Qualitative Analysis of Student Experiences With Food Access Over Academic Breaks

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Background: Students at residential colleges often rely on meal plans and campus dining opportunities for food access. These facilities often close over academic breaks and there is limited research on how students staying on campus adapt.

Objective: The goal of this study was to explore student experiences with food access when staying on campus over academic breaks.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: The qualitative, exploratory study took place at two coordinated, residential colleges in Minnesota. Eligible participants were undergraduate students over the age of 18 that stayed on campus for at least one academic break during the semester. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and asked about participants’ meal plans, living situations, and experiences accessing food over breaks in comparison to when school is in session. Food security status was assessed via the USDA Six-item Household Food Security Survey Module.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Inductive thematic coding by two independent coders was conducted to determine thematic analysis.

Results: Twenty-four participants completed interviews. Forty-two percent (n = 10) of participants were food insecure. Common barriers for accessing food over breaks were campus dining center closures or limited hours, lack of resources to purchase extra food, and limited personal kitchen access. Fifty-four percent (n = 13) of participants lived in dorms with a community kitchen and 46% (n=11) had apartment-style living with personal kitchens. Fifty-eight percent (n = 14) of participants had unlimited meal plans that couldn’t be used during breaks. These participants were more likely to “eat less than they normally would” during breaks than students with smaller meal plans. Themes in coping mechanisms for accessing food over breaks when on-campus opportunities were closed were transportation from friends, using their own monetary resources or money from family to purchase food, and collaborating with students that had personal kitchen access to cook group meals.

Conclusion: Students that rely frequently on campus dining opportunities may lack access to food during academic breaks. College campuses need to consider opportunities to support these students moving forward.

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Snacking Consumption Among Adults in the United States: A Scoping Review

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Background: Head Start teachers have suggested using food as a tool to teach across learning domains may alleviate well-described barriers to nutrition education in the preschool classroom. While there are clear benefits to food-based learning (FBL), concerns have been raised about the nutritional quality of foods featured.

Objective: Explore experiences of Head Start teachers’ use of FBL during experiences focused on science, (language) arts, and mathematics (SAM) in the preschool classroom.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Thirty-five indepth semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with teachers from 16 counties across North Carolina. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Researchers used thematic analysis to identify significant statements through open and focused coding. Codes were grouped into themes and interrelated themes were condensed into a description of teachers’ experiences. Researchers also identified and counted specific foods used during learning experiences.

Results: Participants were 94% female, 40.8 years (SD = 10.06), predominantly White (52.9%) or Black/African American (44.1%), and of non-Hispanic (97.1%) ethnicity. Teachers identified 105 foods used to teach across learning domains. 44.8% of food items featured were “unhealthy” (high in sugar, fat, sodium, and/or calories). Teachers most frequently described using food in hands-on “experiments” (eg, potato clock) to teach science, graphs and measuring activities to teach mathematics, and reading books about food featured in hands-on activities or during meals/snacks to encourage literacy. Finally, teachers stated that food-based science experiments were often used due to their ability to engage young children’s senses. However, these activities more often wasted food during investigations and were least likely to be clearly connected to health or academic outcome.

Conclusion: Teachers use FBL as a teaching tool across multiple learning domains, but additional training on reducing waste, and aligning activities with Science learning standards is needed.

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