

You live and you learn: Student perspectives on food literacy at UCLA

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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 nutritiously 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 (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2011)
- 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 listserv
- 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

Focus Group Participant Demographics (n=76)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	47	62%
Male	28	37%
Gender nonconforming	1	1%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	26	34%
Hispanic	20	26%
White	14	18%
Biracial	7	9%
Black	5	7%
Other	4	5%
Financial aid		
Yes	61	80%
No	15	20%
Living situation		
Other off campus housing	35	46%
Campus	25	33%
Off campus university housing	10	13%
Parent / guardian	4	5%
Fraternity or sorority	2	3%

*Percent may not add up to 100 due to rounding



“It’s exciting to me. There’s so many foods that I’ve tried here that I never had at home. I did the whole thing – I told my boss ‘queenoa’ and she’s like, ‘What? What is that?’ But yeah, it’s ‘quinoa.’ I tried that for the first time and I tried way more vegetables and fruits so...it’s a learning experience.”

- Undergraduate Student



“I’m surprised we have all these GE requirements, but there’s nothing about food. That’s one of my pet peeves. What about food, and what about financial wellness?”

- Undergraduate Student

“I think maybe if we were to have a class it would have to be objective, like maybe explain why or why not people say milk is good and why people say it’s bad... And there’s reasons why you could argue it both ways. I think that would be a little bit more helpful than giving us a template of what to eat.”

- Undergraduate Student

“A lot of information is like, ‘Oh, yeah, go organic, be more vegetarian habits,’ or all this stuff, and when it comes to the reality, at least for me as a low income student, it’s not affordable, it’s not accessible. And then all of the healthy options around UCLA, it seems like they’re just increasing in price. It’s becoming more of a trend, like a hip trend instead of a real issue. So I think if they talk about it more, it’s an issue instead of something cool that people could do. That would help, especially for low income students, because we’re trying to be healthy. We’ve seen how it affects us and our families.”

- Undergraduate Student

Key Themes + Emergent Issues

Food Environment

- A tool for both experiential education and behavior modification
- Challenges with transitioning to the college food environment
- Cost of food on campus – especially healthy food

Cooking + Enjoyment of Food

- Dining, cooking, and discussing food as a social activity
- Perceived benefits of preparing food at home: saving money, protecting and promoting health, having control over the ingredients, relaxation and stress relief, practicality, and expression of creativity

Critical Awareness

- 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 ever-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

Learning + Information Seeking

- Sources of food knowledge and skills: Family, peers, travel, news media, entertainment media, social media (e.g. Yelp, Snap Chat, Facebook), smartphone applications, scientific journals, UCLA courses, UCLA resources (e.g. dietician, FITTED program), K-12 education, the food environment, social marketing, and advertising

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 long-term implications of students’ dietary habits. In general, initiatives should use media as a tool for connecting with students and should maximize transparency within the campus food system.

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