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On-Campus Food Options

A policy to ease the college transition

Prospective college students typically rejoice in the college transition, which provides them a new found freedom and independence from household rules and parental supervision. But, freedom for the long haul is no easy transition and lack of parental intervention and supervision can have its downfalls, such as weight gain. The notorious ‘freshmen 15,’ referring to the weight freshmen can easily gain, is an issue many incoming students are faced with, which has been proven to lead to both health complications and symptoms of depression. Currently Penn State is focusing on seemingly passive measures to prevent weight gain, such as alcohol abstinence and advertisements promoting health and exercise. Instead, Penn State should promote a healthier lifestyle by actively changing on campus food options through a re-directed and increased funding.

Before delving deeper into important policies and preventative measures, reasons for taking action must be understood. The correlation between transition, depression, and weight is the main reason weight gain should be avoided at all costs. Undeniably, the college transition is difficult and causes emotional and academic issues and depressive symptoms. The overall trend in a survey from the ‘American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2010’ showed that the emotional health of students is decreasing (The American). Freshmen weight gain is both a result of emotional instability and causes further depression. Kelly Brownell at Yale University said that the stigma around weight gain can lead to an ‘unrelenting bias that inevitably results in depression’ (Rabin, Roni C). In today’s society, the media projects the need to be thin while we are losing our ability to make healthy options drown in a food industry governed by fast food. Weight gain and depression have an unstable relationship and together they can dramatically reduce motivation and overall performance on academic and social levels. For a smoother, healthier, and more successful college transition, weight gain should not be an added concern for college freshmen.

Georgia Cambel, a friend of mine whose name has been changed for privacy, had a devastating first year college experience. After suffering anorexia throughout early high school, Georgia was on track to a healthier lifestyle and blossoming with confidence. After moving ten hours from home, the first time she'd truly been independent, her obsession with food manifested in a new ways and she found her comfort in 'pigging out on at the ice cream bar and candy aisles.' For Georgia the stress of constantly being surrounded by both peers whom you are expected to impress and endless food that is begging to be eaten was simply an intolerable combination. After being sucked in by the vicious cycle and reminded by the ghost of her dark past, she revealed she had thoughts of suicide and started dangerous bulimic behaviors. In a study conducted by BOSTON, 55% of 15,010 students surveyed had suicidal thoughts (Jayson, Sharon). Though students may walk out of their dorms seemingly confident, this number is real and any means of reducing it should be taken.

In addition to reducing weight gain in efforts to decrease the percentage of students suffering depression, weight gain affects overall health. Several studies have revealed that today we eat an average of 300 calories more a day and weigh an average of ten pounds more (Pollan, Michael). High fructose corn syrup, a chemical found in most fast and processed food, contributes significantly to type 2 diabetes (Pollan, Michael). Additionally poor habits can have other health complications such as a higher cholesterol and blood pressure, and increased risk of heart disease. The generation born after 2000 is expected to have a shorter life span than their parents, revealed Michael Pollan author of *Food Rules* and *In Defense of Food* in his interview with Bill Moyers. Today, people are at a higher risk for diabetes than they ever were (Pollan, Michael). "We are sick because of what we eat" stated Bill Moyers in his interview with Michael Pollan (Pollan, Michael).

While vaguely recognizing the matter, Penn State seems to be taking an ineffective approach. Penn State's 'Stall Stories,' a news entry distributed throughout restrooms, has repeatedly attempted to deter student from alcoholic beverages and weight gain by emphasizing

their negative impact on one another. College unfortunately nurtures and enables underage binge drinking (Burrell, Jackie). The Core Institute supports this fact by revealing that 73% percent of college students drink (Burrell, Jackie). It's near impossible to tell a student that they can't drink when their alcohol use is so entrenched in their attitudes towards college. Results from an extensive research project conducted by the Harvard School of Public health showed that preventative measures and policies have had little or no impact in underage heavy drinking (Wechsler, Henry and Lee Jae et al). Students will continue to drink and gain weight as a result. Thus, Penn State needs to reevaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

Penn State's main medium for addressing these weight gain and health issues has not been proactive and has been mainly through advertisements such as 'Stall Stories'. Another example is PSU moms, a Penn State website for moms and parents to connect, which has provided numerous tips to avoid freshmen weight gain. From my own experience, students, in the midst of stressful lives, will not implement these methods on their own. Personally, I have noticed such advertisements and efforts made by organization like East Halls Housing, but with a stressful workload I have never had the opportunity to fully implement their recommendations. In addition, many of these tips are not practicable. As already mentioned, aiming to reduce alcohol consumption in efforts to reduce weight gain is ineffective. PSU moms also promotes cooking; however, forced to live as freshmen in the dorms equipped with microwaves and without kitchens, it is hard for students to cook healthy meals. A new policy needs to target active change from within the University, which will benefit students without having them take the extra step and having to devote stressful amount of time towards the matter.

The objective of a new policy, to be enacted by the Pennsylvania State University, should aim to actively initiate feasible means for students to improve their lifestyle and reduce weight gain. If implemented properly, results should include a higher productivity and health of the student

body. Funding towards active on-campus changes should be the main goal of the policy, rather than using passive advertisements.

There are numerous routes in which Penn State can re-direct their efforts to prevent weight gain. Exercise is an activity that burns calories and increases metabolic rate. The university could initiate a gym policy by giving a larger portion of funding towards lowering gym membership costs, promoting the service, and increasing hours. This measure may seem ideal; however, the costs may outweigh the benefits. While it may attract more gym users, many students aren't motivated or lack the time to use the facilities and will continue to make poor food decisions. According Michael Pollan, "exercise hasn't changed much in the period where our public health has declined" (Michael Pollan). Targeting the on-campus food options seems like a more viable solution, because all freshmen students take advantage of campus dining and meal plans.

Changes should be made to improve the food options accessible to students. In today's industrial society, fast food is often a practical option because it is cheap. In fact, the government subsidizes cheap sweeteners by subsidizing corn, which makes fast food and processed foods more cost effective. In the same interview with Michael Pollan, he revealed that the United States massively produces corn ingredients for high fructose corn syrups used in processed foods (Michael Pollan). The surplus of these corn based chemicals is given to schools for reduced prices. Penn State has bought into this vicious cycle of cheap addictive food by recently building a Burger King right in the student center. Pollan excellently highlighted that "you have a war going on between the public health goals (...) and agricultural policies." While healthy options are offered, they are scarce, more expensive, and unappealing. It's difficult for students to develop healthy patterns, when they are faced with the decision between unpalatable healthy foods and stress relieving comfort foods. The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, as well as other research departments, has proven that continuous and overconsumption of fatty and sugary foods changes brain receptors and leads to increased hunger and cravings for even more unhealthy foods

(Casseus F and Chuang M.T et al). Once students begin eating unhealthy foods, it becomes hard for them to stop.

The University needs to develop a means for impeding the cycle of fast food addiction by implementing more desirable healthy options, which increase a student's capacity to re-train their receptors and decrease both their low quality food intake and weight gain. The university could look into developing new recipes or investing in higher quality chefs. Another constructive method would be adapting to locally grown foods and straying away from processed foods. Not only would this improve the local economy of the area, improving the monetary disadvantages of shifting to higher quality food, but according to Michael Pollan will "teach the new generation habits that will last a life time" and help students perform better in the school (Michael Pollan). In fact, Penn State already has a locally grown market fair hidden behind the Eisenhower auditorium every Wednesday; due to poor advertisement and an inconvenient location most are unaware of this commodity. In this case, the University could implement further advertisements for the market. Additional measures could also be taken initially, such as providing free food vouchers at local market to incentivize their use and increase the number of operation days.

Moreover, the architecture and layout of these existing on-campus eateries deters from healthy habits and feeds into the cycle of poor eating patterns. In West Commons, an all-you-can-eat buffet, there are two dessert tables and two soda stations both of which are placed right next to the seating sections; whereas, the vegetarian section is placed in a rather unnoticeable corner. In the student center, students have to pass the Burger King in order to access the salad bar. It seems that this poor planning could deter from both healthy eating and student's will power to resist the fast food industry. In essence, the University should devote a vast amount of money towards remodeling these areas and providing more accessible and visible vegetarian stations.

A larger issue, however, may be the eating style all together. Most universities have also begun all-you-can-eat buffets, where students swipe their cards and have access to eat whatever

they want for any given amount of time. These eateries have become places to socialize, where students gather for drawn out meals of conversation and temptation from anything from creamery ice cream to pizza. A recent NPR report revealed that humans are likely to eat more calories if they are provided with variety than with single dish options. Mary Boggiano, Ph.D., from the University of Alabama, revealed that stress and college transitions can trigger binge eating disorders (Nauert, Rick). The buffet style eating in combination with stressful and transitional lifestyles is not a good mix. Penn State all together should aim to shy away from buffet style eating or at least proceed to build healthier buffets. The policy should also provide more man-power and funding for building cafés. Money could also be devoted to adding kitchens to dorms, promoting cooking instead of cafeteria use.

Overall, the Penn State and the Penn State's food services needs to implement a policy that strives to focus more funding on improving food options in the coming years. This can involve compiling healthier recipes, remodeling cafeterias, hiring chefs who are capable of preparing high quality and palatable health options, and redesigning the layout of dining commons and dorms. This should be the primary effort of the University in terms of weight gain prevention because it can feasibly benefit the entire freshmen population without any added stress. After the effectiveness of this policy is determined, other means can be initiated such as an exercise gym policy.

While the University is not completely to blame for, they need to claim their part and strive to serve their proud student body. Not only is it the University's responsibility to cater a healthy lifestyle for their students, but the consequences of weight gain are unforgiveable in today's society. Suicide rates, depression rates, lifelong health issues are all affected by a students' capacity to self-govern their lives and lead healthy lives in a fit bodies. This is not an issue that is solely affecting Penn State, but it is a national health crisis. Small initiatives around the country have been taken, but it is Penn State's turn, with its large student population, to impact and aid in reversing an era of emotional and physical downfall. With children of our own or for those of us who plan to

parent, this policy is necessary not only for us but for our children whose lives are in the hand of us today.

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