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Our Hungry

Collectively, we fill 36 majors (many of us complete two), play on 60 athletic teams, work 170,000 hours at campus jobs, and participate in 150 student organizations. We can all agree that it takes a lot of energy to be a Williams student, but an alarmingly large minority of us also know how hard it is to do Williams on an empty stomach.

This fall, I conducted an online, anonymous survey to gauge the student body's food consumption and provisioning patterns. Since the Provost's Office frustratingly refuses to circulate student-created surveys, I distributed mine through Daily Messages and the listservs of student groups. Impressively, 1022 students participated in the survey, which asked the what and the why of students' meal plans, skipped meal rates, and supplementary food sources. The results were striking. 30% of students are on a meal plan lower than "the 21," and of these more than a third list "I need to put the money to other uses" (as opposed to "I'd just like to save some money") as one of the reasons they switched to a lower meal plan. Most students supplement their lower meal plans with food from Stop and Shop, followed closely by free food from events/meetings on campus. However, 8% of students not on the 21 don't supplement their meal plans at all, surviving solely on their 10 or 14 dining hall meals a week. 45% of students don't skip meals, while 42% reluctantly skip an average of 1-3 meals per week, and 10% skip 4-6. The remaining 3%—60 students, when extrapolated to the whole student body—unwillingly skip an average of 7 or more meals per week. When asked why they were forced to skip these meals, 36% of students listed lack of money as among the top three reasons, 52% listed lack of physical access to food, and, as expected, 86% listed lack of time. Perhaps the most alarming result of the survey is that 1 in 5 Williams students feel they're not always able to get enough to eat.

For those who've remained on the 21 since freshman fall and have never known life without an excess of swipes, here's how food insecurity generally arises at Williams. All financial aid packages automatically cover the cost of the 21 (by the way, dropping to a lower meal plan will never affect your financial aid package). For students on partial or no financial aid, dropping to a lower meal plan (e.g. 5, 10, or 14 meals per week) will result in a smaller term bill. Those on full financial aid have a term bill of \$0, so a meal plan drop actually results in a positive credit, given to the student via direct deposit or a physical check. The Office of Financial Aid intends for this credit to supplement the student's meal plan with groceries or restaurant meals. However, many students feel forced to spend the money on other things, whether that be non-food necessities, unexpected medical or travel costs, or sending the money home to family.

The campus nutritionist, Maria Cruz, has been approached by several food-insecure students seeking help and considers universal food access a serious issue at Williams college. She notes that skipping meals and relying on the “lower nutrient-dense foods” that appear as freebies around campus “slows metabolism and causes undernourishment, ...lead[ing] to fatigue and health issues.” In other words, man shall not live by free Hot Tomatoes and cookies alone. Going hungry is never fun, but it’s especially trying for young bodies in an already stressful college environment. Reduced or unpredictable caloric intake as well as worrying about where the next meal will come from may cause food-insecure students to struggle inordinately with academic and social life at Williams. National studies have shown that food insecurity may also impact graduation rates.

Students working through CLiA, the Great Ideas Committee, and Eco-Advisors have explored a number of potential solutions. Williams could allocate funding and space for a small emergency food pantry (these are becoming commonplace at larger universities). We could deliver coupons for the Wild Oats suspended groceries program to SU boxes on an anonymous request basis (the owner of Wild Oats is in favor of this partnership). Although this solution would take advantage of a pre-existing, under-utilized system, it represents a distasteful “taking” of resources from the North Adams community, which, unlike us, does not have access to the wealth of Williams. Students could use an informal meal credit sharing app similar to “Swipes,” designed by two Columbia students. Unfortunately this model, based on physical passing off of the student ID, won’t work at Williams as long as we remain capped at one swipe per meal. We explored the idea of a more formal swipe share program, where students with extra meal credits donate to a pool of swipes from which students in need can redeem a limited amount. This solution has the added benefit of strengthening the student community, but the funding for such a program is more complicated than it appears. Dining Services has already accounted for the swipes we don’t use in their meal planning and pricing, so “extra” swipes are an illusion. Therefore any swipe share program would be a system of sharing in name only, more closely resembling a voucher program funded by a donation from Dining Services. Bob Volpi has made clear that this is unlikely to occur.

Complicating all potential solutions is the fact that providing a safety net for students will cost money, and the office or department on which this burden should fall is unclear. Although the issue of food insecurity seems bound to Dining Services, meal plans are merely the place where a deeper problem surfaces. Food insecurity is a symptom of financial insecurity. Similarly, emergency food sources are just that—band aids able to patch things up in an emergency, but hardly long-term solutions. Therefore, the path toward a school where all students have consistent, adequate access to healthy food begins with an institutional commitment to learning about the root cause of food insecurity at Williams (I propose a

school-wide survey designed by the Provost's Office), to raising awareness and destigmatizing the issue, and to, perhaps most crucially, funding deep-reaching and long-term solutions.

Williams, with an endowment larger than the GDP of Liberia and growing, has ample resources to provide for the basic needs of all students. Lack should not exist alongside such plenty. In its mission statement, our school promises to foster “direct engagement with human needs, nearby and far away.” We—students, faculty, staff, administrators—must now engage directly with the nearest needs: those of our students.

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