**Food Stamps Become Unlikely Source for Student Support**

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 With filled schedules and bank accounts emptied, one student found them self face-to-face with a choice: groceries or electricity? Students face a yearly raise in tuition bills, rent payments and textbook prices, and are letting the daily necessities fall behind in order to gain a seriously needed education.
 Senior Kerith Rae faced the electricity bill head-on and found a way to still fill her fridge with the supplies she needed to make some of her well-known meals. Rae enjoys cooking while attending Radford University, but last year found an easier way to keep up with the bills
 Rae first heard about the use of food stamps by college students through her work studies group at RU. Several of the students she worked with applied and received the benefits they recommended Rae to make use of the funding available for students to take advantage of.
 “I feel like it’s a great program for students to take advantage of,” Rae said. Rae applied and receives an estimate of $200 a month.
 In October 2009, Virginia will officially change the name from the food stamp program to a subtler acronym, “SNAP.” SNAP stands for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and helps a large number of individuals afford groceries.
 In Rae’s case, she saved an estimate of $1,200 over a period of roughly six months.
 “I spend mine mostly on staples,” Rae said. “Fresh fruit, vegetables, milk and meat. [I buy] stuff that is really keeping my immune system up—stuff I wasn’t able to buy when I was budgeting.”
 There are eligibility requirements to the system. In order to meet the requirements one of several needs must be met. A student can be eligible between the ages of 18 to 50. There can be a limit to the amount of time a student remains eligible. For instance, a student could receive food stamps over the period they are enrolled at RU, however the funding would cease during the summer break. For Rae, a review is issued every six months to re-determine eligibility.
 According to Susan Harp, the Benefit Programs Supervisor for Radford City, the maximum allotment is currently 200. While a student’s educational income, such as work studies, does not work against their allotment, a student living in a residence hall or possessing a meal plan that supplies more than 50 percent of their food will not qualify for the program.
 A student can be eligible if enrolled in school and working 20 or more hours a week or take part in a work studies program. These requirements are few among many that influenced many students to partake in the system.
 “We do see an increase,” Harp said. “Our case load does pick up when students are back in town. However, the state remains constant in terms of usage.”
 The food stamps are processed electronically at any store with a Virginia EBT sign. The stamps can be used like cash to purchase food. Those who are accepted receive a card which holds an allotted amount per month, similar to a debit card, and can be swiped like a credit card to remain confidential among shoppers

 There are many restrictions to what items cannot be purchased with food stamps. Alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, prepared foods, pet foods and non-food items, such as paper towels or cleaning supplies, are not covered. However, seeds and plants that produce food are covered under SNAP.  A sales tax is also not charged on the items that apply to food stamps.
 “I have recommended this to anyone who qualifies because most of my friends are supporting their own tuitions,” Rae said. Ensuring the necessity, she reminds students that it’s not a con, “You can’t scam them. There’s no way you can beat the system.”
 As most students confront a tough economy with part-time jobs and hope, the SNAP program and the reality of food stamps has lately become a trend for students to take advantage of.
 For more information log on to http://www.dss.virginia.gov.

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