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Fall 2018 First Prize Essay

RENOVATION OF DUQUESNE DINING: CREATION OF A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ALLERGEN STUDENTS

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In some way, shape, or form, everyone has been affected by a food allergy or a dietary restriction. Approximately 15 million Americans have food allergies (*FARE*). Of these suffering Americans, 5.9 million are kids (*FARE*). Many of these children grow aware of their allergy and become accustomed to a dietary routine. They quickly learn where is safe to eat and where is not. As these children continue to progress through life and reach a point when they are on their own, things change. For many kids and young adults, college is that change. Not only do these young adults need to consider a school that satisfies their academic needs, they also need to find one that fits their dietary restrictions. Many schools state that they create allergy friendly zones and safe spaces to eat for their students with allergies, yet in reality they are not as safe as they are made to appear. Duquesne University is no exception to this predicament. The efforts the University puts forth appear to be reasonable, however they are deeply flawed and can be unsafe for students with allergies to rely on. In order to increase student safety and appeal to collegiate prospects, the University should implement a new allergen-free dining space within Duquesne's dining options for students with allergies. This implementation would both benefit the University and its students, thus it is a win-win situation for everyone involved.

As prospective students and newly admitted students tour and go through the orientation process, Duquesne University displays the series of "measures" they take in ensuring allergen safety. Such measures include an app which will label certain foods that you can or cannot eat in the dining hall each day. In addition, a GroupMe group chat with the chefs can be set up through a personal meeting with the chefs themselves. The chat is designed to have a chef personally and readily answer any questions regarding what foods are allergen-safe and which are not. However, both attempts have been proven to be flawed in their efforts. There has been a plethora of incidents where what has been listed on the menu has not been what was served. Similarly, things that have been labeled allergen-free have not been. A conversation through the GroupMe chat between Ashley, a freshman who is intolerant to dairy, and a Duquesne chef highlights one example of this incident:

Ashley: Is the chicken minestrone okay to eat?

Chef: It is a tasty soup, however the pasta that's in it contains dairy so I would not be comfortable if you ate it. Can we do something else for you instead?

Ashley: Okay I just had some because it didn't show up on my app that I couldn't eat it.

If Ashley didn't notice the pasta that was in her soup and hadn't questioned the validity of the app's labeling, she would have been sicker than she already was later that day. Although an alternative was later offered, the damage had already been done and Ashley still got sick. Senseless mishaps such as this can cause allergic reactions to take place. This is a very dangerous situation that could be deadly for some students with allergies, for "about 40 percent of children with food allergies have experienced a severe allergic reaction such as anaphylaxis" (*FARE*). Anaphylaxis is a potentially fatal reaction to certain allergens and can only be treated with an injection of epinephrine (*Anaphylaxis*). For most, the reaction results in a closing of the throat, vomiting, diarrhea, low blood pressure, rashes, the inability to breathe, etc (*Anaphylaxis*).

If this occurred to a student with this sort of allergy, the consequences would have been deadly.

In a similar situation, Hannah, a freshman who has Celiac Disease (which doesn't allow her to have gluten), questioned whether or not a soup was safe for her to eat:

Hannah: is the cheesy lentil soup gluten free? it is not on the app

Chef: I didn't make it this morning and I'm not comfortable saying that it's gluten free.

Hannah: okay also the tofu is labeled as gluten free but had noodles

Once again, a miscommunication between the staff and a miscommunication between the staff and the app. Had Hannah eaten the soup because the app did not state whether or not the food was safe to eat, she would have gone through a reaction and gotten sick.

The miscommunication between the staff and the app is not the only factor in this overarching problem. Another factor is inadequate awareness and understanding of the fear and consequences students with allergies go through on a daily basis. In an interview with Ashley, she expressed her frustration with the dining system's need for greater comprehension, "I think that some of the dining staff tries to care about me. However, it's really hard for them to do so when they don't completely understand the potential consequences I face when they change the menu without expressing so on the app or ingredient information." Ashley has to manage this problem regarding food allergies on a daily basis. The responsibility of finding food that is safe for food-allergy students to eat should not lie completely on the shoulders of the students. Duquesne University as a whole should also feel responsible for the health and well-being of their students and provide both accurate and tasty meal options for all food allergy students. A major cause for the misconception of what the dining deems as "allergen-free" could be that the dining executives and chefs do not have personal experience with food allergies. Without this personal experience, they might not completely understand the fear that lies within someone with one of these allergies. Food allergies have risen about "50 percent between 1997 and 2011" (*FARE*). As time continues to progress, the severity and commonness of food allergies continues to progress with it (Gupta). Thus, there needs to be an up keep of increased awareness of the severity of allergies, starting with where students can eat. However as of now, Duquesne University is lacking in this understanding. Not only is their understanding minimum, their care for their allergy students needs to be improved. In another GroupMe interaction a chef from Duquesne's Hogan dining center, wrote "...we cannot guarantee nut free for anything because they are processed in the same kitchen in the other building." This statement implies that there is no food in the dining halls that is safe for peanut and tree nut allergy students. How can it be expected for a student to live on campus and eat when they are supplied with food not knowing if they will have a reaction or not? This is unacceptable and puts many students at risk of a reaction. Students not only have to stress about their grades and extracurriculars, but now also have to worry about their food being safe to eat. It is an unnecessary stress put on the students due to the University's inadequate attention to allergy impacts. Students come to Duquesne believing the few accommodations the University offers to make for them will be beneficial, yet they actually are not.

Often college meal plans are quite expensive, and students pay a lot of money to eat food which they are supposed to enjoy. Duquesne is no exception to this, as students at Duquesne students pay up to \$2,834 a semester to eat on campus at the various dining locations (*Duquesne University*). Of course, it is something that must be paid for and would be worth it if all students were able to get a good meal for the money they spend. As this may be the case for non-allergen sensitive kids, it is not the case for allergy students. Hannah expresses her irritation with the expenses in her interview, "It enrages me because my parents are paying all of this money for me to eat here and I have to end up eating 2 of my 3 meals a day in my room rather than the dining hall. Not only that, but I also have to find time to go to the grocery store and the limited money I have here on food that the dining hall should be accommodating me with." Food allergy students pay a lot of money for food that they are not even sure is completely safe to consume. It is an unequal trade-off between the University and its students with no forgiveness. There is no problem in paying this hefty price if you are able to reap in the overall benefits of it, which students with food allergies are not able to do.

As a way to both appeal to prospective college students and accommodate the dietary restrictions of the

students they already have, a new allergen-free dining hall should be implemented into Duquesne's dining options. Even if a whole new dining hall cannot be implemented, at least a room within Hogan should be transformed into an allergy safe space. Approximately \$45 million dollars is being used to renovate the AJ Palumbo Center and transform it into the UPMC Cooper Fieldhouse this year (*Pittsburgh Action 4 News*).¹ Duquesne has the money available to go through such a complicated and expensive renovation, so money should also be available to put this proposal into action. Rather than solely focusing on sports entertainment, the University should also be attentive to problems that affect the health and well-being of its students. Duquesne states that its mission is, "Duquesne serves God by serving students..." (Duquesne University), yet they have allowed students with food allergies to suffer while thinking they are doing a good job of helping. However, they need to try harder, and the implementation of an allergen-free dining hall would prove that they are following their mission statement and serving students in an efficient manner.

Many Universities, such as Stanford and Dayton, have implemented rooms and dining situations similar to this one. It is an achievable task as other schools have also taken such measures. The University of Dayton in Ohio has created an allergy friendly room dubbed the "A+ Room" (University of Dayton). The A+ Room allows for students with allergies to "acquire something to eat if they have a food allergy or intolerance" (University of Dayton). In order to eat there, access is approved by authorities and it is well regulated. This shows the courtesy and care Dayton has for its students and the extents to which they go to benefit them. The school even has appliances such as microwaves, toasters, and toaster ovens in the room to prevent cross contamination (University of Dayton). Similarly, Stanford University has implemented a dining hall to provide a safe place for tree-nut and peanut allergy students. The dining facility is called Ricker Dining. Ricker, which provides a safe dining option for people with nut allergies, also serves those students without any nut allergies (*Residential Dining Enterprises*). Stanford University explains on its website that, "Ricker Dining (is) the first on-campus dining facility in the country to designate itself a peanut and tree nut sensitive environment" (*Residential Dining Enterprises*). The University goes on to state that they hope to inspire other schools to do the same. A school that could follow this inspiration is Duquesne. University of Dayton and Stanford University are not the only schools that have created these safe spaces, and Duquesne should follow the lead of these schools. Doing so would provide a better dining experience for students with allergies. Also, doing so would boost the University's publicity as being an allergy friendly school that cares about its students. It would also deepen the appeal to prospective students and cause more students to want to apply and attend Duquesne.

Food allergy severity and the predominance of it on college campuses is exponentially growing. It has been referred to as the allergy epidemic of the last 10 years, and it has no sign of stopping (Greenhawt). Duquesne and other colleges are not necessarily prepared for what needs to be done in order to safely and correctly feed college students with food allergies (Greenhawt). As stated in "Food allergy and food allergy attitudes among college students," by Matthew Greenhawt, "universities are in potential need of education, advocacy, and protection and has made educational materials available on their Web site" (Greenhawt). There is no slowing down the rate of food allergy growth as the years pass by. Therefore, an allergen-free dining space will not go unnoticed or unused at Duquesne. It will constantly be beneficial for both the students and the University. Students will also feel much safer about consuming the food they are served.

¹Editor's note: According to the university administration, costs will be covered by external fundraising and sponsorships rather than tuition dollars.

Editor's note: The Hogan Dining Center recently announced that it is moving its allergy-free center to a new room as a further precaution against cross-contamination, according to the September 5 Duquesne Duke.

It is not being proposed that the dining options be changed in totality for allergen-free students, rather, that another establishment all together is organized. Doing so would provide allergy students with the same or at least comparable options as their peers, and non-allergy students can also enjoy dining at the allergen-free spaces. College is a time where students are stressed from head to toe with schoolwork in preparation for the rest of their lives. Schoolwork should be the only stress factor that Duquesne students endure. However, the system in which Duquesne dining serves its food allergy students adds additional, unnecessary stress which could be avoided with the creation of an allergen-free dining option. Duquesne says how they care for their students, but as Hannah states: "... it feels as though they don't care about us students as individuals because they just care about producing the mass quantity of food at the lowest money value. They make it seem like we (food allergy students) are an inconvenience to dining" Students should come to college feeling wanted and valued by their school, for it is their new home. The current dining system for students with allergies is unacceptable and should be renovated. The implementation of an allergen-free dining space would provide students to feel safe with the food options provided on campus and open the appeal of Duquesne to prospective students with food allergies. It has been done at other Universities and there is no reason it cannot be done at Duquesne. In order to fully follow the mission statement of serving God through serving students, Duquesne must make this change (Duquesne University).

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