Promoting Balanced Eating using a Non-Diet Approach in University Dining Services

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THE CHALLENGE:
PROMOTING BALANCED EATING IN CURRENT DIET CULTURE

College is a time when lifelong habits around eating are solidified (Lee, 2013). College students require significant overall calories from macronutrients, as well as micronutrients such as calcium, iron, and potassium. Unfortunately, most college students do not meet recommended nutritional needs. Research shows college students eat fewer fruits and vegetables and more foods high in fat and calories than recommended (Lee, et al. 2013). And, certain eating habits like skipping meals are concerning habit-forming behaviors. College students experience many barriers to balanced eating, including workload, poor sleep, social pressures, and stress.

Unhealthy weight loss methods are also common among college students. Between the myth of the “Freshman 15” and weight stigma prevalent in our society, it is easy to see why. In fact, weight gain is normal from ages 16 to 20 years old, and research shows a normal weight gain of about 2.5-3.5 pounds during freshman year (Zagorsky, 2011). Further, individuals in large bodies who practice healthful lifestyle behaviors live just as long as their smaller counterparts (Bacon and Aphramor, 2011).

Restrictive dieting leads to inadequate energy intake, which impacts ability to function. It also incurs a variety of medical, social, and psychological consequences. One concerning side effect of dieting is eating disorders. It is estimated that eating disorders affect about 25-32 percent of college students (White, 2011).

The challenge for University Dining Services is to provide and educate students about balanced food options, while empowering students to use internal, rather than external, eating cues.

THE SOLUTION:
THE BALANCED PLATE MODEL

Boston College’s Balanced Plate Model was made to communicate with students and dining staff with a comprehensive diagram of balanced eating that depicts adequacy, moderation, and variety. Further, the model combats diet culture with Intuitive Eating principles.
Intuitive Eating is an approach that includes eating for physical rather than emotional reasons; eating when hungry; and giving full permission to eat all foods (Resch & Tribble, 2012).

One study surveyed 2,287 college-age students and found that students who trusted their bodies and responded to signals of hunger and fullness had lower body mass index measurements, less disordered eating behavior, and less chronic dieting than their counterparts who did not use Intuitive Eating (Denny et al, 2013). Other studies show that students who eat intuitively have better body acceptance, weight management, lower risk for chronic disease, and improved self-esteem versus students who do eat for external factors (Tylka, 2013).

**Highlights of the Balanced Plate Model:**
- Moderate portions of food give unconditional permission to eat. All foods are part of a balanced diet, even ‘fun’ foods.
- Incorporates dietary fats throughout the plate to promote thinking about diet in context, rather than as stand-alone nutrients.
- Encourages mindfulness of appetite signals and awareness of sensory pleasures of food to promote moderation and variety.
- Celebrates eating for cultural and social enjoyment and promotes balance.
- Students who do physical activity for one hour or more per day need more than plate carbohydrates.

In all-you-care-to-eat university dining, the Balanced Plate Model can be adapted by placing vegetables next to proteins in appropriate portions and grains or starches that have appropriate-portioned serving utensils. Education in the dining hall should also eliminate messages of “avoid this” or “limit that”.

**ENGAGING STUDENTS**

The Balanced Plate Model is used to educate, empower, and engage students through discussions and handouts, information on the Boston College Dining website, and collaborative programming.

One example of utilizing the model among students is the “Guess the Balanced Meal” tabling activity, developed in collaboration with the Office of Health Promotion. In this activity, peer health coaches from the Health Coach Institute, who are trained by the Administrative Dietitian on the model, engage students in guessing which meal is most balanced from a choice of three displayed meals.

During Healthapalooza, a festival highlighting resources for health and wellness at Boston College, about 300 students completed the ‘Guess the Balanced Meal’ activity. Two-thirds of students did not guess the correct balanced meal, often citing the correct answer could not be balanced since a cookie was incorporated. This result emphasizes diet culture and stigma of certain foods.

The “Guess the Balanced Meal” tabling activity allows peers to educate students about the importance of carbohydrates and research that shows decreased chance of binge eating.
and psychological distress when students allow themselves permission to eat any food (Tylka, 2013). The 'Dining Made Easy' handout provided during the activity highlights balanced meal options that adhere to the model in the three major dining halls.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The Balanced Plate Model meets the challenge of educating students about their nutritional needs, while also promoting a non-diet message.
- Successful implementation of the model at Boston College has increased balanced menu options and reframed students' misconceptions about nutrition and dieting. Tracking sales and measuring student response will continue to inform efficacy of the model.
- Empowering and training staff, encouraging peer-to-peer interactions, and collaborating with campus partners have improved engagement and buy-in from students and staff.
- Every University Dining Service is suited to promote the Balanced Plate Model's messages. If there is a registered dietitian (RD) on staff, he/she is exceptionally suited to bridge gaps in knowledge among students and staff, formulate and enact interventions, and collect data. Even without a RD, the model can still be promoted among staff and students in ways that fit the unique environment and culture of the University.

**References:**


