

We Don't Have a Lot of Healthy Options: Food Environment Perceptions of First-Year, Minority College Students Attending a Food Desert Campus

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Abstract:

First-year college students are at particular risk of dietary maladaptation during their transition to adulthood. A college environment that facilitates consistent access to nutritious food is critical to ensuring dietary adequacy among students. The objective of the study was to examine perceptions of the campus food environment and its influence on the eating choices of first-year students attending a minority-serving university located in a food desert. Focus group interviews with twenty-one first-year students were conducted from November 2016 to January 2017. Students participated in 1 of 5 focus groups. Most interviewees identified as being of Hispanic/Latino or Asian/Pacific Islander origin. A grounded theory approach was applied for inductive identification of relevant concepts and deductive interpretation of patterns and relationships among themes. Themes related to the perceived food environment included adequacy (i.e., variety and quality), acceptability (i.e., familiarity and preferences), affordability, and accessibility (i.e., convenience and accommodation). Subjective norms and processes of decisional balance and agency were themes characterizing interpersonal and personal factors affecting students' eating choices. The perceived environment appeared to closely interact with subjective norms to inform internal processes of decision-making and agency around the eating choices of first-year students attending a minority-serving university campus located in a food desert.