



The Effects of Food-Related Stress and Food Insecurity on College Students

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Abstract

This poster presents a project on a student's experience with stress and their eating patterns. Food-related stress, for this project, refers to stresses related to factors including overconsumption or underconsumption of food, to worrying about healthfulness of diet, and not being financially stable to purchase food. To have a better understanding of the range of food-related stress, students participated in either a free-list exercise or an informal interview with a survey that followed. Students who participated in this study either lived on campus or off campus and expressed their concerns and how they deal with stress related to food.

Methods

In the fall semester, about 40 students ranging from freshman to senior, were given a free-list exercise asking what cooking and nutritional topics they would like to learn.

In the spring, 23 students were interviewed and took the 10 item Food Security Survey Module created by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). There were three groups represented in the participants: Rooney apartments, commuters, and students who stay at Saint Vincent during breaks. The interviews consisted of questions pertaining to student examples of their dietary practices, food acquisition practices, food-related stress and their perception of food-related stress.

The USDA 10 item Food Security Survey Module is used to assess the severity of food security or food insecurity a person may be.

Results

Free-List Exercise

Students were asked to list off the topics they would want to learn if a cooking lesson session was available on campus and nutritional information they would want to know. Topics students would want to learn more about are

- How to make quick and easy meals
- Meal Prepping
- Learn to make baked goods

As for the nutritional topics, students would want to learn more about:

- General nutrition
- Vegetarian and veganism
- How to balance diet and exercise when you don't do a sport

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were completed with 23 students. The average length was between 15-30 minutes.

- 6 Rooney Apartments
- 10 Commuters
- 6 Living on Campus over Breaks

The researchers developed a codebook based on the set of themes covered in the interviews complemented by a grounded-theory analysis of the responses to identify unanticipated themes that were brought up by students. Selected major themes from the interviews are reported below:

Missing Meals Having fewer than three meals per day is considered a marker of food insecurity. This phenomenon, though is fairly common among students interviewed. However, students' sense of whether this is a problem varies. Some students report skipping breakfast because they are not hungry in the morning, while others indicate that their missing meals is the result of scheduling issues and sometimes lack of availability of dining services. It is these students that efforts to improve student food security and nutrition should focus on.

"Cause like for lunch, it's like a time where I'm in class most of the time. So I can't get lunch here."

Stress College is a stressful time for people do the workload and trying to figure out the career path they will pursue. With trying to figure out what the end goal is or how to answer a homework problem, consumption of food can be either placed on the back burner or needed at that time to cope with the situation. Students explain that they either eat when are stressed or do not eat at all. For those who do eat when they are stressed, they go for things that are unhealthy and cheap. Eating junk food has a higher satisfaction level than fruits or vegetables for that student.

"When I get stressed out, I usually get chocolate rather than like grapes. I get more satisfaction from the chocolate than the grapes."

Perception of Diet In a college environment, unhealthy foods are easier to access and more affordable than healthy foods like fruits and vegetables. People perceive healthy food as expensive, and when you're on a budget, nutrition

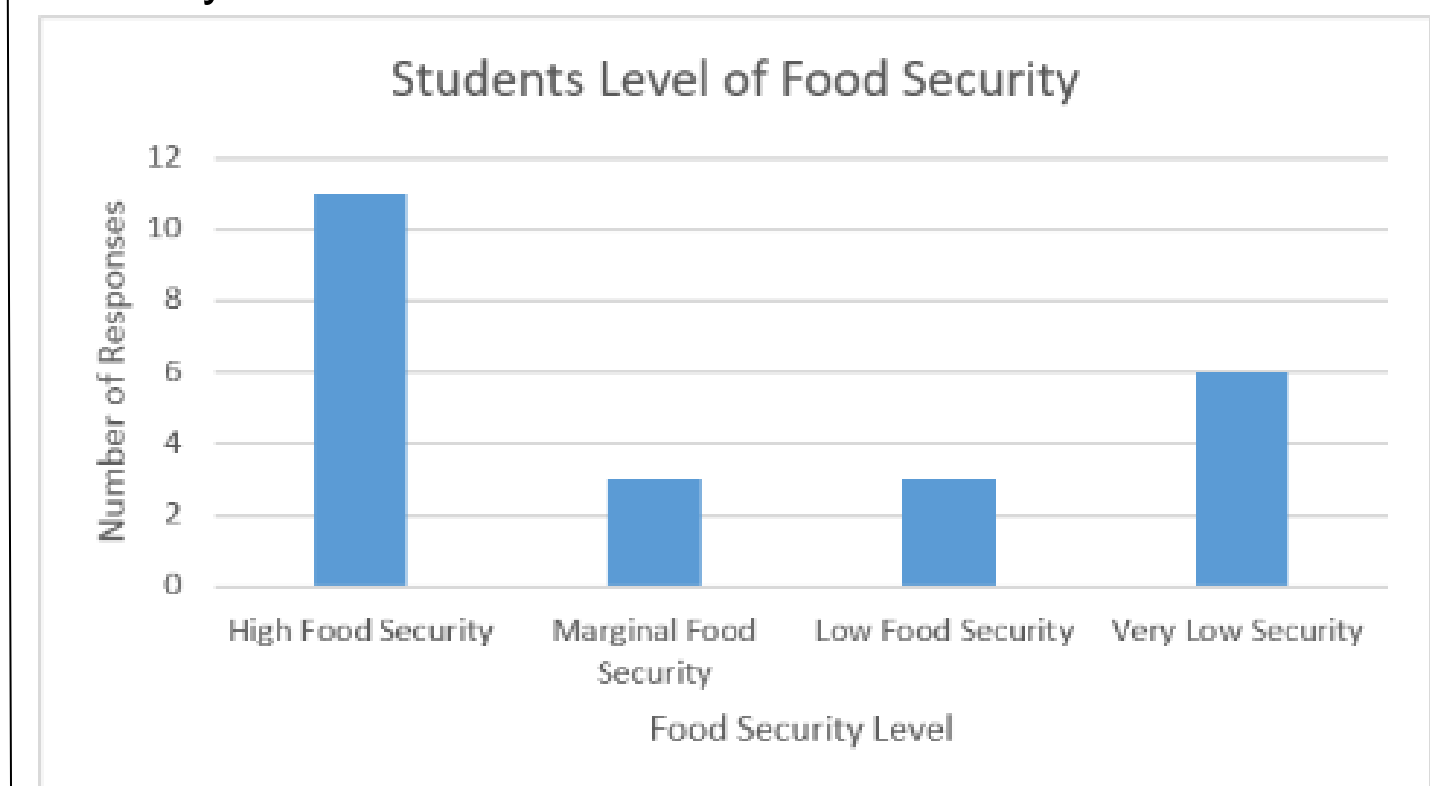
can be the last thing they think of. Colleges provide healthy options to their students, as it benefits the students' ability to learn and focus in the classroom. However, some students feel that there is a lack of nutritious and desirable options provided, to which they attribute weight gain or weight loss.

"Uh, freshman year I lost thirty pounds. Uh, cause I did not like the food. I did not want to eat the food."

Survey

After each interview, participants answered questions from the 10 item Food Security Survey Module which is used by the USDA. This survey is used to evaluate a person's standing with their food consumption. The survey is analyzed into four parts ranging from high food security to very low security (indicating food insecurity). Food insecurity is not always apparent in the semi-structured interviews, so this provides us with the ability to detect food insecurity in a systematic way.

Additional analysis will compare the responses of students with low food security to those with higher food security.



Discussion/Outcomes

Student experiences vary and understanding the factors that influence students' dietary practices is important to designing a nutrition environment that will enable and encourage healthy eating for all students. Key factors to recognize are the way in which schedules and operating hours affect student food access; the varying ways in which students respond to stress through their eating; and the way in which the nutrition environment is experienced by the students as facilitating or not facilitating healthy eating. The results of the free-list exercises help to identify specific areas in which low-cost educational interventions could meaningfully support students' understanding of nutrition and how to implement healthy eating in their diet.