

Nutrition Education for College Freshmen: What Works and What Does Not

What Was the Question?

Kicklighter, Koonce, Rosenbloom, and Commander (2010) identified the perceptions of 34 college freshmen, in a new student orientation course, concerning the effectiveness of a module called *Nutrition Survival Skills* taught by graduate nutrition students.

What Was Done?

The nutrition module content, which included a PowerPoint presentation, emphasized healthier food choices, portion control, and simple, healthy food preparation. Students analyzed their diet using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Interactive Healthy Eating Index (IHEI) and also played a nutrition game.

During the spring semester, three graduate students conducted five one-hour focus groups to gather the participants' impressions of the module and discover whether they had altered their eating behaviors. The sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. The results and major themes that emerged from the analysis were reviewed and verified by a nutrition faculty member.

What Was Found?

Five major themes emerged from the data analysis.

Theme 1: Acquisition of Knowledge. Students increased their knowledge of proper nutrition in relation to their previous knowledge of appropriate portion sizes, daily food selections, the amount of calories and fat in fast food and snack options, and how easy it is to shop for and prepare simple, healthy meals and snacks. Some students indicated the need to address their limited knowledge of proper nutrition by learning other strategies to choose healthier foods regardless of schedule, situation, or location.

Theme 2: Behavior Change.

Several students were willing to immediately change their current eating behaviors while others, primarily male students, stated they were unlikely to change their eating behaviors unless it was necessary. Rather than purchasing fast food, some students indicated that they were beginning to cook and prepare recipes from the nutrition module. The students also reported that they were starting to consume regular meals and healthy snacks, eating breakfast regularly, and avoiding soft drinks.

Theme 3: Instructor Characteristics for Effective Learning.

Students liked the informal and friendly manner in which the graduate nutrition students presented the information. Students reported an ability to relate the nutrition information to their own lives due to the candidness of the instructors, who described their own challenges with decisions to make healthier food choices.

Theme 4: Effective Aspects.

Students had the opportunity to handle food models and visually conceive the concept of variety based on food pictures in the PowerPoint presentation. Examples of simple recipes that included ingredients to purchase, meal preparation instructions, and the look of the finished product also enlightened the students. Because a number of the students lacked the appropriate measuring devices, portion-size equivalents (i.e., a deck of cards, a baseball) were useful in visualizing measurements when preparing meals. Lastly, students enjoyed the "nutrition survivor" game played at the end of the session because it helped them to integrate module information into their own life.

Theme 5: Less Effective Aspects. Some students reported

noncompletion of the IHEI; others who did complete the IHEI noted software limitations in food choice variety and that the module was not user friendly. Other less effective aspects of the nutrition module were its shortness and the need for more challenging recipes.

What Does the Study Mean?

Nutrition is an important aspect of the college experience, in which many incoming freshmen succumb to poor food choices, have inadequate funds to purchase healthier food options, or have limited knowledge of proper nutrition. In an effort to gain new insight on the effect of nutrition education in college freshmen, the authors qualitatively identified the type of information (i.e., portion control; simple, healthy, budget-friendly recipes; snack-food comparisons; disease prevention; and sports nutrition) and activities (i.e., food models, nutrition survivor game) that should be emphasized when nutrition is taught in classes and programs. In addition, the authors suggested that the findings of this study could assist health and nutrition professionals with the facilitation of university policies in regard to the types of nutrition services offered on campus.

Reference

Kicklighter, J. R., Koonce, V. J., Rosenbloom, C. A., & Commander, N. E. (2010). College freshmen perceptions of effective and ineffective aspects of nutrition education. *Journal of American College Health, 59*(2), 98-104.

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