

You gonna eat that?

By Stella Reneke

My mother always lost her mind when I slept without sheets. She'd just done the laundry, clean bedding was folded in a neat pile on the corner of the mattress, and I had explicit instructions to make it up before going to sleep.

But in the heat of the Florida summers, I was more inclined to curl up on the bare mattress and pass out. When she found me like that in the morning, it was never a pleasant awakening.

"I cannot believe you slept on a bare mattress like that, you *have* sheets! My children do *not* live like this!"

It took me several years to understand it, but my mother's outrage wasn't about my refusal to do as I was told (although that definitely ticked her off). It was about how unthinkingly I took for granted the simple luxuries of not only a bed, but a bed with clean sheets that she had laid out for me.

The circumstances in which my mother grew up were a world away from mine. She was raised by a single mom struggling to support four children on a nurse's salary. As often as not, the kitchen wasn't stocked, the bills weren't paid, and the sheets on the beds definitely weren't clean. So when she had children of her own, Mom was determined our lives would be different.

If nothing else, she taught me that little is worse than wasting what others would give their left kidney to have. That's why the universities in this country are officially on my shit list.

Everyone knows that a college education is necessary to get most jobs these days. It's also unbelievably expensive.

According to USA Today, in North Carolina alone, 61 percent of the college class of 2015 graduated with student loan debt; the average amount was \$25,645. Students and their

families spend so much money on tuition, supplies, and basic survival that it's no surprise some fall painfully short.

In 2014, Feeding America reported that 10 percent of their adult clients were college students. That's roughly 4.65 million kids turning to food banks to survive their education.

Despite working two additional jobs on top of work-study, there was a week last spring where I had \$9, after miscellaneous school and living expenses, to get me to my next paycheck. It wasn't enough for a single meal at the campus dining halls, which cost nearly \$12 each. It might've cost less per meal if I'd invested in a meal plan that year, but I hadn't because I couldn't stand buying more meal swipes in bulk than I would ever actually use.

As junior biology major Paige Springman readily confirmed, wasted meal swipes are not uncommon at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"I keep trying to get my parents to downgrade my meal plan, but they're worried I'll go hungry. But I had 76 swipes left at the end of last semester, and we can't get them refunded." said Springman.

It's true, you can't. Nor can you roll them over to next semester, or transfer them to someone who needs them. Whatever you don't use is just extra cash in the administrators' pockets and untouched food in the dumpsters.

During the week that I had \$9 to my name, I relied on Carolina Cupboard, the free food pantry hidden in the basement of a dormitory on campus. I'd heard about it not from the school, but from my friend and classmate Vibhor Kedia, an international student from India.

Vibhor and I were already eating a lot of \$2 pizzas after hours at Old Chicago on Franklin Street, but it wasn't enough. There's no nutritional value in pizza and for anyone with a common allergy to dairy or gluten, there's no value at all.

The issue is too multifaceted for there to be a cure-all for food insecurity on college campuses; but avoiding this obscene waste of food and money is an easy starting point. Schools have to respect their students enough to not make them choose whether to be hungry now so that they can support themselves with a degree later, or drop out now to afford three non-pizza meals a day and spend the rest of their lives struggling to compete against the people who chose the former.

Well-read and hungry now or well-fed now and unemployed later is not a real choice.

References:

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