Brain Food: What are the Healthy Options Available for Late Night Snacking on Bryn Mawr Campus?

An Article by Emma Hoffman

The hissing and sputtering of a milk steamer shrills over lilting laughter, chattered conversation, and softly playing indie rock. With an air of casual ease, a barista swings a cup under the spigot of the espresso machine before swaying in a half circle to pump in a triple shot of vanilla. It’s just after 8 pm and The Lusty Cup, the student run café in the basement of Canaday Library, is opening for the night.

For college students in search of late night fueling, Lusty is one of two cafés open after the dining halls have closed for the evening. With selections like the Zebra Mocha and London Fog, Lusty is predominantly a coffee shop, but Uncommon Grounds, the other night café located inside the Campus Center, offers more substantial (though not always more nutritious) food. After midnight however, students are out of luck as the only sources of energy become vending machines and dorm room snack stashes. While Bryn Mawr Dining Services are known for their range of healthy options and accommodations of dietary restrictions, once Bryn Mawr’s two dining halls are closed for the night, studiers are left to fend for themselves in finding affordable and healthy food options. At an institution costing upwards of $60,000 a year, how are some of the only snacks available to students ramen noodles and Pringles?

Sarah Kalen, a Bryn Mawr student, says that since “college students have chronically irregular sleep schedules” and the dining halls close by 7 pm weekdays, it can be a struggle to find food after this time. Sarah goes on to comment on the BMC take out policy where students can receive one box per meal period, saying “I know you can technically go to the dining halls and get take out, but I don't have a fridge and people steal food [from the communal refrigerators on the floor of each dorm]. It's just not practical to take my late-night snack with me to class for 6 hours.”

Sophie Goldstein, another Bryn Mawr student agrees. She says she would appreciate more late night food options “because having something to give you energy while you’re studying is very important.”

This idea of getting energy from snacking is backed up by science. An article published by Harvard Medical School details the study conducted at Brigham and Women’s Hospital where a correlation was found between diets high in saturated fats and memory (Harvard Health Publications 2012). The article goes on to recommend a Mediterranean Diet which consists of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, nuts, and limited intake of eggs and red meat. Eating healthier options like fruits and vegetables or the foods mentioned in the Mediterranean Diet is correlated with increased creativity, curiosity, and “greater flourishing in daily life” according to a study published in an edition of the *British Journal of Health Psychology* (Connor et al. 2015)

But the types of “brain food” recommended by both studies are not necessarily the types of food available to students on campus after dining halls have closed. A tuna sandwich from Uncommon Grounds costs $6.95 and consists of tuna salad, lettuce, and tomatoes on whole grain bread (Bryn Mawr College 2017). For the same price, a student can instead purchase an order of chicken tenders, an order of French fries, and a 16-ounce bottled soda beverage.

Rummaging in her bag for a Snickers bar as we talk in the hallway of a dorm, Sarah observes how the “unhealthiest options are the cheapest,” and college students often prioritize economy over nutritional value when making food selections. Simply to withdraw money from an ATM on campus, there is a $3 fee. Sarah articulates this dilemma saying, “I'm not going to pay $3 to take out $5 to buy this thing that costs $2.”

 The pricing of cheap, highly processed foods puts those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at a disadvantage. In examining commodity foods given to Native Americans by the US Government, Dana Vantrease writes that “many people blame commodity foods…for diabetes, obesity, and associated health problems, including coronary artery disease and hypertension” (Vantrease 2013). In his article “Food Justice and Collective Food Relations,” Kyle Powys Whyte inspects collective food relations for African Americans in Detroit where “roughly 80% of the population is African American, 30% live below the poverty line, … and African American Detroiters live on average 1.1 miles farther from supermarkets than residents of mostly white neighborhoods.” Additionally, unhealthy food is “found mostly in impoverished neighborhoods, such as liquor stores, gas stations, party stores, dollar stores, bakeries, pharmacies, and convenience stores” (Whyte 2017). Whyte goes on to define food justice as “the right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food.” While students may not be participating in growing or selling, access to healthy food to eat is far less than that of processed commodity food. These examples demonstrate the principle of the nutrition-based poverty trap (Banerjee and Duflo 2011).

The culture at Bryn Mawr encourages working hard and there is even the counterintuitive and often unarticulated perception that if you are going to sleep at a reasonable hour and not complaining about the pressures of your workload, then you are not working hard enough. If students want a snack for when they are staying up late to finish work, all that is available (meaning both present and affordable) is junk food. This junk food makes people less productive, by spiking and dropping blood sugars instead of keeping glucose at constant levels that are attained from eating a balanced diet with fresh fruits and vegetables (Friedman 2015). Lowered productivity leads to poorer academic performance which in turn results in increased pressure to stay up late and study more. This cyclical phenomenon involving stress, staying up late, and eating habits is voiced by BMC student Zosia Haney who says, “Sometimes I need to stress snack while I study.”

 For most, “stress snaking,” as Zosia calls it, equates to eating junk food. Sarah points out how “being healthy here is a privilege. Mini fridges are $80 [at least]. Super markets are at main line prices.” Eating the kind of food that boosts productivity and creativity is simply not affordable nor convenient for most college students.

As a possible solution to this, BMC student, Becca Adlai-Gail says, “I think there should be more food like dining hall food that’s available at night.” This would provide students with the nutrition they need to focus into the wee hours of the morning.

While extending dining hall hours may seem like a good way to ensure students’ access to more nutritious food later into the evening, it is not practical as the dining halls are staffed with student workers. Sarah, a student worker at New Dorm Dining Hall points out that “the remedy [to the lack of healthy late night food options] is not extending hours because full time and student workers shouldn’t be tied to such long schedules.” In fact, extending hours would only make it so that student workers would have to stay up even later to finish their homework after they finished their work shifts, thereby perpetuating the sleep-stress-health cycle.

While students at Bryn Mawr must resort to fried, packaged, and processed foods if they want a snack for studying past dining hall hours, there are several other, more flexible dining policies to be explored. A current student at New York University for example, says that “a limited number of places [nearby] take dining dollars.” Bryn Mawr could consider partnering with nearby grocery stores or local restaurants to provide students with more varied, more nutritious late night snacking options, or transition to the “dining dollars” system instead of the unlimited on-campus meal swipes currently used.

There are several options to be explored in making healthy late night snacking a reality at Bryn Mawr, but for the moment, healthy eating options for students outside of dining halls is, as Sarah Kalen puts it, “just not practical.”

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