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We're all poor college students, so why aren't more of us applying for food stamps?



By
**TONI
MORTENSEN**

Let's set some common ground. College students are poor. Everyone knows that. We eat Ramen, mac and cheese or hot dogs for every damn meal because all of the healthy food costs an arm and a leg — which you need both of, especially if you're taking CyRide anywhere. After moving into my first apartment and fighting with my checkbook every time I went to the grocery store, I started to dread buying food. I would drag myself into Hy-Vee and the \$3.99 per pound strawberries would stare and laugh at me. I mean, I could buy them, but that would mean less beer money and of course less money for bills, so I opted for off-brands and food on sale.

Well, I'm a girl who loves to eavesdrop (who doesn't?) and one day I heard a co-worker talking about how she needed to apply for food stamps again. I know what most of you must be picturing, but before we go any further, scratch the stigmatized image society has forced into our brains and picture this.

A bright-smiled, energetic student, who works 16 hours a week at the ISU Admissions office, is on the honor roll, in a sorority and plays an active role in her church. Does this sound familiar? Maybe it doesn't describe you to a tee, but I bet most of you are questioning how on earth she gets food stamps. I was too, and I asked her how I could get in on the deal.

Applying online through the Iowa Department of Human Services' (DHS) website is about an eight-minute process. "If you know that you qualify for work-study, or you know that you work at least 20 hours a week, and even though you're making money

you seem to not have any left over, food stamps could be an option to help you save money and have a good nutrition plan," Natasha Oakley, senior in apparel merchandising, explains.

Although either qualifying for work-study or working at least 20 hours a week are the two main qualifications for students, there are multiple policies that apply to the not-so-average college student. Check out the sidebar for a few, or visit the DHS website and pull up the PDF — student requirements begin on page 70.

So you might be thinking food stamps are shameful and embarrassing. But I hope you made it this far, because after weighing the pros and cons of food stamps with Matthew Fay, junior in logistics, he brought up a valid concern. "I just don't think I would want them. I mean I just wouldn't want to lose my pride," Fay says.

I don't blame him, because there is a negative connotation. But ask yourself these questions: Do you have loans? Are you the average ISU student who will be at least \$30,000 in debt after graduation? Wouldn't you like to take advantage of a program the government has made available for you?

I know I would. The name "food stamps" doesn't accurately describe the program because you technically do not use "stamps." Rather, a pretty little debit card makes paying for food a breeze. "Food assistance" is the actual name of the program, and personally I like the idea of having an extra \$200 a month (the maximum a student can qualify for) in case my gas bill skyrockets because Ames decided to become Antarctica again.

"Even though some people would

You don't need to meet student eligibility criteria if you:

- are under 18
- are over 50
- cannot work because of a mental or physical handicap
- are attending school less than half time
- are a single parent, living on your own, and caring for a child under age 12

If none of these apply, you need to meet at least one of following:

- work an average of 20 hrs a week and be paid wages
- be eligible for a work-study program
- be responsible for the physical care of a dependent household member under age 6
- be responsible for the physical care of a household member under age 12 when certain
- circumstances prevent adequate child care and you from going to school and working 20 hours a week

All of this info is in a PDF online. Just visit http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/policyanalysis/PolicyManualPages/Manual_Documents/Master/7-i.pdf

question you being a college student and think you don't need food stamps, it's not a matter of being in college or that you need to look a certain way. It's more about if you meet the requirements," Oakley says. "I think you should take the chance and apply regardless of what other people say. There will always be people who have something to say because of the stigma that comes with food stamps."

I agree. Use the resources. In a time when the economy is uncertain and essentials are burning a hole not only in your wallet but your jeans, utilize programs that are out there. It's no big deal to be a poor college student, but be a smart, poor college student.