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Danial Truog
Seattle University

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Smart Shopping and School Programs Help Fight Rising Grocery Prices

Daniel Truog, Sports & Opinion Editor

Every week, Seattle University student Mira Martin takes on the task of feeding herself and three roommates using SNAP benefits. The third-year civil and environmental engineering major does so by shopping at the Capitol Hill Farmers Market, which is not usually considered an affordable grocery destination. Thanks to Washington's SNAP Market Match program, which doubles EBT dollars at farmers markets in Seattle and across the state, Martin makes it happen.

The rise of grocery prices in Seattle means that Martin is far from the only Seattle U student seeking out ways to make every dollar count at the store.

As of August 2024, food prices in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area have increased by 0.9% since August of the previous year. Prices have been rising for years, with a 15.9% increase in grocery prices from 2021 to 2024 according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many third and fourth-year students who currently live off campus started at Seattle U during this period of rising grocery prices. Now without meal plans, these students are feeling the effects of these inflated costs.

Grocery prices have increased for a number of reasons. Avian flu outbreaks have pushed the prices of eggs higher. Inflating prices of fuel, labor and other areas of the food transportation supply chains are being passed on to consumers.

For Delcie Lewallen, a fourth-year strategic communications major, one particular shift in pricing at Trader Joe's was the most noticeable indication of stores raising prices.

"I noticed our bananas have always been 19 cents, and now they're 23 cents," Lewallen said. "They were 19 cents from 2019, when I started working at Trader Joe's, until last year."

While it may seem like a small increase, bananas are far from the only food item whose price is going up. Lewallen still works at Trader Joe's, finding that it helps her save on groceries. Even without the employee discount, she sees it as a cheap option for students.



Evelynn Labriola

A variety of vegetables perched on display at the end of the QFC produce section.

Finding the grocery store with the lowest prices for essentials can be challenging. Trader Joe's ended up having the second lowest total price for a bag of six essentials: three bananas (or one pound), a 24 ounce loaf of whole wheat bread, a dozen eggs, a half gallon of milk, a 15 ounce can of beans and 2 pounds of rice. At the Trader Joe's on 1700 E. Madison St., these items added up to \$13.44 without tax.

The most expensive grocery store near campus was QFC, with the same bag of essentials coming in at \$18.24. Milk and bread at QFC were more expensive than at any of the five stores surveyed. The same loaf of Franz whole wheat bread was \$2 cheaper at Grocery Outlet. Nodia Rogers, the associate director for student care and support at the Office of Wellness and Health Promotion, noted that grocery prices around campus make the neighborhood count as a food desert.

"Most of the city of Seattle can't afford the food that's priced in our grocery stores. That's what qualifies us as a food desert," Rogers said. "There's access to fresh and nutritious food, but when you look at the third leg of that definition of it being affordable, most of the neighborhoods in Seattle don't meet that mark."

Grocery Outlet, located at the intersection of Union Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Way is 1.2 miles from campus, further than most other stores surveyed. However, it had the lowest price for rice at \$1.89 and eggs at \$2.99 and the lowest price for the full bag of six essentials. No store had the lowest price on every item.

Lewallen mentioned that one drawback of Trader Joe's was the produce, much of which spoils quickly and comes in plastic containers. Martin prefers the fresher produce found at the Sunday farmers market north of Cal Anderson Park.

"We go to the farmers market, which we use all the time, because farmers market EBT, you can exchange money and you can get double your worth in money at the farmers market. So I do that and get all of my produce there," Martin said.

The SNAP Market Match program helps Martin get fresher produce for lower prices than most expect from a local farmers market. However, changes in the EBT program's requirements means that this resource is not available to as many students in 2024.

"It's a little bit more difficult to get EBT than it was when I originally applied, just because they're changing a bunch of stuff. They're taking back their COVID policies," Martin said.

Martin's grocery store of choice during the rest of the week is QFC, which has a wide selection of items and saves her time with pickup orders.

"I'm always going to QFC. It's so convenient, and I can do a digital pickup order, which is awesome for EBT, because as a student, I don't have enough time to go walk through every single aisle of a grocery store."

While the EBT program can give students a helping hand, Seattle U's requirement for first and second-years to live on campus with a meal plan can place extra financial stress on students, especially those who are paying their way through school.

To fight food insecurity in students, the university has invested in resources to help students access food that is affordable and nutritious. Rogers works hard to make a wide range of resources accessible.

"We live in a society that really stigmatizes the use of resources, especially those that are free," Rogers said. "We've created this entire culture around the college student that says that you're supposed to struggle, right, you're supposed to starve and struggle to pay your bills."

The Seattle U Wellness Cafe and Food Pantry, located next to Bellarmine Hall in PAVL 150, is a key resource that any student can access to receive groceries. Wellness and Health Promotion Director Chris Fiorello noted that 47% of Seattle U students are food insecure on the USDA Food Insecurity Scale.

"The administration has been really receptive to the messages about food insecurity and how we can grow that program," Fiorello said.

Wellness and Health also has free meals that students can access. These meals require no preparation, supporting students with time or mental health constraints that make cooking a challenge. No-cook meals can be accessed during lunch at the Wellness and Health Promotion office in Student Center 380.

Engaging with issues of food insecurity is important to creating a healthy environment on campus. Rogers sees breaking down the stigma around these issues as crucial to make students feel more comfortable using resources the university has in place for them.

“The more that students have conversations with each other, we can start to see a shift in more food secure students because we’re having the conversation and providing the resources,” Rogers said.

Students like Owen Abbott are newer to cooking. Abbott is a third-year computer science major living in Vi Hilbert. Students in Vi Hilbert are not required to have a meal plan, and Abbott and his roommate opted to cook at home.

“This year we all discussed if we’re going to get a meal plan or not. And I think we kind of challenged ourselves by not getting a meal plan and like pushing ourselves to cook,” Abbott said.

Meal plans support busy student schedules but are more expensive than the cost of ingredients and deter students from making food for themselves.

“If you have a meal plan, there’s not much motivation to cook,” Abbott said.

Gabriel Albert, a third-year political science major and Abbott’s roommate, also ditched the meal plan. Albert has had some support from his parents, citing his father’s knowledge as a chef and his mother’s support in grocery shopping practices. But he rarely cooked in high school and is just now recognizing the importance of meal prepping and smart shopping.

“Budget an hour to an hour and a half of your time over the weekend, maybe cook up three or four chicken breasts, you’re good for the week,” Albert said.

Money is not the only limited resource that gets in the way of preparing healthy meals at home. Crammed schedules make takeout or on-campus dining the only option if time is not managed efficiently.

In Capitol Hill, there is no “perfect” grocery store. No single store will have the lowest prices on every item each student’s household needs to be sufficiently fueled for life on and off campus. Rogers compared the process of finding the best prices for each object to a “chess game” students have to play each time they go shopping for food.

With knowledge of state programs, campus support and the benefits of the neighborhood’s grocery options, students can keep their grocery budgets down without spending too much time shopping or cooking. More information about food security initiatives can be found on the Wellness and Health Promotion website.