

The Motivations of College Diet Stakeholders and Impacts on the Student Relationship

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid
on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Does diet hold an influence over performance? A positive correlation was shown in a 2003 study of elementary school students in Nova Scotia, as “students with decreased overall diet quality were significantly more likely to perform poorly on the assessment” (Florence, 2008). These results open questions to other contexts such as performance impacts on working adults or mitigation of age-related diseases on the elderly. The research I have and will continue to address is the application of these results on college students. The first stage of research involved identifying the diet stakeholders in a college environment, which was completed in my prospectus. The second stage of research and purpose of the current paper is understanding the motivations of said stakeholders and the implications on how diet improvements should be approached. The final stage will involve research into links between diet and performance in young adults and will provide specific suggestions to the identified stakeholders on how to improve diets.

In regards to researching stakeholder motivations, why is this useful? The intent, purpose, and role of the stakeholders in student lives alters the feasibility of different diet improvement approaches, with some better aligning with stakeholder values than others. As such, in this paper, the purpose and the perspective on students will be analyzed from the stakeholder point of view to help with future development of a generic action plan catered to the particular relationship.

The first question to be answered are the stakeholders in question. As researched in the prospectus, the most impactful influencers to a student’s diet include dining halls, food providers, college administration, and students themselves. With this selection, to answer the question set forth on stakeholder perspectives, college administration and food providers will be the case of study, providing numerous unique examples of student health involvement. The exclusion of

dining halls is in large part due to the lack of distinction that can be made between it and the college administration's decision making. Students are also excluded from the analysis since their influence can be less easily modified through generic plans.

The obvious question introduced is the relevance of obtaining unique examples of student health-related interactions. The answer: these interactions provide insight into the relationships between the stakeholders and students, better defining the perspectives on them. Given this emphasis on relationships, the researched interactions will be summarized and categorized under labels that define said relationships. The most prominent labels in a college diet context are community, next generation, and customer, which will be the foundation of the framework used for this analysis.

Using this framework, the relationships within the following case studies will be analyzed: the Healthier Campus Initiative and Great Lakes Food Service Providers. The selection of these studies is a result of the respective focuses on college administration and food providers, giving a holistic view on college student stakeholder perspectives. By defining the student relationships in each case study, the perspective of stakeholders on students can be better understood and mapped. With better insight into the stakeholder views, custom proposals can be initiated in regards to changing the college diet. These proposals will not be addressed in this paper due to the separate branch of research; however, this paper intends to address and analyze the perspective of the major diet stakeholders on students through examination of the mentioned case studies.

Discussion of Literature

Inspiration for this topic of research derives from the heavy focus on the links between diet and performance, however outside of a college or even academic context. An example is

Raymond Starling's research on fat versus carbohydrate diet impacts on muscle triglyceride concentration and muscle glycogen storage. These are important measurements of body energy storage and athletic performance recovery. He found that "the ingestion of a high-fat diet increased muscle triglyceride concentration by 36%, 24 h after the cycling bout", and that a high-carbohydrate diet would "increase muscle glycogen storage" (Starling, 1997). Based on the substantive evidence he provides, there are clear positive links between macronutrient-focused diets and athletic performance recovery. These results led me to question how this can apply to other contexts, such as mental or intellectual benefits.

This questioning was further inspired by the studies found on the beneficial links drawn between certain foods and brain development at young ages. Steven Zeisel's study on choline and the effects on brain development are a key example of this. Via testing on rat pups, he found that when pups "received choline supplements (in utero or during the second week of life), their brain function is changed, resulting in lifelong memory enhancement" (Zeisel, 2004). The significance of this supplementation is apparent given the researchers could "pick out the groups of animals whose mothers had extra choline even when these animals are elderly" (Zeisel, 2004). The clear impacts of choline on permanent memory retention implies the potential of a "good" diet towards enhancing general brain performance.

With many similar studies and extensive research existing, I intend to look into how diets can enhance short term brain function and performance in a college environment. This requires research into the integration of these changes in light of college diet stakeholders' intention, a rarely addressed topic, which is the focus of this paper.

Discussion of Cases

Healthier Campus Initiative

The Healthier Campus Initiative is an initiative created by the Ohio Regional Campus administration, with the intent to improve student health on campus.

Of multiple goals set by HCI, promoting “quality of life, healthy development, and positive health” (Roncone, 2019) of students was among the most important. Thus, the administration evidently view themselves as facilitators to the college lifestyle. Not to mention there is a sense of community, given the wellbeing of students and faculty are taken as responsibilities by the administration. Further example of this is observed in the review system that was implemented to gain participant/student feedback. Participant evaluation forms were provided, giving room for metrics including “perceived psychological benefits, perceived overall health benefits, and overall program effectiveness” (Roncone, 2019). Not to mention participants were provided an opportunity to express “ways to improve the program” (Roncone, 2019), suggesting the critical nature of the user experience. Similar to the previous case, links can be drawn to the sense of community given the administration’s diligence in providing a program catered towards the students.

In a similar vein, the program hosted information sessions for the participants to enable them to better understand these efforts. One such example is the Kick Off event, which “was an informational-based delivery (open forum), with a question and answer period for the participants” and it “served as a motivational period to encourage participants” (Roncone, 2019). Beyond facilitating the health of students and faculty, the program made efforts to educate the participants. This suggests that the administration is treating this as a learning experience for the participants, implying this to be knowledge they would be able to take into the future. As such, they are treating students as the next generation, who they are responsible to educate to create a more learned society.

Breaking away from the responsibilities the administration had to the students, some interactions showcased the administration catering to its self-interests. This can be observed through the buy-in necessary for the participants to enter into the program. Specifically, “Participants had a fee of \$5.00 per person (\$10.00 per team) and had to sign-up and pay their entry fee in the Business Office” (Roncone, 2019). This is in addition to a liability protocol that was to be completed. Overall, this transactional interaction sheds a different light onto the initiative and administration. Rather than being selflessly obligated to the health of the students, they are expected compensation for their actions. The participants are treated as customers to this service of health. This is further supported by the advertised opportunity for prize money. During the 2014 spring semester “the top three teams with the most combined points earned the following cash awards: First Place, \$70.00 (\$35.00 each partner); Second Place, \$40.00 (\$20.00 each partner); and Third Place, \$20.00 (\$10.00 per partner)” (Roncone, 2019). This differs from the first example due to the monetary benefit applying to the participants, however it leaves the same impression. There is a major emphasis on the monetary transaction between the participants and HCI, detracting from the health intent. In turn, the participants can be seen more as customers to HCI’s business in which they are buying their way to a healthier life.

The relationship between HCI and students and faculty was complex, but it can ultimately be defined by three labels: community, next-generation, and customers. Utilizing these labels, the administration-student relationship will be better defined, enabling a greater understanding of the college administration’s view of its students.

Great Lakes Food Service Providers

The shift in food providers for liberal arts programs in the Great Lakes region during the 2000s was a movement towards greater fresh and healthy food accessibility. This was a

consequence of increased focus on food and diet, thus implying the availability of useful information on both food provider and college administration intent. The following section delves into unique perspectives from individuals within the food provider-college system on the system. From this, a clearer view of the relationship between the food providers and colleges can be established, enabling conclusions on food provider views.

First, by stepping back to the initial shifts to fresh food FSPs, the motives for this change become apparent, providing insight into the goals of food providers and consequently intent and perspectives. The most obvious motivator for this change was the increased flexibility offered by fresh food FSPs who cater more to student preferences. A food service administrator from one such FSP comments the students want “more scratch cooking, more healthier menus [sic], more local purchasing”, hence “we (the current provider) got the contract” (Henshaw 2019). Whether or not this flexibility is the result of profit maximizing, the fresh food FSPs clearly intend to act partly in service to the students. Similar to the college administration, a feeling of community is showcased, as the wellbeing of the students are treated as a priority by the food providers. This argument is further supported by the interactions and emotions of the individuals within the FSPs. A manager from another FSP discusses the attitudes of their chef, mentioning:

The relationship (with the institution) is exciting for the chef, the chef has liberties. They get to set the menus; that's not the norm in the university food service world. (Henshaw 2019)

This goes without saying, but this excitement and freedom suggests the chefs willingness to better students through their food. Not to mention, these decisions being in the hands of chefs does inherently propose that food health and taste are placed as a priority, once again suggesting

FSPs' care for student wellbeing. This further strengthens the fresh food FSPs association with students and the community between.

Similar to the administration, food providers also serve their own self-interest, which is evident in the transactional relationship that occurs between them and colleges. The instantiation of the fresh prep FSP market is a prime instance of this. Henshaw notes "Fresh prep FSPs have emerged to fill a market niche that appeals to institutions that already outsource their foodservice and compete for students who consider food an important institutional amenity" (Henshaw 2019). Not just fresh prep FSPs but FSPs in general were started as a for-profit industry that addressed a necessary market. Through this lens, FSPs are a business and both colleges and the students that fund FSPs are vital customers to it. This customer outlook is further shown by the bias the food providers place towards the schools who spend more for their service. Namely, "institutions that had achieved higher percentages of local purchasing (35–45 percent) had created specific purchasing plans more narrowly defining local and putting additional emphasis on local acquisitions" (Henshaw 2019). The 35 to 45 percent local purchasing of food is significantly higher than the 20 percent available for basic plans, and showcases food provider preference towards relationships that benefit themselves. This transaction and prioritization of self-benefit once again showcases the business side of FSPs, meaning the students and colleges are viewed as customers to these organizations.

The final example of this customer based relationship extends to both college administrations and food providers. During one of the discussions within the study, a college administrator addresses the importance of food to retention for both providers and administration. He mentions that "you might be able to save some money, but if students are unhappy, in the long run it's a loss" (Henshaw, 2019). Essentially, poor food quality leads to

unhappy students and more reasons for the students to leave the college. This is bad business for the college and FSPs, and the obvious intent to avoid this is further affirmation of the business structure residing in both entities.

Reviewing the major points acquired from the case, there are a few conclusions that can be made. The influence of the FSPs in the Great Lakes region implies they hold significant power in transforming college diets, especially when little competition is present. Furthermore, the relationship between the food providers and students are straightforward compared to the administration. The predominant relationships found are community and customer, which will be the basis of further analysis into food provider perspectives on students.

Analysis

To reiterate the purpose of defining these diet stakeholder relationships, the theory of reasoned action can be used, concluding that “intentions are the proximal predictors of behavior” (Sheeran, 2002). The existing relationships between students and food diet stakeholders while derived from observed behaviors and interactions also serves the purpose of predicting future behaviors. In view of this, the specified relationships enable the writing of a generic diet action plan that are in line with the expected behavior for these entities. Thus, the weight of each stakeholder relationship will be addressed in regards to the overall student relationship, providing an accurate representation of expected behaviors and opportunity for a more integrated action plan.

The interactions and perspectives between the college administration and students were defined by community, next-generation, and customer. Bearing in mind the few examples supporting the label of next-generation, especially in regards to performance-based dieting, this label will hold little influence in the proposed action plan. Between community and customer,

there are a roughly equal number of interactions that support these relationships, so that alone is not a useful metric to determine how the relationships contrast. Rather, the quality (instead of quantity) of these interactions should be addressed in the context of applicability and universalizability in a general college environment. Case in point, larger universities struggle with building community-like relationships due to “the number of faculty members and administrators (sometimes 2,000)” being “too large and the physical dispersion of the campus (sometimes 60 different buildings)” being “too great for informal contact to coordinate the whole” (Clark, 1972). Compared to smaller colleges that are physically and figuratively closer due to a greater teacher to student ratio and more, the responsibility to community is inherently less in larger schools. Considering the clear discrepancies and lack of consistency in the community-based relationship between college administration and students, an action-plan appealing to this relationship would be similarly inconsistent in its effectiveness. Thus, for the sake of creating a generic diet action plan for college administration, the college-student relationship will be treated as transactional or customer-based.

Differing slightly from college administrations, food provider relationships with students are solely defined by community and customer. The slightly less complex relationship is a consequence of the more focused purpose of the FSPs. FSPs exist to provide other entities fresh food and well-prepared meals versus college administrations’ more diverged focus on students. Both purposes factor into the college outsourcing of food provisioning to FSPs, which is aptly described by the following statement: “food service providers are commonly paid directly” with the condition they are “willing to work with the university to meet the needs of the students” (Glickman, 2007). Multiple important takeaways are present. One is the obvious presence of the customer relationship given the payment and obvious presence of community given the

expectation of working with students. More importantly however, the willingness to benefit students directly impacts opportunities for payment. Conversely, adequate payment has a significant impact on the FSPs capabilities in improving student diets. Thus, it is difficult to separate the community and customer relationships existing between students and FSPs, as they are very much intertwined and mutually beneficial to each other. This is relevant in the context of an FSP-oriented diet action plan, since both relationships are important to the student diet and as such, both must be considered in the writing of the plan.

Conclusion

The original inspiration for this focus on college diet stakeholders was an interest in improving college student diets. The initial research, as conveyed in the prospectus, emphasized understanding the stakeholders in a student's diet, narrowing the target audience of the study. This was followed by the current research, which views how these stakeholders relate to, view, and behave towards students.

The Healthier Campus Initiative and Great Lakes FSPs were effective cases in proving the intentions and behaviors of college administration and food providers respectively. The plethora of examples available in these cases established the relationships present between these stakeholders and students. Between the determined relationships of community, next-generation, and customer, each relationship was separately weighed leading to determinations that college administrations primarily view students as customers and food providers see students as a tandem of community and customers.

Where does this research leave us? Now that the relationships between students and both college administration and food providers have been defined, and relevant relationships determined, an action plan can be created that appeals to the perspectives of the studied

stakeholders. This is significant, as the solutions provided through the action plan will match the intent of the addressed stakeholders, increasing the viability and effectiveness of said solutions. In regards to future research, the specifics behind performance-based dieting are in question. Specific questions that are important to the action plan include the impact of food on cognition, positive links between food and cognition, and the incorporation of these links into diets. Only with this foundation in tandem with the current research, can an accurate action plan be proposed for the college administration and food providers.

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