A Qualitative Inquiry into the Appropriateness of and Need for Weight Management Interventions on College Campuses

Jacqueline Hayes, PhD & Hailey Tomashek

Background

• The college environment makes it difficult to maintain healthy weight-related behaviors
• 40% of college students meet criteria for obesity
• Research suggests student access to weight management interventions is limited.

STUDY AIM

To examine the perspectives of students and campus health providers and administrators on the appropriateness of and desire for weight management interventions on campus

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

• 24 participants from 10 higher education institutions in New England:
  - 10 students (18-25, BMI ≥ 25)
  - 6 student health providers,
  - 8 student health administrators

• Recruited through advertisements on campus and direct emails

PROCEDURES

Individual 60 min. semi-structured interviews were conducted in person/via Zoom.

Questions included:
1. Tell me about the range of weight concerns for students on campus.
2. What are the resources for weight management on campus?
3. What do you think about providing college students with a weight management program?

Two trained coders created transcript summaries and discussed and agreed on changes to discrepancies. Data were analyzed using rapid qualitative data analysis techniques.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Schools Represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N or M</td>
<td>N (or M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>M = 21.2 ± 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>5 (56%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>M = 30.0 ± 4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Results

Student Weight Concerns

- obesity more common on campus now compared to historical rates
- more weight-related health issues (e.g., hypertension, type 2 diabetes, PCOS) seen in health centers than previously
- disordered eating/eating disorders are common and often more concerning than obesity

Students

-- frequent concerns about weight
-- employ both healthy (e.g., better food choices, more physical activity) and unhealthy (e.g., fad diets) weight control strategies

It’s like it’s a Pandora box really... weight management is so conflated with the headlines of “I Lost 30 Pounds in One Week.” (Student, 19, M, Hisp)

We actually see a lot of eating disorders... and then we see the flip side as well. Hypertension didn’t used to be an adolescent medicine issue, and it is now so we are seeing the obesity or elevated BMI side of things as well. We see people with type two diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol...”

(Director of HS)

Students

-- eating disorders services
-- mental health services
-- social work/food pantries.
W’by WFM Program Don’t Exist?

-- limited existing resources
-- other higher priorities for health center/campus
-- weight is a sensitive/taboo topic

We’re very short staffed here at [school], as is everywhere else” (NP)

I used to think about [my weight] a lot, a lot. I went through periods of starving myself... and just doing really crazy things. Now not as much... but I always struggled with the thought of my weight and how it appears on me, wish that it wasn’t there.” (Student, 21, F, W)

Discussion

• Obesity and related health was frequently perceived as a relevant or growing issue among students, but this varied across institutions.
• Weight management programming was not offered at any school, outside of some citing one-on-ones with a dietician, though visits were often limited
• Participants generally believed weight management programming would be appropriate, but that it needed to prioritize health improvement and mental and physical well-being of student above weight loss
• Future research may consider how to best adapt a weight management program to be appropriate for students and campuses.

For correspondence, please email Jacqueline_hayes@brown.edu. Funded by NIDDK; K23DK128561; PI: Hayes.