

A Variant Perspective into the Nutritional Choices Made By Nursing Students

Kristy A. Brandabur

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Background/Introduction

Purpose: With the exorbitant amount of people in the world who are malnourished, overweight, obese, anorexic or suffering from a variety of illnesses due to the consumption of “tainted” food sources I wanted to uncover why my nursing students still made bad choices on a daily basis. The purpose of this research study was to initially look into the food choices made by my current nursing students, and why they made the decisions they did. I was very interested in finding out ‘why’ they made such poor choices given the fact that I was providing them with wealth of information as to how to eat in order to remain healthy.

Current research has discovered that many of our foods that are available today are made with synthetic products or are tainted with antibiotics, pesticides, hormones and other various chemicals. With this being said I am an advocate for healthy diet and exercise and teach a functional nutrition course that allows my students to form opinions for themselves based on self-directed study (literature review) and basic dietary knowledge.

Primary Research Question: Why do nursing students make the choices that they do regarding their diet?

Secondary Research Question: How can we provide healthy diets for low income college students?

Demographics

Research data was collected on 48 first year nursing students attending a local proprietary (for profit) college. The ages of the students varied from 19-45 years of age. There are 3 male students and 45 female students. After conducting my initial research I added in the information on annual salary and government assistance because I found that most of the students were making food choices based on financial hardship. See Table 1.1 and 1.2

Table 1.1: Class demographics

	Males	Females	Average Age
Class #1- 16 students	2	14	23
Class #2- 11 students	0	11	29
Class #3- 13 students	1	12	25
Class #4- 8 students	0	8	32

Table 1.2: Household income

	Average household income	Receive government assistance
Class #1- 16 students	< \$10,000/year	12
Class #2- 11 students	< \$18,000/year	4
Class #3- 13 students	< \$20,000/year	2
Class #4- 8 students	< \$15,000/year 1 homeless	6

Methods

Learning in groups: In the initial research data collection I began meeting with the students as a class (focus group). I conducted focus groups on four occasions with each of the four classes involved. We would discuss general ideas about why people make specific food choices. The information that I received was exactly what I expected to hear almost repeated verbatim on what they have heard me lecture about in class. This information allowed me to come up with several trends and code the data that I used to formulate my 1:1 interview questions. I identified 4 areas that affect why students make the dietary choices they do. See Table 1.3

Table 1.3

Week 1	Avg. age of student	Male/Female	Cost	Convenience	Taste	No explanation
Class 1 (16 students)	23	2male/14female	9	6	1	0
Class 2 (11 students)	29	11 female	9	1	0	1
Class 3	25	1male/12female	5	5	3	0

(13 students)						
Class 4	32	8 female	6	2	0	0
(8 students)						
Totals			29	14	4	1
Feedback						

Participant Observation: On 5 different occasions I was able to enter the student break room (field setting) and just observe food choices. Through casual conversation I was able to gain a little more insight into my research and delve a little deeper. See Table 1.4

Table 1.4 Casual participant observation/discussion

	Cost	Convenience
Occasion 1	3	2
Occasion 2	4	0
Occasion 3	2	1
Occasion 4	1	0
Total	10	3

1:1 Interviews: As I moved into 1:1 interviews, the information that I received became much more personal, and I found there were trends in the data that I was collecting. At that point I began to revise my categories and realized that there was a much bigger problem here. It was at that point that my original research question was going to change as I began to understand the socioeconomic hardships of many of my students. This was when Table 1.2 was constructed.

In my 1:1 interviews I had several conversations with students about personal issues that they were willing to share. One female student responded “now that I am in school I have had to cut my hours at work. We were already collecting food stamps to help pay for food. Now things are really bad so we just do what we can do. Kids get free breakfast and lunch at school so they aren’t hungry. I sometimes try to “mooch” off my friends at school when they bring in lunch. Sometimes I just go hungry. You get to the point where you ain’t hungry no more.” Another student revealed to me that she had been living in a homeless shelter downtown and rode the bus to school so that she could make a better life for her and her kids. These personal interviews were heartbreaking to say the least. No electric, no food, no home, how were these students supposed to survive in school.

Literature Review #1: I conducted a review of literature after I did the initial research. The purpose of me conducting this research was to see if there was information available about the findings I was coming up with in my qualitative research. I reviewed three pieces of literature that

led me to understand my findings in a new light. According to the research I conducted, findings showed that a large percentage (54%) of individuals attending proprietary colleges come from low income families, and are typically the first in their family to attend college. This is in comparison to those individuals attending 2-year and 4-year colleges with the numbers falling between 34% and 25% respectively.

(http://www.nacubo.org/Research/Research_News/New_Report_Documents_Growth_in_Proprietary_Institution_Enrollment.html. Retrieved 2-26-2013)

Literature Review #2: Another review of literature returned similar results. The overall result was that “College retention and success research has determined that effective support services succeed in retaining and graduating low-income, first-generation students by “acknowledging their backgrounds, needs, and expectations and then taking action to accommodate them”. www.devryinc.com/resources/pdfs/Pell_DeVry_Report_May2011.pdf. Retrieved 2-26-2013. This again gives validity that the information that I collected in my research has a direct correlation to that of current research trends on proprietary schools and low-income families.

Literature Review #3: A third piece of literature that I reviewed identified that “The obesity epidemic is not so much a failure of biological systems but a social and economic phenomenon. At the individual level, the prevalence of obesity is higher among groups with low education and low incomes”. <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/135/4/900.full>. Retrieved 2-20-2013. Again, the primary focus is that poor nutrition is mostly the result of low income families.

Literature Review #4: The final literature that I reviewed was probably the most disturbing and gave validity to my research theory. “Recently coming under considerable scrutiny, for-profit institutions have been criticized by college access advocates and higher education officials skeptical of what they perceive to be aggressive marketing campaigns by for-profits that offer big promises to students. For-profit schools have also been accused of “misleading” students about the costs and debt they will incur.” <http://diverseeducation.com/article/13667/#>. Retrieved 2-27-2013. This piece made me really look at how my students were living, and caused me to feel a deep amount of compassion and pain for their struggling.

Triangulation: Using different sources of data collection (focus group, participant observation, 1:1 interviews, and literature review) allowed me to converge all of the information into a basic theory about my research findings.

Theory

Grounded Theory: data collection, coded, concepts, categories and theory

Thematic Analysis: taking the codes and forming a theory based on the codes which came from various forms of data collection.

Research Design

The following provides a view of the semi-structured *initial* questions that were used in the focus group discussions. You will see that these questions allowed for open ended responses. It was with this series of questions that the 1:1 interview questions evolved. The questions that were asked of the individuals and their responses were documented in a chart. The entire field notes were then combined into categories to aid in simplifying data collection. See Table 1:3

1. What do you consider when choosing foods?
2. How often do you shop for food?
3. How often do you eat out?
4. How often do you eat out as a family?
5. What one thing determines your food choice? Why?
 - convenience
 - cost
 - tastes good
 - no explanation

Upon the collection of this focus group data, when I moved into the 1:1 interview questions, you will see how the formatting of the questions changed based on the initial responses in Table 1:3. The 1:1 interview questions were a little more focused on my secondary theory. See Table 1.4

1. What do you consider when choosing foods?
2. How do you decide what foods to purchase at the grocery?
3. Is it necessary for you to get government assistance to pay for groceries?
4. What is the number one thing determines your food choice?
 - convenience
 - cost

Results

The results of my research provided me with findings that were consistent with my original theory as well as my revised theory based on the methods of collection. See Table 1.5

5 codes determined as to why students choose the foods they do:

1. nutritional value of food is not a priority
2. food stamps do not provide enough support
3. students tend to eat food that is convenient
4. students tend to eat food that is inexpensive
5. it tastes good

Table 1.5

Research results inventory	Student feedback
Nutritional value of food is not a priority	"When it comes to nutritional value, right now I can't worry about it. I am just trying to put food on the table. Sometimes it is cereal twice a day.

	I know I should be concerned, but I can't."(21 year old single female)
Food stamps do not provide enough support	"WIC only provides nutritional care up to 5 years old. I have a 3 year old, which that helps, but my other children are older. Food stamps barely cover the essentials for a family of four, and getting them is a rough process. There is so much you have to do to get assistance. They don't know how tough it is out there." (26 year old, mother of 3)
Students tend to eat food that is convenient	"I eat what is easy. McDonalds, Wendy's and Taco Bell are in walking distance to school. I don't have gas money to drive all over looking for better options. I take what I can get." (28 year old, mother of 3)
Students tend to eat food that is inexpensive	"I know Taco Bell is bad for me, but on my income I can get enough food to fill me up on just a couple of dollars. I can't go to the grocery and do that."(23 year old, mother of 2)
It tastes good	"Look at my belly! (laughing). I'm not too picky. I like what tastes good. I know it's all added fat, but I like it. It tastes good." (25 year old male)

The data collected in the focus group gave a very general picture of why students made the choices they did. Because of the format of the discussion, there was a great deal of light hearted chatter about liking the taste, and cheap. Unfortunately, this did not provide a clear cut answer to my original questions. It wasn't until the 1:1 interviews that I was truly able to collect the data that led me to my new revised research question and conclusion about student diet. It was from this data, that my entire perspective changed and I was able to formulate a strong conclusion to my research question.

Reflecting back on data collection and literature review, it is apparent that the typical student that attends proprietary college has many different concerns regarding meeting basic needs than that of the 2-year or 4-year college student. Because of these challenges, dietary concern is not a priority and typical food consumption is based on convenience and price, rather than nutritional value. Literature review acknowledges that students attending proprietary schools are often from lower income families, single parent led households, and are often the first of the family to go to college. This review helps to validate that my theory holds true.

As my research evolved, it became evident to me that the choices the students were making were not based on choice, but on financial limitations. Through interviews, casual discussion and observation it became very evident that my initial study was going to change and take a very personal turn. This brought on a whole new perspective on nutritional choices by low-income proprietary college students and altered my original research question. Students were honest and upfront with their responses. Tears were shed and visions of hope arrived as we discussed this was a temporary problem, and life would change for the better soon.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is a problem within the socioeconomic status of the population of first year proprietary school nursing students. This is having a great impact on the general health and nutrition of them and their families. If we expect individuals to lead healthy lifestyles it is critical that all populations are cared for in a way that something as simple as food choice does not have to be dictated by money.

It would be very beneficial to conduct an ethos or modal personality report in which one could review the cultures of these low-income individuals and try to discover ways of better providing for these individuals who are trying to improve their lives. Further research should be conducted to find a way to provide an equal opportunity for success for these students. I would suggest presenting the materials to those who make decisions based on higher education and equality of standards.

References

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but only if we help the public identify foods within each food group that are nutrient dense, affordable, accessible, and appealing

- Limiting low-cost foods may not help diet quality or reduce obesity rates
- We need a positive approach to dietary guidance



Please tell me about how you manage food and eating for yourself.
How about for your family?
How would you describe the kind of eater you are?
How would people closest to you describe the kind of eater you are?
What kind of eater would your mother say you were?
Were you always this kind of eater?
How have you changed?
What about the people close to you - what kind of eaters are they?
What kinds of eaters are your close friends?
What kind of eaters do you know at work?
What other kinds of eaters do you know of through your experiences?
Fill in the blank here:
“I’m not a something eater”
Fill in the blank here:
“I used to be a something eater.”
Fill in the blank here:
“I’d like to be a something eater.”
What kind of eater would you like to be?
Tell me more about that. (Why?)
What keeps you from eating this way?
Fill in the blank here: “I could never be a something eater”