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Food For Thought

Ask any pirate and they will tell you that East Carolina University is the best college in the world! ECU is the home to over 26,000 students all on a journey to receive a small certificate signifying the end of their academic training and the beginning of their adult lives. However, the time at ECU does not fly by and students must make it day to day before even worrying about graduation. With over four thousand new freshman attending the school each year, the university has to come up with a plan to provide food for this large number of people. Although the school has made a great attempt at this problem, there are still many areas that could be improved for the betterment of the students. Students want food that is quick, cheap, and not going to head them in the direction of the dreaded freshman fifteen. Campus dining is a difficult problem for not only ECU but for many schools. With this being a legitimate concern, some form of a solution needs to be found. Too many, an answer may not seem possible, but if the ECU administration would consider a few suggestions to these problems, it could result in a happier student body as a whole.

It is six o’clock and Taylor’s biological clock is telling him that it is dinner time. He walks to the West End dining hall with an empty stomach ready to eat, but runs into a problem; the lines are extremely long. This is a problem that almost every ECU student has at least once in their dining hall days. With this being such an issue for thousands of students, there must be a way fix this hassle? A first suggestion to consider may be giving discounts at non-peak times. This could help the crowd flow vary more throughout the day causing less people at the times of high popularity. Implementing this would hopefully mean that a student who opts to eat their meals at earlier times, or times when most students would not eat, receive some sort of discount. Whether it is offering students a discount for eating at the usually unpopular times, or giving away an item for free, this may help with the overcrowding in dining halls. Although the student may feel inconvenienced in changing their meal times, the price cut or possible reward would cancel this out.

Another solution to help with the overloaded dining halls is simply to have more workers. There are certainly those stations in the dining hall that are low on staff members, and when the lines are backed up out the door, things will seemingly go on forever. If there are more workers that are there to take the students orders as they arrive at the counter, the lines will move much quicker, and make everyone happier.

A study conducted Bowdoin College in Maine showed that a peak lunch hour of one o’clock drew in a majority of the students to the dining halls to eat. When interviewed, some outraged students brainstormed some potential solutions for the overcrowding. Among solutions such as coordinating dining hall menus and providing more seating, the most popular seemed to be the addition of a new dining hall to the campus. Current East Carolina freshmen Torre Grills and Hannah Turner stated, “We have a lot of friends that are out of Pirate Bucks, so they can only go to the dining halls since a swipe essentially gets you an endless buffet. But whenever we go to eat at West End during the preferred dining hours (especially for lunch), it is impossible to get in because everyone is on this part of campus during the day/evening for classes. It gets really annoying.” There are many others who are in the same boat, and therefore cannot go to places like Sbarro’s, Subway, and Destination 360 because they are low or out of pirate bucks and cannot afford or do not want to spend the money on it. If there were a third dining hall built somewhere on the ECU campus, possibly in place of the Chick-Fil-A or Chili’s that are under construction now, the student population in the dining halls would be more properly distributed resulting in fewer people at each dining area.

Another problem with East Carolina’s dining is the pricing. Although the school makes attempts at creating appropriate dining packages for students, most are extremely pricey and result in either a shortage or surplus of meals. One solution would be to allow for a roll-over meal plan. Perhaps one week a student doesn’t use all of their meals, it would be great if they could roll over into the next week so that they are not just throwing away meals and essentially money. Another possible solution is to have the school offer individualized plans for each student giving each person the perfect amount. ECU created “Pirate Bucks” hoping to solve this problem by allowing people to use it as debit card to pay for food. Although a good idea, it is just one more thing for students to pay for and keep up with. A suggestion would be to have ECU students should receive pirate bucks with their tuition giving a large incentive. This could help not only on-campus students, but also those who don’t live on campus. Commuters will be more likely to eat on campus instead of going out to eat or back to their place.

If the University plans on keeping the dining options as they are know, then commuter students should receive a small discount when eating on campus. These discounts may only be $0.50 or $1.00 but it would still help them out and definitely raise the percentage of off campus student consumption. Another way to help the commuter students would be not to tax their meals when they eat on campus. They would need their ECU One Card to be programmed so the dining system automatically knows to subtract the tax from the total.

Students, however, who already live on campus, pay way too much to live in dorms and cannot afford the extremely pricey meal plans. Being able to eat for free or a discounted price should be an incentive to live on campus. Also, the pirate buck situation is kind of confusing. When using a meal-plan for something that costs more than an average meal, the rest of the total comes from your pirate bucks. Students aren’t given enough pirate bucks in the beginning of the semester, so they run out very easily. One solution to this is to get rid of “Meals” and just have pirate bucks. Appalachian State University uses this type of meal plan. (Meal Plan Options) This way everything that is ordered or bought costs a certain amount of money and will cut down on students being able to go to the dining hall for one meal swipe and eat buffet style.

Sadly, the price of the food could be probably be cut drastically if the dining halls did a better job at serving individual instead of in bulk. Although it is difficult to know how many people will eat, at the end of the night there are always leftovers. This food is probably thrown away wasting student’s money. The dining halls are open for breakfast 7:00am to 9:30am. (West End Dining Hall) Not many students are going to get up to go to breakfast this early. When going to eat in the morning, there is always a large quantity of food that is just sitting there becoming cold. If there was a way for the cooks to prepare the food as the students came in, perhaps there would be less of a waste of food and money.

When students first begin college the idea of a meal plan and all you can eat dining halls overwhelms them with the thought of having access to so much food. It is not to long after starting college when they realize the food on campus gets old fast, because of the lacking variety in food choices. On East Carolina University’s campus, there are two dining halls, the Galley, Destination 360, Wright Place, and Subway. To an individual who does not attend East Carolina or even a student who lives off campus and very rarely eats on campus, this may seem like a lot. But according to Ashley Redfern, a freshman at East Carolina who lives on campus, those places do not provide enough variety of food choices. According to Ashley, the two dining halls serve the same Sunday-Saturday schedule of meals each week. The dining halls may each serve different foods, but each place also has the same menu that never changes. If students did not have to rely on these places for relief from the dining hall three meals a day, seven days a week, they would not be so bad. After a while students get tired of the same food choices all the time, and greatly need more variety of food available to them. (Redfern)

The college has tried to solve this problem by adding variety to the types of food served in the dining hall. They do this for example by every Wednesday night serving Chinese food at one of the food stations. The problem is that every Wednesday night it is the same exact rice and chicken they serve. One solution to the lack of variety in food choices on campus can be to continue serving Chinese food on Wednesday nights, but change it up some each week by serving different types of Chinese food. This should be used not only for the Chinese booths in the dining hall, but all the others as well.

Another solution that will provide East Carolina student with more variety in food options will be to bring more franchise’s on to campus. For example, this can be done by building a second story onto West End Dining Hall that is set up like a mall food court. It could contain well known fast food restraints such as Zaxby’s, Taco Bell, Arby’s, etc. Though these places, like the other fast food places on campus, will serve the same menu every day, they will expand the number of options available and bring greater variety in foods to campus. The College of William and Mary has a system that allows students to use “flex points,” similar to ECU’s pirate bucks, on restaurants located all throughout the campus. Students can even order pizza and use these points (Meal Plan Choice). This would definitely help bring more variety to the campus. East Carolina could also work with some of the restaurants in Greenville that are close to campus, to come up with some kind of discount that East Carolina students get when they eat here. This will bring the restaurants more business by encouraging students to eat there, and also allow more places to eat and bring more variety in food for students.

One of the biggest complaints heard throughout the campus is the lack of variety offered to students. Also, the way the dining halls are set up at East Carolina University can have a significant effect on the health of the students. The types of food offered in the dining halls at East Carolina are not suitable to people with certain diets, such as vegetarians or people with various food allergies. Although some vegetarian and vegan options are available, there are often not enough to give these individuals adequate nutrition. Vegetarian and vegans could be considered a minority compared to individuals who eat meat, but they should still be offered many different food choices. At East Carolina, however, they often have the same vegetarian options available to students multiple times in a given week which is unfortunate for the students who do not enjoy these meals.

East Carolina’s dining halls also have not taken individuals’ certain food allergies into consideration. Often times students do not always know the contents of the food they are consuming which could be very dangerous and unhealthy. Not only is it harmful for people with food allergies or with special diets to not know what is in their food, but it is also unhealthy for any college student to not know what is in the food they eat or the nutritional information of that food. On a daily basis, East Carolina only provides students with the nutritional information for the main courses served instead of having it available for every item being served. East Carolina students would be able to eat healthier if they knew what was in their food and how healthy it was.

Another problem with the dining halls is the layout. The dining halls being set up buffet-style, allows students to eat more than they should which can lead to obesity. There are many ways East Carolina could improve the dining halls to reduce obesity and make it healthier for their students. Instead of allowing students to serve themselves in a way that would lead to them eating more than they should, the workers in the dining halls could serve the students portions that would be healthier. Rachel Workman, a freshman and student at ECU, says “It is hard being healthy when you can eat all you want. I mean you never want to over eat but it is hard to know where to draw the line. I think that is where students have a lot of trouble being healthy” (Rachel Workman). This buffet style proves to have a negative effect on student’s health. Students are more likely to serve themselves more food than they are actually capable of eating, and this would lead them to eating more responsible portions.

To teach the students at East Carolina better eating habits, the university could set up menus that tell the exact content of every item they serve and its nutritional information. This allows students to know how healthy the food is they are eating, and it allows students with special diets to know the contents of each meal for safety purposes. East Carolina could also offer a special seminar to new students to teach them how to eat healthy while in college, and to show them other ways to stay healthy on campus. Not only will teaching students how to eat healthier improve their overall health, but improving the taste of the healthy food offered in the dining hall will give students an incentive to eat healthier. Many students at universities around the country admit that they eat at local fast food restaurants or meal trucks because they do not enjoy the food offered in their dining halls. A student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they offer food trucks as a special vendor on campus, says “Campus food at CMU is really bad, so people default to the food trucks” (Mulhauser, 1). This seems true for many students. If the food at the dining hall was more appealing and healthy, the problem of students seeking out unhealthy options other ways would be eliminated.

East Carolina University is well-known as an incredible school, however, and the administration needs to work on fixing these few problems with campus dining to live up to its name. Although the school has tried to do its best with providing for the thousands of hungry students, the flaws in the system are noticeable. ECU should consider implementing some of the previously mentioned solutions to fix the problems before it continues to cause more unhappiness throughout the university. Food is important in the academic lifestyle to keep students going and with the unhealthy, pricey, and time-consuming means to get it on campus, many students are complaining and East Carolina’s reputation may soon begin to drop. The administration needs to take action and makes changes in each of these problems. Pirates everywhere are relying on ECU to be the home of not only incredible academics, sports, and social life, but also the home to the best, cheapest, and healthiest food. Hopefully, the administration will consider these possible fixes and do something to improve the way East Carolina University handles campus dining.