per year for those who lived in OSCA.

A random lottery for interested students decides OSCA’s membership each year. All students, regardless of class year, have an equal chance of getting into the co-op of their choice. Ninety spaces are reserved each year for new students. If a student decides to join a co-op mid-year, they will get on a waitlist that is prioritized by random number.

There are two special interest co-ops that require an application: Kosher-Halal Co-op (KHC) and Third World Co-op. KHC is a community built on Jewish and Muslim dietary laws. Priority is given to students who follow these dietary laws, but all are welcome to join. KHC also prepares a weekly Shabbat meal, held in KHC and the connected Talcott dining hall. The College’s Rabbi serves as the religious advisor to the Co-op and is an integral member of its community. Third World Co-op is a safe space for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. It is a community that promotes coalition building through dialogue among students of differing backgrounds.

One element that sets OSCA apart from a standard housing or dining experience is its self-reliance. The members of OSCA do all of the cooking, cleaning, food buying, composting, and other tasks within their individual co-ops. This is what gives OSCA its unique sense of community: the knowledge that you and your fellow co-opers are preparing, eating and cleaning up food together. Co-op members work a certain number of hours in their co-op each week; each co-op decides how much time members need to put in at the beginning of each semester (it usually ends up around 5 hours per week). For those who hold jobs outside of the co-op, most co-ops will reduce the number of co-op hours required (what OSCA calls time aid), depending on how many hours a person works.

Another component that distinguishes OSCA is its decision-making process. The Board of Directors and most co-ops make decisions through a consensus model. For a proposal to become policy, the overwhelming majority
of OSCA has to approve of it. This system assures that each member’s voice is heard. Any member can also initiate the decision-making process by writing a proposal. In individual co-ops, policy is decided on each semester, usually using consensus. This means that discussions are held to make sure the needs of everyone in the co-op will be met for the semester. Many co-ops are vegetarian and vegan-friendly as a result, and allergy awareness of the membership is always a priority.

Because it empowers its membership to participate actively in the Corporation, OSCA has several notable programs. The local foods program works with area farmers to bring fresh organic produce, eggs, cheese and other foods to the co-ops. OSCA also financially supports a sister co-op in Nicaragua and regularly sends representatives to visit the co-op during Winter Term.

OSCA is comprised of two corporations, OSCA and OSCA Properties. Each member of OSCA is also a member of OSCA Properties. OSCA Properties offers housing to members of the Oberlin community through a house it owns and by providing scholarships to OSCA members to help defray the cost of their board bill.

These two powerful, non-profit corporations have annual operating budgets that together total more than $2.3 million dollars. With its money, OSCA is able to do many good things. All investments made by OSCA are in socially responsible funds. OSCA loans a percentage of its savings to other organizations that cannot get loans from traditional sources. Recipients of our loans have included a local community development organization, a development corporation on a reservation in South Dakota, a local sustainable agriculture project, and a women's microenterprise development corporation. OSCA also has money invested in the Kagawa Fund, a loan fund for the development of student cooperatives.

OSCA also uses its resources to provide member services. All OSCA members are members of NASCO, the National Association of Students of Cooperation. Any member of a co-op may apply for a subsidy to go to various conferences that may relate to how the co-op functions. In addition, OSCA puts out its own monthly publication that can be found around co-ops or online.

As a prospective student, please visit a co-op and experience OSCA for yourself. Meal times are generally 12:20 for lunch and 6:20 for dinner (usually 12 and 6 at Kosher-Halal). There is no line checker to keep you from getting into the co-ops. Feel free to help yourself to food and talk to members of the co-ops about their experience, both in OSCA and at Oberlin College. You can also come to the OSCA office on the fourth floor of Wilder Hall, Room 402. Office Hours are Monday through Thursday, 12 to 4. If you aren’t on campus, you can call us at (440) 775-8108, e-mail us as OSCA@Oberlin.edu., or check out our website at www.oberlin.edu/osca.

We look forward to meeting you!