Introduction

Largely in response to the rise of diet-related chronic diseases and the need for a more sustainable food system, the University of California (UC) Office of the President launched the UC Global Food Initiative (GFI) aimed at tackling the challenge of nutritionally and sustainably feeding our growing population. The GFI Food Literacy Subcommittee was recently established to plan and implement initiatives that empower UC students to make educated choices about the foods they eat – for their own health and wellbeing, as well as for our environment and society. This study aims to contribute the student perspective to program planning efforts in order to address gaps in services and maximize acceptability of new initiatives.

Defining Food Literacy

• Collective food knowledge + skills
• Four domains: 1) planning and management, 2) selection, 3) preparation, and 4) eating
• Functional competence + critical awareness
• Interactive by nature, as individuals necessarily influence and are influenced by local and global food systems (Cullen & Hatch, 2011)

Working GFI definition:

“Food literacy” is the understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of the social (culture, ethnicity, history), political (policy, economics, law), scientific (basic science, nutrition, environment), and personal (deliciousness, cooking) dimensions of food within one’s local and global community.”

Research Approach

Goal: Understand food literacy within the context of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

→ Contribute the student perspective to program planning efforts in order to address gaps in services and maximize acceptability of new initiatives

Guiding Questions:

• How do UCLA students perceive and interact with the food environment on campus?
• What are some of the influences on UCLA students’ current food knowledge and skills?
• What opportunities and challenges exist for improving food knowledge and skills among UCLA students?

Methods

Conduct a total of ten focus groups with four unique UCLA student subpopulations:

• Three with residential undergraduates (living on campus with a meal plan)
  – Targeted recruitment via Residential Life student leadership list
• Three with non-residential undergraduates (living off campus)
  – Recruitment via departmental listservs
• Three with graduate/professional students
  – Recruitment via departmental listservs
• One with undergraduates currently utilizing food security resources
  – Targeted recruitment via resource program leaders

Analysis: Inductive approach to developing codes and themes + deductive organization of data, iterative coding using ATLAS.ti

Results + Outcomes

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<th>Focus Group Participant Demographics (n=76)</th>
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Key Themes + Emergent Issues

Cultural and Healthy Eating

• Diet-related chronic disease, the carbon footprint of meat, pesticides, factory farming, food deserts, food processing, farmworker exploitation, and the role of food companies in determining food policy and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Mixed Messages, Frustration, + Apathy

• Frustration with a system that prioritizes profits over people
• Skepticism about scientific research aims, food labeling, and even-changing nutrition recommendations
• Not being able to access or afford food perceived to be the “right choice”

Culture and Healthy Eating

• Acculturation by way of cooking and eating less of students’ traditional food
• Perceived lack of culturally variable approaches to healthy eating

Students as Ambassadors

• Students carry their new knowledge of food back to their communities

Discussion + Recommendations

Results of this study illuminate the important role of the university in supporting food literacy not only through academic instruction, but also through the food environment. To enhance critical awareness and truly empower students to make informed food decisions, food literacy programming within the context of higher education should acknowledge imperfect science, trade-offs, and competing priorities in food decision-making.

To maximize acceptability, food literacy initiatives at UCLA should improve students’ access to healthy and sustainable food, problematize food issues, create platforms for critical discussions, allow opportunities for student leadership, and increase the salience of the university in supporting food literacy not only through academic instruction, but also through the food environment.

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