



## BACKGROUND

- Obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and other chronic conditions are increasing in incidence among college students across the U.S., and more particularly across the southeastern U.S. Dietary interventions aimed at promoting long-term dietary change seldom address factors that contribute to food choices, such as social and environmental aspects of eating. College dining halls offer a variety of menu offerings; however, little is known about how student perceptions of a dining hall's menu, location, social atmosphere, layout, healthiness, and location influence food choices or student eating habits.

## OBJECTIVE

- To determine factors that influence freshmen food choice in dining halls and impact student perception of a dining hall's overall healthiness in order to shape future nutrition education efforts in college dining.

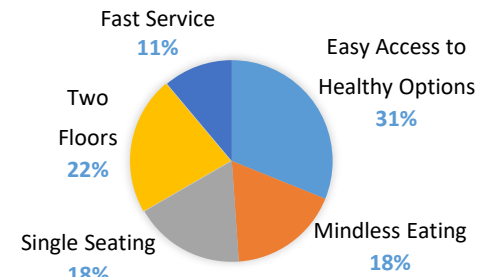
## METHODS

- Twenty freshmen living on campus with all-access meal plans participated in five focus groups.
- Focus groups discussed factors that affect healthy eating: time, class load, convenience, stress, peers, dining environment, social interaction, campus dining hall location, and dining hall menu offerings.
- Focus groups designed their ideal dining hall and ranked dining halls according to health, alleviating anxiety, social interaction, and best overall.
- Focus group responses were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings.
- Qualitative analysis was performed using MAXQDA software to systematically categorize focus group responses.
- Inter-rater reliability was established at 86% for coding and analyzing themes.
- Grounded theory was used as the qualitative data analysis strategy.

## RESULTS

- When designing the "ideal" dining hall, all focus groups placed healthy food and quick healthy items on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor within easy reach of the entrances and exits, and "social" and "unhealthy" food upstairs away from entrances and exits.

PERCENTAGE OF DIALOGUE SPENT ON  
TOP 5 THEMES DURING DESIGN OF THE  
IDEAL DINING HALL



### Ideal Dining Hall Traits All Focus Groups Had in Common:

#### Menu

- Healthy options such as salad bar, vegetarian line, yogurt bar, main/home cooked entree line, deli
- Coffee bar, grill, pizza, desserts
- Variety of food options without the overload of too many choices

#### Layout

- 1<sup>st</sup> floor: healthy options, quick service, study space
- 2<sup>nd</sup> floor: "unhealthy" food, social, fun, desserts

#### Healthiness

- Make healthy easy the automatic choice
- Make healthy eating the quick and convenient choice
- Make mindless eating hard

### Key Themes

#### Healthiness Made Easy

##### *Focus Group 1*

M1: Put most of the healthy options on the first floor. Those items would be seen first.

##### *Focus Group 2*

F4: When you're walking out, instead of seeing like desserts, you're gonna see like your smoothies, or like right when you walk in you're thinking, "Oh! Yogurt." Like, fruit...

F2: Cause it tastes good, but it's also healthy so like it's a, it's just a good thing to promote for people...

##### *Focus Group 3*

F1: So, I think I'm gonna put all the super healthy stuff down here - vegetables, yogurt, salad - and then the fun, unhealthy stuff up here.

#### Avoiding Mindless Eating

##### *Focus Group 4*

M2: Being social typically leads to more unhealthy eating, so you put that together upstairs...

##### *Focus Group 2*

F1: So you want the dessert and milkshakes upstairs because it's further away...

M2: and you have to work for it...

F3: and you have to make a conscious decision...

M1: and you're getting dinner first and then getting dessert.

## RESULTS

- Choice architecture, customer base, layout, convenience, and menu offerings influenced student perception of dining hall (DH) healthiness.
- Focus groups could not dissociate "healthiest" from their definition of "best" when ranking dining halls.
- "Convenience" inferred healthy food items when designing menu options and choice architecture of their ideal DH
- Healthiness, layout, time, seating, and avoiding mindless eating were key themes for all 5 focus groups when designing their ideal dining hall.
- Students reported eating healthier in the dining hall they ranked as "healthiest."

## CONCLUSIONS

- Students had widely varying opinions on which dining hall was the "healthiest" despite 80% of menu offerings being the same across dining halls.
- Student perception of dining hall healthiness was influenced by layout, choice architecture, convenience, menu offerings, personal preferences, and personal perceptions of what constituted a healthy food.
- Healthy options and mindful eating principles were key determinants in the design of students' ideal dining hall, even when students stated they were not currently eating healthy or did not have healthy eating goals.
- Perception of healthiness may be an important area for nutrition education efforts to influence student eating habits.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- This project was funded by UGA Dining Services. Thanks to UGA Dining Services. Thanks to UGA meal plan students for participating in the focus groups.
- For questions or additional information, contact Katherine Ingerson (Ingerson@uga.edu).