Development and Implementation of a Nutrition Security Plan within a large public university

Objective

To develop a Nutrition Security Plan to improve equitable and sustainable access to healthy foods among young adults in college.

Methodology

- Community Based Participatory Research using a movement-building evaluation framework.
- Engaged community partners include: university administration, food service contract staff, county health department staff, NC DHHS nutrition staff and college students (including international student representatives).
- Employed mixed methods design for data analysis.

Results

12 Item Nutrition Security Action Plan (those in green have been implemented)

- Create a centralized resource center for student needs such as food, housing, and financial literacy.
- Provide food storage (e.g., refrigerators) and cooking equipment (e.g., microwaves) in selected buildings across campus.
- Develop and promote the SNAP eligibility Screener for Students university communication platforms, Student Assistance and Support Services (SASS), International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO), and student organizations and gatherings.
- SNAP authorization of convenience stores on campus
- Develop programs that increase food literacy through nutritional knowledge and cooking skills
- Create more effective nutritional accommodations that provide healthier food and culturally sensitive food options in university cafeterias/meal plans and food pantry.
- Use course materials and syllabus statements to connect with students facing food and nutrition security.
- Improve bus routes or ride sharing to provide access to healthy food stores and food pantries.
- Provide larger amounts of funding to meet student food needs.
- Increase the reach and usage of the Swipe Out Hunger program by increasing the cap on the number of swipes that can be accepted through donations.
- Incorporate the GiveHealthy system for Jamil Niner Pantry food donations.
- Improve awareness around campus resources and interventions that address food and nutrition insecurity.

Introduction

Prior research shows that college students struggle with food insecurity and without an inclusive and holistic framework to address it long-term, conditions such as the current health pandemic would continue to exacerbate both food and nutrition security*.

Data analysis and Interpretation

First, analysis of food purchasing data showed interesting trends in student food purchasing behavior. The analysis in Figure 1 reveals that fast food stores make up about 58% of transactions in the top food purchasing locations on campus while stores with relatively healthier food options make up about 1.2% of these transactions.

Second, analysis of information gathered on existing nutrition supporting services on campus (e.g. food pantry, Swipe out Hunger, student garden) revealed emerging themes useful for issue framing. Data shows that University policies prevent students from easily sharing meal plan swipes, complicating food access. Also, the majority of students served in the Swipe out Hunger program are international graduate students.

Conclusion

Providing equitable access to healthy foods for young adults has both short and long-term benefits for public health and social outcomes. Implementing a Nutrition Security Plan on university campuses is a step towards achieving this goal. Nutrition educators are encouraged to collaborate with university partners to develop Nutrition Security Plans for their campus community.