

INFLUENCES ON COLLEGE STUDENTS' EATING HABITS

By

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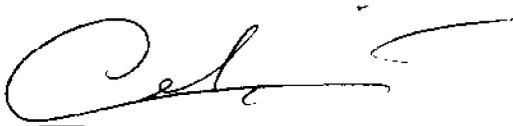
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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the factors that influence college students' eating habits and that may impede them from eating how they would prefer to eat by surveying 219 undergraduate college students, looking especially at the impacts of time and money on college students' eating habits. The results show that money does not affect all students equally but disproportionately affects students of lower economic classes. Social class and time constraints make eating healthy difficult for many college students. Students today have busy lives because they are not only students but workers, volunteers, and participants in campus organizations. Prices of food also have lead students to seek out cheaper, often unhealthy food choices. Unfortunately, eating healthy costs more money in our society. While in my study I look at college students these same issues are relevant and visible in a larger society as well.

## **Introduction**

Food is an integral part of daily life. Eating for many people is more than just survival, eating becomes social and cultural. There are many limitations on eating habits, for college students two of the main limitations are time and money. College students have busy lives and often must balance many different activities and responsibilities; in addition, many college students are on a limited income, severely impacting their food choices. The United States has a large amount of inequality and stratification among classes. It is interesting how far reaching this inequality is in people's everyday lives. It is astonishing that the inequality continues to expand in a nation that is supposed to be so advanced, even among college students (Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz 2009). Social class differences affect individuals in many ways, including their health. For example, this can be observed through the differences in eating habits. One possible explanation for this is because eating healthy on average costs more. There are many factors like cost of food, knowledge of food, time of food preparation, family structure, and culture that contribute to the differences in food habits. Food habits among college students are also impacted by these same factors. Some of these factors may even be multiplied given the life of many college students. This leads to the question, what influences college students' eating habits?

## **Purpose**

The purpose of my study is to look at the motivations and rational in food choices of college students to see how the burden of social class and time affect eating habits. Students often must balance busy lives and have limited income, so money and time often are critical when deciding what to eat. The main concepts of my research question have to do with what causes people to eat healthily or unhealthily. The idea behind the survey is to get at the factors

that influence people's eating habits, primarily how social class and time influence eating habits. Healthy food is often much more expensive than unhealthy alternatives. Social inequality affects many different aspects of people's lives. I would like to know to what extent social inequality and time affect the eating habits of college students.

### **Literature Review**

Food choices are determined by a variety of factors including social class, time, preferences, cultural practices, media influences, and family structure. With diet fads and local and organic food movements saturating popular culture and on the other end fast food advertising flooding the media, these lead to two very different and conflicting cultural messages on what to eat. This compounded by money and time leads to a difference in eating habits across society.

Food is a class issue because the least expensive food is often the least nutritious food, which leads to structural inequality in society (Wright and Ranson 2005). The same is also true for the quickest food with the least prep work, it is unhealthy. This puts those with monetary and time constraints in a position where out of ease and necessity they eat unhealthily.

Some Americans do not even have the luxury to think about food choice because their main concern is if there is even going to be enough food to eat. While the government has food assistance programs, in 2005, out of 35 million food-insecure Americans, only 55.6 percent received assistance from the government (Winne 2008). There are still millions of Americans who struggle simply to provide enough food for themselves and their families. Many eligible people do not take advantage of the programs offered by the government for whatever reason; this leaves these people with dismal food choices with whatever little money they can come by. For those on assistance, there is still virtually no food choice because the assistance is often so

minimal. Students at Vanderbilt School of Medicine recently spent five days eating on a \$16.97 meal plan, or the average five-day grocery budget for a food-stamp recipient. Many students failed and those that did make it often remarked that “they had to choose between eating healthily and not feeling full or eating high-calorie foods that weren’t as healthy”(Prah 2010). For those people on food stamps, there simply is not enough money to eat consistently healthy. When choosing between being hungry or eating healthy is the reality for many individuals it leads to a disparity in health among classes.

Studies have been done to examine the effects of prices of “fast foods” and “fruits and vegetables” on dietary intakes. Looking at the association between these food prices and BMI and risk of obesity across family income categories, they analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Continuous Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals 1994-96 (Beydoun, Powell, and Wang 2008). They conducted multivariate linear regression analyses to test the effects of the price indices on dietary intakes. The variation in food prices are generally associated with dietary intakes in a manner that conforms to economic models was observed for fast foods although not for fruits and vegetables (Beydoun, Powell, and Wang 2008). This suggests that changing fast food and fruit and vegetable prices could influence the food choices that individuals make. Studies also show that, "the better-off a household is the more it spends on fruits and vegetables," (Belton and Belton 2003). Income is directly related to the level of fruits and vegetables an individual consumes.

Those who reside in food deserts are also economically disadvantaged, looking at impact of social class on food habits. They found that school districts with higher percentages of populations located within food deserts are more likely to be structurally and economically disadvantaged. Additionally they found a positive relationship between increased rates of child

overweight and the percentage of the district population residing in a food desert (Schafft, Jensen, and Hinrichs 2009). Other studies have found that residents of inner-city, poor communities pay more for groceries. Poor residents have limited access to small grocers which have smaller package sizes and selection leading to higher prices (Chung and Meyers 1999). People that are disadvantaged have less access and lack transportation to larger chain grocers that are less expensive and provide more selection.

Environmental factors influence food choices and possible intervention and policy strategies to promote healthy eating. Studies have examined different settings and places for healthy eating, looking at homes, childcare, schools, after-school and summer programs, work sites, retail food stores: supermarkets and small grocery stores, and eating out at restaurants and fast-food outlets. This line of research looks at what is available in these various locations and also what has been done to promote healthy eating in these locations. This work also examines the disparities in food access in low-income communities. National survey data as well as data from USDA, National Restaurant Association, Keystone Center, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kaiser Family Foundation, IOM Committee on Food Marketing to Children and Youth, and governmental policy are used to discuss and measure the factors influencing food choices. The article concludes that a sustained effort is needed to improve eating habits and lower obesity rates, starting with making healthy food choices available, identifiable, and affordable to all people (Story 2008).

The presence of children may also play an important role in food choice (Crotty 1999). People may alter their food choices to incorporate the needs of children. Their children's requests may also be taken into consideration. The family structure and who is making the decisions in the family directly affect the food choices selected. There is also a changing attitude

in child rearing that allows children to choose what to eat and informs them of healthy and unhealthy food (Coveney 1999). This can often be harmful to children, particularly with the increasing abundance of advertising aimed at children. Family structure can alter food choices in that parents put their preferences second to what they view as best for their children.

Looking at the media, there is an abundance of advertising for fast food and junk food, while virtually no advertising for fruits and vegetables because they are not attached to a brand name (Belton and Belton 2003). Advertising is big business and companies that produce junk food have the money to pay for advertising. Furthermore, advertising is confusing children about what is healthy and what is unhealthy with labels like low fat and empty claims of being good for you (Simon 2006). The worst advertising offenses are aimed at the most vulnerable people in our society, children. Research has shown that, “fatty foods and sugary foods should only be 7 percent of our diet yet they make up 70 percent of all TV advertisements during children's peak viewing times” (Belton and Belton 2003). Children are being bombarded with commercials for unhealthy food, enticing them to desire and ask for these products. Children are not immune to the effects of unhealthy food. In fact, “Children are increasingly experiencing health problems previously seen only in adults, such as Type 2 diabetes and early signs of heart disease” (Simon 2006). Children are not eating healthy foods and this is reflected in their overall health. Even companies that make health claims often do so only partially, like Kraft which only produces six out of fifty-six healthy Lunchables (Simon 2006). This leads many people who do not read the fine print to purchase food that is not as healthy for them as they think it is. Often there is a big difference in the quality of diet people think they are consuming and what they actually are consuming.

The effects of unhealthy eating are not just affecting children in general but disproportionately all individuals of lower social class. Four factors of social class have been positively correlated with obesity (Sharoun-Lee, et al. 2009). Those that are most influenced by food price and advertising are those that are most prominent in the lower social class: income and education. They have less money to spend on healthy food and have less education to inform them of healthy eating choices. Social class does not influence eating habits alone, it is also affected by nutritional knowledge. Studies show that in order to see “improvement in overall diet quality, socio-economic interventions must be coupled with health education programs targeting all segments of the U.S. population” (Beydoun and Wang 2007). People are not always aware of the nutritional content of what they eat and do not think it important.

Many women diet to conform to the social construction of beauty as needing to be thin (Williams and Germov 1999). In order to diet, it takes both time and money. Women, however, go to extraordinary lengths to be thin, because this is what popular culture tells them they should look like. Images of models and celebrities saturate the media. Many women base their eating habits on diets and the restriction of foods in order to lose weight and be thin. This, however, can also tie back into social class because only people of a certain class have the resources necessary to diet.

More specifically to college students, studies have shown a gender difference in food choices. One study of college students revealed that males are less likely to pay attention to food labels and are less interested in their food decisions compared to females (Levi, Chan, and Pence 2006). Male students are less likely to think about food and eating, while female students view it as a constant thought process. There are many theories linking male’s non-interest in food decisions to ideologies of masculinity. There is often an association with dieting to being

feminine. Since male students are less likely to respond to food knowledge education, some other strategies offered by the author were to remove availability of unhealthy food, reduce cost of healthier food, and offer samples of healthy food (Levi, Chan, and Pence 2006).

When people think about college students' eating habits, one common thought is the Freshman 15. There is a widespread belief that due to poor eating habits, college students often gain weight during their first year of college. A recent study, however, found that first-year female college students' caloric intake actually decreased for most of the participants, but that physical activity decreased as well for those who gained weight and stayed the same for those who lost weight (Jung, Bray, and Ginis 2008). From this information, it can be said that physical activity level may have more impact of students' weight than food habits. This, however, fails to look at what types of foods were being eaten, and studies have shown weight may not be the best indicator of health (Wildman, et al. 2008).

Many factors such as lifestyle have been linked to college students' eating behaviors. Eating behaviors were related to hours spent on campus, commute time to campus, and weekly budget for food. The study found that male students consumed more alcohol and more water as well as spent more money on campus for food (Jackson, Berry, and Kennedy 2009).

Additionally, "poor eating behaviors tend to cluster, as individuals who engage in one poor eating behavior generally engage in other poor eating behaviors" like increases in fast food consumption and lower physical activities (Jackson, Berry, and Kennedy 2009). The study commented on availability of nutritious foods on campus and looked at changing eating habits based on changing lifestyle factors.

## **Methodology**

The target population for my survey was college students at the University of Arizona. The sample, a convenience sample from two general education classes, was used to represent the general population of the University of Arizona. The subjects were a sample of 219 undergraduate college students who were enrolled at least part-time in a general education classes at the University of Arizona. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. These classes were chosen because general education classes include a wide variety of students of all backgrounds. Each student in the class was given a questionnaire with seventeen questions ranging from demographic information to questions about influences on eating habits. The data was then entered and analyzed using SPSS statistical package.

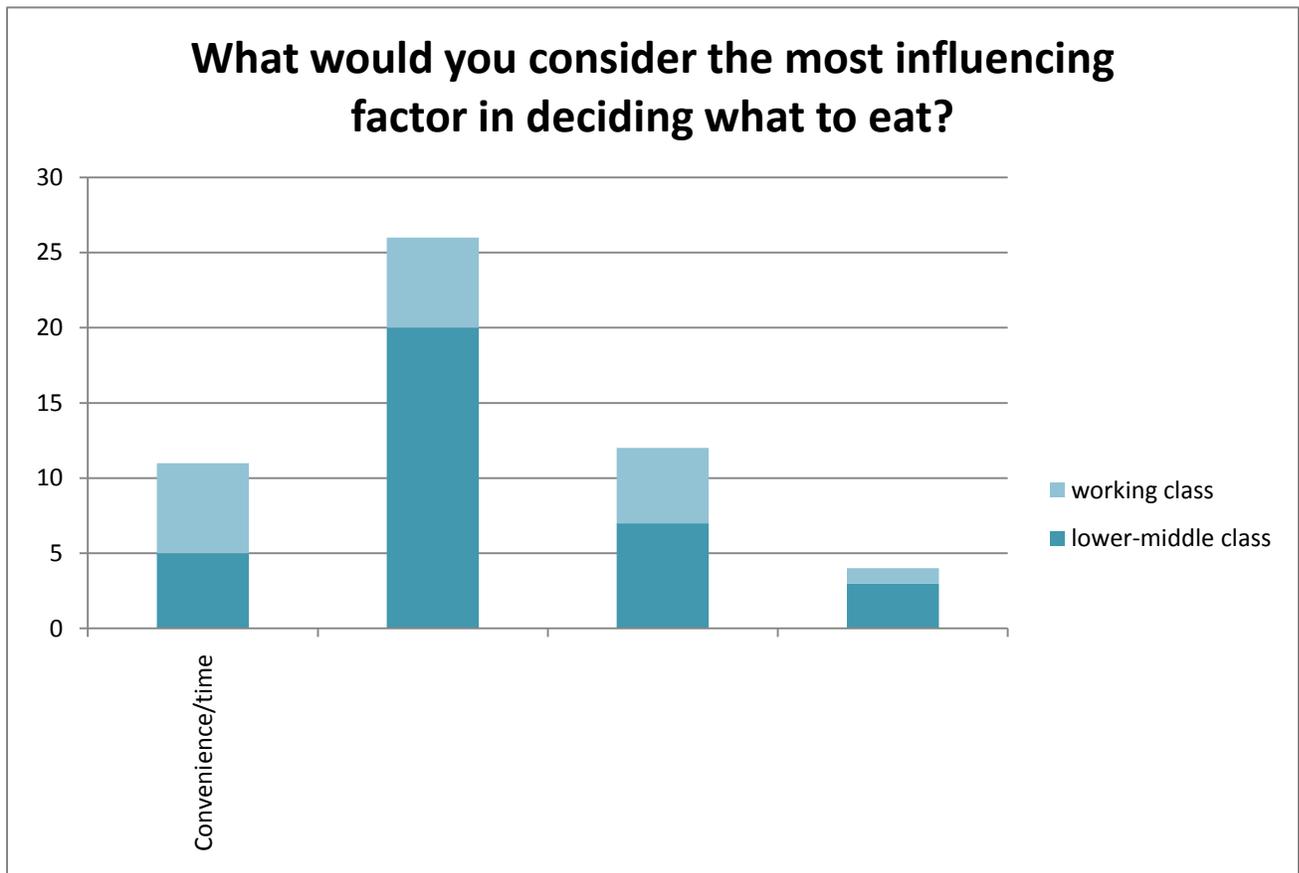
### **Hypothesis**

My hypothesis is that students from working and lower class background will be more influenced by money when making food choices. I believe that: 1) class will be a bigger indicator than race or gender; 2) a majority of students would eat healthier if both time and money were not factors; 3) students from working and lower class backgrounds will be more likely to think food choices are not an important factor towards overall health; and 4) students who frequently eat fast food and do not get the recommended amount of vegetables daily will be those of lower class.

### **Results**

In a survey of 219 students, they were predominately single, 18-24 year olds, with no children and an almost equal distribution by gender. Ethnically, the respondents were 63.6 percent white, 13.8 percent Hispanic, 12.9 percent Asian American, and 5.5 percent Black. For self identified social class, the respondents identified as 8.5 percent working class, 16.5 percent lower-middle class, 63.2 percent upper-middle class, and 11.8 percent upper class.

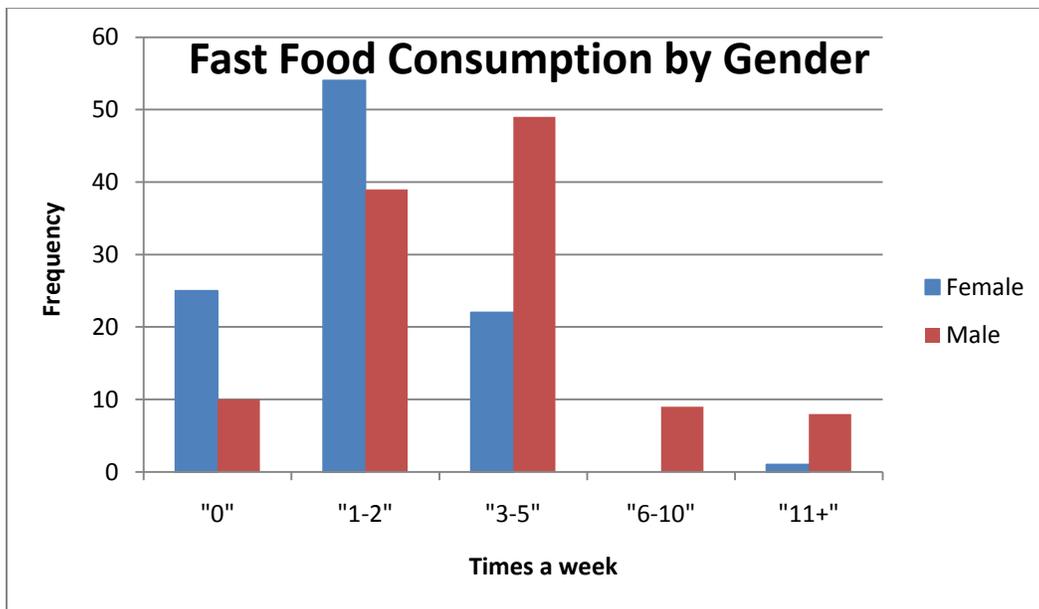
70.2 percent of respondents did not eat the recommended amount of vegetables on an average day, yet 62.4 percent described their food choices as healthy. 62.0 percent indicated that they would eat healthier if money was not an issue and 82.0 percent would eat healthier if time were not an issue. While overall the most influencing factor in deciding what to eat was fairly close, with 33.5 percent preference, 30.3 percent convenience, and 28.9 percent money, when accounting for social class the results change. Money becomes the overwhelming factor (with 49.1 percent) when looking at working and lower-middle class students. Breaking it down by race, whites were most influenced by convenience, Hispanics and Blacks by money, and Asian Americans by preference.



In looking at fast food consumption, 42.9 percent ate fast food 1-2 times a week, 32.7 percent 3-5 times a week, and only 8.2 percent eating it more than 6 times a week. Accounting

for social class, the results yield similar results. When looking at gender though, females tend to consume less fast food than males.

There was no evidence that students from working class or lower-middle class thought about the effect of food on health any differently than students from other social classes or felt they were knowledgeable about food and health. Fast food consumption was not linked significantly with class in any way. Those students that ate the recommended amount of vegetables daily were less likely to eat fast food, more likely to eat breakfast, and more likely to eat at regular hours. There is definitely a clustering of positive eating behaviors apparent in college students' eating habits, although this is not the case for all students, there is a great deal of variation in responses to food habits.



### Analysis and Discussion

The data show that both time and money have an impact on the eating habits of college students. The data also show how different groups of people may use different rationales in deciding what foods to eat. Social class, gender, and race all influence different aspects of eating habits. The data showed that a majority of students would eat healthier if money and/or time

were not a factor in deciding what to eat. The data also show that the price of eating healthy disproportionately affects the working and lower-middle class students since money is more of a factor for that population while, preference is actually most influential not looking at social class.

The study shows that there is a clear distinction between how healthy college students think they are eating and how they are really eating. Further, the study highlights the emphasis of social class on eating habits, not only is money a factor in eating habits but time is too; as the saying goes, “time is money,” which links time directly to social class. Although time may be linked to money, it seemed to be a factor that was indicative of students of all classes. The general price of healthy food options available to college students should be looked at, as well as the possibility of increasing the prices of unhealthy food and lowering the price of healthy food. Since time was also the most influential, creating quicker healthy options for students would likely change eating behaviors.

## **Conclusion**

Why are college students eating unhealthily? It is more than choice that causes students to not eat healthy. There are structural forces that make it difficult for college students to eat healthy. The barriers for college students to eating healthy are primarily time and money. The preference for unhealthy food is also a factor, though the survey used is not capable of capturing the issue of food preference. Results do indicate that money and time have profound impacts on the eating habits of college students. Other limitations of this study are that it is based on self-described eating habits and behaviors which may or may not adequately reflect reality. Students may not act in accordance with what they think. This same problem also affects the distinction of social class, self-identified social class is not the best indicator of true class standing. The true social class distribution may be different. There is also no way to analyze the compounding of

factors, money may make time a factor or vice versa. Still, even with its limitations, this study provides interesting information that can serve as a foundation for further studies of the eating habits of college students and what factors influence those practices.

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Thank you for participating in this questionnaire for my honors thesis project on college eating habits. Please be honest, there are no right or wrong answers. This is completely anonymous; do not put your name.

**Please circle the answer choice that best applies.**

**Age** 18-24 25-30 31-36 37+

**Gender** Male Female

**Marital Status** single married

**# of children** 0 1 2+

**Class background** working class lower-middle class upper-middle class upper class

**Race/Ethnicity** White Black Asian Hispanic American Indian Other

**Are you a vegetarian?** Yes No

**How many times a week (7 days) do you eat fast food?** 0 1-2 3-5 6-10 11+

**On an average day do you eat the recommended 2 ½ cups of vegetables?** Yes No

**Do you eat breakfast on a regular basis?** Yes No

**Do you eat at regular hours?** Yes No

**How would you best describe your food choices?**

Extremely healthy healthy unhealthy extremely unhealthy

**Would you eat healthier if money were not an issue?** Yes No

**Would you eat healthier if time were not an issue?** Yes No

**What would you consider the most influencing factor in deciding what to eat?**

Convenience/time money preference/taste other\_\_\_\_\_

**Do you view your food choices as an important factor towards your overall health?**

Yes No

**Do you feel you have an adequate amount of knowledge about healthy food to make good choices concerning food?** Yes No