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Reporting & Writing / 201-1
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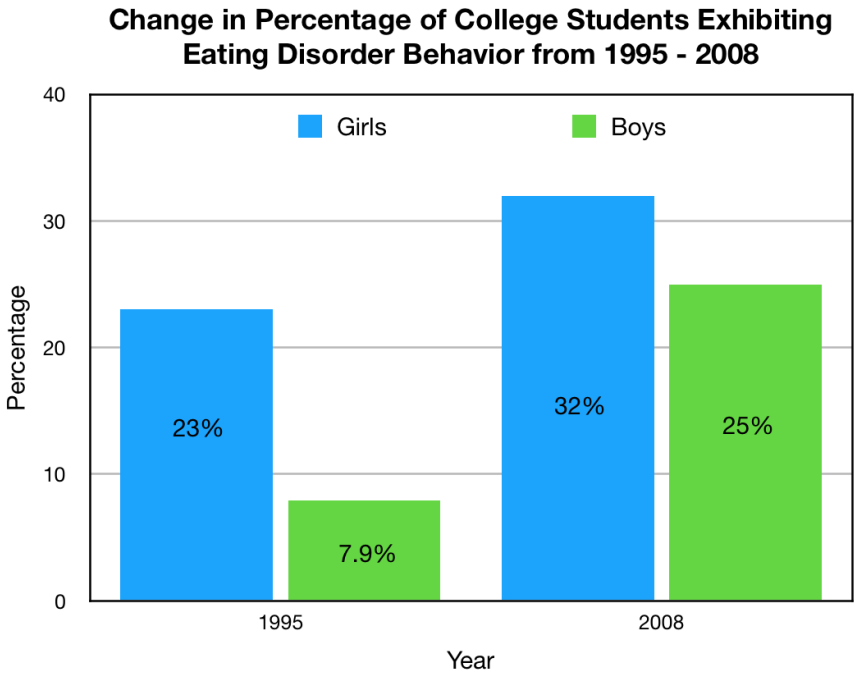
5 December 2018
Enterprise Story Final Draft
Word Count: 1,076

Eating culture on college campuses and learning to exert "positive control"

"Genetics loads the gun, but the environment pulls the trigger." For Northwestern University senior Hannah Collins, 22, her transition to a college campus did just that, and the gun went off. Collins was later hospitalized for an eating disorder.

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, eating disorders are on the rise in college-aged students, as "data from one college over a 13-year period shows total eating disorders increased from 23 to 32% among females and from 7.9 to 25% among males." And, eating disorders result in more fatalities than any other mental disorders.



Source of Data: Disordered eating and the use of unhealthy weight control methods in college students: 1995, 2002, and 2008

However, Casey Tallent, the National Collegiate Outreach Director for Eating Recovery Center, said that “we see those statistics rising because people are becoming more and more aware that it is alarming.” In turn, a greater number of individuals exhibiting symptoms are being diagnosed, rather than a rising number of individuals developing the issue. Regardless of the trend, eating disorders on campus remain an issue.

The start of college is marked by anxiety, new experiences and independence, said Northwestern University’s registered dietician, Lisa Carlson. Independence can be daunting. TeriSue Smith-Jackson, a public and community health professor at Utah Valley University and author of research articles on eating disorders and body image, said first-year students can be struck with feeling “now I'm in control and I don't really want to be in control.”

Rather than facing the challenges of autonomy, Smith-Jackson said that “they latch onto something, like food, that they can control, as opposed to dealing with, now I’ve got to grow up and figure out what I want to be.”

Courtney Lewis, 21, who attended Northwestern University through her sophomore year and is a current junior at DePaul University, can attest to utilizing food as a coping mechanism. “I think deciding that I was going to lose weight gave me something I could do to improve the stress and other pressures put on me.”

If colleges can promote a sense of wellbeing and control not tied to calorie counts and digits on a scale, students could have the potential to control their own health in a different, more productive manner.

Shannon O'Connor, a postdoctoral fellow in the psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience department at University of Chicago, said that "seeing the calories typically doesn't change someone's decision to select something." Students such as Katerina Alexopoulos, 18, a Northwestern University freshman, agree that calorie counts do not influence their choices within campus dining halls.

Both O'Connor and Smith-Jackson recognize that calorie-counting can turn problematic for individuals recovering from an eating disorder or genetically predisposed to eating disorders. "I found that I was obsessing over these counts and making sure that I stayed below a certain number that I could burn off on the treadmill," Lewis said.

Northwestern offers alternatives to calorie-counting to promote personal wellness without steering students down the path to eating disorders. Although calories are displayed, Carlson emphasized that the amounts of macronutrients, such as carbohydrates and proteins, are listed and provide a more complete picture.

In addition, Carlson said Northwestern dining halls have purposefully replaced trays with plates. With a smaller plate, students can eat and then contemplate whether or not they are truly hungry for a second round.

Hannah Lachow, 20, a Northwestern University junior, finds a sense of control through beginning with a small portion. When she simply piled all she planned to eat on her plate, she often felt “gross” after finishing her meal. “It made me feel better to be more incremental, even if that meant I was eating more in the end, just so I could have more control over what I was eating.”

However, students argue that even with the inclusion of macronutrients and the substitution of trays, visually determining what constitutes a healthy portion of food remains a challenge. “I’m a vegetarian, so my mom is always having to remind me that I’ll have to eat visually a bigger portion to get adequate nutrients than someone who eats meat. But at the same time, when there’s no visual given for an adequate portion, it’s nerve-wracking,” Collins said. Lewis also described comparing her plate with those of others as a stressor.

The structuring of dining halls is only a single piece of the greater wellness puzzle. O’Connor advocates for an educational component of promoting healthy habits.

“I think talking about balance is important and that all foods can be part of a healthy diet, rather than saying these foods are bad foods, avoid these foods altogether, because that kind of leads to extreme restriction,” O’Connor said.

Matching O’Connor’s mindset on balance, Lachow sees the importance of straying from that “black-and-white” terminology, and then firmly deciding “toast is ok, but bagels are not ok.”

People's perceptions of their own health can be skewed by their devised categories of healthy versus unhealthy because "sometimes, something that is more caloric is better for you," Lachow said.

Regardless of an individual's definition of healthy, Carlson recommends students rely on timely meals rather than sporadic snacks. She is not opposed to snacking, but advocates for students to "plan a good snack, so then you're not faced with 'Oh my god. I haven't eaten for three hours and I have a class,' so it's only the vending machine."

Even when planning meals, an individual can remain restricted to unhealthy options, Lachow said. "Late night would often only have pizza and dessert. If you have class that goes until 8 p.m. and you're eating dinner at 8:30, if you are someone that's struggling with an eating disorder, it's easy to be like, there's nothing here for me to eat."

Lewis sees that a healthy relationship with food extends beyond the dining halls and involves thoughts surrounding yourself. "Something that's also been super important for my recovery is radical acceptance," Lewis said. "Accepting that you're not in control of everything, and it's ok, and realizing that you can control your actions in response to those stressors, even if you can't control the stressor itself." She is a proponent of finding activities that are soothing and "allow you to take a break."

For Collins, relying on her strong relationships and finding control in other areas of her life has contributed to healthier eating habits. "Staying organized in other aspects of your life helps

because you have something to write down and feel good about — I'm making a list, I'm doing all of these things for myself, I'm exerting positive control." ###