

Menstruation Matters: The Case for Free Sanitary Napkin and Tampon Distribution at George Mason University

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THESIS

To create a more inclusive and accommodating campus, George Mason University should provide menstrual hygiene products free of charge in women's and gender-neutral bathrooms.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

With the elimination of the taxation on menstrual hygiene products across 13 states, sanitary pads and tampons are starting to be viewed as a necessity rather than a luxury in the U.S.¹ New York City recently made it mandatory to provide free menstrual hygiene products in public schools, shelters, and jails.² Multiple colleges and universities across the country are also beginning initiatives to expand access to such products.³ However, menstrual hygiene products are difficult to access on the George Mason campus.

While menstrual hygiene product machines are located in most bathrooms in academic buildings, they are often understocked or broken, as there is no current maintenance policy in place.⁴ As they require quarters to purchase products, the machines are inaccessible to many students on campus who use only their Mason IDs or credit cards for dining services and vending machines on campus. While boxes of menstrual hygiene products are available for purchase in a few convenience stores on campus, they are sold for nearly three times as much as those sold in off-campus pharmacies.^{5,6} When students are only in need of one tampon or sanitary napkin, they are either forced to buy a whole box, ask fellow students for a product, or walk to their dorm if they live on campus to retrieve products, causing students to miss out on valuable class and study time as a result.

TALKING POINTS

- As of 2016, with over half of George Mason's student population receiving some type of financial aid, including over a quarter of students receiving Pell Grants, the price mark-ups for menstrual hygiene products on campus may make these products totally inaccessible to students with financial need.⁷
- Many of the machines are outdated, understocked, or nonfunctional, and over 20 women's bathrooms on campus do not have any type of menstrual hygiene product machine. None of the gender-neutral bathrooms have machines.⁸
- George Mason's campus provides condoms free of charge in the Student Support and Advocacy Center Office, in residence halls, and in various academic buildings throughout campus. However, menstrual hygiene products are not offered anywhere on campus to the general student population free of charge.⁹

POLICY IDEA

George Mason University should provide menstrual hygiene products free of charge in women's and gender-neutral bathrooms in academic buildings across campus. In place of the current outdated vending machines, which are currently in campus bathrooms, George Mason will save money by simply providing the products in bathrooms instead of maintaining and buying new machines. The housekeeping department should refill stocks of the products in bathrooms as needed.

POLICY ANALYSIS

This policy option is the most financially practical for both the George Mason administration and students. While the university could install new machines in the bathrooms that do not have them, the existing and the new machines would still require regular maintenance. Currently, each machine costs around \$350 to purchase and install. If the university were to invest in new machines that would allow for credit card payment, they would be even more expensive. The most rational solution would be to stop using and installing the machines and instead stock menstrual hygiene products in the bathrooms free of charge. A pack of 500 tampons is around \$80 and a bulk supply of pads comes at a similar price.¹⁶ The funding for the products would come through University Life, which collects and manages student fees.

Other schools such as Brown University, The University of Minnesota and The University of Nebraska-Lincoln have successfully enacted similar programs and now stock free tampons and pads in all of their bathrooms on campus. Brown's Council of Students recently started an initiative to provide sanitary napkins and tampons in women's, men's, and gender-neutral bathrooms and restocks the supplies in bathrooms on a weekly basis.¹⁷

NEXT STEPS

George Mason University should implement a policy to provide menstrual hygiene products for free in bathrooms in every academic building. Roosevelt at Mason has just begun a university-wide student survey regarding access to menstrual hygiene products on campus. So far, based on a continuing Roosevelt @ Mason survey, 93% of students believe there needs to be a change in order to improve access to menstrual hygiene products on campus.¹⁸ Many students have commented that they should either be free in bathrooms or accessible to students in another way, possibly in the form of new vending machines.¹⁹ As the survey continues into next semester, there will be sufficient data to present to the university to help eventually implement this policy. If costs cannot be directly covered by University Life, George Mason should apply for a Planned Parenthood grant or similar funding which would help maintain the free supply of menstrual hygiene products in bathrooms.²⁰

KEY FACTS

- On average, women experience around 450 periods in their lifetime, spending over 2,000 days of their life menstruating.¹⁰ It is estimated that women spend around \$120 on menstrual hygiene products each year.¹¹
- According to a survey by Free the Tampons, 86% of women reported beginning their period in public without the supplies they needed, and only 8% reported the menstrual hygiene product dispensers in bathrooms working 100% of the time.¹²
- Each menstrual hygiene product machine at George Mason costs about \$350 to buy and install, whereas a bulk supply of 500 quality tampons costs about \$80, and a bulk supply of sanitary napkins costs about \$50.¹³
- A box of 10 Tampex tampons costs \$4.10 at an on-campus store, while a box of the same products at CVS only costs around \$1.50.^{14, 15}

ENDNOTES

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- 14 George Mason University, "Mason Dining."
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