

An Assessment of US College Food Environments: From Food Service to College Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: As obesity continues to increase among adolescents and young adults in the U.S. and these populations enter college, Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs) are facing a changing set of student health issues. With these students comes an increased responsibility to address the nutritional environment of the campus. **Purpose:** College health educators and food service programs are on the forefront of this issue and can provide important insights into the challenges and opportunities of providing and promoting healthy food options on IHLs. **Methods:** Initially, a series of focus groups, primarily comprised of college health educators, were conducted. Topics included the discussion of the campus food environment, nutrition campaigns, comprehensive health campaigns, and food and nutritional policies influencing campus foods. Themes from the focus groups were used to design an interview script for IHL food service directors. Twenty-one IHL food service directors were interviewed about practices, policies, and strategies to promote a healthy nutritional environment. **Results:** Key topics included: educational and policy efforts for nutrition and healthy eating; healthy food choice availability and promotion; nutrition information distribution; nutrition programs led by registered dietitians; and education mechanisms using technology. The presence of a prominent champion for healthy foods was frequently cited as a factor for success. The most frequent medium for delivering nutrition and weight management education was the internet. Many participants cited a need for campus-wide policies addressing healthy food availability and nutrition and wellness promotion. **Conclusions:** Comprehensive wellness initiatives, food policies and environmental changes were reported as affective for improving healthy food availability for college students.

KEYWORDS: Food environment, Food policy, Dietary guidelines, Obesity, Young adult