

BULKING UP

Yet another trend

By Lee Burdette Williams

IT WAS THE START of a new school year when I first became suspicious. Being a dedicated professional, I'm always scanning the student life horizon for significant trends, fads, and directions that are likely to have an impact on the work I do.

This obviously qualified as something—something big, something with the potential for far-reaching impact, something worthy of several journal articles, the back page of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and definitely space in this fine little publication.

What did I see? Students coming into group meetings and class carrying little plastic baggies full of colorful candy. They placed the bags in front of them on the table or desk and, during the meeting, snacked on the candy. Students bringing food to meetings was nothing new. Working with overcommitted student leaders who eat on the run is a basic part of my job. But I have to admit, it was a little disconcerting to see them sitting so uniformly with their baggies in front of them, glazed smiles on their faces—a rapture brought on by the intense sugar highs they seemed to be experiencing. Where were these baggies coming from? Why the sudden influx of candy?

Within a couple of days, I had traced the candy to its source—new bulk candy self-serve containers near

the checkout line of the snack bar in the student union. The snack bar had had bulk candy available for several years, but it had always been behind a counter, and

someone had to serve it. Now it was merely a matter of pulling a baggie off the roll, lifting a handle, and letting the sweet stuff of your choice slide down a chute into the waiting bag.

It was almost revolutionary in its effect. Students everywhere were seen carting baggies around. No one sitting in the snack bar dining area was without a baggie. Students came to class with candy. Half-finished bags of various candies held in someone's tight little grip were seen in TV lounges and lobbies of

residence halls, crossing parking lots, decorating the stands at football games. The campus had, it seemed, gone bulk candy mad.

I am a researcher by nature and found myself thinking hard about this new trend. I started to investigate. I was curious about what kinds of candies students preferred. I discovered that perhaps the second most significant effect of self-service (the most significant being an

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increase in the sheer number of candy purchases) was that students had the ability to mix candies. All the bulk candies cost the same twenty-eight cents per ounce, so students were free to mix and match as they chose, and some of their combinations were, in a word, frightening.

"Some Gummi Bears and M&Ms, Lee?" one student offered at a club council meeting. "I like both," I assured her, "but not together." This began an interesting discussion among those in attendance about mixing and matching.

"You know what I like?" said Brianne. "I like to get the Sour Patch Kids and mix them with Gummi rainbow babies because the sugar falls off the kids and coats the babies, which makes them even sweeter."

"Definitely," said Kevin. "And when you mix the yogurt-covered pretzels with the French burnt peanuts, you get that 'multiple crunch' sensation."

"I like to mix my M&Ms," said Kim. "Some peanut, some peanut butter, some regular."

"What about the minis?" asked Jamie.

"No—I don't like mixing sizes. That's too weird. And never the mint M&Ms, because they're not really M&Ms. They're mints with a candy coating, like those pink-and-white things you see next to the cash register at the China Palace."

"I knew this guy," said David in almost a whisper. "He used to mix chocolate-covered raisins with yogurt-covered raisins."

"Ewww!!" they shouted simultaneously. "You never mix chocolate and yogurt." I wondered why, since they do seem to have that dairy connection, but was too intimidated to ask. The discussion continued, and I was much too fascinated to cut it off in favor of the agenda.


"Do you think there's a difference," asked Jay, "between Gummis? I mean, like, do Gummi Bears taste the same as Gummi Worms?"

"You know," Brianne said, "I know this girl from my high school whose old boyfriend's dad works for the company that makes Gummi stuff, and she said that they make Gummi from plastic six-pack rings. They melt them down and just add sugar and coloring, and it's all legal because there's actually a kind of edible plastic. . . . But anyway, I think they taste the same." Hmm . . . An urban Gummi myth. I should make a note of that for future research.

"Except for the Gummi Coke bottles, which taste like Coke," intoned Adam.

"I don't know if they taste the same," said Kevin. "They definitely feel the same, which is the whole point of eating Gummis—the fight they give you. I really like to mix the Gummi Baby Blue Sharks with the Gummi bananas. You get this kind of tropical Gummi rush."

I finally suggested we might want to finish up the candy and get to the agenda, which they did, contentedly munching on their bulk, like cows in a pasture. But the images stayed with me long after the meeting—colorful little worms slithering between lips. The quiet scream of a Gummi Bear being decapitated by a bicuspid. A runaway peanut M&M rolling across the tabletop and falling silently to the carpet.

 SEVERAL DAYS LATER I expanded my research. I spoke with a group of student union employees. "Do you see a lot of bulk candy when you're cleaning?" I asked.

"Don't get me started," said Adam. "It's everywhere. Those Petite Smooth & Melty mint things are the worst. They have those sprinkles on them, which fall off the candy and onto the carpet, and then get ground into the fiber, and wham! Little pastel stains everywhere."

Jon, a supervisor, somberly informed me that they might need to add some new staff that will focus specifically on getting sugared fruit slices out of the carpet once they've been stepped on twenty or thirty times. "Watermelon slices are toughest," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Two colors. What a mess."

I wondered how this might be affecting students emotionally—this new dependency on little pieces of candy. I sought out my counseling center friend, Denise. "So what do you think of this bulk candy thing?" I asked her.

"Well, actually, it's kind of interesting. Every student brings a bag of something to a session, and I've actually been able to tell a lot about the student from her or his choices. Like if they have wrapped stuff, like Hershey's Kisses and caramel squares, they tend to be pretty emotionally closed off. One student brought a baggie of grapefruit slices, and I just knew he was someone with masochistic tendencies, unable to enjoy life. And one woman . . ." She paused, obviously overcome by despair.

"Yes?"

"Well, she mixed yogurt-covered raisins and chocolate peanuts, and I knew she was beyond help here. Can you imagine—mixing chocolate and yogurt? Poor thing. I think she just got discharged last week."

We sat in silence for a moment, and then Denise reached into her drawer and pulled out a baggie. "Want some Fruit Runtts and Tart 'n' Tinys?"

My next stop was the residence life office, where my pal Jason works. Jason's desk is decorated with tiny animals, toys, Beanie Babies, and stickers. He has a disco ball hanging above it. Clearly, he is an educator.

I asked him if he had any thoughts about the flood of bulk candy among our students. He brightened

immediately (and given his state of chronic brightness, it was a little frightening to see him turn it up a notch). "What's great about it is that when I do programs, I don't have to bring stuff for icebreakers. We just use the candy. Like I'll say, 'Okay, everyone. Give me one piece from your baggie, and let's see if the group can create a story using each piece.' The stories are great. One was about how a Gummi cola bottle was found floating in the ocean by a sour tropical fish that mistook it for its long-lost mother." He sighed contentedly. "That group really bonded that night."

I saw a notice in the campus newsletter that a professor of anthropology was giving a lecture titled "Gummi Ain't So Yummy: Resistance and Defiance Among Indigenous Cultures," which was described as "a critical look at Gummi culture, primarily the use of body part facsimiles, such as little Gummi brains, and the attendant loss of respect for the human form." According to the notice, the guest speaker was a chemist from another campus whose book, *Scratch and Sniff: The Real Story Behind the Jelly Belly Flavors*, is considered a seminal work in the bulk candy field.

I didn't attend the lecture, but there were seventeen letters to the editor in that week's newspaper weighing in on the Gummi issue, more letters than any lecture had ever elicited, including the one about the homoerotic subtext of Beavis and Butthead.

I guess it's a good thing, this self-serve bulk candy. It encourages experimentation—thinking outside the baggie, as it were. It encourages sharing, as students love to try one another's mixes. It has probably added a stream of revenue to food services that will build us a Taj Mahal of a dining hall in three years. Of course, it might make

the "freshman ten" into the "freshman twenty-five and more," if students find themselves addicted to the idea of always having candy in hand.

I guess it's just hard for us old traditionalists, who like our candy one type at a time. I'm a Swedish Fish kind of girl myself (red only, please), buying a bag each time I see a bulk candy store and keeping it in the console box of my car. For sheer ability to withstand extreme temperatures, Swedish Fish should be given some sort of Nobel Prize, which you'd think they'd have already gotten—being Swedish and all. And I like peanut M&Ms. And I love chocolate-covered raisins and pretzels, but not together. Am I bound to be left behind by this critical trend of the new millennium? I wondered.

So I tried it. I went to the bulk candy containers, ripped a bag off the roll, and filled it with some sour Gummi night crawlers, a few Jordan almonds (assorted), a one-inch jawbreaker—just because I liked the color, three or four Bumpy Blue Raspberry Gumballs (though I *was* tempted by

the Eyes of Terror Gumballs), some carob-covered peanuts, and, just in case nothing worked out, one Swedish Fish, red. I paid for my booty and went off to a meeting with the vice chancellor, a known candy fan.

"Want some candy?" I asked. He peered into my baggie, which looked to me like a high-sugar train wreck.

"Yes, thanks," he said, reaching into the baggie and taking a handful, including my lone fish. "You know what I love to mix? Those white peanut butter cups with Gummi Peachy Penguins and a few Jolly Ranchers, with just a hint of cappuccino Jelly Bellies. Now *that's* a great snack."

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