

New York University charges food-insecure students for "free" meals

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Last month, New York University's (NYU) student newspaper, the *Washington Square News*, reported that food-insecure students who had used the schools' Courtesy Meals Program (CMP) had the cost of allegedly free meals deducted from their financial aid packages. This is in spite of the commitment on the program's website that it "will not have an impact on a student's financial aid."

The CMP provides 75 'dining dollars' (enough for eight to ten meals) to enrolled students who are in immediate need of food assistance. It is available for anyone who seeks it and is initially offered on a no-questions-asked basis. Following the third request, however, a student must attend a meeting with staff from the Office of Financial Education in order to receive further aid.

Last semester 1,933 students, nearly 10 percent of the school's undergraduates, utilized the program. The news of the financial aid deduction will discourage students from using the service.

Food insecurity is defined by Feeding America, a not-for-profit network of over 200 food banks, as "a household's inability to provide enough food for every person in the household to have an active, healthy life."

Responding to the NYU administration's unannounced change to the program, Senior Elaine Cho, who was unexpectedly charged \$150, told the *Washington Square News*, "I think it's a cash grab. I don't think it's the first time the university has promised us a service that's supposed to be helpful that ended up harming students, especially vulnerable students." Cho cited the university's mental health program as another example of students being continuously let down.

It is not the first time that CMP has been the center of controversy at the university. The program only became

widely known amongst the student body in Fall 2018, when its usage increased from 30 to 1,165 students over the course of the semester. It was introduced by the "Food Insecurity Working Group" in 2016, but, for reasons that still have not been made clear, was not advertised to students.

Speaking to *Washington Square News* in May, Malak Enaytallah said, "Even now, I don't think it really is publicized; it's mostly by word of mouth. That's how I found out about it and that's how I've been telling other people about it."

Even when used by students, the program acts as little more than a band-aid for a chronic issue, providing just three days' worth of food to students with long-term food insecurity.

CMP was not implemented with the intention of alleviating student hunger at NYU, but as a fig-leaf to divert the attention of legitimately outraged students away from the issue. Last semester the program cost around \$200,000, a fraction of the university administration's expenditure on services which provide no benefit to students, such as the \$9 million spent on "client entertainment" in 2018 alone.

Furthermore, the university boasts an endowment of \$4.2 billion and many of its top administrators earn million-dollar salaries. Despite these lavish expenditures, in 2019 the school was ranked as having the third-worst financial aid in the United States by the *Princeton Review*.

The university's administration cannot claim to be ignorant of the problem of hunger on campus. The student government has set up various committees, including the aforementioned "Food Insecurity Working Group," to tackle the issue, albeit to little effect. Student-senator Kosar Kosar told the *World Socialist Web Site* that when the administration says it

is reaching out to students for feedback it is like they are “giving someone a call and putting them on mute.”

Despite NYU’s awareness of the extent of food insecurity amongst its own students, the administration has refused to allow the establishment of a student-run food bank at the university. When asked by the student newspaper to explain why a food bank had been rejected by the working group, Mark Wais, NYU’s Senior Vice President for Student Affairs, answered, “It’s expensive, between the staffing and the space rental and the setup.” Students, however, know that NYU is fully able to fund a food bank.

Students who find themselves in financial difficulties are forced to find alternative methods for funding.

As quoted in “The Art of the Gouge,” a 2015 report detailing the ferocity of NYU’s financial extortion of the student body, one student described how when they “asked the people in financial aid [the Bursar’s Office] for help, they laughed.” In order to raise the \$2,000 needed to cover the cost of tuition, the student resorted to SeekingArrangements.com, a website that pairs cash-strapped “sugarbabies” with wealthy “sugardaddies.” While the university’s president nets a salary of nearly \$2 million a year, NYU students face a choice between thinly veiled sex work and starvation.

Hunger at NYU is only the tip of the iceberg; for millions of American workers and students, food insecurity is the norm. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, in 2018, 37 million Americans were food insecure.

Students and young children are disproportionately affected by this issue: a poll conducted in October 2018 found that one in five students in high school or college, some 15 million people, were food insecure.

The problem is even more acute amongst college students, particularly those attending community colleges. According to the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 36 percent of undergraduates in the US suffer from food insecurity. A 2017 survey performed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that in the Los Angeles Community College District, two-thirds of their 230,000 students could not afford regular meals.

Food insecurity for students is often caused or exacerbated by steep increases in tuition. According to the Census Bureau, the US median family income has not increased between 2007 and 2017, while according to CollegeBoard.org, in-state tuition costs at public

colleges grew by 63 percent over the 12-year period from 2008 to 2020.

The average cost of tuition and fees for the 2019-2020 school year was \$41,426 at private colleges, \$11,260 for in-state students at public colleges, and \$27,120 for out-of-state students at public colleges. This is before fees, which can often amount to multiple thousands of dollars, and housing costs.

The dramatic increase in living costs in major American cities over the same period also adds to the terrible financial burden on students. Many students, whose parents may have worked their way through college a generation ago, are now forced to work 40-hour weeks on top of classes. They still graduate with tens of thousands of dollars of debt.



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