

FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE FRESHMAN 15

by

Lauren Penney

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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SIGNED: Lauren Penney

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

November 29, 2006

Mimi Nichter
Professor of Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Discourses surrounding the idea of the Freshman 15 are prevalent within the press and popular media. While college weight gain and eating and exercise practices have been attended to through the collection of survey data, to date no one has linked these trends to wider social and economic processes or contextualized them within the lives of college students. This thesis provides a description of the ways in which 22 college women came to anticipate and experience weight gain during their freshman year of college, as well as the practices they adopted that contributed to weight changes. I analyze this interview data through a discussion of the concept of risk, personal responsibility, and ideas about the female body, while pointing to broader political economic pressures that are changing the ways in which universities provide dining and recreation services to students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Each year in colleges across the United States sets of young people embark on their first year of college. They arrive with a complex set of emotions, among which might be anticipation, excitement, joy, fear, hope, and sadness. Along with their many expectations, some hold a concern about the Freshman 15, a belief that freshman college students gain 15 pounds over the course of their first year of college. While discussed quite frequently in the media and popular press, to date it has garnered much less academic attention.

This thesis provides a description of how a small group of female college students anticipated weight gain during their freshman year of college, as well as the practices that they developed that contributed to their weight changes. It also provides an exploration of the ways in which weight changes evolved and the practices in which women engaged to control their weight changes during different periods of their freshman year. Most importantly, it provides a contextualized account of these experiences as they were communicated by women during in-depth interviews.

Summary of objectives

This project began with an intent to explore the salience of the Freshman 15 to female freshman college students. At the same time, it arose from an interest to understand how women's eating and exercise patterns and weight issues are produced by the social and structural contexts in which they find themselves. Out of these considerations, the project took on four main objectives:

- (1) To explore the extent to which female students who enter the university anticipate weight gain (the Freshmen 15).
- (2) To describe health-related patterns and practices (i.e., eating and exercise) of first-year female college students.
- (3) To determine to what extent freshman women experience and monitor weight changes and adopt practices to deter or induce weight change.
- (4) To examine how the campus food and recreational environment affects food choice and physical activity engagement.

In the chapters that follow, each of these objectives are discussed using data gathered through interviews and observations.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature and theory most directly related to this project. It begins with a short discussion of the emerging adulthood construct, followed by a description of the literature concerned with college student health practices and the Freshman 15. I also review and describe sociocultural literature and theory concerning the body, health, and women, which forms the basis of much of my analysis.

In Chapter 3 I present data concerning the extent to which informants knew about and anticipated being affected by the Freshman 15. This discussion mainly focuses on women's perceptions before entering college, but also notes how concern about the Freshman 15 changed over the course of the freshman year as people's situations changed.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, describes in detail the eating and exercise practices that informants adopted during their freshman year. It particularly relates these practices to their eating and exercise habits during high school, as well as the social contexts in which they found themselves in college. I stress that students constructed

practices within the limits of their environment in relation to the things that they found important in their lives.

Chapter 5 delves into the specific weight changes that informants experienced as well as the practices they adopted in attempt to control these changes. I also describe the ways in which weight changes were discussed and commented on between friends and family members. In addition, I discuss informants' perceptions of the relative importance of appearance within the college environment and issues related to an ethic of personal responsibility.

The sixth chapter is an initial exploration of the political economic pressures that are changing the ways in which institutions of higher education operate. It also provides a description of informants' perceptions of and practices within two institutional spaces—dining services and the Student Recreation Center.

In Chapter 7 I offer up some basic conclusions, as well as point to study limitations. I end by tentatively noting some possible areas for interventions and pointing out areas for future research.

Although I have broken down this thesis into a number of different chapters and different topical areas, during my interviews with informants these topics were enmeshed. In their daily lives, these topics articulated and affected one another in very real and substantial ways. While I have tried to highlight the connections in the following chapters, the structure of the thesis into specific components can eclipse this. In the interest of highlighting certain practices and themes, I have taken this more fragmented, analytical approach. I ask that the reader take this limitation into consideration.

Research methods

The bulk of this paper is based on 22 interviews I conducted with female University of Arizona students during the summer and fall of 2006. All study procedures and instruments were approved by the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board. Informants were freshmen, sophomores, and juniors who were living or had lived on campus during their freshman year of college. I decided to focus my work on women's experiences because of the particular meanings that weight holds for women within our society (see Chapter 2). In addition, because of the small, exploratory nature of the study, I thought it best to focus my attention on one group's particular experience and the specific social and structural issues surrounding it.

My initial plan to recruit from summer school classes proved difficult because of smaller than anticipated class sizes. Thus in addition to recruiting from classes, I left flyers in the Student Recreation Center and the summer student residence hall, held a recruitment session for a pre-college summer program, and took referrals from women I had interviewed as well as acquaintances who knew undergraduates who might be interested in participating. In the end I recruited 14 women from classes (five of these women were in the pre-college program), five through referrals, and three from flyers.

All but one of the interviews were conducted in a building on the university campus; the last interview was conducted in a small café near campus. The majority of the interviews took place in a university professor's office and several others took place in other offices and a conference room. In one instance, the woman's boyfriend was also

present during the interview. Other than an occasional cell phone call and knock on the door, the interviews ran smoothly and the rooms proved to be quiet and private spaces.

Interviews ranged in length from 55 minutes to an hour and 45 minutes; most of the interviews lasted about an hour and a half. Although I followed an interview guide (see Appendix A), I encouraged participants to speak freely. Often when given the opportunity to speak openly and continuously participants touched on questions not yet asked or brought up issues not on the interview guide, but important to their own particular experience. I also frequently asked unstructured follow-up questions and mentioned things that other women had told me to elicit reactions and opinions.

Informants ranged in ages from 18 to 21 (mean age 19) (see Table 1). Nine were freshman, two were sophomores, and 11 were juniors. In terms of ethnicity, more than half were Anglo, just less than a quarter were Latino, 14 percent were Asian American, and 5 percent (or one individual) were African American. Regionally,

Age (mean years)	19
Year in school	
- Freshmen	9
- Sophomores	2
- Juniors	11
Ethnicity	
- Anglo	13
- Latino	5
- Asian American	3
- African American	1

half of the women were from the Southwest (specifically Arizona), five were from the West Coast, two were from the Midwest, two were from the South, one was from the Northeast, and one was from South America (see Appendix B). As previously noted, five of the freshmen participated in a pre-college summer program. This annual, six-week program is intended to help students transition from high school to college by providing classes, tutoring, peer advising, and residence hall living experiences. Three of these

women elected to live on campus during the program, while two others commuted from their families' homes in Tucson.

All of the interviews were audio recorded and all but six were transcribed verbatim. There were audio problems with one of the interviews; half of it was transcribed, while the second half was summarized based on my notes and memory. The last five interviews I conducted were summarized based on the audio recording, with selected sections transcribed.

In addition to the interviews, I also spent a number of hours in various dining facilities on campus observing and experiencing the campus food environment. This proved to be useful in understanding and analyzing the interviews I conducted. As a commuter student, I also participated in life in and around the university in so far as my daily classes, coursework, and socializing necessitated.

Research setting

The University of Arizona is located in Tucson, Arizona, about 70 miles north of the Arizona-Mexico border. Tucson is a sprawling, Sonoran desert metropolis of approximately 750,000 people. The university is centrally located within the city on 356 acres; however, especially for students living on campus, the university and its immediate area can seem as a sort of an island cut off from the larger community. In the 2005-06 academic year, the university boasted a student population of a little more than 37,000 students (UAOIRE 2006). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the 28,462 undergraduates are white non-Hispanic (65%), followed by Hispanic (9%), Asian or

Pacific Islander (6%), Black non-Hispanic (3%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native (2%) (UAOIRE 2006).

Freshmen are not required to live on campus their first-year of college; however for those that do, the university maintains 21 undergraduate residence halls. These halls vary in size from the smallest that houses 107 students, to the largest that houses 800. Rooms come equipped with standard furnishings as well as small refrigerators. A number of different food establishments are available on and around campus to meet student dining needs and students can purchase one of four meal plans to use on campus (though meal plans are not required).

Personal background

During the spring of 2006 I engaged in research exploring high school women's experiences with physical activity, particularly within their schools. A number of problems were encountered along the way and I eventually had to abandon the project. It was at that time that I decided to explore the idea of the Freshman 15. As a researcher the issues I dealt with and the lessons I learned doing the physical activity work helped inform and shape the work I did with this project. It provided valuable insights into how to go through institutions to gain access to populations, how to recruit participants, and how to engage with participants in the space of the interview. These practical issues aside, the work in the high schools led me to reflect on my own position within my work and how it intersected with my own personal experiences, identity, and physical self.

While preparing to engage in research on physical activity and adolescent women, I developed an awareness of my physical body and the role it might play in my research. I

began to worry about how my lack of fitness and engagement in regular physical activity might appear paradoxical. However, as I began my work and talked to young women who had recently given up a sport that had been very meaningful to them, I realized the profound sadness I still hold regarding the strong body I once had when I competed in sports in high school. I mourned the physical capacity and joy that I used to get when engaging my body in physical activity. Somewhere along the way I had lost my confidence in my body and exercise had become very stressful (because of my remembrance of what I once was) and like an unhappy obligation. As I talked to young women and read the literature, I was disheartened to see that few talked about the pleasure of physical activity. The women talked in a way that reminded me of a confession, their words (to varying degrees) laden with guilt about how they “should” exercise more. While observing a yoga class at one of the schools, though, my desire to once again tap into that joyous embodied experience led me to take up yoga and jogging again. Through my own renewed exercise practice I began to experience both the joys and repression¹ that such practice brings; I found this to be of great use when writing this paper and dealing with issues in my own life.

As that project ended I began to explore the idea of the Freshman 15. I was hesitant to take up an issue involving weight for a number of reasons. First, because it was during my own freshman year of college that I was diagnosed with an eating disorder and had to drop out of school. Second, because I spent most of my undergraduate career studying

¹ By “repression” I am referring to the ways in which exercise can become an obligatory or a disciplinary activity.

eating disorders in attempt to find some meaning in my own situation. While personally interesting, though sometimes troubling, this work was ultimately unsatisfying and emotionally draining. Frankly, I was burned out on the subject of weight, body image, and dieting, and while my eating disorder is under control, I am still self-conscious about my weight and eating habits. However, knowing that the Freshman 15 is an important and interesting topic, and that very little academic work had been done on it, I decided to take it up.

While I prepared for my work and began recruiting, I again became aware of how my body might impact my work. At first I thought that this consciousness might be unique, stemming from my own experiences with weight. However, midway through the process I read an article by Kathryn Backett (1992) wherein she divulged her own self-consciousness about appearing outwardly healthy during her fieldwork on family health views and behaviors. This helped put into perspective that health and health-behaviors are value laden for many people. I realized that each person I came in contact with would respond to my physicality in different ways and that it was something I had to be aware of and could use in perhaps understanding some of these meanings.

One thing that concerned me was how my being thin would affect people's willingness to talk to me about their own weight issues. This is something I often thought about while recruiting participants and that one experience particularly brought to mind. Not liking to talk in front of people anyway, I was even more self-conscious particularly of my body when speaking to classes about my project. I remember vividly standing in front of a classroom and seeing the woman closest to me look my body up and down.

Although I have no idea what she was thinking, I could not help but immediately infer that she was negatively evaluating me based upon my outward appearance. Recruiting was difficult, as I know it is for many people, but I wondered whether my thinness and my own timidity and self-doubt made it even more difficult.

Interviews also proved to be challenging because of my consciousness of how emotion-laden weight, food, and exercise can be for some people. During the very first interviews I was quite shy about asking women about their body issues and I realize now that my own apparent awkwardness in my delivery of certain questions probably made answering the question more awkward for the women I was interviewing. I was concerned that asking women about their eating and exercise patterns might make them feel badly about themselves. My fears were partially realized when a woman I was interviewing said that answering my questions made her feel that she should go workout. In a later interview with a woman who had first heard about the Freshman 15 during one of my classroom recruitments I asked whether she was concerned that she might gain weight during the school year. She responded, "Well now I am, because I didn't know this. But now that I do, I am." Throughout the process I wondered, and still wonder, whether especially talking to new freshman about the Freshman 15 I was helping to produce greater worry and concern among the women.

In attempt to make the interview a space wherein women would feel comfortable talking about their weight and body issues, I tried to establish a comfortable conversational rapport with them. For the most part, I think this was accomplished. However, there were several interviews where the rhythms that the informant and I

brought to the space seemed out of sync. Sometimes the interviews just started out “slow,” and opened up after I spent some time asking the informant about a topic that she seemed interested (e.g., a sport, a family member). Other times I felt a disjunct throughout the interviewee. Looking back, these were interviews wherein I felt hurried to finish and interviews with informants who laughed throughout much of the interview. Both of these things impeded my full engagement in the interview.

Overall the interviews were a great, though sometimes painful, experience. I found that I could identify with almost all the informants on at least some level. Listening to informants narrate their struggles with food and weight could be quite upsetting and often evoked a lot of memories for me. It was especially hard to hear women talk about currently engaging in what could be considered extreme dieting behaviors, such as only eating 400 calories a day, or having very rigid eating practices; these are two things that I have much personal experience with that have caused me a great amount of suffering. However, I think that this allowed me to bring a certain sensitivity and empathy to the interviews. My hope is that informants were positively impacted by sharing their stories with me and gained a greater appreciation of the importance of their experiences, perceptions, and opinions. I additionally hope that my usage of their stories does them justice and can help provide a more complex understanding of the experiences of young women in college.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a description of the literature informing this project. I begin with a brief discussion of the developmental period conceptualized as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000) and then delve into the academic literature concerning the Freshman 15. This is followed by an overview of some of the studies that have been done about college eating and exercise practices. I finish this chapter with a lengthy discussion of sociocultural theory concerning the “risk society” (Beck 1996) and the meanings of the body and health; I pay particular attention for the implications that weight and bodily appearance have for women and how this contributes to specific bodily maintenance projects.

Emerging adulthood

Transitioning into college is a process that involves ambiguity, change, and adjustment as youths encounter new social and physical environments (Butler et al. 2004). This transition can present young people with significant challenges that can lead to stress and difficulties adjusting (Lafreniere et al. 1997). For students leaving home to attend university, new challenges can include living with unfamiliar people, budgeting money, trying to find their way around a new town, and setting self-limits on social activities (Lafreniere et al. 1997). For each individual, this process is unique and necessitates forming new behavior patterns (Bray and Born 2004). While this involves new freedoms and abilities to control one’s lifestyle (Dinger and Waigandt 1997), it also involves new constraints.

Arnett (2000) developed the idea of a developmental period called “emerging adulthood” to account for the stage of prolonged role exploration found among youth aged 18 to 25 in cultures where marriage and parenthood have become increasingly delayed. This period is characterized by “relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations,” as well as change and exploration of different life possibilities (e.g., in love, work, and worldviews) (2000:469).

Emerging adulthood is associated with peaks in risk behavior (e.g., unprotected sex, substance use), partly due to a desire to experience many things before settling down and having less adult supervision. However, this is only a semiautonomous state (Arnett 2000). For example, college students living on campus often are reliant upon parents for financial support and are subject to the rules and supervision of the university. Moreover, they are bound by structural factors and other mechanisms of late modernity that cause variations among experiences and limit role exploration for many (Bynner 2005).

The Freshman 15

One of the things that many freshman college students deal with is the Freshman 15. The Freshman 15, the widespread belief that freshmen college students gain 15 pounds during the course of their first year of college, has much social currency.² To date few studies have explored the Freshman 15. One study conducted by Hovell and colleagues (1985) explored university women’s weight change over the course of their first three

² A search of the Internet will yield many sites offering advice on how to not gain weight (e.g., KidsHealth’s “Beating the Freshman 15,” Svec’s “The Freshman 15”). There are also many popular press college preparatory books that warn of and provide advice about the Freshman 15; an example is the recent *Dorm Room Diet* which was written by a college student (Oz 2006).

years of college. It also compared their first year's changes to weight changes in a same-aged community sample who were attending community or state colleges but most of whom were living with their parents. During their freshman year, the university women gained a mean nine pounds of excess weight,³ which was significantly more excess weight than the women who lived at home. In the small subsample that was followed-up with through the third year, the researchers found that the university women's weight stabilized and decreased in the sophomore and junior years when they were no longer living on campus. The authors proposed that the steep excess weight gains were attributable to the stress of moving away from family and friends, academic competition, and high-caloric, communal style cafeteria food.

These factors, along with others—such as buffet-style dining services, snacking while studying or socializing, less exercise, and overeating due to stress of adapting to college life—are often cited as contributing to freshman year weight gain. In the following subsections I review the academic literature related to college freshmen weight change.

Academic literature on freshman weight

As previously noted, few studies have been conducted on the Freshman 15. With the exception of three citations at the end of this subsection, most of the academic articles that discuss the Freshman 15 have focused on whether there is any basis to it or not (e.g., Hajhosseini et al. 2006; Hodge and Jackson 1993). Below I briefly review the nature and

³ Excess weight is determined by subtracting actual weight by ideal weight.

findings of these studies as well as other studies focused on weight change during the freshman year of college.

Several studies have focused specifically on changes in weight during the first year of college. Anderson, Shapiro, and Lundgren (2003) sought to determine whether the transition from high school to university was a critical period for weight gain. The 135 students in their study gained on average three pounds during the first semester, with no significant gender differences. However a small subsample followed through the second semester did not show significant weight change during that period, indicating that weight seems to stabilize over time. Another study conducted with 61 female freshmen at another public university found a mean gain of just less than one pound during the first six months of school (Hodge and Jackson 1993). In contrast to the results noted above, the authors of this study stressed their finding that most of the women's weights remained stable (defined as less than four pound change) and that even among the women who gained weight, average weight gain was seven pounds, less than half of the Freshman 15.

Other studies looking at weight change have collected data on factors related to weight gain. Levitsky, Halmaier, and Mrdjevnovic (2004) found that the significant amount of weight gain (4.2 pounds) their 60 participants experienced during their first three months at a private university could be attributed to environmental stimuli including "all-you-can-eat" dining halls, and consuming high-fat foods, evening snacks, and "junk food." Notably, the amount of excess daily calories needed to support the gains was relatively low at 175 kilocalories, which has been found in other studies (Hajhosseini et al. 2006).

Taking a broader approach that accounts for both energy in and energy out, Butler and colleagues (2004) assessed changes in diet, physical activity, and weight among 54 female freshmen at a Midwestern University. They found that although there were significant decreases in caloric intake over the first five months of college, the percentage of calories from fat and alcohol significantly increased. Students were also less physical activity and showed decreases in fat-free mass, indicating a loss of fitness. They also observed statistically significant weight gains (average of about 1.5 pounds) during those five months, which they attributed more to decreases in physical activity than to diet. The decrease in caloric intake is curious; the authors note, however, that caloric underreporting occurs more frequently with increasing body weight.

Most of the above studies found an average weight gain amongst study participants (Anderson et al. 2003; Butler et al. 2004; Hodge and Jackson 1993; Levitsky et al. 2004). However this mean gain did not exceed 4.6 pounds over the academic year, indicating—as several have noted (Hajhosseini et al. 2006; Hodge and Jackson 1993)—that the idea of the Freshman 15 is more fantasy than fact. Importantly, though, a more recent, yet unpublished study involving more than 900 freshman students at Purdue found a mean gain of more than nine pounds for both males and females (Hellmich 2006). This study is significant because of its large sample and much higher mean weight gain. It makes me wonder, however, how generalizable data from different colleges are for college students at large and how differences in school environments (both in terms of food service systems and social norms) might impact weight gains. There is also a question of at what point freshman weight gain becomes a point of concern in terms of health regardless of

this idea of the Freshman 15. Before commenting on the implications of weight gain for young women's experiences, I will first offer a number of general comments and critiques of the above studies.

Comments and critiques

There are a number of limitations to keep in mind when reading studies such as those described above. First, most of the studies looked strictly at mean weight change among their participants. This is problematic because it ignores how different subpopulations (e.g., gender, SES, ethnicity) might differ in terms of weight gains or losses. By breaking down weight changes into groups it allows us to begin thinking about the diversity of college student's weight change experiences and about what sort of factors might lead to these different experiences. Another problem with just looking at mean weight change for a sample is that authors often neglect whether the individual was overweight or underweight to begin with. For a person coming into school underweight, gaining weight could be a positive benefit to their health. In addition, only Butler and colleagues (2004) assessed the quality of this weight change; for some students, weight gain might be in the form of fat free mass (i.e., muscle).

The time frames used by many of these studies can also be a limitation. For most, the time frames are less than a year and weight is measured only two to three times. Also many of the studies lasted for the duration of a semester and thus they fail to capture weight gain over time (i.e., whether it is more intense during particular time periods or whether it stabilizes over time; see Anderson et al. 2003; Hovell et al. 1985). The studies also often weigh participants at the beginning and end of semesters, which does not

explore how weight might fluctuate over the course of the semester or what events might precipitate weight fluctuations (e.g., finals, parties). Moreover, exploring weight fluctuations might lead to a better understanding of the factors that contribute to weight changes and to an understanding of how weight might routinely vary for a person.

Third, and related to the time frames, is the high percentage of dropouts. While several authors were careful to note that their dropouts did not differ significantly from the nondropouts on a number of demographic and weight variables, losing thirty or more percent of your sample between time 1 and time 2 raises questions as to what impact the dropouts weight changes might have contributed to their not returning. In addition, the studies described above also have very small sample sizes, which calls into how representative weight changes in the samples are of the general college population.

As an anthropologist, several other shortcomings of previous studies can be noted. Notably, the above studies do not provide information on how the transition to college and weight changes were perceived or felt by individuals. In addition, they included no observational data, little discussion of potential gender or ethnic differences, and no qualitative data.

Impact of the Freshman 15

While the above studies have assessed weight changes (specifically weight gain) during the first year of college, they fail to discuss issues surrounding the Freshman 15. For example, do young women anticipate gaining weight, and if so, how does this impact their behavior? In a qualitative study exploring body image, Field (2002) found that among the 16 young college women she interviewed, the Freshman 15 was experienced

sometimes as a surprise and always in a negative manner. Moreover, while some women did not experience weight gain first hand, they still perceived that they were at-risk for it.

Graham and Jones (2002) have proposed that the idea that weight gain during the freshman year is normative could facilitate a self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., sanctions overeating). To test whether belief in the Freshman 15 impacted actual or perceived weight gain they gathered data from 49 college freshmen. While over the year students lost an average of one and a half pounds, participants perceived they had gained an average of just over four pounds. Moreover, women concerned with the Freshman 15 were more likely to think about their weight, have poorer body image, and categorize themselves as overweight. The authors concluded that “concern about the Freshman 15 myth may distort a student’s thinking about weight, possibly leading to a more negative body image” (Graham and Jones 2002:173). However, it is unknown whether concern with the Freshman 15 is greater for women already concerned about their weight and body.

Writing in response to Graham and Jones (2002), Keeling (2002) argued that simply calling the Freshman 15 a harmful myth misses that it is somewhat common for college women to gain weight during their freshman year. He contended that the first year of college is associated with many changes in behavior (e.g., eating, partying, exercising) that make weight gain a real possibility and that this has implications for socio-cultural norms about women’s bodies. He concluded that health education is not going to fix health problems related to nutrition, diet, and body image because shame is such a large part of them.

College student health concerns and practices

While the Freshman 15 has not attracted the attention of many researchers, overweight, obesity, and other health concerns have. As college is a time when new lifestyle patterns are adopted, there is concern that the habits developed in college will carry on into adulthood (Haberman and Luffey 1998).⁴ One of the ways in which the U.S. government has tracked the health of college students is through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National College Health Risk Behavior Survey (NCHRBS), which was conducted in 1995. This is part of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) which helps monitor priority health risk behaviors among the nation's youth. More recently (1998), the American College Health Association (ACHA) initiated another monitoring system, the National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA), "to assist college health service providers, health educators, counselors, and administrators in collecting data about their students' habits, behaviors, and perceptions on the most prevalent health topics" (ACHA 2006b:2). Both these systems collect data on large samples of youth from across the country and provide details (albeit shallow in their depth) of youth behavioral practices.

Assessments such as these focus on specific sets of health practices such as (1) alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, (2) sexual behavior, (3) overweight and obesity, (4) nutrition and exercise, and (5) injury and violence. Specific behaviors within these

⁴ I think it is worth noting that in a large, multi-state study of young adults aged 18 to 24 years old, college undergraduate and graduate students had more healthful habits and food choices than nonstudents of the same age (Georgiou et al. 1997). This indicates that college students' dietary behavior is not representative of their same aged peers and that health concerns might be directed at young adults not in higher education. This might also have socioeconomic implications.

categories, such as insufficient physical activity or alcohol abuse, are considered to be risk behaviors that contribute significantly to mortality, disability, and social problems (CDC 2006). Importantly, and not coincidentally, these overlap with the leading health indicators used by the CDC to motivate action and measure progress, which are linked to the nation's Healthy People objectives (see <http://www.healthypeople.gov/default.htm>). This paper will deal predominantly with issues related to weight, diet, and exercise.

In the 1995 NCHRBS, 35 percent of the students sampled were overweight (Lowry et al. 2000). Ten years later, using the same definition of overweight, the ACHA-NCHA found the same percentage of college students in their sample to be overweight (2006b).⁵ Of particular concern is that weight gain during the early college years will track into adulthood, especially because it has been found that BMI at age 18 (at least for white people) has excellent predictive value for body mass index (BMI) at 35 years of age (Guo et al. 1994). There is also concern with this age group because Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data between 1991 and 1997 showed that the greatest increase in obesity prevalence (70%) among any age group occurred in 18 to 29 year olds (figures rose from 7.1% to 12.1%) (Mokdad et al. 1999). As such, college campuses have been identified as potentially important places to reduce overall overweight prevalence (Lowry et al. 2000; Racette et al. 2005).

Related to this concern with overweight and obesity has come research on the nutrition and exercise practices of college students. The 2005 ACHA-NCHA found that

⁵ In both the NCHRBS (Lowry et al., 2000) and the ACHA-NCHA (2006b) overweight was defined as a body mass index (BMI) ≥ 25 kg/m² and obesity as BMIs ≥ 30 kg/m².

only about six percent of college students in their study typically consumed five or more fruits or vegetables a day, while 62 percent typically consumed one or two (ACHA 2006a). Within the same sample, just over 41 percent of students participated in 20 minutes of vigorous or 30 minutes of moderate exercise on at least three of the last seven days (2006b). Also of concern are unhealthy weight reduction practices, such as vomiting or taking laxatives (2%) and taking diet pills (4%) (2006b).

Literature on college student eating and exercise

In general, eating and exercise have been approached with the interest of describing the prevalence of young adults whose eating and/or exercise practices do not meet standard guidelines. With increasing concern about obesity within the United States and elsewhere, eating and exercise patterns are often discussed in relation to how they put people at risk for overweight or obesity. However, patterns are also discussed in terms of their direct relationship to morbidity. In this section, I briefly describe some of the work done on college students. This is by no means an exhaustive overview of the literature, rather it is meant to provide a snapshot of some of what is known and where areas of concern have been identified.

College student consumption practices

Many of the studies on college student eating patterns have focused on determining whether college students meet dietary guidelines. Studies have found that while very few college students eat the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables (DeBate et al. 2001; Huang et al. 2003), they are much more likely to consume adequate levels of

protein (DeBate et al. 2001), and exceed recommendations for fat, sugar, and sodium (Anding et al. 2001).

Frequent consumption of fast food (Cusatis and Shannon 1996; Debate et al. 2001), skipping meals (Debate et al. 2001), lack of self-efficacy for making healthful food choices (Cusatis and Shannon 1996), and concern with monetary value of food (Koszewski and Kuo 1996) have been suggested to explain diets of adolescents. One study found that women's diet adequacy as well as their meal frequency decreased along with their weight satisfaction (Koszewski and Kuo 1996).

Frequency of fast food consumption has garnered additional attention. In a food service trade journal, one author proclaimed, "It is no secret that college life and fast food go together" (Knutson 2000:69). In fact, college students are prime targets for fast food advertising dollars because of the view that transition periods are prime times for getting people to change behaviors or, in this case, change brand affiliation and become lifelong, loyal customers (Knutson 2000). Among college students, frequency of fast food consumption has been found to be negatively related to meeting recommended daily allowances (Hertzler and Frary 1992). Another large study conducted with college freshmen found that frequent consumption of fast food and fried food was significantly inversely associated with consumption of fruit and vegetables (Racette et al. 2005). Undergraduates with the highest frequency of fast food attendance in one study took in almost twice as much fat as students with the lowest fast food attendance (Hertzler et al. 1995). As is a problem for many studies that have reached these conclusions, it remains

unknown whether the fast food contributed the added fat to the diet or if individuals with high fat diets are more likely to eat high-fat foods from fast food establishments.

While educating college students about basic nutrition is sometimes promoted as a way to enhance student nutritional intake, it is not clear that students lack knowledge of dietary guidelines or that having that knowledge would lead to different consumption patterns. For example, younger adolescents have shown that despite knowledge of recommended dietary guidelines, the guidelines might not be followed due to issues such as lack of time, limited availability of healthy foods at school, and lack of concern for following the guidelines (Croll et al. 2001). These barriers to eating healthily are important, but I would also suggest that social group norms could also be important in terms of eating behavior. For example, even if healthy foods are available, they might be viewed as inappropriate in certain social situations.

College students and physical activity

Within the United States sedentary lifestyles have become recognized as a public health problem (McKenzie and Kahan 2004). Physical activity has been linked to a number of health issues such as cardiovascular diseases, colon cancer, non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, and obesity (US Health and Human Services 1996). At the same time, physical activity and exercise have been shown to yield a number of positive benefits to participants (US Health and Human Services 1996), such as enhancing aerobic fitness, decreasing body fat, and having positive effects on areas of mental health (Sallis and Owen 1999). In terms of mental health, engaging in aerobic activity can improve aspects of one's self-concept related to physical ability and decrease

trait anxiety (Açici 2003) and has been shown to decrease general anxiety and stress in certain individuals (Simono 1991).

Importantly, data from a number of studies have shown that physical activity declines from adolescence to adulthood (Bray and Born 2004; Caspersen et al. 2000; Stephens et al. 1985). A study conducted in Canada found that one third of the participants that had been sufficiently vigorously active⁶ during the last two months of high school were not so during their first two months of college (Bray and Born 2004).⁷ Another analysis looking at data across eight studies from the U.S. and Canada found that the steepest decline in physical activity occurred during adolescence and early adulthood; this decline is especially apparent when looking at sports participation (Stephens et al. 1985). One of the potential reasons for the declines is that many school physical education programs revolve around competitive sports, activities that are difficult to maintain in adulthood because of fewer opportunities for it (Ellis 1988). Findings such as these and concern about declining adult levels of physical activity have led to young adulthood being viewed as a time for implementing physical activity interventions (Leslie et al. 2001). Notably, the inverse association between age and engagement in exercise is particularly strong among women (Buckworth and Nigg 2004; Caspersen et al. 2000; Leslie et al. 1999; Stephens et al. 1985).

⁶ Sufficient vigorous activity is often defined in accordance with USDHHS recommendations. This is that people should engage in activities that make you sweat and breathe hard for 20 or more continuous minutes on three or more days of the week.

⁷ While interesting, this study problematically only studies a very limited time period and time periods that involve much change and adjustment, particularly those first two months of college (Gall 2000). Moreover, by focusing on the students who decreased their vigorous physical activity, one neglects the 11 percent (13% of the females) who apparently increased their vigorous physical activity from high school to college.

Further gender differences exist in terms of types of physical activity engaged. For example, women have been found to be more likely to engage in moderate physical activities and flexibility exercises than men (Dinger and Waigandt 1997); while men have been shown to engage in more muscular strength activities than women (Caspersen et al. 2000; Dinger and Waigandt 1997; Racette et al. 2005). Men have been also found to be more likely than women to engage in sport and vigorous physical activity (Stephens et al. 1985).

Additional studies have examined what factors serve as barriers and motivators to engagement in physical activity. First-year college students have reported institutional (e.g., limited fitness facility operating hours, workload), intrapersonal (e.g., lack of motivation, prefer to relax), and interpersonal (e.g., social events during workout time, lack of training partner) barriers to participating in vigorous physical activity (Gyurcski et al. 2004). Lack of self-efficacy has also been reported as a significant barrier to exercise (Sullum et al. 2000).

In terms of motivators, one study found that sports participation was more frequently associated with intrinsic motivations (e.g., enjoyment and challenge), whereas exercise participation was more often associated with extrinsic motivations (e.g., appearance, and stress and weight management) (Kilpatrick et al. 2005). They also found gender differences, with women reporting weight management as a significant motivator for participation in physical activity (particularly exercise) and men citing motivations for challenge, competition, social recognition, and strength and endurance.

Risk society, the body, health, and feminine body ideals

According to Beck (1996) we are currently living in a risk society. That is a “phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological, and individual risks created by the momentum of innovation increasingly elude the control and protective institutions of industry society” (1996:27). Giddens has argued that “Living in the ‘risk society’ means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence” (1991:28). By thinking in terms of and quantifying risk people embark in a colonization of the future that helps to stabilize daily life which is embedded in a socialized nature that can act in both predictable and unpredictable ways. People are compelled to construct themselves through processes of intervention and transformation (Giddens 1991).

Within this context lifestyle holds particular meaning (Giddens 1991). There are also increasing numbers of experts (e.g., medical specialists and researchers) who monitor health risks and provide risk profiles for the public. People have to negotiate between a variety of lifestyle choices and risk profiles in the production of self-identity and daily activity. At the same time the knowledge that one might use to make these choices and to calculate risks is by no means certain. Underlying many daily unconscious and conscious decisions is a trust that the available information is right. Importantly, people accept a certain amount of specific risks in their lives because they often view risks in “packages” (Giddens 1991). Thus individuals tolerate some risks (e.g., automobile driving) in the pursuit of certain lifestyles.

One of the major problems with this idea of risk society is that it holds a view of the self as autonomous and reflexive (Petersen 1997). In general, it provides a very cognitive perspective on the ways in which individuals go about assessing risk and neglects how this risk might be embodied (Turner 1992). However, Giddens in particular has helped us to think about how the body has become important to an individual's sense of identity. As Shilling notes, "In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual's* self-identity" (2003:4).

Lupton (1993) has argued that risk discourses are not neutral and are often used to blame the victim. Lifestyle risk discourses in particular function to make the individual responsible for maintaining their health for both the sake of themselves and society, while diverting attention from structural factors involved in producing ill-health. The result of this is that the body "has become a commodified and regulated object that must be strictly monitored by its owner to prevent lapses into health-threatening behaviors as identified by risk discourse" (1993:433). Thus individuals are responsible for practicing self-control, being thin, and engaging in health-promoting behaviors such as by following recommended nutritional and physical activity guidelines.

It is important to remember that in an increasingly complex society wherein people feel less able to exert control over their surroundings, the body's size, shape, and appearance is one area that people feel their actions have consequence (Shilling 2003). But the body is not completely moldable (e.g., it is subject to the constraints of biology) and the ways in which one attempts to mold it are often reflective of social norms.

Ideal bodies, body image, and appearance

The body is a symbolic medium upon which culture is written and is a locus of social control (Bordo 1989). The body is thus an artifact of culture that is subject to cultural pressures, behavior patterns, and norms (Hesse-Biber 1991). As such the body is meaningful and can be used or read with particular regard to the self. According to Glassner the “physique has become a cardinal sign of the self” (1989:184) and Kirk (1997) has argued the body is often conflated with self-identity. The focus on appearance is in fact an attempt to “‘construct’ and control the body” (Giddens 1991:7). Particularly in a world inundated with images of and talk about the body, the body has become a focus of social interaction and the self is experienced with a consciousness of how others see it (Glassner 1989).

It is in corporeal discourses that meanings are reproduced on, around, and through the body. Kirk (1993) has noted that since the late 1950s with the linking of sedentariness and heart disease, body shape has come to mean new things; namely, it has become a sign of success and control. Within this context certain discourses have become more powerful than others (e.g., the “trim, taught, and terrific” body), but all individual’s reading of these discourses are mediated by personal history and current circumstances (e.g., physical environment) (Kirk 1993).

Movement and bodily practices reflect power relations in society, particularly between genders. It is through cultural processes such as movement activities that males learn to be males and females learn to be females (Sage 1997) and that gender is embedded in the body (Kirk 1993). According Kirk (1997), “the socially constructed

body and physical culture in toto are of central importance to understanding the nature of new times, since the body in culture is both a surface reflecting and refracting cultural change, and an active agent in producing change” (1997:40).⁸ To understand the purpose and meanings of movement one must take into account cultural influences and immediate social situations (e.g., group size, composition, values, norms, expectations, opportunities for social evaluation) (Brustad 1997). In understanding differences in movement by gender, one needs to look at culturally-based gender roles and how this impacts participatory interest. Situated reality (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic status, physical ability) has a definite impact on the movement opportunities and contexts that one is exposed to (Brustad 1997; Young 1990).⁹

According to Spitzack (1990), within our culture women’s bodies are presented through a multiplicity of images and constructed as being more aesthetically pleasing to look at than men’s bodies. This leaves female bodies open to others’ gazes and scrutiny, which when realized lead to an inward appraisal of bodily deficiencies, which in turn become perceived as deficiencies in self. To alleviate themselves from possible negative judgment, women often seek to “improve” their bodies.

Several feminists have further discussed social weight and body ideals through eating disorders (Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 1991). As women have sought and won

⁸ When Kirk (1997) refers to “new times” he is speaking about the era of high modernity.

⁹ Young (1990) has argued that “there is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular modalities of the structures and conditions of the body’s existence in the world” (1990:144). She has identified three modalities of feminine motility: (a) ambiguous transcendence, (b) inhibited intentionality, and (c) discontinuous unity. These are contradictory modalities whose source is partially in women’s experience of her body as a thing and a capacity.

greater independence in the public and political spheres, there has been more emphasis placed on bodily control, management, and discipline through things such as diet, starvation, and exercise. While dieting and exercising have the allusion of control and mastery (generally male gendered values), the time, money, and energy put into maintaining this amounts to subordination (Hesse-Biber 1991). In addition, “women are locked in a perpetual state of ever-increasing need, since the ideals of beauty have become increasingly stringent and elusive” (Hesse-Biber 1991:185).

Hesse-Biber (1991) has argued that over the course of recent history women’s bodies have been transformed into commodities, while women themselves also have the role of consumer. Capitalists use body insecurities to produce desires in women for particular products marketed to quell body anxieties (e.g., diet foods, gym memberships, exercise equipment, appetite suppressants). Spitzack (1990) has also noted that there is a surge in the politics of women’s health (trend towards seeing the female body as diseased and in need of repair) at the same time that women are working toward empowerment and are shaking up the patriarchal system. She argued that women are socialized to gaze upon themselves (a process of self-objectification) in order to continuously monitor and assess their thoughts and behaviors to ensure correct bodily presentation. The unhealthy woman is considered to have lost control of her sexuality and self-control. However there is a tension here because while achieving a slender body is presented as an act of empowerment, following a diet signifies past or hidden indulgences (masked deviances) that can elicit guilt. Thus instead of diets, you hear discussions of monitoring behaviors

for health concerns, which actually “*heightens* a concern with outward appearance and mandates increased discipline” (Spitzack 1990:36).

Bordo (1989) has explored how gendered disorders such as hysteria and anorexia nervosa can be simultaneously viewed as examples of resistance and the ways that resistance efforts can not only be “undercut but *utilized* in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations” (1989:15). In this way bodies come to “unwittingly” play a role in the “symbolization and reproduction of gender” (1989:16; see also Markula 2003). Similar to Bourdieu’s (1977) conception of habitus then (see below), there is a logic that disposes people to reproduce the underlying social structures.

Practice theory

Another theory that has guided my thinking, and helped temper the expansive agency of Giddens, is Bourdieu’s theory on social reproduction. This theory of practice centers on the concept of *habitus*. The habitus is a socialized body and or an embodied history (Bourdieu 1990). In each person it is deposited through experience (e.g., repetitive bodily engagement), particularly during early upbringing) into a system of dispositions which frame perception, thought, and action (Bourdieu 1977). Practices can only be accounted for by relating the past conditions which created the habitus to the present conditions which seemed to have provoked them. Groups of people have coordinated practices due to having similar (not identical) histories and conditions of existence; people of the same class are more likely to have encountered similar situations and within a class, individuals’ habitus are related by homology (1990). One’s embodied identity is formed through the habitus (Brown 2005).

Although new experiences can influence the habitus to a point, the habitus is most likely to choose experiences which reinforce it. Regarding how people are somewhat fixed within their positions he says, “The relation of what is possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself” (Bourdieu 1990:43). Thus social positions (e.g., relegated by class, gender) determine what one sees as a possibilities and what one expects for the self.

According to Bourdieu (Turner 1992) physical capital is gained through the formation of bodies in the social sphere through activities that implicate the body, such as sports, leisure activities, and waged work. The ways in which the body is used expresses social location and has a symbolic value. Social class (and I would argue gender) fundamentally affects the forms of physical capital that one is able to acquire because this places a person in different social locations, which are the context for the development of habitus and tastes (Turner 1992).

Thus far, Bourdieu’s theory has been used to a limited extent to explore social class differences in sport participation. In his own work on sport, Bourdieu (1978) conceptualized the field of sport as a site of struggle over the definition of the “legitimate body” and the “legitimate use of the body.” Brown (2005) has used the idea of physical capital to discuss how sporting social identities are formed and how this both predisposes and qualifies individuals for future physical activity engagement. Using this theory we

can begin to think about how “legitimate” uses of the female body are embodied through experiences. We can also utilize his notion of systems of dispositions to understand how groups (e.g., gender, ethnic, social class groups) of people’s perceptions, thoughts, and actions are framed in similar ways based upon their histories and conditions of existence (Bourdieu 1990).

While I find this theory useful to think with, it is important to acknowledge limitations within Bourdieu’s work. Particularly problematic is the degree of structural determinism and lack of room for embodied agency, although the possibility of the latter is hinted at in Bourdieu’s later work (Brown 2005). These difficulties have been addressed by individuals such as Turner (1992) and Shilling (2003) who have tried to create a theory of an embodied agent that pulls from both structuralist and phenomenological theories of the body.

According to Shilling’s (2003) conception, the body is profoundly affected by social relations (e.g., through physical development and embodiment); however it is because of the biological basis of these bodies that social relations are possible. Moreover, bodies are unfinished, which allows for people to engage in a limited amount of body manipulation; inequalities within society dictate who and to what extent these projects can be engaged. Importantly Shilling points out the inextricable interaction between biology, individual, and society (2003).

Healthism

The trend of healthism within society provides a means of discussing the ways in which healthy and unhealthy have become signifiers of one’s moral worth (Petersen

1997). Healthism is a particular way of viewing health and disease that, like medicine, places it at the level of the individual (Crawford 1980). In effect, it works to depoliticize public health and produces “healthy” and “unhealthy” as moral signifiers (Petersen 1997). At the same time, one’s physical appearance becomes an important means of claiming status and as evidence of his or her pursuit of a risk-free existence (Petersen 1997).¹⁰

In recent years, many countries have adopted what have been called “active living” policies that function to raise public awareness and motivation to engage in behavior change. According to Fullagar (2003), these policies are a product of the intersection of advanced liberal political rationalities (a biopolitical concern that you can cut risk by optimizing population health) and “an emphasis on the freedom of the self-governing individual to take responsibility for health” (2003:50). Through these activities subgroups, such as college students, are identified, measured, and monitored. By placing an emphasis on individual responsibility for increasing physical activity there is a neglect of the power relations in different spheres of life that produce barriers to identified inactive groups (e.g., women) engaging in more physical activity (Fullagar 2003). It does not take into account, for example, that the decisions people make regarding health practices are affected by social and cultural ideas of what is appropriate masculine and feminine behavior (Saltonstall 1993). Moreover, the individualistic perspective also

¹⁰ It should be noted that a number of groups profit from discourses on healthism. These include the fitness, diet, and pharmaceutical industries, medical professionals, and the government.

exonerates other entities from their responsibility in contributing to people's ill health (Kirk and Colquhoun 1989).

Writing in the late 1980s and following Foucault, Kirk and Colquhoun (1989) noted that the “simultaneous emergence of a particular view of the relationship between exercise, physical fitness and health at a number of different sites of cultural production is a matter of considerable significance, because it indicates a shift in the locus of social control within capitalist societies from mass, external control of the body to an individual, internal mode of corporeal control” (1989:418). They argued that through the representation of the body in media, for many people the slender body shape has become a metaphor for health, well-being, and affluence, while fatness evokes criticism and blame. Thus ideal body shape and weight take on moral imperatives and signify a way of life. It is believed that individuals will be able to attain and maintain health if they only have the will and determination to do so. Through this work health becomes located in our bodies and “*feeling* well is a strong personal indicator that all is well with our health too” (Kirk and Colquhoun 1989:427). According to Kirk “bodies tell a story about the person they embody” (1993:7). Signs are constantly being emitted from the body that are consciously or unconsciously given and interpreted. Thus the body is an important index affecting the ways in which a person is judged, identified, and understood.

In a world where “health” pockmarks a multiplicity of discourses, it is important to interrogate what this word means. Among younger adolescent women, Croll and colleagues (2001) found that girls often discussed healthy eating in terms of weight loss and appearance (e.g., for special events), rather than in terms of physical or physiological

benefits. A study of adults found that women more often than men emphasized the outer body (e.g., appearance, presentation of the body) when describing body maintenance practices (Saltonstall 1993). Glassner (1989) has argued that health and fitness are often used as if synonymous, and the women Saltonstall (1993) interviewed regularly linked healthiness, eating, exercise, and being thin. Thus especially when talking with women, it is important to investigate the linkage or slippage that occurs between health and thinness.

Femininity and weight control

The fall 2005 ACHA-NCHA found that while nearly 60 percent of college women reported that they were currently trying to lose weight, only 32 percent of men reported the same thing (ACHA 2006a). Over the previous 30 days in attempts to lose weight, 59 percent of women had exercised, 40 percent dieted, three percent vomited or used laxatives, and five percent had taken diet pills. While the data suffers from the standard questionnaire limitations and by being collected from a sample that was 83 percent white, it does provide some idea of the weight control and loss behavioral trends of college students.

The social nature of eating

Food and eating are meaningful markers especially in terms of identity. Furst (1997) said, "Through the food we eat, we confirm who we are and who we are not" (441). This is particularly evident in terms of ethnic or group identity (Kifleyesus 2002; Padolsky 2005). The relationship between gender, identity, and food has been studied in terms of

women's changing public and political roles (Counihan 1988) and in terms of personal pleasure and power (Devasahayam 2005).

Work on sororities has provided some interesting insights into how social groups can impact orientations and practices related to food and weight. Allison and Park (2004) found that disordered eating did not differ between sorority and nonsorority women during their first two years of college; however, by their third undergraduate year, sorority women scored higher on drive for thinness (DT) than nonsorority women. Importantly, the sorority women scored about the same on DT over time, whereas the nonsorority women's DT scores dropped over time. This indicates that among sorority women weight issues and dieting continue to be emphasized, while they are given less attention over time for women not involved in sororities. Crandall (1988) also conducted research with sororities; he found evidence of group norms surrounding appropriate binge-eating behavior. In one sorority the high-binge eating women were better liked, whereas in the other women's popularity was enhanced by binge-eating the norm. He also found that as the group friendships became more cohesive, the binge-eating behavior resembled one another more:

The more important the social group, and the more central a behavior is to the group, the greater the pressure toward uniformity and the more likely that members of the group will imitate each others' behavior. ... If binge eating is an important or meaningful behavior to a social group, then over time within groups, people's binge-eating patterns should grow more similar. [Crandall 1988:590].

Notably, binge-eating behavior was significantly higher in sororities than in a sample of women from all-women dorms. This work helps to address a gap in studies relating to the

impact that social groups have on eating and weight maintenance behaviors (see also Paxton et al. 1999).

Exercise and body maintenance

Coupled with diet, exercise is promoted as a means to form the body into whatever one wishes (Diamont et al. 1991). At the same time, however, there are specific, dominant messages that women receive about what is and is not appropriate exercise for females beginning at an early age. The toned, athletic body is often preferred by women. However, in a study of body build preferences among college students, females eschewed the female body builder body (Diamont et al. 1991). This has implications for the types of exercise practices women adopt.

Weight preoccupation, body dissatisfactions, and eating pathology have also been shown to be related to exercise habits (Burger and Dolny 2002; Thome and Espelage 2004; Zabinski et al. 2001). For example, one study found that college women who engaged in the most regular patterns of exercise displayed the highest frequency of disordered eating and weight-preoccupied attitudes and behaviors (Burger and Dolny 2002). Another study found that exercise was related to both positive and negative psychological health in college women (Thome and Espelage 2004). Specifically, exercise was associated with negative affect in women with high Eating Attitude Test (EAT) scores and associated with positive affect in women with low EAT scores. Moreover they found that women outside the clinical range of the EAT were also more likely to use exercise as a coping mechanism (Thome and Espelage 2004). This latter study usefully notes that physical activity can be engaged in and experienced in different

ways depending upon one's concern with and orientations toward his or her body and weight.

Dworkin (2003a, 2003b) has more specifically studied and explored the ways in which adult women's physical activity and exercise are circumscribed by feminine body ideals for fit, slender, and toned bodies. In their attempts to attain those bodies, women engage in particular practices to mold their bodies in specific ways that limit their actual experience of their bodies (2003a). In her work, she found that a quarter of the female gym goers whom she interviewed, viewed cardiovascular-types activities as "'feminine' bodily savors" and weight lifting as masculine body work; for these women, large body size (whether composed of fat or muscle) was transgressive of feminine body norms. The majority of her interviewees, however, lifted light to moderate weights and structured their gym activities to ensure "femininity" (i.e., maintain subtle and toned curves without adding to body size). These women carefully monitored their musculature for signs of excess and enacted strategies such as backing off (not lifting as frequently) or holding back (not lifting as much weight) to maintain their strength, but not increase their size. According to Dworkin "women engaged in fitness—particularly those who seek muscular strength—may find their bodily agency and empowerment limited not by biology but by an (ideological) ceiling on their muscularity" (2003b:244). Although women may negotiate this ceiling and gradually push it higher (2003b), pushing the boundaries too far puts a woman at risk for stigmatization (2003a).

Cockburn (1999, 2001) has studied similar issues related to sports participation and adolescent girls in Britain. She found magazines targeted to young women portrayed

sports as risky, trivialized sport participation, and contained message that sports participation is contradictory to femininity (1999). Cockburn says that such messages lead to young women missing out on the health promoting benefits of physical activity and becoming “physically disempowered and estranged from their bodies in terms of sporting capabilities and fitness, and are likely to learn life-long attitudes that physical exertion—even for fun—is not for them” (1999:11). Among young high school women in physical education she found a tension between having to display certain traits identified as masculine in order to succeed in teacher’s standards and having to preserve their constructed feminine image in order to succeed in feminine standards (2001). While this work has been used to describe decreasing sport and physical activity participation in high-school-aged females, it helps to inform researchers looking at college-aged women and the types of orientations that they may have gained in their recent pasts to physical activity and their own physical capabilities. It also offers examples of how women negotiate to varying degrees the dominant gender ideology in order to engage in and enjoy physical activity (Cockburn and Clarke 2002).

Practices involving alcohol and the body

An interesting intersection of health issues among college students is that between alcohol and weight control behaviors. In 2005, women participating in the ACHA-NCHA reported consuming a mean number of 3.5 drinks the last time they partied or socialized (ACHA 2006a). Just over 30 percent of women, though, reported having drunk five or more drinks in a sitting during at least once during the previous two weeks.

Using data from the 2004 NCHA, Adams and Araas (2006) found that 18 to 24 year old college women who purged reported heavier alcohol use and more negative consequences of that use.¹¹ The study is interesting because it shows a correlation between purging behavior and alcohol use, but does not examine what sort of relationship exists. For example, are women purging specifically to rid their body of alcohol they have consumed or is it in response to something else? The authors also imply that this purging behavior is indicative of an eating disorder and I am hesitant to say that since almost six percent of the women were classified into the purging group. I think that more needs to be understood about such things as what purging means to the people who engage in it and when it takes place.

Another study found a link between dysfunctional eating and alcohol use among first-year college women (Krahn et al. 2005). Specifically they found a positive, graded relationship between dieting and bingeing severity and (a) prevalence of past month alcohol use, (b) drinking enough to get high on at least half of drinking occasions, and (c) heavy drinking (more than five drinks in a row). The authors hypothesized that people who go on severe diets deprive themselves of reinforcing foods, setting themselves up to value more highly “binge” foods and alternative reinforcers, such as psychoactive substances.

¹¹ Problematically, Adams and Araas (2006) defined purging and nonpurging groups based on yes or no answer to whether they’d vomited or purged in the last 30 days to lose weight. After discussions with informants on similar issues, I noted that some answered yes to purging, but said that the purpose was not to maintain weight, just that they were hung over.

Peralta (2002) explored the relationship between body image, diet-related behavior, and alcohol use more in-depth through interviews with undergraduates. He hypothesized that particularly for college women there might be a conflict between pressure to achieve a socially approved body and pressure to engage in social alcohol use, which is seen as a high caloric undertaking. He found that students would exercise, purge, and change their eating and drinking patterns in an effort to counter weight gain thought to be caused by alcohol. Of the 37 women in the study, just over a quarter reported that they would alter their eating patterns by skipping meals or eating less to reduce their caloric intakes when drinking alcohol; a similar percentage would attempt to reduce calories by drinking less alcohol or drinking alcoholic beverages thought to have relatively fewer calories. Four would exercise and two reported purging to rid themselves of the extra calories taken in by drinking. Another interesting finding in this project was that many of the women did not see a point to drinking except to get drunk (Peralta, 2002).

Conclusions

As this chapter has shown, college students inhabit a developmental period that is characterized by engagement in a number of different behaviors and role explorations. While these behaviors are treated as statistics and with regard to how they place young adults at risk in much of the literature on college students, it is also evident from the sociocultural literature that these behaviors carry profound meanings and are influenced by a great many social and structural factors. As such in order to understand these behaviors these larger scale issues need to be taken into account. Particularly we need to pay close attention to the lived experiences of college students with regard to eating

habits, ideas about the body, and weight management projects. In the chapters that follow I explore the data collected through in-depth interviews with college women and relate it to the literature described above in the hopes of providing a more complex understanding of college eating, exercise, and weight-related practices. I begin by first addressing the Freshman 15.

CHAPTER 3: THE FRESHMAN 15

With the theories and issues described in Chapter 2 in mind, I embarked on interviews with my informants to find out what their experience with the Freshman 15 had been like both before and after starting college. I describe what I found out through this process below.

The degree to which young women express knowledge about the Freshman 15

When recruiting participants in classes for this project I would usually ask for a show of hands of who had heard of the Freshman 15. Invariably at least 75 percent of the class would raise their hands and sometimes I would observe smirks on people's faces or hear chuckles ripple throughout the class.¹² Summer school instructors and other people I came in contact with would also often relate to me their own or other's experiences with "getting" the Freshman 15. Thus even before interviewing women I realized that the Freshman 15 is something that many people have at least heard something about and is a way in which some people frame weight gain during the first year of college.

I asked informants directly whether they had heard about the Freshman 15 before they started college; all but four (19%) had heard at least something about it. Notably, three of the four women who had not heard about the Freshman 15 were participants in the pre-college summer program, which caters in part to minority students, some of whom might be first generation college students.

¹² Notably, on several occasions nontraditional students (i.e., returning students) would remark that they had also gained weight while attending school or entering a graduate program. My mother, an instructor at a community college in California, also noted to me that her older students also have talked to her about gaining weight while attending school.

On occasion, when I asked women who had told them about the Freshman 15 they responded “everyone” or “just culturally.” Rebecca, a sophomore, said, “Everyone kind of talks about it. It’s just like, ‘Oh yeah, college 15, every freshman puts on weight.’” Generally this “everyone” included friends, parents, family, and the media. In the same vein, the Freshman 15 was taken by some to be a broad cultural myth that students are told before they enter college. For example, when asked what she had heard about it, Blair said “I don’t know, it’s just kind of one of those like tales that you always hear about college.”

But freshman weight gain was not something people only heard about in high school, they also observed it. Christy, a slim 20-year old junior, described her best friend and her reaction to seeing people they knew return to town after having gone to college: “I mean, we would see them and we’d be like, ‘Oh god, you’re so much bigger than we remember you.’”¹³ On occasion, people would talk about freshman weight gain in general with their college friends; a few women related to me anecdotes about women their friends had gone to school with who had started out the year very thin, partied all the time, and gained a lot of weight.

Others said that they would talk about it, along with other things they would do in college, with their high school friends as they neared graduation. I asked two of the women whether they discussed it with girl or boy friends, or both. They both said that they mostly talked about it with their female friends because they do not usually hear

¹³ Although Christy did not explain this comment, I would be surprised if she had actually said this directly to the face of the individual who had gained weight. More likely she might have remarked to her friend that the individual had gained weight.

males talking about weight. Previous to this, one of these women also said she had heard that “mostly girls experience [the Freshman 15] rather than guys, but it’s like, happens to pretty much everyone.” This indicates that the Freshman 15 might be something more salient for women than men, a point related to the emphasis and attention placed on women’s bodies, discussed in Chapter 3.

A few women said that their families seemed to derive good-natured pleasure from warning them about the Freshman 15. Belinda, a 19 year old junior, remarked that her three older siblings had continued living at home during their first year of college and gave her a hard time about moving out to go to school; she noted that they taunted her, saying, “Oh, you’re gonna be fat!” She also said that her siblings hoped she would gain weight because it would provide them with more things to tease her about.

Discussions with people about freshman weight gain could be serious and/or light hearted. Jenny, an avid soccer player before coming to college, with a host of older cousins who were in college, explained:

With my cousins it was kind of joking slash serious, just because, you know, they knew I was an active person and they didn’t think that it would be too much of a concern. But with my mom, she was like, she was serious because she didn’t think it, that it would be, I would gain weight because of like not working out or not getting enough exercise, she thought it would be because I love things like Starbucks, like the sweets, like I love just sweets and everything, and she’d think that I’d overdo that and everything adds up, and so. With my mom it was more serious, but with everybody else it was kind of like, “Oh, Freshman 15!” You know, like kind of a joke kind of like. Standard before you go to college thing you hear about it.

Alcohol was often cited as something people heard associated with the Freshman 15 before coming to college. Other reasons for the weight gain that women heard about were

stress, change in eating patterns, partying, “late night munchies,” and lack of parental supervision and cooking. Michelle, a junior from Latin America, said, “I mean, obviously you’re not around meals and stuff so you gain the weight from eating junk food and pigging out on fast food. And I also heard from alcohol and booze, like you gain a lot of weight from that.”

While women were hearing different things about the Freshman 15, they were not necessarily receiving advice about what they could do to avoid gaining weight. Ten of the women interviewed said that they had not been given any advice of how they could avoid weight gain during their freshman year. Rebecca said that when people would talk about it “it was just like, ‘It’s gonna happen,’ or, ‘If it happens, it’ll happen.’ It wasn’t like, ‘You can prevent this.’”

Most of those given advice were encouraged to exercise, limit their alcohol consumption, and watch what they ate. This is illustrated when Christy described the little advice that she got: “it was pretty much just, you know, like just be more diligent about what you’re eating. You know, just not kind of give into that like tendency to just eat really badly and be sure to like, you know, get out and exercise and, you know, not drink too much.” Several of the younger women I spoke to said they had received advice to buy their food from the grocery store instead of eating on campus or getting a meal plan.¹⁴

¹⁴ One of these women also noted that the advice had come from her parents who were also hoping that she would save money by cooking her own food rather than buying food on campus.

A few women reported that they had not gotten much advice from family or friends because their family and friends were not worried that they would gain excessive amounts of weight. I asked Erin, a junior, what her mother, who worked on a college campus, had told her about the Freshman 15. Erin replied, “Not much. She, she wasn’t really worried ‘cause she knew that I was so active in high school and that I would stay that way.” Erin later said that her mom was also not too concerned because she knew that there were fresh fruits and vegetables available on campus and that Erin would not eat the less healthy foods too often because she did not enjoy eating them.

Some women noted that they made their own suppositions about why freshman might gain weight and came up with their own ideas of what they could do to not gain weight. Often this meant applying their knowledge of weight maintenance or weight loss tips and what they knew about college lifestyles. Valerie said that she thought she should not drink as much or go on eating binges, such as “cookie scarfing.” Although Jenny received some advice from her cousins and her mom, she said, “I think with, to me it was just kind of common sense, like, ‘Okay don’t eat too much of this and don’t eat really late and, you know, don’t order pizza in the middle of the night,’ kind of thing [...] being an athlete, like I already knew what I needed to do.”

Notably, while women who had heard of the Freshman 15 were quick to acknowledge they had heard of it, when it came to talking specifically about what they had heard about it and who they had heard it from, they were much more vague. I got the sense that while they had few in-depth discussions about it, almost all the women knew that the Freshman 15 was a reference to weight gain and that the mere mention was

evocative. I take up this issue in more detail in Chapter 5 where I discuss the ways in which women talked to each other about weight, dieting, and exercising.

The extent to which young women express concern about the Freshman 15

Hearing about the Freshman 15 did not necessarily translate into concern that they would gain weight their freshman year nor did it mean that they thought it was true. In this way, for some women the Freshman 15 was a sort of bogeyman. Again, it was just one of those things that people told freshman college students about, but did not necessarily have a basis in reality.

Several women specifically said that after hearing about the Freshman 15 they did not give it much thought. After I asked sophomore Jessica if she might remember who had first told her about the Freshman 15 she said:

Yeah, actually I was talking about it with a friend and she just said, she had mentioned something about a restaurant that was right by her college and she said something about fresh-, "I don't wanna get the Freshman 15." This was when I was in high school and I had, I hadn't really understood the concept and then a couple people explained it to me and I didn't think anything of it.

While a number of women did not give the prospect of weight gain during their freshman year of college much thought, as this quote illustrates, others paid it more attention. After hearing about the Freshman 15 from me during a classroom recruitment, Natalie, a slightly overweight freshman, talked to her peer advisor and summer school teacher about it. After contemplating it, she said she was not sure if it was possible or not, but could see where weight gain might come from. Out of the 22 women I interviewed, only five (23%) said that they were at no time concerned that they might gain the Freshman 15.

For women who had been involved in sports during their high school years, concern about the Freshman 15 often involved the awareness that they would no longer be as active as previously. Many realized that they would have to begin to structure their own exercise patterns (for many, this was something previously done by a coach) and possibly watch what they were eating more closely because of slowing metabolisms. Erin, who had played basketball, soccer, and golf her senior year of high school, went to see a physical trainer the summer before leaving for college in order to put together an eating and exercise plan so that “I could stay how I was and not worry about not gaining that weight.”

I noted that some women’s concern with the Freshman 15 seemed to be linked with goals they had set to lose weight in college. Throughout our interview, Natalie stressed how important it was for her to improve her fitness level for a specific program she was involved in; being slightly overweight, one of her goals was to lose 15 pounds during her freshman year. Thus finding about the Freshman 15 raised her concern that her own goal might be hindered. By contrast, Jessica said she was not as concerned about the Freshman 15 because of a long-standing goal:

I didn’t really think about Freshman 15. I knew I wanted to lose weight and when I was in high school I had told myself, I remember once thinking to myself, “I’m not going to have any weight issues when I go to college.” Not that I, that my issues would just dissipate, but I, I wanted to be fit and I, I’d always wanted that for myself.

Some women knew of people who had gained as well as lost weight when they went to college; this knowledge affected the ways in which they negotiated their own thoughts as to what might happen to them. Regan, a freshman from the Northeast, saw her older

sister gain 50 pounds during her freshman year. Saying that her sister was “huge,” she said she did not want that to happen to her. One of Regan’s older friends went to school in Florida and had lost weight during her freshman year and, thinking about the similarities in climates, she thought she might also lose weight during her freshman year. Another freshman, Colette, noted that her oldest sister lost 15 pounds as a freshman, while another sister gained five pounds. Colette said that, like her oldest sister, she thought that she had too much control to let her own weight “get out of hand.” These two cases illustrate the ways in which women apply knowledge from their experiences and observations based upon, in part, perceived similarities and differences to predict what the future may hold for them.

Several other women said that they thought they might lose weight their freshman year. Chloe, a junior, thought that it would be easier to control her weight while in college because she would not have as much access to snacks and other foods that were available in her family’s home.

Importantly, at least five women said that they had not been very concerned about gaining weight until they got to college. Sara explained:

Sara: [E]specially when I got here and I realized that it was really hard to find anything healthy to eat and what you did find that was healthy, it was pretty expensive. [...] I knew I’d gain weight just ‘cause, you know, you’re in college and you eat like fast food more and you’re eating later at night. But um, I didn’t realize how hard it was gonna be to keep myself from gaining weight.

LP: And did you realize that like right away or?

Sara: Pretty much like within the first month I would say I really understood that it’s a lot easier to gain the Freshman 15 than I thought it was going to be.

Sandra, a petite junior who lost about 14 pounds during her first semester, said that it was not what she was observing in her own body and behavior that elicited her concern, but what she was seeing in the people around her, namely that they were gaining weight. She told herself, “Wow, I don’t know, I don’t want to be like that.”

By contrast, three other women said that while they had been concerned about gaining weight before coming to college, they were not so after being on campus for several weeks. Valerie said that after a month she found that she was losing weight because she had nothing to eat and Regan said that she found she was only eating healthy foods.

A number of women’s concern with the Freshman 15 or weight gain was tempered by their knowledge of their past behaviors and expectations for future ones. In explaining why she thought freshmen might gain weight, Belinda also explained why she was not concerned that her weight would change during her freshman year:

I don’t know if it’s a stereotype or not, but um, I think that a lot of people they come from their house and they’re like, “Oh we can eat whatever we want, ‘cause our parents made us, you know, have vegetables,” or whatever, you know. And I was never like that so I never had that issue. I could still eat junk food and not gain any weight if I wanted to, so I wasn’t really concerned, but I could see how other people could definitely, and drinking. There’s probably a lot of drinking now that they’re on their own. The whole beer belly thing. So just an unhealthy diet, changing your diet dramatically and eating a lot of stuff that isn’t good for you necessarily. But my, I think, like I said, I was already used to eating all that stuff, so [Chuckles] it wouldn’t have really affected me ‘cause it wouldn’t really be a change of diet that much. So I wasn’t really that concerned about gaining fif-, Freshman 15. I didn’t either, so I guess I was right. [Laughs]

Several other women said that that they had been less concerned because they had come into college with the expectation they would continue exercising. Rachel, a

freshman in the pre-college summer program, said, “I wasn’t really concerned with [the Freshman 15]. Um, because I was the one, well I still have in my mind like I’m gonna go to the Student Rec Center at least half hour a day. Get some sort of exercise in.” Rebecca also expressed little concern because of her assumption that most of the weight gain was due to drinking too much alcohol, something that she did not do.

Summary

Despite their limitations, studies on college freshman weight gain show a general trend for students to gain weight their first year of college. They also show that these weight gains, along with increases in percent fat mass, can be supported by relatively low levels of increased daily energy intake paired with decreases in physical activity. Moreover, they indicate that environmental stimuli (Levitsky et al. 2004), past dieting practices (Lowe et al. 2006), and weight satisfaction (Megel et al. 1994) are all significant factors in the observed weight gains.

Importantly, though, average weight gains appear to be much more moderate than the Freshman 15 would suggest. Graham and Jones (2002) argue that belief in the Freshman 15 can provoke increased negative body image, while Keeling (2002) has pointed out that the problem lies in the adoption of socio-cultural norms concerning the body that elicit shame about weight gain. While this work is helpful in pointing us toward the possible impacts of belief in the Freshman 15 and other body ideals, it has done little to explore the ways that freshman college students anticipate gaining weight.

Before coming to college, most of the women I spoke to had heard something of the Freshman 15, however having heard of it did not necessarily mean that they were very

concerned about it. Informants seemed to engage in a sort of risk assessment ala Giddens (1991) when thinking about the Freshman 15 in the sense that they were collecting information and thinking about their particular potential for gaining weight in college. However, they were not consciously drawing upon expert knowledge. Instead, informants used the information they had heard about the Freshman 15 (from family, friends, and, sometimes, the media), what they knew about college life, and what they anticipated their own behaviors to be in order to assess their risk for getting the Freshman 15. These assessments changed over time, particularly during the first month of college, as they were exposed to new information. As such, the degree of concern they experienced over the Freshman 15 varied depending on the particular context they found themselves and the ways that they negotiated the knowledge they had.

In the next chapter I describe the eating and exercise patterns that informants developed during their first year of college, concentrating on the personal and social factors that helped to shape these.

CHAPTER 4: HEALTH-RELATED PATTERNS AND ACTIVITIES

Under the assumption that at a very simplistic level freshmen students' weight change is driven by the differential of energy in (i.e., calories consumed) and energy out (i.e., calories expended), I sought to find out what kinds of eating and exercise patterns and practices students develop during their first year of college. I was more interested in discovering the personal, social, and structural factors that shape the development of these patterns and practices. Below I describe the health-related practices adopted by informants during their freshman year, beginning with a description of pre-college attitudes and practices.

Pre-college eating patterns and practices

Because I wanted to understand women's eating within the context of their lives, I asked informants several questions to find out what their eating was like during their senior year of high school. These discussions proved very valuable because they provided detailed information about the women's families' food attitudes and practices. This in turn was often associated with women's attitudes and practices during their freshman year of college.

I asked women to think about the types of foods available in their parents' home and rate them on a scale from one to five, with five being the most healthy and one being the least healthy. Women's rankings ranged from two to five, with just over three being the average. As informants explained their scores it gave me a clearer idea of the ways in which they assessed the healthiness of foods and the types of foods they had eaten growing up.

Predictably, many informants gave their families higher food scores if fresh produce was often available in their home. One of the more interesting things to arise during these discussions was that many of the women gave their families' higher food health scores if one or both of their parents frequently cooked dinner. For example, after rating the food in her father and step-mother's home a four, Christy explained:

I mean my dad cooked a lot, so, you know, we didn't eat out all, we didn't eat out a lot. He cooked and they were, you know, balanced meals, you know, the vegetable, starch, and the meat. So that alone like when I think back on it, you know, that, you know, was really good, 'cause like every night, you know, we would have dinner. We wouldn't, you know, go out and eat or we wouldn't like go to McDonalds.

As implied in the preceding excerpt, junk food, greasy food, fast food, and other convenience-type foods tended to be used to explain lower family food scores. Living with her mom and three older siblings during her senior year, Belinda said that her family's food was about a two. Providing a uniquely detailed explanation, she said,

Once we got older we all decided we hated everything, so no matter what [my mom] cooked at least one of us didn't like it, so by the time, you know, we hit junior high, high school, we were eating out like every meal. Plus we're all busy and we're all like doing different activities and between all of us we've never, you know, so a lot of fast food. Unhealthy.

Fast food

Because increasing consumption of fast food has often been linked with rising levels of overweight and because so many of the women viewed it as unhealthy, I was curious about how often they typically ate fast food during their senior year. After several interviews, I realized that the definition of "fast food" could be somewhat ambiguous. Some women's definitions of fast food were general, such as, "pretty much anything I

guess that you can drive through without like sitting, you know, sitting down and eating.” Some used the speed at which food was acquired to differentiate fast food from other types of food. Other definitions were descriptive and consisted of lists of specific fast food franchises. For the most part, informants did not categorize restaurants as fast food, but sometimes the line between restaurant and fast food was blurred because of the types of food served or possibly the healthiness of the food.

Among the women I talked to, the frequency of eating fast food with their families varied greatly from never to about nine times a week. On average informants ate fast food a little less than twice a week with their families during their senior year of high school. For those who ate fast food infrequently with their families, they would eat it on unusual occasions (e.g., driving somewhere) or routinely on a specific day (e.g., Friday pizza nights, after church). In general, though, most women talked about eating fast food with their family as a way of saving time, energy, and sometimes money.

In addition to eating fast food with family, I asked informants about how often they ate fast food with friends. Again, responses varied, this time ranging from zero to 14 times a week.¹⁵ More often, if informants ate fast food with friends, they did so routinely after school or on the weekend. For example, Christy mentioned that her friends and she would sometimes get fast food after partying on weekends.¹⁶ These examples show how

¹⁵ Rosa reported that she ate fast food 14 times a week with friends during the first semester of her senior year. However, at that time Rosa was living in an apartment with her friend and they would get fast food most nights.

¹⁶ This was notable because it was a practice women often talked about doing their freshman year of college (described below).

adolescents can use going out to eat at specific places at specific times to establish a group practice.

Concern about eating healthy foods and food monitoring

During interviews, many of the women described the orientations their families had towards food and the ways in which food was monitored. This often involved reflection on the roles in which those attitudes had on their own health practices. Jenny described how her own “common sense” approach to eating (i.e., eat what she wants to eat and either workout or not eat something as fattening or sugary later) was impacted by things her mother said and did:

[My mom] knew that we liked to eat these kinds of things, but like she wouldn't buy them all the time so that we couldn't eat 'em all the time. And um, she would tell us, “Okay, well if you're gonna eat this now, don't have any dessert later.” Or, “Don't have any whatever later.” So it just made sense.

However, a parent's concern with health could also negatively impact a child's concern about health. Jessica, who grew up with her mother and older brother, described how her mother went away for six months for job training when she was young and was overly concerned about health and fitness:

When I was growing up, [my mom] was very, very into health and fitness. One of the reasons it detracted me from health and fitness is because when I, when I lived with her, when she came back from training [...] she wouldn't let me buy lunch at school and I was the only kid that had a packed lunch. And it wasn't a fun packed lunch, it was like a boiled egg and carrots. And when you're that age, you don't want a boiled egg and carrots. So I don't remember even eating it. And so she would definitely try to implement that kind of thing, but it was almost a forceful action that detracts people from wanting to participate in such an activity because number one you don't have the knowledge and number two it's not fun. [...] As we progressed she always had health food in the house, but it was almost at the point that it was so healthy that no one wanted to eat in the house, so then I started ordering out, because I didn't want to eat anything she had.

Undoubtedly Jessica's difficult relationship with her mom impacted her reaction to her mother's concern about healthy eating. However, as she notes, the concern her mother placed on health was too forced and unpleasant, which discouraged Jessica even more from being concerned with her eating and perhaps influenced her adoption of a less healthy diet.

Sometimes a family's concern with eating healthy foods was partially related to someone in the family having a health condition. For example, Isabel's older brother spent his childhood overweight due to the steroids he took for his asthma. In high school, though, he decided to lose weight by changing his eating habits and exercising; in turn, he stressed his particular ideas about taking care of his body to Isabel, who shared them with their mother. As such, the three would help monitor one another's behavior and periodically go on diets together.

As this section has shown informants' families practiced a wide variety of eating habits. However when it came to assessing the healthiness of those habits, informants used many of the same criteria, namely the frequency that someone cooked family meals and the degree to which convenience foods were consumed. Most informants did not eat fast food with their families above twice a week and many discussed how they had adopted familial attitudes towards healthy eating. In the next section, I describe the eating practices informants assumed during their freshman year.

Eating patterns and practices

To pay for their meals on campus the majority of the informants purchased a school meal plan. While I will discuss the structure of campus dining facilities and services in

much more detail in Chapter 6, for the purposes of discussing the types of eating patterns that informants developed during their freshman year, I describe the school's meal plan system below.

There are four student meal plans available at the UA: Plus 5, Plus 7, Plus 10, and commuter plans. The first three are flat rate plans that provide discounts on food items and waive tax; the money is put into an account that is deducted from every time food is purchased using a Cat Card (student identification card that also acts as a debit card). Balances on the meal plan at the end of the school year can be recouped for a fee ranging from 50 to 125 dollars; otherwise balances are absorbed by the UA. The commuter plan is more flexible because there is no limit to how much or how little money you put into the account, however it does not come with any discounts besides tax exemption. Meal plans can be used at all campus dining locations, including convenience stores or "markets." Informants mainly described using their meal plans at eating venues located in the Student Union Memorial Center (SUMC) and Park Student Union (PSU).

Just less than three-quarters of informants had been on some sort of meal plan their freshman year; notably, of the six who were not on meal plans, four were in the pre-college program and had not decided whether they would buy a meal plan. Six informants had the smallest meal plan, four the middle meal plan, and one the largest meal plan; the remaining five had commuter plans. Some students who had heard that eating on campus could lead to weight gain intentionally did not get a meal plan or bought a smaller one to limit their campus food consumption.

Weekday meals

To get an understanding of what informants ate during their freshman year, I asked them to describe where and what they would typically eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. “Typical” eating patterns proved problematic to assess because informants schedules were dynamic and varied sometimes day-to-day based on classes and other things they had going on. Overall, they described eating patterns that ranged from chaotic to rigidly structured.

Breakfast was the meal most frequently described as variable, often dependent upon the time of informants’ first classes. Notably, several women said that although they did not eat breakfast, they usually ate a granola bar or something similar after their first class. Those eating breakfast described eating either foods that were small and portable (e.g., yogurt) or cereal.¹⁷

Only a few informants described eating most, if not all, their meals on campus. Sara, a tall, slender junior who reported she rarely ate fast food her senior year in high school, said that she usually ate out for lunch and dinner during her freshman year. About twice a week she would get a breakfast burrito from Highland Market. For lunch she generally ate at the main Student Union, usually at IQ Fresh, and then had pizza, tacos, McDonalds, or something else “that you wouldn’t want to eat” for dinner.

One of the most often described meal patterns was one that generally did not involve breakfast or, if it did, it was something quick and portable that was in students’ rooms.

¹⁷ Most said that their breakfast eating habits were the same as in high school.

This pattern usually involved eating one meal on campus and one meal in the dorm room. Many of the informants talked about eating their on-campus meals at IQ Fresh, Cactus Grill, and/or On Deck Deli, where many would get sandwiches and wraps. Easy-Mac, Ramen Noodles, cereal, and soup were mentioned numerous times as typical in-room meals. Jenny, who had had a commuter meal plan during her freshman year, described this pattern:

Jenny: [B]reakfast was always questionable because it depends if I had time to eat it in the morning. But if I did eat breakfast it would be like a granola bar that I had in my, like in the dorm room. Or, you know, like a Pop Tart or something like that. [...] Sometimes I would maybe meet some friends at the Union, um, depending if my class was later or something like that or if we got out early, I would eat something at the Union. And if I did that, it would be um, probably like pancakes or whatever, tater tots [...] But I think in general my freshman year probably didn't eat breakfast the majority of the time. [...]

LP: How about for lunch what would you do here?

Jenny: Um... whatever, whatever was in the dorm pretty much. Occasionally, like um, sometimes we, you know, like I said, we'd go to the Union or whatever, but, you know, sometimes we'd go down like here to University, 'cause that was like close walking distance as well. But other than that, it was like, you know, Easy Mac in the dorm or something like in the dorm rooms or, you know, like Ramen noodles, like just whatever we had basically. [...]

LP: How about dinner, what would you do?

Jenny: Um... I think out of all the meals in the day, dinner's probably the one that we like would go out um, somewhere. Like um, freshman year I was dating this guy that was a sophomore and he had a car and so like we, he would take me out to dinner sometimes or we would come down to University [Boulevard] or something, so I think dinner was most often not in the dorm, either in the, you know, Union or like out at a restaurant somewhere.

Several informants described eating habits that seemed to defy patterning. When I asked these informants about their eating habits, I generally received a long list of the different things they ate during their freshman year. For these women, asking them what

a “typical” day of eating might have been was not adequate to capture their experience. Chloe, a slender, hippie-ish junior who had grown up eating very healthy foods with her family, said that the only “rule” in her eating her freshman year was “inconsistency.” She described her eating as going through phases that had a lot to do with what types of food were available in her dorm room and what she could get on sale or for free.

In contrast to these more dynamic eating patterns, several other informants described very regimented or routine eating habits. It is notable that these individuals often displayed a high degree of concern about their weight. Jessica, a sophomore, provided me with an extremely detailed account of her eating patterns that described her food in terms of serving sizes and food groups, something none of the other informants did. She said that she tried to keep her diet consistent from day to day and discussed her eating in terms of functionality, for example saying that she would eat a snack before going to the gym that would help, not “hinder” her gym goals.

While interesting as a case study, this goal-oriented and calculated orientation towards eating was a great exception amongst my informants. Many informants talked about their eating habits as being strongly affected by convenience. For example, they would grab something at a food venue that happened to be located between two classes, with some noting that fitting eating into one’s schedule could be difficult.

Fast food and soda

I specifically asked informants about their fast food and soda consumption during their freshman years, and whether this differed from

More fast food eaten in college	15 (68%)
Same	3 (14%)
Less fast food eaten in college	4 (18%)

their consumption in high school (Table 2). Nearly 70 percent of informants said that they ate more fast food their freshman year of college than they did during high school, while about 13 percent said they ate the same amount, and 18 percent said that they ate less. Several of those saying that they ate less fast food their freshman year had eaten fast food quite frequently their senior year of high school and those reporting the same amount of consumption generally ate fast food less than once a week.

The 15 informants who perceived they ate more fast food their freshman year noted that they did not have a parent cooking meals for them and/or that fast food was convenient and accessible. Many also discussed a dearth of other food options on campus and a general inaccessibility to off campus food sources. Interestingly, when talking about friends' consumption of fast food several informants specifically indicated that their friends ate it because they were lazy.

The issue of identity and fast food explicitly arose in several interviews. When talking about virtually never eating fast food with her family, Gretchen said, "We're not fast food people." Anna also said, "I'm not a fast food person." By contrast, when I asked Helen to describe the type of eater she is, she replied, "Um, really a fast food person. [Chuckles]" These identities corresponded well with the frequency of fast food they reported eating.

Several other informants said that while they generally refused to eat fast food, there were certain exceptions. In general the exceptions were perceived to be less greasy and perhaps healthier. Erin said that she generally refuses to eat fast food unless she has to and that she will never again eat a chain fast food hamburger. Despite these strongly

expressed opinions about fast food, she said that she likes french fries, ate Panda Express about once a week, and occasionally ate a chicken sandwich from McDonalds during her second semester of freshman year. With regard to eating at McDonalds, she explained that she started eating it because she was tired of eating the other things they had on campus and needed a change.

A few indicated that although they knew fast food was unhealthy and they tried not to eat it very frequently, they still enjoyed the taste of it. Isabel said she did not like the grease and other things that fast food establishments add to their food because they are not good for your body; however, she also said that those additions make it taste better. For informants with these conflicted feelings toward fast food, when they did eat fast food, particularly “too much” of it, they often felt guilty.

Soda consumption varied widely from none to five sodas a day. Notably, half of the informants said they either never drank soda or only extremely rarely, and four said they would have a few sodas a week. A number of informants said that they had stopped drinking soda in their early teen years because they realized it was not good for them or because they thought it would make them fat. Ten informants (48%; almost all of whom did not drink soda) said they drank the same amount of soda their freshman year that they did during high school, six said that they drank less soda their freshman year (29%), and five said they drank more soda their freshman year (24%). Those whose soda consumption had increased often noted that their high schools had either banned or discouraged soda consumption.

Regular soda seemed to be drunk more frequently than diet soda, but this varied. Whether or not one drank diet or regular soda sometimes depended upon where they were, what they had access to, and/or who they were with. Sara said, “I drink diet when I was with my [sorority] sisters or when I was like out like at a restaurant, but you know, in private you gonna drink, you might as well drink the real thing.” Others said that they did not drink diet soda either because it was unhealthy (because of the chemicals in the sugar substitute) or they did not like the taste. Even among the diet soda drinkers there was consensus that regular soda tasted much better.

Second dinners and pizza

Having several dinners or late-night snacks came up frequently in interviews. When I asked Kisha, an average weight, fast-talking junior, about what she would do for dinner, she said:

Oh, I’d have a couple of those. [Chuckling] It depends on that they were serving in Cactus Grill. Anything from stroganoff to sometimes they’d have like chicken cacciatore or chicken some other way, lot of chicken. [...] I’d eat dinner, go to class, and then eat dinner again. [Chuckles] [...] ‘cause I, I’m a night person, so I’d study at night, so I’d need to eat again ‘cause I’d end up, I know that if I don’t eat now, I’m gonna be hungry later and so I do anticipatory eating, which is bad. [Chuckles]

Similarly, Colette described often taking leftovers home from dinner to eat later on that night as a snack or “mini-meal” three to four times a week. She said eating leftovers was “not like the best, but it’s better than have, like ordering pizza or something.” She explained that in college she was staying up a lot later than she had previously because in the residence hall there is always a friend around or something to do.

Pizza is a common second dinner or “late, late snack” for many dorm dwellers. As several informants noted, when they stayed up late and wanted something to eat, there were few things they could buy besides pizza. In addition, pizza could be delivered and could be paid with using their meal plan, so it did not take much effort to get it. A handful of informants described scenarios wherein they would be hanging out with friends, possibly watching a movie, and someone would say, “Ooh, let’s order pizza.” Several said that they ordered pizza “too much” or “a lot,” which ranged anywhere from four times a week to once every two weeks.

While students were generally of the opinion that eating late at night was not good practice, many did, though to varying degrees. Often eating late was associated with socializing with people in the residence hall, but it could also be undertaken when studying.

Snacking and dorm room food

A number of informants talked about snacking more in college than they had previously. Gretchen reflected that in college you keep your snack foods in your dorm room where you hang out and study, so it is easy to see the snack foods and eat them: “[Laughing] So, you know, you’re sittin’ there staring at your crackers like, you’re like, ‘Hm, I could really go for some crackers.’”

Slim Fast drinks and energy bars often functioned as snacks and meal replacements, many noting their convenience, not necessarily their role in weight management projects. Snack and other food items informants keeping in their room included (in approximate order of frequency of mention): granola bars, nuts, yogurt, macaroni and cheese, Ramen

noodles, canned soup, cereal, milk, peanut butter and jelly, bread, various types of chips and crackers, cheese, popcorn, deli meats and tuna packets, pretzels, cookies, Pop-Tarts, cream cheese, juice, soda, Chex Mix, frozen dinners, eggs, chocolate candy, hot dogs, and alcohol. Many informants noted that their parents bought them bulk-sized snack foods for their rooms or sent care packages with cookies and other junk foods. As Chloe described it, people's attitude seemed to be "Let's stock a room full of bomb shelter food and eat it."

Fresh fruit and vegetables were often described as being difficult to keep in the dorm room because of lack of space and because people were unable to get to a grocery store very often. However, several students said that they consciously tried to keep fruits and vegetables in their room to avoid snacking on other less healthy foods.

Smoothies were also a snack that some students mentioned having quite often. Jenny talked about how she "loved" to get smoothies at IQ before or between classes. I spent several afternoons conducting observations in the SUMC and noticed that around three o'clock the line at IQ (and many of the other eating establishments) grew enormously. Most of the people (about 75% women) in line ordered large smoothies and walked away with them, presumably on their way to class or somewhere else.

Another beverage that several students mentioned drinking regularly (some as much as at least three times a week.) were coffee drinks. I generally did not specifically ask about the types of beverages students were consuming. I got the impression that many did not categorize drinks as snacks, so they were not mentioned when I asked about snacking, as I had anticipated. In fact, Rebecca specifically said the lattes she would drink were not

snacks, but a “caffeine craving.” Given my own observations, I believe that many more informants were frequently drinking smoothies and coffee drinks than specifically reported it. In retrospect I should have specifically asked about smoothie and coffee consumption, as well as the amount of money students typically spent on them.

Comparing freshman eating practices and home eating practices

At different points during interviews, informants compared their freshman year eating practices with their eating habits when they lived with their parents. Regan, who rarely ate with her family during her senior year and who described her family as having a lot of junk food around their home, said that after three weeks of being in college her eating habits had changed. They changed because she no longer had access to all the junk food in her parents’ home and that it took effort to walk to the main student union to get fast food. As such, she said her eating patterns had improved. Although she was eating more often and having larger portion sizes, the food she was eating was healthier. She explained:

[B]ecause like at home I was like a big, big like junk food snacker. And like I’d have like a cookie in the morning and then like at night I’d have like, like a salad and then I would like take like a piece of cheese cake [...] And like, so I was only eating like, maybe like three little things, but they were all junk food.

She supposed that even though she felt that she was eating more, because it was healthier the calories would even out if not be less.

Before coming to college Rebecca, a 19-year-old sophomore, had lived at home with her parents and younger siblings. She talked about how her family had previously made “round” (i.e., containing all the food groups) meals, something she never had in college. I

asked whether it was possible to get a “round” meal on campus and she said yes, but the meals they provided “scared her.” As mentioned above, she also said she snacked a lot more in college.

Thus while eating habits reportedly improved for informants who had unhealthy eating patterns at home, those who had experienced regular family meals said they missed having balanced, full meals. Those used to home-cooked meals also generally expressed negative or skeptical opinions about the healthiness and quality of the meals prepared in some of the more cafeteria style eating venues on campus.

Weekend eating and drinking

Almost all of the informants said that their eating patterns were different on the weekends than the weekdays. Five informants specifically said they were more likely to eat off campus than on campus with friends on the weekends than the weekdays. Several of the interviewees who had grown up in Tucson also noted that they might go visit with their friends or parents in town during the weekends.

Eating was often described as less structured or characterized as “grazing” on the weekends. Chloe explained that it was due to not having “classes to order your time,” people doing a variety of things, and not necessarily having people to eat with. Several women noted that the lack of structure contributed to their eating less on weekends than weekdays because they were not thinking about eating as much. By contrast, a few others said that they were likely to eat larger meals (particularly breakfast) on the weekends because they had more time for it.

Most informants said that if they did drink alcohol, they would not compensate for those calories elsewhere in their diets, however a few of the older students indicated that they are more likely to do that now. Rebecca said that she had heard of women not eating before going to a party both to compensate for calories and so that they can get drunk faster. In general, informants said they might eat less before going out, but were likely to eat more during or after a party because they did not care as much or to settle their stomachs. If informants ate less following a night of drinking it was usually because they were hung over or otherwise did not feel well.

However, eating in the early morning hours after a night of drinking and/or partying was often described by informants. Chuckling, Valerie said after being out all night “you just want pizza,” and that her friends and she would order pizza every few weeks after partying. Like she did in high school, Christy said she would often pick up fast food before heading back to her dorm room. Eating after drinking was also noted by some to help settle their stomachs.

I did not specifically ask informants what kind of or how much alcohol they drank, but sometimes they spontaneously talked about it. Chloe said that she did not drink beer or mixed drinks with sugar and instead might drink hard alcohol: “I was definitely conscious of that. That’s what I thought the Freshman 15 was from: beer and like margaritas. [Chuckles]” I was surprised by how often women associated beer with weight gain and reported that they only drank mixed drinks. Because mixed drinks can vary widely in terms of caloric content, it would have been useful to query into the types of alcohol and other mixers that they were drinking.

Impact of friends on eating habits

Most of the informants said that whether or not they ate meals alone or with others depended on the day, time, and what people were doing. Overall, it seemed that dinner was the meal they were most likely to eat with other people, especially on the weekends. However, many mentioned that they would regularly or sporadically plan to meet friends for lunch on campus.

When informants did eat with friends, most said that it could impact where they ate. For example, they would have to compromise on a place to eat, which most said was never problematic. Several noted that when eating at the unions with friends everyone would “spread out” and buy food where they wanted, and then meet back to eat together.

While informants were in good agreement that eating with friends could influence where they ate, they had wide ranging opinions on whether friends influenced how much or what they ate. For some eating or being around friends who had differing levels of concern about the healthiness of food could be troubling, while others described altering their food practices to appear more concerned about their health and/or weight. Sometimes informants noted that their food practices changed depending on the people they were with. Finally, a few believed that other people did not affect what they ate, saying that if they were hungry they ate, if they were not hungry, they did not eat. Below I illustrate these differing issues.

Personal health and weight goals could make eating with others difficult. Jessica said she was concerned that if she ate out she would overconsume and fall back into old habits; thus, she decided to completely “abstain” from eating out. She said turning down

invitations to eat out was really hard, “Because usually people wanna be accepted and they wanna say yes to everything in college.” Isabel, who was trying to eat as healthy as possible, also noted difficulties associated with eating with friends who would tempt her with the fast food or unhealthy food.

While Isabel discussed how it was difficult to refrain from eating when in the company of her friends because of her own health goals, others discussed how their eating was constrained in the interest of self presentation. Natalie discussed how she was more careful about how much she ate when with friends: “I don’t want to appear like I’m overeating and it’s an image for myself that I don’t want them to be stereotypical or like, ‘Oh, she eats so much,’ or whatever. I like watch what I eat, and I’ll order a smaller amount when I’m eating with my friends.” Natalie also described feeling guilty when eating something that might be considered unhealthy in front of her health-conscious roommate; several other informants also mentioned feelings of guilt in similar situations.

Consciousness of what one was eating seemed to be heightened for some when in the company of others. To illustrate, Chloe said:

I think when you eat with people you’re more conscious of what you eat. Although sometimes when you eat with people you can eat things you’re not going to eat otherwise, if it’s around, someone offers it to you or eating socially pressure, pressured things, like pizza or whatever. You wouldn’t eat that on your own. [...] But for me, I was, it’s more of a social c-, it’s more constraint when I eat with people, definitely. I mean I won’t like go back for too many more seconds, you know. Or little things. Or I just kind of assess what they’re doing and probably follow it.

There are several important things to note here. First, people might eat less healthy than normally in order to participate with others. At the same time, people's eating might be constrained by monitoring and mimicking what others are doing.

Another illustration of how women might follow the crowd, so to speak, when eating with others came from Sara. Sara was a member of a sorority and noted that when she went out to eat with her sorority sisters they would all order salads and that she would generally eat "a lot less" when with them. I asked whether she felt pressured to eat this way in front of them and she said,

I didn't necessarily feel pressured, I just, it was kind of I don't know, I guess they influence you, like not in a good or bad way, just, you know, if they order something and I say, "Oh I'd like that," like, you know, it's just unconscious I guess influences. [...] It wasn't like they off l-, like they put foods off limits or they said anything, it was just kind of more accepted I guess to eat healthier food.

I often mentioned this example to informants to get their reactions and almost everyone said that they did not do this. However they indicated that they were aware that some people did this, they were just "not one of those people."

While some people's eating was constrained around certain people or groups of people, several noted that their eating was less constrained around certain others. For example, Sara said that around her long-term boyfriend, who she had dated since high school, she would eat less healthy foods, such as from Pizza Hut or Panda Express. Blair, who generally ate very little, said that she felt more comfortable eating with her extended family. She said one of the reasons why she ate more when around her family was that they had "home-cooked food and you don't wanna miss out on your chance to eat it."

Many of those concerned about what they were eating expressed some difficulty in being around friends who were unconcerned about their diet, but other informants provided the opposite perspective. I asked Jenny whether eating with her friends impacted how much she ate.

Um, how much I ate, no [Chuckling] because I still eat as much as I want to if I'm with my friends or as little as I want to. It doesn't, doesn't matter to me if they're only eating certain things, then I should feel like, no that doesn't matter to me. [Chuckles] I eat w-, I'm like, "Oh really? You're just gonna eat that little? Well I'm really hungry, I'm still gonna eat a lot."

Eating as a social event

Food was described as a pervasive aspect of socializing with others. Although she thought she was eating healthier and losing weight, average weight freshman Regan said that there were many opportunities to eat: "[M]y friends eat all the time, they're always like [Chuckling] 'Let's go here, let's go there.' So it's hard not to eat here." Food would often be present at night when hanging out in the dorm, during study sessions, and at different social events.

Going out to eat both on and off campus was also something that people could do together. Particularly for freshmen who are coming into a new environment and trying to establish connections, going out to eat and sharing food could be a medium for forming new relationships. Although Jessica would not eat out herself, several times a week she would bring a bagged lunch and eat with her friends in the union. Establishing certain patterns of eating out with friends could also be fun, meaningful, and a way to establish a group practice. For example, Blair described how she enjoyed staying up all night with her friends and going out for a big breakfast in the early morning.

For informants who ate most of their meals in their dorm rooms, eating with friends often meant eating things they typically did not eat. Valerie, who described eating few meals her freshman year, said that it would be “an occasion if we go out and pig out.” In terms of eating more than usual, she noted, “[S]ometimes I would just take advantage of the fact that I’m eating a meal and just have the meal. So, then I wouldn’t be hungry later.” While Valerie seemed to be consciously eating more in order not to be hungry later, others said that they unintentionally ended up consuming more calories when in these social situations. For example, there might be more food available or the food might be calorically denser than the food they usually ate.

Thus while eating with others fulfilled certain social needs and provided an opportunity to eat a meal when one might otherwise have snacks or pre-packaged foods, depending on who the person was with, it could lead to eating more and/or less healthy foods.

Judging eating patterns

In evaluating their freshman year eating patterns, informants generally acknowledged that they could have eaten better, but that they thought they did okay or “fine.” Many noted that they did not think they had much control over what they ate and that they did what they could to eat healthy. Several said they relied upon eating convenient foods because they felt they were really busy, while others said that because they had been so busy in high school, their freshman year felt like a break and a time that they could focus on developing a healthy lifestyle. Notably, only one informant said that she thought her eating habits had been “good.”

Snacking and late night meals were often assessed as being “bad” by informants, although many admitted to doing it. For the most part, however, informants expressed that when they “slipped” and ate something they deemed to be unhealthy they were not upset by it:

And like of course sometimes, you know, I’ll slip, you know, like I’ll have unhealthy meals, but whatever. Like if that’s once every like five days it’s not gonna, you know. I’m not like crazy about it where I will like, you know, like not eat the rest of the day if I have like a piece of pizza or anything like that at all. [...] I’ll just kind of like, okay, like “Maybe I shouldn’t have had like four pieces of pizza [Chuckling] maybe I should’ve only had like two,” but I get over it. It doesn’t like stay in my mind. [Colette]

At the same time, several informants discussed grappling with food, particularly the increased accessibility to unhealthy food. For example, there might be a certain type of food that they perceived they could not control their consumption of, or, as Jenny put it, was their “downfall.”

The informants who said that they thought their eating had been “bad” were generally the same informants who had expressed great concern with their eating and weight. I noticed that some of the older students in looking back at their past practices evaluated them in a distant, though negative manner. For example, Chloe noted that she would sometimes get an omelet with egg beaters after her first class. She then said, “It’s disgusting to think of now.” She later said a similar thing about using butter-flavored cooking spray on her popcorn. Some of the younger informants, particularly those who had participated in and were nearing the end of the pre-college program, were also more reflective about their eating habits and seemed to show concern about what the future year held for them.

Pre-college exercise patterns and practices

As I had done with eating, I asked informants to describe their exercise habits their senior years of high school. I assumed that getting an idea of what people had been doing in terms of physical activity before coming to college would give me an idea of the orientations, motivations, and physical bodily knowledge informants had carried with them that would inform their college practices.

Just a few informants said that they had generally been inactive during their senior year of high school. Nine informants had been involved in an organized sport their senior year of high school. The degree to which they engaged in exercise outside of their sport varied greatly. In general, I found that those who played multiple sports were more likely to exercise during the off season in a gym or in a structured manner at home.

The six informants who routinely exercised outside of an organized sport generally did so in a gym or other sort of class. Although some of these informants described working out daily, others went several times a week. Outside of exercising in structured environments, a few informants discussed jogging in their neighborhoods and doing abdominal strengthening exercises at home from two to four times a week.

Doing abdominal exercises seemed to be quite common and was often not discussed unless I specifically asked about it. For example, Anna initially said that the only exercise she had done her senior year was walking around her high school; after I asked if she had ever done crunches at home, she quickly replied that nightly she did 50 “regular crunches” and 60 “side crunches.”

I often asked informants if they had continued exercising or started exercising differently the summer before coming to college. For the most part, informants said that either they had continued exercising several days a week or they had not done much of anything. Several noted that they had planned to get themselves into shape before coming to college, but that they never ended up doing it, noting they were busy working, traveling, and/or hanging out with friends.

Exercise practices

To begin discussing what informants did in terms of exercise their freshman year, I asked them to

Regularly	10 (45%)
Every once in awhile	9 (41%)
Every once in awhile to hardly ever	2 (9%)
Hardly ever	1 (5%)

categorize their freshman self as someone who “exercises regularly,” “exercises every once in awhile,” or “hardly ever exercises” (Table 3). Ten informants categorized themselves as regular exercisers, nine as exercising once in awhile, two between hardly ever and once in awhile, and one as hardly ever. However, it is important to note that quite a few informants noted that their exercise patterns varied in terms of consistency throughout the year. Many of those who described the variations in their patterns said that they would exercise more frequently when they were more concerned about their appearance. For example, Sara said about twice a month she would have the thought, “Oh, I need to look better.” Several also noted that their engagement in exercise would dwindle during finals and other busy times of the semester.

Of the four older students who seemed to report the least frequent engagement in exercise, two had been involved in one sport their senior year (but generally had not exercised outside of that sport) and two said they had basically not exercised at all their

senior year. Most of those who said they exercised regularly reported that they exercised every other day or daily. For those reporting little to no explicit exercise, many seemed to rationalize this by saying that they thought they got a lot of exercise from daily walking around campus.

While a couple informants said that they ran outside or periodically played intramurals, the majority exercised solely within the confines of the Student Recreation Center (hereafter “the Rec”). Over a third said that they used the cardiovascular equipment, a little less than that paid for and attended classes (e.g., kickboxing, pilates), a quarter used the weight room, and others noted using the pool, the indoor track, or indoor basketball courts. In general, people seemed to use equipment that they had previous experience with. For example, Rachel identified herself as “more cardio than weight lifting” because that was the type of exercise she had done in cheerleading; she also noted that in high school the football team had control of the weight room and had limited knowledge of how to use the weightlifting equipment in the Rec.

Informants generally exercised alone, though a few said they had gone to the Rec or played games with friends. Several said that while they did not need someone to exercise with them they found exercising with others, such as in a fitness class, to be motivating. Particularly those who found the Rec intimidating, they said they felt less self-conscious when they went with a friend.

Almost all of the informants who had played sports in high school discussed the adjustment in having to plan and structure their own exercise patterns. Some talked about participating in pick-up games, particularly for soccer. However, many noted that they

missed having regular, focused, training workouts and a coach to tell them what to do and motivate them. A few also expressed sadness that they no longer had opportunities to play their sport. For many of the athletes, instead of preparing them to play a sport as it had before, exercise functioned more in weight management projects. The changed focus in their exercise purpose had implications for their exercise routines. For example, whereas before they might have worked on strengthening their muscles to enhance their capabilities in sporting contests, many said that they no longer needed to have big muscles and were more interested in toning.

While I had the impression that most of the informants were exercising in attempt to maintain or lose weight and/or to tone their bodies, a few described additional reasons for exercising. In reply to my question about why she exercised, Rebecca said, “Because I felt like I was, my Freshman 15 I was not comfortable with that and so. [Slight pause] And plus it was fun, it was like you felt, I always felt better afterwards. Get your endorphins going.” Others similarly described using exercise as a means of distressing and/or of evoking a good feeling within their bodies; notably most of these women had been very active before coming to college.

Much of my discussions with informants about exercising in college related to the Rec. Opinions about the Rec varied widely. Some said they loved it, while others complained that it was often too busy or intimidating. I discuss these issues in detail in Chapter 6.

Judging exercise practices

While about half of the informants expressed at least some regret for not having exercised more frequently, nine said they were happy with their levels of activity. All except one of these women had categorized themselves as regular exercisers their freshman year. Christy who had been both active in high school and college reflected: “I was doing pretty well. I mean [Slight pause] again I wasn’t, you know, I managed to like get out, like yeah, I remember being at the Rec Center quite a bit and doing stuff, so yeah it was good.”

The proportion of informants expressing happiness with their exercise patterns lies in contrast to the one informant who had assessed her eating patterns to be good. However, in evaluating their eating practices, informants generally expressed that while they could have done better, they had done the best they could given the limitations of their environment. By contrast, about half the informants seemed to place more blame on themselves for their exercise practices than they had their eating patterns. A few noted that they had been busy with school-related work and lacked sufficient time, but many acknowledged they had just been lazy and that had they chose to, they could have exercised more frequently or consistently. (This was true even for some of the informants who had reported they had exercised regularly.)

I asked several informants what they would have liked their exercise patterns to look like and their responses varied widely. One of the inactive informants said that she would have liked to go to the Rec daily for two hours. By contrast, two of the more consistently active informants reported more moderate ideals: 30 minutes three days a week or daily.

As Kisha noted and as I have experienced through my own life, starting a consistent exercise practice can be difficult. Setting ideals and expectations for oneself that are unrealistic (and in fact quite daunting) can lead to frustration and disappointment.

Interestingly, three informants discussed their dissatisfaction with their exercise practices in terms of transitioning to college. For example, Jenny said:

[I]t's just kind of like that period of transition and you're trying to do all kinds of things, try lots of new things and um... I guess I didn't feel like I had to try exercising, 'cause I already knew I could do it if I wanted to. It's just I didn't choose to do it, so that was no one else's fault but mine. [...] it's just I like knew that I could go and I should go, but I just didn't go.

It is important to think about how college students' priorities might shift during this first year of college wherein they are establishing new social networks and trying out new ways of being. In such cases, exercise can lose (as in the case of Jenny) or gain (as in the case of Jessica) relative importance in a person's life. Thinking about changing patterns in relation to life transitions gets back to the idea of emerging adulthood, which I will discuss in more depth in the summary and conclusion below.

Expressed ideas about food and health and the role of expert knowledge

Exercise was often used to rationalize consumption of "bad" foods. Jenny reflexively noted:

I try to be good, but that's I think why I exercise so that it kind of balances out, 'cause I figure, "You're active, you could do whatever you want." That's not necessarily true, but that's how I thought, especially in high school 'cause I was playing club soccer and high school soccer, so it was year round. [...] so I didn't care if I ate past nine or I didn't care if I ate, you know, what I ate just as long as, you know, I was sure I was working. [...] I don't know if this is maybe not even a good mindset but I figure I can eat whatever I want as long as I exercise, you know.

Helen described herself as having the same mindset and also noted that she was unsure whether having this viewpoint was “good.” As mentioned above, even though some informants had a blasé attitude towards what they ate, assuming it would balance out, not engaging in stricter monitoring of their behaviors seemed to evoke a sense of guilt or maybe ambiguity. As if their actions and attitudes were somehow not right.

This idea of “balancing” out lifestyle habits is interesting. However, other informants expressed a different conception of “balance.” Rachel particularly expressed disapproval of the approach Jenny and Helen described, saying that “balanced” means eating meals that contain all the food groups. For her, a healthy lifestyle was one that involved being healthy most of the time and not compensating for unhealthy behaviors with healthy ones.

An important point is that for many informants the ways that they assessed their eating and exercise seemed to have more to do with weight than physiology/health. For example they might say that their behaviors were okay because they did not gain weight or indicate that their exercise was not doing them any “good” because they were still eating unhealthily and not losing weight. One noted that she had not exercised all week so she was not going to eat anything higher in fat and was generally not happy with herself. However, a few did note the effect that eating and exercise could have on their overall functioning, such as ability to study and immunity.

Deployment and use of expert knowledge

Only a few of the informants expressly talked about expert knowledge about food and health. For example, when discussing why they disliked fast food, many informants

simply said that it was unhealthy. However, others provided commentary that incorporated expert knowledge they had acquired. For example, Rachel noted that she reads health-related articles in women's magazines and hears different things about health on the television news. During our interview she said that diet pills could negatively affect your heart and that frequent consumption of fast food could increase cholesterol levels, heart disease, and blood pressure. Her discourses about health were generally more specific and incorporated language from medicine and public health.

A few informants noted the ambiguity and contradictions between health messages they had received. Gretchen said that her frequent snacking was bad, but then said that "snacking all the time rather than eating good meals is supposed to be good for you." Although she tried to laugh it off, Rosa expressed quite a bit of uneasiness about the multiple messages she has received about what she should eat.

'[C]ause I'm really frustrated with like p-, like I don't know. People keep telling me like, "Oh, eating foods that are labeled fat free actually gets you, makes you gain weight because of all the carbs. So you should eat the fat stuff." And then it's like, "Oh, you shouldn't eat the fat stuff." [Chuckles] So I don't know what to eat, so I'm just like, "I don't wanna eat anything." [Laughs]

To overcome the inconsistency, Rosa said she was just going to rely upon common sense when it comes to eating and continue to workout as frequently as possible.

Because of the pervasiveness of expert knowledge about diet and nutrition within society it would be hard not to absorb at least parts of it. Even if not consciously concerned about food intake, informants expressed similar ideas about food, exercise, and health. When asking Gretchen what she thought about when making her food choices, she paused a moment before answering carbohydrates and fat content, which she related

to the Atkins and fat diet “crazes.” While Gretchen linked this consciousness to specific sources of knowledge, other ideas were less grounded in a source. For example, in multiple interviews women noted that it was not good to eat past six o’clock in the evening. This illustrates how aspects of expert knowledge can be assimilated into lifestyle practices even when that knowledge is not explicitly sought or desired.

Summary and conclusions

In looking back at the coded data and what I have written, I am reminded of something Chloe said. I was asking her about why she thought she went through so many eating phases during her freshman year and she replied:

Because [my roommate and I were] always trying to just get healthy or like figure out a system. I think that’s the biggest thing, that you’re just start on your own and you, you’re used to some source of order in your house and you just can’t, it’s hard to just come up with it, you know. And we didn’t want to just conform to like the college order, we wanted to create it ourselves, but we didn’t really succeed.

While not always conscious, many of the informants were engaged in this kind of work during their freshman year. They tried out different behaviors attempting to find ones that seemed to fit. For some this meant engaging in practices they had been brought up doing, while for others it meant finding something new. However, they were doing this work in a specific social and physical environment that facilitated certain practices and limited others.

In general, informants described having eating patterns that usually did not include breakfast, so that during the day they would eat one meal at a student union and one meal eaten in their room. Those with less structured eating habits tended to also mention lots of

snacking, sometimes in place of a meal. Probably about half of their eating was done in the company of others. The majority said they ate more fast food their freshman year and many described late night eating that was largely impacted by staying up later socializing or studying. In terms of exercise, just less than half reported exercising regularly; almost all of their exercise was done at the Rec. Many talked about exercising as a means to maintain weight or tone their bodies; this was somewhat of a shift for many of the ex-athletes.

Time was an issue that came up in several of the interviews. While some said that they felt they had much more time their freshman year because they had been really busy during high school, others said they felt as if they were rushed around quite a bit and found it difficult to fit in time for exercise. When talking to Belinda about feeling rushed around as a freshman, she noted that she felt rushed not because of lack of time management, but a lack of actual time to do things. It's important to realize that many students undertake a number of responsibilities during their freshman year (e.g., in campus organizations, work, classes) and that many have had experience with multiple responsibilities from high school. Thus, when people talk about interventions to help increase student physical activity by teaching them time management skills, they neglect that many students might already have good time management skills and simply lack much free time in their schedules. More importantly, that apparent "free time" spent hanging out in the dorm is actually productive, in that it helps to establish important social bonds. In addition, it is important to note that many informants lacked a consistent daily schedule. The lack of consistency can make establishing a stable eating, exercise,

and sleep patterns difficult, particularly if those things are not thought of as being priorities.

When thinking about health behaviors it seems reasonable to think that different health behaviors might vary together in some way. A study of first-year college women found that healthy lifestyle variables (e.g., diet, physical activity, sexual activity, smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use) tended to occur in concert (Hendricks et al. 2004). For example, physical activity was significantly associated with a healthy eating pattern. While I found this to be the case with many of the informants, another trend was also apparent. This was the trend typified by the “balanced diet” wherein one compensated for eating junk food by eating healthy food later (Backett 1992) or the compensation of eating junk food with increased exercise.

Engaging in healthier practices was easier for those who had had prior experience doing them. This was particularly clear in terms of exercise. Although even some of the athletes noted they had found it somewhat difficult to begin configuring their own exercise regimes, many described drawing upon past training experiences to put together new practices: “I did the same, you know, patterns and types of workouts that I did in high school ‘cause that’s what I knew what to do.” The patterns of workouts that people had been exposed to before, though, could be gendered. Kisha explained that during high school they had two unofficial weight workouts. One was the “women’s workout” that focused on toning, while the other one was the “men’s workout,” which focused on building strength. This sort of training gendered dispositions towards physicality, along with broader social-level expectations for male and female bodies, affected the types of

practices that women engaged in during their freshman year. We can also think about women who had been athletes before entering college as having built up physical capital that contributed their forming a sporting social identity that both qualified and predisposed them “for entry into future fields of physical activity and sport” (Brown 2005:3).

In the case of diet and exercise, participants generally said that their friends did not impact their eating and activity patterns. However, the social activities that informants engaged often involved eating specific types of food that they might not normally consume. There was certainly awareness by many that the eating habits they formed in college—particularly the snacking, eating out, and second dinners—were not healthy. However, there was also an underlying understanding that that was how one ate in college.

Although at least a quarter of the women reported that they went to few if any parties their freshman year, those who did report going to parties often talked about eating food afterwards. There seemed to be little to no intentional compensation for alcohol beverage calories consumed, although there was indication that informants were careful about the types of alcoholic beverages they drank because of concerns about weight gain.

Overall informants’ eating and exercise practices were reflective of their previous practices as well as the normative practices they encountered amongst their peer group on campus. While there was awareness that many of the practices adopted were not the healthiest or what one would have liked, within the context of other priorities and practical limitations they were generally accepted. However, issues related to weight gain

often heightened one's awareness and concern about their practices; this will be a topic for the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: WEIGHT MONITORING AND PRACTICES AIMED AT SHAPING WEIGHT CHANGE

While research cited in Chapter 2 showed a general propensity toward weight gain among college freshman, it also indicated that students experience a range of different weight changes. In this chapter I discuss the weight experiences of informants as well as the actions that these experiences elicited.

Weight and body shape

Describing the type of body she was working on producing, Rosa said, “I don’t want body fat. [...] I want to be like defined. And, and I don’t wanna be like bulky and big, I wanna be [Laughing] little and defined.” Although I did not ask women specifically about what their ideal body would look like, throughout the interviews this is the picture of the ideal body that emerged. Generally, women in their desire for a toned body indicated an intolerance of fat and a belief that fat was unhealthy and took away from strength. Underlying this, though, I had the impression that many of the women who struggled with their bodies yearned to feel “right” or “comfortable” at whatever weight they happened to be. To reach such a point would mean they would no longer have to survey their eating and exercise, and that the risk of being told “You’re eating too much,” would disappear.

Perceptions about the pressure to look good in college versus high school

Early in the interviews I asked informants to rate on a one to five scale, with five being the most concerned, how concerned they had been with their weight and body shape their senior year of high school. While responses ranged from one to five, the

middle half fell between three and five. Thus most of the informants indicated they had been at least moderately concerned with their weight and/or body shape their senior years of high school.¹⁸ Interestingly, a number of women said that they were confident in themselves and had never really been concerned about their weight or body, but then also indicated that they were conscious of the effect their eating and activity levels had on their bodies. For these women, this consciousness was often described as a nagging thought at the back of their minds that they generally did nothing about.

Almost all of the older informants said that they had been more concerned about their weight their freshman year of college than their senior year of high school. Reasons why people felt more concerned about their weight freshman year generally related to getting less exercise (e.g., no longer playing a sport), however other people mentioned being less busy and having more time to think about it, and seeing a lot of attractive women on campus. Although Chloe said she was more concerned about her weight during high school, she said, “But I was definitely conscious, I didn’t want to get the Freshman 15, I was afraid of that.” Regan also noted that trepidation about the Freshman 15 had encouraged concern for her weight.

Nine of the informants thought there was more pressure to look good in college than high school, while 10 said there had been more pressure in high school. A handful of

¹⁸ Curiously, several informants mentioned at this point that they had been very concerned about their weight during late middle school. They were fairly vague about this, noting that they have since learned that friends had similar “secret” unhealthy eating practices and that it was fairly normative behavior for that age.

women also said this comparison depended a lot upon one's social group and the type of person one was.

Those who felt there was less pressure in college often noted that people in college were adults and had more important things to care about, dressed more sloppily, and were fairly anonymous in their classes. Chloe said, "[I]n high school I used to see the same people every day and in college barely anyone knows you in your classes. So that's less pressure."

By contrast those expressing that there was more pressure to look good in college than high school frequently cited the revealing clothing that students wore and the general attractiveness of the student body. Blair said pressure to look good was especially high on the UA campus:

I don't mean to sound mean or anything, but like if you look around campus it's like Barbie and Ken here. Like you have your dorm sorority girls, like stereotyping but that's like basically what our whole campus is. And it's really hard to compete with other girls on this campus because all guys like other, like certain type of girls and if you don't fit that model then it's really difficult.

Interestingly, these women also explained their concern with the relative anonymity of college. This time, however, they said that they were more concerned because they knew less people and were concerned about making a good first impression, particularly when around males. Christy explained, "[C]ause you're anxious to like look good, you know, so people will view you favorably, you know, and there's all these people that you've never even seen before."

In terms of whether they thought women compared themselves to one another more or less in college than high school, informants were more in agreement. Half said that

there was more comparison between women in college, while only four said high school; the rest generally said that it depended, with several noting that women do this all the time anyway. Again, for many increased comparison had to do with being exposed to more and a more diverse set of women, and because women tended to wear less clothes at the UA partially due to the warmer weather. Notably three of the four women who said there was more comparison in high school were freshmen in the pre-college program.

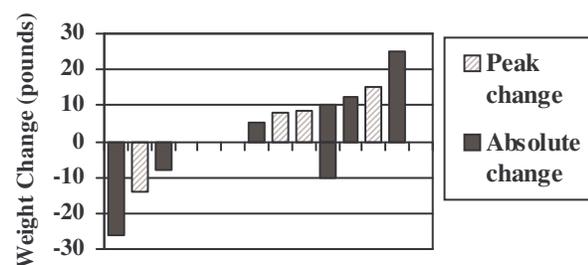
Women had different perspectives about the degree of pressure there was to look good in college, with many noting that this pressure was felt differentially depending upon the social setting one found oneself. However, most said that they were more concerned about their weight and found that women compared themselves to one another more in college than high school. The exposure to a greater array of people they did not know and the general attractiveness of students were two important factors in this.

Weight changes

As expected, informants experienced a wide range of weight changes and fluctuations during that first year of college. The 13 older students described weight changes that ranged from a loss of 26 pounds to a gain of 25 pounds. Crudely

averaging out the numbers, there was a mean weight gain of about two pounds for the older students over their freshman year. However, it is important to note that instead of absolute weight changes, five informants described weight “fluctuations” or “peak” changes. Rather than looking at a mean change, a better way to look at the data might be

Figure 1. Older Student Weight Changes



in terms of gains and losses over the course of the year: three lost between eight and 26 pounds, three did not experience weight change, four gained between five and 12.5 pounds, and two gained between 15 and 25 pounds; one woman described her weight as fluctuating within 20 pounds (see Figure 1). Thus the majority did gain weight.

Even though they had only been in college for between two and five weeks, the freshmen also described a variety of weight changes. Three said they had lost weight (between two and eight pounds), one said she had not changed weight, and three reported gaining two to five pounds. This is not totally surprising given that many of the older informants indicated that their greatest weight changes occurred during the first semester.

However, the actual quantities of weight changes I collected are questionable. Instead of using a scale, a great many assessed their degree of weight change based particularly upon how they fit into their clothing, and also by how they “felt” and how they looked. In comparing the weight changes for those who regularly weighed themselves and those who did not, I found that those regularly using a scale (generally at the Rec) accounted for most of the large weight changes. In fact, only one person reporting a weight gain or loss over nine pounds said she did not weigh herself.

An interesting aspect of the older women’s weight gain was that many did not realize they were gaining weight until at least near the end of the first semester. For many, this came when they were able to use a scale at their parents’ home during the holidays. For others, their awareness was evoked several weeks before the holidays because they wanted to look good for their families, friends, and, sometimes, boyfriends back home.

It is important to observe that at least eight informants had gained some weight their senior year of high school and/or the summer before college. Notably, two informants specifically said this weight gain was due to taking birth control. Two others said that they had started to lose weight the summer before college by engaging in a specific diet or exercise regimen.

Reactions to and explaining weight changes

Generally informants felt good about losing or maintaining weight. This was even true for individuals who had lost so much weight they were in the unhealthy range. Jessica, who lost 26 pounds her freshman year through a regimented eating and exercise practice, said her weight loss had made her feel “powerful” and “satisfied.” However, losing weight in “unhealthy” or “bad” ways could elicit contrasting emotions. While Blair’s weight fluctuated up and down within a 20 pound range, when she weighed less she said, “I felt better about myself in a way, but I also knew like it wasn’t really healthy. So it also still kind of like weighed me down. Like I knew I was being unhealthy.” There seemed to be specific ideas about what was the right way to lose weight that seemed to include eating healthy and exercising often.

Those gaining weight expressed differing degrees concern about it. A few indicated that while they did not like it (or that it was “bad”), they were confident they could lose it. In reflecting on her weight gain of 10 to 15 pounds, Jenny said:

I guess I sort of gained the Freshman 15 a little bit, but I mean, I wasn’t, I wasn’t too terribly worried about it or too terribly upset. I was kind of like, “Aw, man. That, that does kind of suck.” But I fi-, I knew that um, I knew why, you know, ‘cause I couldn’t, I couldn’t have access to certain foods that I wanted to eat and like I just didn’t eat them because it was more convenient just to go somewhere

else than to attempt to cook downstairs or to do whatever um, at the dorms. So, and then I knew that I didn't, I wasn't exercising or playing soccer or doing anything half as active as I used to, so therefore I really shouldn't be eating as much or the kinds of things that I ate, because I wasn't burning it as often. So to me it was like, "Okay I know why," so I wasn't worried about it, 'cause I knew that I could fix it.

But gaining weight could also be felt more acutely negatively. For example, Sara reported she had gained between 20 and 30 pounds over the course of the year¹⁹ and that it had made her feel "bad" and "just gross." Anna, one of the pre-college students who lost eight pounds during her five weeks in the program, said that a few weeks into the program she had gained weight. She knew this because she no longer fit into a dress she was supposed to wear for an event for her parents. She explained how she felt after she first realized this: "Horrible. I felt fat. I've always been thin, so it was weird for me. I mean, it was a size small, I always fit in a size small, so it felt very embarrassing actually. I'm the skinny one in the family, too. [Chuckles] It's embarrassing."

To explain weight gains, seven informants talked about being less active than they had been previously; many of these women also said that they had eaten too much or continued to eat as much as they had when they had been really active. Six women ascribed at least part of their weight gain to eating less healthy, such as increased fast food and snack food consumption. Related to this, four women said increased stress levels had either led to increased snacking or might have in some way altered their physiology to increase their proclivity to weight gain. Two women also thought their alcohol consumption might have contributed to their weight gain; interestingly, five

¹⁹ I think it's important to note that Sara, who was tall and thin when I met her, had indicated she had been unhealthily thin during high school.

women talked about beer as leading to weight gain in others. Finally one woman each said that eating later, not getting enough sleep, missing family and friends, and an overall lifestyle changes were factors in their weight gain.

Women who lost weight generally linked it to not eating much (either purposefully or because food was less available), stress, walking around campus, and increasing their exercise. Similarly, those who maintained their weight described factors such as being conscientious of what they ate, not experiencing a change in their lifestyle, and walking everywhere as helping them sustain their weight. Below I discuss the approaches and strategies that informants adopted during their freshman year to lose or maintain their weight.

Weight maintenance and change practices

Before describing the types of weight change practices informants adopted during their freshman year it is useful to think about the attitudes toward weight change practices they were exposed to and the dynamics surrounding food within their families.

Family attitudes towards eating, weight, and dieting

At various points during interviews, informants mentioned parental and family dieting practices. Two informants spoke about going on diets with their parents. Sometimes specific diets, such as Atkins or South Beach, were mentioned, while at other times people described taking ideas from other diets and creating their own rules about what they could and could not eat. For the most part if someone in the family was dieting, it was the mother. The mother's diet restrictions could then impact what the family was eating and ideas women had about their own eating practices (e.g., portion control).

Sometimes seeing a parent fail on a diet and with their own weight management could provide impetus for informants to do something else with their lifestyles. Colette described her observations of her mother's struggle with her weight and her father's preoccupation with his weight and fitness:

I know [my mom's] so unhappy. And um, I don't ever want to like be so down on myself. 'Cause I see it, she's, she can be very down on herself and it just makes me so sad seeing her like that and I don't ever wanna be like that. So, and my dad, this definitely doesn't help. He's like, he's 5'2" I think, he's tiny. And um, he weighs like 130 and he runs marathons and like is so active and that's, and he like, he's, he says stuff to me. He's like, "Oh have you gained any weight?" Like every time he talks to me. And so that like, it just kind, it makes me want to not to, just so he can't like put it in my face. But like I know like my mom looks at my dad with envy and I don't like, I just don't ever want to be like that.

Siblings were also mentioned a few times in relation weight issues. As previously mentioned, Isabel's brother had been a driving force in her concern with her eating and exercise habits; he also had made her go on annual summer diets with him, a practice she continued with her mother. Weight issues can turn into sibling rivalry rather than sibling support. Growing up, Regan was the "scrawny" one in the family, while her sister was the "chubby" one. Regan said her sister was always jealous of this and watched what Regan would eat, making Regan more conscious of what she is eating. Regan said eating has become competitive between them and that her sister gets upset when Regan eats healthy because she wants Regan to gain weight.

Generally family weight consciousness was described as being a good thing because it helped informants become more conscious of their own eating habits. This consciousness was described by several as having helped them to be less heavy than otherwise.

Painful family dynamics related to food

Four informants described having negative experiences with members of their family and food and weight. At times women talked about these experiences with reserved sadness, while at other times with anger and frustration. Notably, each of the women expressed concern about what they were eating and their weight their freshman year.

During our interview Natalie described having a strained relationship with her mother, who lived several states away. She described what it was like to visit her mother:

Natalie: My real mom is VERY health-conscious, like I feel guilty going there. I can't stand eating at her house, because she is ridiculous about it. And she thinks, you know, all the time I need to lose weight, need to lose weight. And she's the thinnest person I've ever seen. So, it's not healthy for her and so I feel guilty [...] My dad talks about it all the time, like, "She's not healthy. You don't have to feel guilty, she's not healthy." [...]

LP: So she makes comments about your weight?

Natalie: All the time. All the time. Whenever I see her, it'd be like, "Have you lost weight? Oh, [Natalie], it looks like you're gaining weight." Or, so I can't stand it, like, we fight a lot about it. [...] she has tons of like weight loss books and diet books, and she'll just happen to leave one on my bed. And I'll see it or whatever, and then she'll ask me about it casually later, whatever, be sitting and talking or whatever. Be like, "Oh did you get the book I left for you?" Or, "Man, I can't find my diet book." Uh, thanks mom.

While parents could be harsh about food and weight, extended family could be also. Sandra and Rosa, both of whom are Latino, expressed great preoccupation with their weight, and described how their extended family had enhanced their concern. Sandra, who was very petite, said that her paternal family members would say to her, "'You're getting fat. You're, you better not become fat.'" In contrast, Rosa said that she had always been scared of becoming fat because all her family members are obese. She then

noted that her own weight is increasing and although she has been trying lots of different things to lose weight, nothing seems to work: “I don’t know what to do.” Although she chuckled when she said this, there was real desperation and pain in voice and manner.

As these brief examples show, weight and food can be highly contested and evocative issues within families. A family member’s health and food consciousness could be perceived as positively impacting one’s own practices, while at other times it could be experienced as unnecessary and painful criticism. Importantly, though, whether positively or negatively felt, these dynamics served to raise one’s consciousness about their consumption and body weight. This consciousness might or might not lead to efforts to control ones weight.

Activities aimed at controlling one’s weight

Throughout interviews, informants would talk about specific strategies they had used during their freshman year to manipulate their weight. I also asked women whether they had engaged in particular practices (e.g., dieting, increased

exercise) in attempt to control their weight. Sometimes after an informant answered yes to having engaged in a behavior, such as skipping a meal, and describing it, I re-queried whether they had done the behavior specifically to control their weight. In a few cases the informant backtracked and explained that they had not engaged in the behavior with the intention to control their weight. Table 4 provides an overview of the number of women using different weight management practices.

	# that Practiced
Watching what you eat	19
Increasing exercise	13
Dieting	4
Skipping meals	4
Diet pills	2

Dieting

Only four women (19%) said that they had attempted dieting at some point during their freshman year. Sara said that she had tried to diet a few times: “I mean that was kind of on those like one or two day like diet, these lose weight binges, but then I’d get hungry and eat [Inaudible] or something. So it didn’t usually last very long.”

One of the ways that informants dieted was by dissecting and quantifying the food that they were eating. Isabel said that she used the Internet to do research on the food she eats. For example, she might look up the calorie and carbohydrate content of different fast foods, comparing different establishments to see “who has the least.”

Another way was by limiting calorie consumption to a set amount. As previously mentioned, Anna noticed a few weeks into the pre-college program that she had gained weight. In order to fit into her dress, which her mom stressed she had to do, she went on a two week 300 to 400 calorie a day diet. Reflecting on her dieting experience that resulted in a loss of eight pounds, Anna said, “Well while I was doing it [I felt] bad, ‘cause I wasn’t eating. [Chuckles] But now, like after, I’m really proud of myself that I lost weight.” She then went on to say that her pants now fit her much looser and that she would have to buy smaller pants or else she would gain the weight back. By the time I talked to her, she was no longer on her diet, but still was only eating one meal a day. Although she noted it was hard to get back to eating normally, she felt good that she was only eating a little bit because it indicated that she was probably losing more weight. During our interview, Anna also described how back home her dieting attempts had never been very successful because of the presence of lots of good food and her parents

supervision. This is important because it indicates that for some women coming to college might enhance their ability to engage in weight loss projects because of less supervision and monitoring from parents, and greater ability to control food accessibility.

Several informants expressed very negative attitudes towards dieting, noting that all people have to do to lose or maintain weight is eat moderately and consistently exercise. Jenny, who said she had never been on a diet, derided efforts to seek expert knowledge about eating:

I always thought it was silly to be like, "I'm going to see a dietician and I'm gonna have her tell me what to eat." I don't like people telling me what to eat, because if I want to eat something, I want to eat it and then I'll deal with it later. Like I'll work out or I'll, you know, not eat something as fatty or as sweet or something. You know, like I just think it's, for me I guess it's always just been common sense.

She also did not see the purpose of dieting because once the diet is over one goes back to his or her old eating patterns. Others indicated that they thought many diets were scams.

Watching what you eat

By far, the most common weight control method informants engaged in was watching what they ate; all but three of the informants said they did this. Although the line between dieting and watching what you eat is debatable at times, the ways that I perceived informants differentiating the two had to do with the length of time they engaged in the practice and the rigidity of the practice. In general, watching what you eat was described as being a less finite and less rigid practice. However, there were several women who expressed lack of faith in diets who described short, focused stints of watching what they ate. Overall, though, watching what one ate was discussed as

involving an overall consciousness of what one was ingesting (see Nichter et al. 1995 for a discussion of distinction between dieting and “watching what you eat”).

One of the main ways that women watched what they ate was by placing loose limits on (as opposed to restricting) their eating practices. A number of informants said that they would try not to eat after six o’clock in the evening because they believed the food they ate would stay in their “systems” because people are less active at night. Others said they tried not to snack as frequently or limited certain types of foods (e.g., fried foods).

For many, watching what they ate involved being especially conscious of portion sizes.²⁰ Colette, a freshman who had talked about dividing her dinners in high school in half to limit how much she would eat, discussed how after the first week and a half of college she started halving her lunch sandwich and eating the second half for an afternoon snack. She also began to notice differences in the sizes of wraps on campus and stopped eating the wraps at On Deck Deli because she thought they were too large.

Skipping meals

Four informants said that they had skipped meals to control weight during their freshman year. Sometimes this was part of an overall diet project, while at other times it was not. For example, Blair said that she did not “believe” in diets and would just

²⁰ As an interesting aside, both Kisha and Gretchen talked about how as children their parents made them clean their dinner plates. Gretchen said that this early socialization has proved problematic today when she goes out to eat and is given huge portions: “I have this like mental setting that I have to like clean this plate. And I’ll be like full when I’ve only eaten a quarter of the food [Chuckles] but I’ll keep eating because I just feel like I have to clean the plate.” Both described consciously trying to change this behavior and how difficult it was to get used to leaving some food on their plate.

occasionally skip meals. Skipping meals could also serve as a way to save money and lose weight at the same time.

While many informants acknowledged having skipped meals their freshman year, just those four said that they skipped meals as a means of controlling their weight. More often women talked about skipping meals because they were in a hurry or, with breakfast, wanting to sleep in as long as they could before leaving for class. A few women also said that while they had sometimes skipped meals in high school to control their weight, they had not engaged in that practice in college. Many of these women noted that they had found that skipping meals just made them hungrier and had a negative impact on their body.

Increasing exercise

An awareness that one had gained weight was often the precipitating factor in informant's increased engagement in exercise. In all, 13 informants said they had at some point increased their exercise in attempt to control their weight their freshman year.

Although she did not think her weight changed during her freshman year, Christy explained how feelings of having put on weight would "motivate" her to increase her exercise:

I just go through stages of it, you know, like, "Oh my god I'm fat! So you need to get off your ass and go do something." So. [Laughs] It's, I hit that point where I'm like, "Oh god," you know, "You're gettin' a little," 'cause you know you can just feel that in your mind. Like you know how much weight you're carrying, you know what you're comfortable carrying, so you just go, "Hm. It's time to," [Laughs] "be proactive about this issue."

Several months into her first semester, with thoughts of going home for the holidays, Rebecca weighed herself for the first time at the Rec and found that she had gained about 13 pounds. She described herself as shocked and uncomfortable: “I was like, ‘I wanna be myself again,’ like my, you know. I used to weigh 125. I was just like, ‘138, that’s ridiculous.’” This discomfort led her to increase her exercise.

As a side note, Anna said she had tried to exercise more frequently when she went on her diet, but found that her body was very weak from only having 300 to 400 calories a day. Sandra, who had also greatly curtailed her food consumption, noted that she fainted once at the Rec.

Diet pills and other medications to suppress appetite

I asked women whether they had ever heard of people using medications to suppress their appetites. Most said that they had heard something about diet pills or people using medications for dieting, but really did not know much about it. A few informants noted seeing television commercials for diet supplements such as Trim Spa.

Sara and Rosa were the only two to report having used diet pills or dietary supplements during their freshman year. Sara said she began taking diet pills near the end of her freshman year, but discontinued taking them because they made her dizzy. She noted that one of her sorority sisters had started taking them before she did and that she knew other women who used laxatives. Rosa described having taken several different diet pills starting in high school. Like Sara she noted that one she had been taking made her dizzy. Although no longer taking that one, she said she was considering going back on it and taking less than the suggested amount. Only one of her friends knows she takes

the pills and she said she did not tell anyone else because, “I thought they were gonna think I’m crazy.”

I was particularly interested, though, in the use of prescription medications, such as Adderall, as appetite suppressants. Blair noted that a woman in her hall had been given Adderall by her parents because they said she was fat. Sara estimated that of the people she knew taking Adderall, “a good amount” did so to control their weight; she also noted that many bought the Adderall from students with learning disabilities on campus.

Several mentioned they had been tempted to try out different medications or diet aids. Anna said, “[I]f I see MTV like a commercial about weight loss or something like, ‘Ooh that’d be [nice], I wonder if that works or that would work?’ But I wouldn’t do it because I’m sure there’s a lot of risk to it, so I just stick to just not eating or skipping meals.” After finding that a headache medication that she was taking suppressed her appetite, Chloe had contemplated using it to control her weight, but then thought, “Gosh, this is really disgusting.” [Chuckles] I was kind of disgusted myself start thinking about it.”

As with dieting, several informants expressed negative attitudes towards the use of pills or other medications for weight loss. Jenny indicated that she thought it was unnatural to use these types of diet aids: “[L]ike you need to eat something, [Chuckling] your body needs energy or like needs nutrients to like just function, so why would you suppress that?” As Anna’s quote also indicated, taking diet pills or using medications to lose weight was also perceived to be dangerous to one’s health.

Other practices

I also asked informants whether they used supplement bars or smoking in their weight management practices. As noted in Chapter 4, most people were using meal replacement foods as snacks and as meal replacements when they did not have time or materials to buy or make a meal. A few noted that when they ate the bars they ended up still being hungry and eating more than they might have otherwise. No one said they smoked as a means of controlling their weight and only one informant, Sara, revealed that they had smoked their freshman year.

Friends and weight change practices

Friends could be supportive in efforts to watch what one was eating by splitting a meal, accepting food restrictions, or otherwise participating in weight control projects. After weighing herself after Thanksgiving dinner and realizing she had gained eight pounds, Erin and a friend arranged a competition to see who could lose the most weight before Christmas. Erin was careful to not call this diet, rather she described it as a process of being conscious of and in her behaviors, particularly by watching what she ate (e.g., eating a salad instead of a sandwich) and increasing her exercise. She said the competition itself was kind of ridiculous, “but it worked. I mean, it got us to be conscious especially during finals and stuff. [...] the purpose of the whole thing was to support each other in the whole trying to work out more and eat right and stuff.”

However, friends could also inhibit weight goals. Isabel described the relationship between her friend and her, and how her friend could both support and detract from her weight management efforts:

[W]e push each other, but sometimes we slack off on our diet, but, “Don’t you just want a french fry?” I’m like, “Yeah, but I’m gonna have to workout like two-, or double that because of the french fry.” But we do slack sometimes, but we push each other like, “Okay, that’s bad, we can’t eat it.”

Extreme practices

Due to my own struggles with an eating disorder, I was especially sensitive to women who expressed practices or attitudes about their bodies and food that I considered to be extreme. In general this reflected a lifestyle in which assessment of food intake and exercise seemed to take a central position. Space limitations preclude an in-depth discussion of this topic, so I have chosen to present only a brief description of one such individual. I follow this with a discussion of the social impacts of adoption of such a lifestyle.

Jessica was a prime example of someone whose goal for weight loss led to a restructuring of her eating and exercise practices to such a degree that they were fairly rigid and calculated. She herself acknowledged that she had dieted “extremely” and exercised “fanatically,” was working to become more flexible, and that she knew no other people her age who adopted this sort of lifestyle. Her self- and moral-identity seemed to be closely tied to her lifestyle as she continually mentioned working towards specific “goals.” During our interview, she gave me a very detailed description of what she was eating and where she was deriving certain food groups and nutrients. She also described setting limits on the types and amounts of food she would eat. However, after she experienced a loss of her period and her family doctor expressed concern, she saw a

nutritionist and began to take steps to stabilize her weight. She also worked on becoming more flexible:

I think my big step was I went out for gelato ice cream once and it was really, actually really hard for me to do that. But I did it and I was, it happened and I didn't gain 15 pounds from it, but it happened. And um, so I mean the goal is obviously to be more accepting towards things like that.

However, later on during the interview she noted that there are times that her friends will go out to ice cream and not bother to ask her because even if she agreed to go she would not eat anything. She also expressed sadness at being made fun of for not joining in when people in her dorm would order pizza, but then said, "But if I look at who's making fun of me and why, then not sad. I'm just very goal-oriented and if people can't see that then I shouldn't befriend them anyway." She articulated a similar sentiment when describing how her food restrictions and regimented lifestyle had been hard on her dating life.

While leading a restricted and regimented lifestyle could be difficult socially, some found that friends helped to support them. Many of the informants I talked to whom I was concerned about expressed that their friends had been worried about their health practices and/or weight. Sandra, who had lost up to 14 pounds her freshman year, said that her friends were concerned by her eating practices and tried to take care of her.

They were like, "You have to eat." And they will like sit with me [Chuckling] until like I finish my food. And um, sometimes some of my friends will invite me to their houses so I can eat there, 'cause they knew that I didn't like the food here that much. But they will get frustrated 'cause they're like, "You're eating a sandwich every single day!" It was like, "Well, that's like the most healthy food we have here."

While it is important to realize that some college women engage in extreme practices such as these, it is just as important to realize that most of the women I talked to did not

diet or take diet pills. Rather, these women watched what they ate and moderately increased their exercise to manage their weight.

Discourses surrounding bodies, weight, and the Freshman 15

Most of the informants said that no one had commented on their weight changes. If comments were made, they generally came from family members. This was particularly true after the first semester when many informants saw family members for the first time in several months. Comments received from people back home ranged from “You got fat,” “What happened to you?,” “You look a little plump,” “You look healthy,” and “You look good.” For example, when Jenny went home for the holidays, her family bluntly told her, “Wow, you gained some weight.” While she said her family was just stating an obvious fact (she had gained about five pounds at that point), “[T]hat kind of sucked, that kind of made me a little bit mad, but it was true, so, you know, what are you gonna do.” She said this in a matter of fact manner, but then noted that when she returned for the spring semester she was more self-conscious about her weight and tried to exercise more consistently.

For those who lost large amounts of weight (e.g., Sandra and Jessica), comments came from both friends and family who were concerned about the possibility that they had an eating disorder. In many cases, this led to an intervention of sorts after they were pressured to see a dietician or counselor. Sandra said that although she was happy with her weight loss, others’ concern about it eventually led her to change her habits. In addition, her father threatened her with an ultimatum, “If you don’t like become normal

again, you're not coming back to school.'" More moderate weight losses were also described as eliciting feedback, this time generally positive, from friends and family.

Women generally did not discuss their weight changes with anyone, or if they did it was with one or two friends or maybe their mother. Most said that they had heard friends or other women on campus talking about their weight, dieting, or exercising.²¹ A few informants explained that the degree to which people talked about these issues differed by social groups. For example, Kisha said that her female African American friends and she tended not to talk about weight, while others noted that it was more prevalent among sorority women. In addition, I noticed that the informants who expressed the most weight concern reported that fat talk that was not followed up by discernable action was prevalent amongst their friends.

Friends might complain about feeling fat or heavy after seeing someone thinner than them or after or while eating a large meal or junk food. These were also times that women noted people might say they needed to go on a diet. Anna explained

[My friends] usually say it when they're eating a lot or when we're all eating like, you know, like junk food. So then, you know, I'll be like stuffing chips in my face and then like, in my mouth or whatever, and they'll be like, "Ah, I'm gaining weight," I'm like, "Oh great, here we go." And this makes me feel so much better about myself.

Sara said that she thought women might announce plans to go on a diet to justify present overeating or eating junk food. Several noted that they thought women verbalized things such as "I need to go on a diet" or "I'm fat" in order to express self-discomfort (a

²¹ Importantly, many could cite at least one person in their life who complained about these issues. However, some talked about knowing one woman who did this (maybe a roommate), while others said they heard lots and lots of women discuss weight and health-related behavior.

gloss for “I don’t feel good about myself today”) or elicit positive feedback or reassurance from others. However, as Sandra noted, even when positive feedback was given, it was not always believed because they did not expect that their friends would admit that they really were fat. In addition, when a thinner woman complained about their weight it was often perceived as annoying and not tolerated. Several of the informants found this difficult because they did not feel they could verbalize how they felt around their friends.

Interestingly, both Belinda and Isabel indicated that they had particular relationships with friends wherein they would affectionately refer to one another as fat. For example, Isabel and her friend had nicknamed one another “gorda” (Spanish for “fat”). Belinda described a more elaborate fat talk with her friend:

We tell each other we’re fat like everyday, but we’re just kidding, ‘cause, you know, neither one of us think that the other one’s fat and we don’t think that we’re, our-, we ourselves are fat. But we just say it like when we eat too much or, you know, something silly like that. Like, “You look at little fat today [Wendy].” She’s like, “I know!” [Laughs] And we just harass each other.

While Valerie and several other indicated that women who complained that they needed to exercise would generally follow-through and go exercise, others said that such statements were not followed by engagement in exercise. In that sense it was used by some much as talk about dieting or being fat, perhaps as a sort of confession of guilt for a known transgression (Nichter 2000).

I asked informants specifically whether hearing someone talk about going on a diet made them think they should go on a diet. Although the majority answered in the negative, many said that it often led them to reflect upon their eating or health-related

practices, however the degree to which this concern was evoked depended on the person doing the talking. For example, Christy said that when her “crazy dieting friend” talked about going on a diet, she did not give it much thought because this friend’s dieting behaviors tended to be “outrageous”; she was more apt to take someone seriously if she felt they honestly were trying to be healthier and in better shape. This was something that Rebecca echoed. She said that because she has “always been against dieting,” she is not affected by diet talk. However, when people talk about eating healthy, she begins to think that she should eat healthy, too.

Informants did not usually spontaneously say whether the Freshman 15 was a topic amongst their friends or whether they heard it discussed on campus. In general informants said that the Freshman 15 was usually talked about in a joking manner. Regan, a freshman, said some floor-mates would warn one another, “Don’t eat that, Freshman 15!” She indicated that the Freshman 15 was a way of joking with one another after eating a lot. Colette, also a freshman, said that she had heard women make comments such as, “Oh, I’m starting on the Freshman 15.”

As the above shows, discourses around the body were fairly prevalent amongst women on campus. However, discussions about weight amongst peers were generally not described as very extensive. Rather they consisted of brief statements such as, “I feel fat” or “I need to go on a diet,” that communicated certain things depending on the person who was saying it and the ways that these issues were commonly discussed in the group.

Summary and conclusions

Almost all of the women in the study subscribed to a body ideal that was trim and toned. Most found themselves more concerned about their weight their freshman year and found there to be more pressure to look good in college. It is important to note that enhanced concern about weight could be reflective of several things: actual weight gain, being exposed to a larger, diverse peer group, and/or a social setting that emphasized physical appearance.

Participants had a variety of opinions on whether or not there was more pressure to look good in high school or college. For many, the increased student population in college either heightened consciousness about their body due to exposure to more people or lessened their consciousness about their body due to increased anonymity. It was also interesting that both sides said that being an adult was a factor. Those feeling less pressure said that as adults they had more important things to worry about than their appearance, while those feeling more pressure said that as adults they were more serious and concerned about finding a mate.

Connor-Greene and colleagues (1994) found that weight-preoccupied college women perceived greater emphasis on appearance on their campus than normal controls. They suggest that “it is likely that women who are especially attentive to appearance demands are also highly sensitized to pressures about weight” (1994:130). I found this to be generally true among my informants. Connor-Greene and others seem to suggest a certain, maybe biological, sensitivity that makes women especially sensitive to widespread societal messages promoting thinness. While I would not preclude some sort of

biological basis, I am more interested in how peer subgroups (Allison and Park 2004; Crandall 1988; Paxton et al. 1999) and familial attitudes toward weight and shape help to produce individual preoccupation or weight management behavior. I think it is also possible that individuals with like-minded attitudes toward weight and body, as well as other issues, would be more likely to form social groups. While my data seemed to support the impact of friendship groups, more work is needed to flesh this out.

There was a general trend towards weight gain among participants (a crude mean of two pounds). However, the range of changes varied widely and informants reported fluctuations throughout the year. One of the things I had wondered about before interviewing women was whether weight gain during their freshman year might follow being underweight to at the start of their freshman year. In a magazine article about the Freshman 15, it was hypothesized that some students might diet during the summer before college in order to obtain a good figure and then proceed to regain that lost weight during the regular school year (Kelly 2003). Although no one in my study fit that profile, several said that they had thought about trying to lose weight the summer before entering college, but did not. Students were more likely to have described gaining a few pounds the summer before, or even during their senior year. The relationship between weight changes the year before and after starting college deserves further attention.

Most of the informants were using watching what they ate as their main means of weight control, followed by increasing their exercise. I was somewhat surprised that less than 25 percent reported that they had dieted, particularly given that 40 percent of the women in the 2005 ACHA-NCHA had dieted in the previous 30 days (ACHA 2006a). It

is quite possible that because my sample was so small I was unable to capture the true population frequency. However, it is also possible that the ACHA-NCHA diet data is biased high with people who might have been watching what they ate (which was not a choice on the ACHA-NCHA). Utilizing data collected during ethnographic interviews with younger adolescents, Nichter and colleagues (1995) found that categorizing youth as dieters or non-dieters is perhaps too simplistic because it does not allow for the gradations that you find in adolescent weight control behaviors. Similar in-depth study of the college women's weight control behavior is needed.

I was often struck by how frequently informants would express their belief that eating and exercise patterns were personal choices, and that one should never dictate to another how they should behave. For example, informants would sometimes preface their weight management strategy by saying something such as "what works for me" or "personally." Other times they would qualify a statement by saying "but it's different for everyone." There seemed to be some hesitancy in making general statements that might in some way judge another person's weight management or health-related habits. At the same time women expressed the idea that individuals were responsible for taking care of their bodies and health, and if they did not they were ignorant or lazy. Several expressed a real disgust with behaviors they perceived to be unhealthy or deviant, such as excessive alcohol or fast food consumption. These statements reflect a pervasive logic of individual responsibility for their bodies and health (Lupton 1993; Petersen 1997; Shilling 2003). Engaging in self-care regimes was a means for taking responsibility for themselves and was thus a moral good.

Talking about good and bad behaviors can often slip into talking about good and bad people (Backett 1992). I heard this frequently during interviews with informants as they talked about having been “good” or “bad” particularly in terms of their eating and exercise. As just one example, when talking about hardly ever exercising her freshman year, Valerie said, “But I used to be so good.” I noted that these statements were often tinged with a confessional quality with references to guilt. Spitzack wrote:

Confession proceeds from a recognition of sin, a desire to obtain forgiveness, to become clean again, by way of recounting one’s deviation from scripture. In the act of confession, woman is the spokesperson for her deviance and seeks forgiveness from an omnipotent, silent, inspecting other. [...] implicit in the act of confession is a promise to realign thoughts and actions with predominant social values.” [1990:58-60]

In some cases acknowledgement that one felt fat or that one needed to diet or exercise after eating “bad” food was a means of confessing one’s transgression. The Freshman 15 also seemed to be used in a similar way to communicate recognition that if they continued in that same behavior they would gain weight.

As Nichter (2000) found in her study of high school women, fat, dieting, and exercise discourses among freshman women seemed to serve a number of different functions. As some informants noted, expressing that one was fat or needed to lose weight was a means of eliciting positive feedback from others. It was also a way to express that one was not feeling right and thus, possibly, acted as a means of requesting social support. As described above, after eating unhealthy foods these discourses functioned to show others that they did subscribe to dominant ideas about good behavior and recognized their transgression.

In the next chapter I focus on two specific institutional spaces and their role in shaping informant eating and exercise experiences.

CHAPTER 6: STRUCTURING ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

As has been indicated in previous chapters, the college environment in which informants lived played a strong role in shaping the types of eating and exercising patterns they developed. One of the things missing from assessments of college health is discussion of how the college environment structures students' health-related behaviors. For example, there is little to no mention of how not having to attend classes or have lunch at particular times affects students' eating patterns. Nor is there discussion of how supermarkets might not be very accessible to students living on campus or the limited ability of students to cook for themselves or keep food in their dorm rooms. In addition, while many researchers suggest that education is needed to help people engage in more healthy behaviors, few have examined how competing priorities and differing social contexts impact health behaviors (Backett 1992).

Below I discuss the two institutional spaces that seemed to have a large impact on students' practices: the campus dining services (specifically the student unions) and the Rec. It is important to note that the structures of the dining and recreation services are impacted by larger trends within higher educational institutions. I begin with a description of how these trends have changed and emerged in recent years. Take note that this chapter is just a small step toward understanding the complicated issues surrounding the changing and emerging industry of higher education and how this impacts student health-related practices.

Trends in campus food and recreation services

Over the past three decades there has been a growing corporatization of higher education. Among administrators, students are increasingly viewed as customers (Moses 1999) and as markets that they must cater to, win, and retain. One of the ways in which universities are attempting to increase the size of their student bodies (and perhaps help justify growing tuition rates) is by identifying and responding to consumer (i.e., student) needs and desires. Many universities have built large, impressive student unions, residences, and recreation centers as a way of enticing what are seen to as more demanding and consumer-savvy students.

At the same time many college ancillary services are being privatized. There is an assumption that especially given budgetary concerns (e.g., reduced state support), privatizing services will reduce overall costs and increase quality (Kettl n.d.). In addition, as these support services become more specialized, contracting them out will allow the university to focus on its core mission, namely to educate students and support research (Oster 1997). Two auxiliary areas where this trend can be seen is within university dining and recreation services and facilities.

Campus dining facilities

College dining services shape students' nutritional intake by largely limiting choices and variety of foods for students living on campus (Dinger and Waigandt 1997). If one reads articles from trade journals in food services or higher education, or even in newspapers, one would realize that college dining services have changed a great deal in the last 15 years.

In the early 1990s, there were several threats facing college food service operations: (1) decreasing government funding, (2) changing customer demands and demographics, (3) poor image of college food service (Badinelli and Engstrom 1993), and (4) increasing competition from outside vendors (Bambenek and Hollywood 2001). These threats were problematic, as food services are often an important source of revenue for colleges (June 2006) and used as a means of attracting new students (Bernstein 2003; Kelly 2003). There were also calls for dining service operations “to behave more like firms that are actively trying to gain market share in a competitive environment” (Tayce and Gassenheimer 1999:10).

To better address college customer desires and expectations for higher quality products, and to keep their “dining dollars” on campus, many institutions began contracting with brand-name operations. The idea being that having franchises on campus would increase the likelihood that students would buy more meal plan options, thus adding to the university’s earnings (Badinelli and Engstrom 1993). However, these franchises bring high-fat fast food to college campuses, foods that if eaten frequently have been shown to significantly increase fat intake (Hertzler et al. 1995; McCrory et al. 1999) and be negatively related to the healthiness of nutritional intake (Hertzler and Frary 1992; Racette et al. 2005).²²

²² Notably, there is evidence from studies with adolescents that fast food consumption leads to greater daily caloric intake in overweight youth, but not lean youth (Ebbeling et al. 2004). Thus overweight students might be especially prone to weight gain on campuses whose dining services composed of a high proportion of fast food.

At the same time, with concerns that college students are becoming “too flabby” and student requests for healthier food options, there is a trend among some college campuses to offer downsized portions and lower fat foods (Bernstein 2003). Some schools have seen that adding healthy options to their food service menus have been popular among students and lucrative for them. Ironically, many of these same schools continue to expand all-you-can-eat and calorie dense options (Bernstein 2003).

While a discussion of the impact of these trends is missing in the academic literature, there is evidence that place of residence impacts college student dietary intake. Brevard and Ricketts (1996) found that students living off campus were consuming a greater percentage of calories from protein and had higher triglyceride levels. The authors suggest the possibility that students living on campus have more access to fried and fast foods, while those living off campus consume greater quantities of leaner proteins (Brevard and Ricketts 1996). This article is important because it begins to explore how place of residence can impact dietary behaviors.

Campus recreation

As with their dining facilities, many institutes of higher education are trying to attract students by offering state of the art recreation facilities (Reisberg 2001). Some colleges have also argued that building recreation facilities with lots of “bells and whistles” help motivate students to engage in healthy lifestyles (Zizzi et al. 2004) and positively contributes to the “university experience” (Taylor et al. 2003). The growth in scale of facilities has reflected increased demands from students for additional services and programs (e.g. personal training, group fitness classes) (Taylor et al. 2003). However,

others have criticized the spending of millions of dollars to build facilities such as these while resources for academic programs and materials are increasingly difficult to find (Reisberg 2001).

In collaboration with StudentVoice, the University of Arizona Campus Recreation Department (2006) conducted a national survey on how campus recreation services impact students. Generally, the purpose of the data is to help support and justify continued finance of recreation programs, as well as steer program planning and development. Nationally, they found that the majority of respondents said that campus recreational facilities were moderately to very important in their decisions to attend and continue attending their chosen institutions; this trend was less strong at UA. Almost three-quarters of both national and UA respondents also agreed that participating in campus recreation programs had expanded their interest in staying fit and healthy. More than 80 percent agreed that that participation had contributed to their quality life at school. Respondents also agreed that participating had increased or improved aspects of their life including their concentration, self-confidence, feeling of well-being, sleep, and stress management. This data supports some of the justifications used for building these state of the art centers; however one needs to question the structure of survey questions as well as the students sampled. Many of the survey questions were quite leading and ambiguous (e.g., “From your participation in Campus Recreation, activities, programs, and services do you feel you have increased or improved your: Feeling of well-being”), thus it is uncertain how important such facilities are to students or what sort of impact they have on their daily life.

While many colleges have expanded opportunities for physical activity on their campuses, growth in technology use (e.g., computers, Internet) have contributed to sedentary lifestyles (Leslie et al. 2001). This is at the same time that institutions are dropping or at least decreasing physical education requirements (Hensley 2000).²³

U of A food environment

At 405,000 square feet, the university's main student union (Student Union Memorial Center or SUMC) is one of the largest in the United States. Completed in 2003 after three years of renovations and expansions, the union houses dining services, retail outlets, a theater, a variety of meeting rooms, and other student services (UA "Student Union Memorial Center Grand Opening"). The dining services includes 35 different eateries, including both restaurants and a food court (UA "Student Union Overview").

In 1999 the UA considered privatizing the student union dining services, but decided that it would be in the its financial interest to maintain control over these services (Swedlund 1999). At that time, however, only about 40 percent of the campus food system was actually controlled by the university; the majority of the system was already controlled by private vendors. The first fast food contract was issued in 1995 to Domino's Pizza. Presently, five food outlets and Mexican food concessions are not operated directly by the UA (personal communication, Kristi Van Os, September 11, 2006).

²³ After consulting the UA catalog, I found that while there are a few nutrition and physical education courses that fulfill general education requirements, these did not appear to have activity experience components. Moreover, students choose from a range of general education options, thus are not required to take courses in these topics.

The dining services have taken several steps to address nutritional concerns. One example is Healthy Options brochures located around campus; these glossy and colorful brochures provide listings of food items low in fat (less than 15 grams), low in carbohydrates (less than 20 grams), and vegetarian available on campus. Another example is in about 2004 a restaurant (IQ Fresh) was developed by the dining services in order to bring some healthier foods to campus. A Dining Services Advisory Group was also formed in order to help address student food service needs and desires (Serafin 2006). In 2006 the food services were working to make organic foods more readily available on campus and instituted a weekly farmers market as well as other healthy food options (Serafin 2006). In addition, the food service web site began providing nutritional information for food sold on campus.

This year has also seen the launch of the Well University Partnership, which involves such groups as the College of Medicine, the Center for Physical Activity and Nutrition (CPAN), Campus Recreation, and Campus Health Services (UA “Well University Partnership”). One of the goals of the partnership is to help address Healthy People 2010 goals at the university level. In the fall they held a Health and Fitness day during a weeklong Promoting Academics, Wellness and Success (PAWS) event. The day included a morning walk, free fitness classes, demonstration tables, and a healthy foods challenge. I attended one of the two food challenges, which was sponsored by the dining services. The challenge was led by the assistant director of dining services and a staff member, and attended by three female students who were there for course credit. We were given ideas about what healthy choices were available on campus, with emphasis

placed on what steps dining services was taking to ensure the quality of the food it provided for its customers. While there was some acknowledgement that there were many unhealthy food options, it was stressed that students needed to be “educated consumers” if they were concerned about the healthiness of their food. It was a good pitch, but I wondered why it differed so much from the perspectives of the students I talked to and why students did not seem more aware of the positive changes that dining services seemed to be making.

The food court

The food court is on the main floor of SUMC. It resembles many of the food courts you find in malls, except for the people at tables studying and individuals in line wearing backpacks. The general soft hum of movement and conversation is also raised significantly on the hour coinciding with classes being let out. I spent a number of afternoons there while writing this thesis in order to get a better idea of what it was like and how it was used.

The center of the food court has probably about 100 four-person tables; during the times that I was there, tables were usually occupied by individuals studying or couples eating. The north and south walls are lined with food venues (those starred are operated by the dining services): IQ Fresh*, Papa John’s Pizza, McDonalds, Panda Express, On Deck Deli*, and Chick-fil-A. Although my observations were not structured or “scientific,” I did notice some general trends in terms of gender differences. I found that customers at IQ Fresh (which served salads, wraps, and smoothies) were much more likely to be women, and customers at Chick-fil-A (which served chicken sandwiches and

fries) and Panda Express (which served Chinese-style dishes such as chow mein and beef and broccoli), were more likely to be men. This corresponded well with how informants had graded eateries in terms of healthiness.²⁴

Meal plans

I described the meal plan options in detail in Chapter 4. Although meal plans come with an economic incentive, informants very rarely mentioned this. During our interview, Isabel said, “I was thinking about buying a meal plan because you don’t get charged tax, but then it’s like nothing but fast food, greasy food. So... I’ll pay less, but I’ll gain more. [Chuckles]” While meal plans are marketed as desirable, in part, because they give you a percentage off your purchase price and waive taxes, they are limited because the money you put into them cannot be recovered without paying a fee. Whatever money is left over in the plan at the end of the academic year is absorbed by the university.

Many informants who had purchased meal plans found that by the end of the year they had quite a bit of money left over. Notably the two students who reported that they had had to add money on their meal plans, Sara and Kisha, also reported some of the highest weight gains (twenty-five and eight and a half pounds respectively).

Operating hours of campus dining facilities also affected students eating patterns, with several complaining the places they liked to frequent were not open late enough. After consulting different food venues operating hours in SUMC I found that franchised food vendors, such as McDonalds and Panda Express, were generally open several hours

²⁴ It was difficult to see what people were buying because most of the food was wrapped up in bags or Styrofoam, and many bought their food and left the area.

later than campus operated venues (see Table 5). I asked Kisha—who had expressed a preference for eating at the Cactus Grill, studying late at night, and eating several dinners—whether the operating hours at places like the Cactus Grill were convenient for her. She said, “The night time hours not so much, but I think that kind of contributed to me doing anticipatory eating because I knew that they were gonna be closed later, so if I got hungry I’d have to get my food now.”

Others, because they were staying up late and would get hungry, often turned to having pizza or sandwiches delivered to their rooms because some delivery places delivered into the early morning hours. Plus, getting delivery was convenient and sometimes pizza places had coupons that were only good in the late night, early morning hours.

As previously noted, students used their Cat Cards much as a debit card for their meal plans. Rebecca repeatedly mentioned that when she used her Cat Card it “wasn’t like real money.” Many indicated that when buying food with their Cat Card it did not feel as if they were expending real money; it was “meal plan money” or credit that was already established. Notably, for most, their meal plans had been paid for by parents and/or scholarship money. By contrast, when buying food off campus they generally had to use cash or some other form of payment that came out of their discretionary spending money or, as Sandra put it, “actual money.”

	Weekdays
Cactus Grill*	7a-8p
On Deck Deli*	7:30a-8p
IQ Fresh*	9a-8p
McDonalds	6:30a-10p
Panda Express	9a-10p
*: UA operated venue	

Student perceptions of the food environment

Informants were generally not particularly pleased or content with their food options while living on campus, however most seemed to be resigned to having to deal with it. Cooking for themselves did not seem like an option for many, thus they had to eat what was available in the food venues on campus or eat prepackaged meals and snacks. Many negotiated with what was available to find options that they felt okay with. In general these options were limited to wraps, sandwiches, and salads, which many tired of over the course of the school year. Thus there was an overarching opinion that it was possible to eat healthy on campus if one was mindful, but that these options were few. I review these issues below.

Campus food venues

A number of informants said that almost everything (if not everything) available in terms of food on campus was fast food. While overall informants were not happy with this, a number indicated that during the first few weeks of school it had been something they liked; in fact, I noted that informants who had only been on campus a few weeks had generally more favorable perceptions of the food on campus. Sara explained her reaction her first week of school:

[W]ell I liked it 'cause I'd always heard like about cafeteria food in college, like I always heard it was really bad. And I was like, "Oh, it's really cool that we have like all these fast food places, it's a really neat idea." And then I realized like two weeks later, "Maybe it's not so great."

A few informants also said that many students on campus did not seem to be concerned by the food options.

Informants most liked the convenience and quickness of food on campus and least liked the lack of healthiness (e.g., too greasy and sugary) and, sometimes, poor quality of the food (especially the produce). Variety of foods available was cited both as something informants most and least liked. While there are several dozen different food venues on campus, many noted that the healthy options at those locations were generally the same: sandwiches, wraps, and salads.²⁵

Only a couple students were aware of the Healthy Options brochure. Rachel was involved in the pre-college program and was going to move on campus in the fall. She said she picked a brochure up in a campus convenience store:

I just picked up one of those 'cause I'm really concerned with, especially that I'm gonna be living on campus, there's not really places to prepare your own food. I mean the dorm has a community kitchen, but it's not like you can go buy a week's worth of groceries and leave it there and worry about someone else eating it or using it. So um, I'm kind of concerned with like the eating options they have here, 'cause a lot of it is fast food or restaurant-oriented.

While the university has attempted to make information such as this available to students, it appears (given my informants) that few students choose to access this information or are aware that it is available.

When it came to describing the continuum of healthiest to least healthy food venues on campus, most of the informants named IQ Fresh, On Deck Deli, and Cactus Grill (notably all operated by dining services) as generally healthier than places such as McDonalds, Panda Express, and Papa Johns. Many informants said they consciously tried to eat at the healthier places and that they refused to eat at specific fast food venues.

²⁵ Notably, about a half dozen informants said that they did not like salads, thus leaving them with even fewer healthy options.

The Cactus Grill was also often cited by health-conscious informants as a place they were able to buy healthier meals. Located on the third floor of SUMC, it is a cafeteria-style food venue, with hot plate stations and salad, fruit, wrap, and soup bars. It was noted to have more variety and “home-cooked” options. The bars particularly were mentioned as giving informants an opportunity to construct meals of their choosing, thus giving them more control over their eating. However, I found that many of the younger informants were not aware of its existence.

While IQ and On Deck Deli were often described as being healthy places to eat, several informants critiqued this broad perception. In essence, these informants pointed out that all wraps and sandwiches are not created equal. Kisha said:

[I]f you don't put the bad stuff on your wrap, you can get a good wrap. [Chuckles] Just people assume that all wraps are good, “Let me throw on some ranch and some fried chicken. Great wrap I have!” Put it in a regular tortilla too. Hmmm! [Chuckles] “I'm eating healthy now!” [Laughs]

Many also noted that even if the food itself was healthy, people often ate too much of it because of the too large serving sizes.

Again, there was an ethic of personal responsibility replete through interviews when it came to opting for healthy food options. For example, after I noted that some informants had been concerned about the lack of healthy options on campus, Jenny responded:

And as far as healthy options, I agree there aren't too many, but there are some and you can make it work if you choose to. Um, I mean, they're not like the best healthy options, but I mean, um, a wrap from IQ is better than a slice of pizza or a hamburger or like fried chicken from, you know, Chick-fil-A, so you can make it work and I think that um, you just have to kind of deal with, you know, pick and

choose because you don't really have an option, but you can find some kind of healthy food if you wanted to.

Gretchen echoed this sentiment when she said, "It's a little hard to eat healthy, but it's not that hard, it doesn't take that much effort to just pick things that aren't bad for you."

Healthy food, hefty prices

Many students noted that they thought the healthier food on campus cost more money. As an illustration, several compared the McDonald's Dollar Menu to the five to eight dollar wraps, salads, or sandwiches. I also noted that while I saw many coupons for pizza and deals for other less healthy foods, I did not see the same for healthier food items.

While students recognized these price differentials, I wondered whether it affected what they ate, especially given that many did not consider their meal plan money to be "real money." A few students mentioned that friends who were receiving cash from their parents instead of being on a meal plan would try to eat as cheaply as possible in order to save money to spend on other things, such as clothes. However, I would say that most of the informants perceived that price did not affect their food choices, at least on campus. Those expressing a concern about the healthiness of their food also said that they were willing to pay more for food they were more comfortable eating. In addition, some tried to be both economical and cut down on their portion sizes by taking home leftovers to eat for a second meal, or by not eating outside their dorm room as frequently.

In addition to these issues, there was a perception that the university was taking advantage of students having few other food options by charging much more for food

items bought on campus. Chloe remarked that the produce at the campus convenience stores were particularly expensive: “I mean they would sell, these markets like celery and peanut butter for three dollars. It was insane. And everything’s hyped up. ‘Cause they have kids that are just trapped here with their parents’ money. It’s a business. The food is really bad.”

Impediments to cooking for self

After about four weeks on campus, Colette was adjusting to her new college eating habits. In high school she had rarely eaten meals out and I asked her how she felt about eating out for most meals. She said, “I mean, I don’t like it. I don’t really like it, but um, there’s, other than like my microwave, there’s not really opportunities to cook yourself a meal. So I just, you know, I get sandwich instead of the wrap and stuff like that.”

Each residence hall was reported to have a kitchen outfitted with a sink, oven, range, and large refrigerator, and have pots and pans available for students to check out. However, most informants said they rarely if ever used these things (the exception to this was Jessica, who prepared all her meals and snacks in her on-campus apartment). First of all, there was a general reticence towards using a small communal kitchen, with many informants noting concerns with cleanliness and the smallness of the space. A few expressed a lack of experience cooking.

Obtaining and storing groceries was also another impediment. Most informants did not have cars and relied upon bumming rides with friends or sometimes parents to buy groceries off campus; only two informants said that they had used the bus for transportation to the grocery store. For many, it did not seem that they were able to go

grocery shopping more frequently than once every few weeks. Although the university maintains several food stops (i.e., convenience stores) on campus, the food is much more expensive than you would find at a typical grocery store and the selection is not as varied, particularly in terms of produce. Even when informants could get to the grocery store, their refrigerators in their rooms were so small they could not store much food and storing food in the kitchen was risky because it was accessible to others in the residence hall. Thus much of what they kept in their rooms was nonperishable, which many acknowledged was generally less healthy. Informants did note that they observed others using the kitchens, usually for baking things such as brownies and cookies or cooking pasta.

Finally there was the hassle factor. Many noted that it took time and planning to cook something. They would need to make sure they had bought all the ingredients (which again brought up the storage constraints) and then make sure they brought all the materials they needed to the kitchen, which might be many flights of stairs away and require multiple trips. Then, because the kitchen was very small, they would have to make sure that the kitchen was not being used when they wanted to cook.

Given these issues, for many it just seemed much easier and preferable to use their meal plans to buy food on campus or heat something up in their microwaves. I think it is also important to note that cooking for oneself was not the norm and would involve practices that went against the grain of both the social and structural environment.

Student Recreation

The Department of Campus Recreation at the UA maintains a number of facilities including the Student Recreation Center (the Rec), Bear Down Gymnasium, and the Robson Tennis Center, while also supporting over 40 sports clubs and running a number of different programs.

The Rec was opened in 1990 and was the result of a vote by students to add a mandatory 25 dollar a semester fee to fees and tuition rates. This fee goes toward paying of the bonds created to construct the facility and, ostensibly, waives the need for user fees. The result is that all full-time students help to pay for the facility and are automatic members of it, whether they use it or not. In more recent years additional fees have been added to semester fees in continued support of services and for a newly proposed expansion plan (UA Campus Rec “Student Recreation Center Expansion Update”).

According to the UA Campus Recreation Department (2006) benchmark data, 90 percent of student respondents use recreation facilities, programs, or services²⁶: 32 percent used cardiovascular equipment, 28 percent used weights, and 4 percent used group fitness classes three or more times a week. Notably, three-quarters of UA respondents said that maintaining a healthy lifestyle was moderately to very important to them before enrolling, while 90 percent projected it would be moderately to very important to them upon leaving college.

²⁶ Respondents were randomly selected by the registrar’s office; 1,102 (44%) of those selected completed the survey online (personal communication, Beata Blachuta, October 20, 2006). More than half of respondents were first-year students and 64 percent were female.

Student perceptions and use of the Recreation Center

As noted in Chapter 4, informants offered a wide range of opinions about and perceptions of the Rec. Several noted that around campus there were widely drawn upon stereotypes about people who frequented the Rec. Chloe explained:

[E]veryone there is kind of obsessive looking. It's pretty obvious. They're just very obsessive exercisers and that's all they do is workout and, it's really odd actually. There's lots of jokes on campus about who works out there. Just like, you know, sorority girls on the treadmills constantly, people like that. And then frat boys working out, pumping iron. That's what you see a lot. You don't see people who aren't in shape working out and getting into shape.

One of the ways I attempted to elicit perceptions of the Rec was to ask informants whether they had ever heard or observed that the Rec was only for people that were already in shape. Although responses varied, most seemed to agree that this was an inaccurate portrayal of the Rec, though they could see how someone might think this. Several noted that depending on what time of the day you went, you would have very different perceptions of the Rec's clientele. For example, older adults (e.g., professors) tended to go in the morning hours, while in the afternoon it was very crowded with more in shape young adults. Different spaces were also described as attracting different types of people. The weight room, with both weight lifting equipment and several cardiovascular machines, was often indicated to be the nexus of fit bodies.

Several informants indicated that one's perception of the Rec varied depending on their sense of confidence and what one made of it. Belinda said people used the Rec to show off and to "hit on" others, to lose weight, and/or to exercise. Rolling her eyes in response to my question about whether the Rec was only for fit people, she said:

If you're really paranoid or something like that, people are looking at you and everything like that, then you're right, it's not for you. But you have to figure it's college, it's on campus, and you're gonna get a variety of people there, and a lot of people who go there either go to be like, "Oh, look at me," or go there really to exercise, and if you wanna be a person that really exercises, then you just need to just not worry about [it], I mean, I really think that 'cause if you let other people control like, I mean, it's for everybody, it doesn't say [that] on the door. [...] Kind of annoyed at those people, but it's okay. I mean, I can understand it, but at the same time, you know, I'm just kind of like, "Well, why are you going to the gym then?" Because you need to go to the gym for yourself, not for other people.

A few other informants also indicated frustration with people who felt uncomfortable at the Rec. Their stance seemed to be that the Rec was open to anyone who wanted to use it and if someone felt uncomfortable there, then it was their issue. While they acknowledged the Rec could be intimidating, they did not express much sympathy for those who were deterred by this.

In the minority, two informants said that when they went to the Rec they felt that it was a place only for really fit people. Sara, who reported infrequent exercise and indicated much self-consciousness about her physical ability, replied:

Like if you're like overweight or if you have like cellulite on your thighs, like pretty much half the world does, then people look at you if you're there. Like it's really only for people who are in really good shape, like the guys who are really like buff and the girls who are like tiny, like thin thin thin. But other than that, like you go in there and you're just intimidated.

Impediments to using the recreation center

I recognized quickly that the women who expressed the most comfort working out in the Rec, particularly the weight room, were those who had previous sports and/or gym experience. Many (even those with previous gym experience) said they would not use pieces of equipment because they did not know how to use them, with several noting that

they were concerned they would injure or humiliate themselves if they used something incorrectly. Rachel explained:

Rachel: I never really learned [proper technique for lifting weights], so I can't just go to the Rec Center right now and hop onto the weight machines, 'cause I really wouldn't know what I was doing.

LP: Does that intimidate you from using the weight machines or do you just not wanna use 'em anyway?

Rachel: Um... I would use 'em if I knew how, I guess I don't because I know the risk of injury of not properly using it and I wouldn't want to injure myself.

Blair expressed a slightly different reason for not using the weight lifting equipment:

I didn't really know what to do and then uh, like if I went into the weight room I don't know like what weights to use or like what muscles I should be working out. And then, again, the intimidation factor like there are some buff guys in there and like hard core gym rats. Like that know exactly what they're doing, everything and uh, and it's kind of weird not knowing anything and just kind of going in there and looking kind of dumb I guess.

Those having had previous consistent experience in a gym also seemed to experience less self-consciousness at the Rec. Several indicated that they had been self-conscious when they first started going to a gym, but had gotten over it by no longer caring what other people thought. Anna, who expressed that she was not comfortable going to the Rec alone, said that her self-consciousness decreased as she got into her workout:

[L]ike the first five minutes, I'll be like, "Oh, like wow, that girls really, you know, fit and I'm not." Then I'm like, after like half an hour I've been on that, I'm usually so tired, I don't notice anything, I just [Inaudible]. Or I feel proud of myself, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm gonna, I'm gonna get there." [Chuckles]

Notably, a handful of informants said that they did not exercise as frequently as they would have liked because the only time they had to exercise was at night and they were concerned about their safety when walking alone to the Rec. As previously noted, some

of those who were intimidated working out at the Rec expressed they would have gone more often had they had a friend to go with them. Others said that they found it difficult to fit exercising into their schedules, particularly because the Rec was often busy with waits for specific pieces of equipment. In fact, one had to sign up to use the cardiovascular equipment in the weight room and was limited to 30 minutes per use.

Another impediment was concerns with self-presentation, which were related to perceptions that the Rec was only for people who were already really fit. Those that comfortably used the Rec facilities were frequently quick to note that although self-conscious individuals might feel that everyone is watching them workout, usually that is not the case. At the same time I think it is important to note that there was acknowledgement that some people do go to the Rec and check other people out, and that for some the ways that people dressed and presented themselves was important. A number of women noted that there was a segment of female Rec-goers that wore skimpy workout attire (and/or sorority letters), and had their hair and make-up done when they worked out. In response to my question about what she thought of the Rec, Sara said:

I always felt dumb because there was like those girls that had on like their matching workout outfits and like they'd run for like hours and I'd have on like my old gym shirt and gross shorts and I'd go and try and workout and then they're there like not sweating with all their makeup on, so it was kind of like intimidating I guess.

The athletes in particular, though, expressed that this more cosmetic side of the gym did not affect them; rather they were interested in using the space and time they had there to engage in something they enjoyed doing, namely exercising.

The weight room: Buff guys

The weight room was often described as a sort of realm for really buff guys interested in outlifting one another. Even women who said they were comfortable working out there acknowledged that this perception could make working out in the weight room intimidating or kind of awkward. However, for women with experience lifting weights around males (e.g., athletes who might have shared a high school weight room with football players), this environment did not dissuade them from using the weight room. They seemed to be focused on lifting within their capabilities and not on how that might compare to what others were doing.

By contrast, those who said they were too intimidated to use the weight room indicated that they were self-conscious about not being able to lift very much weight. For example, Anna said that while she had liked to lift small weights at home, she worried that the men would “be like, ‘Oh she’s picking up the five pound dumbbell.’” Isabel similarly said she thought the men would think, “‘Oh what is this girl doing in here? She doesn’t know what she’s doing in here.’”

In terms of weight lifting, many reported that they predominantly worked on toning their abdominal muscles and their arms. Jenny, who described her intense high school soccer training as giving her large muscles, responded to my question of whether she was concerned about becoming too muscular:

Jenny: [My high school training] was fine and it was like effective, but like, gosh, that was like you have to maintain that muscle or it just turns to fat and it’s even worse. So um, yeah, I didn’t wanna, you know, get too muscular. You know, I like to be fit and I like to have like muscle definition but I don’t like to be like humongous.

LP: And why don't you like to be humongous?

Jenny: Um, just 'cause [Chuckles] just 'cause I'm a girl and I don't think that's attractive for girls or guys. Um, but I just like it's, I don't think it's necessary to be that big. [Chuckles] You know, like you can, I think people can function just fine on regular like muscle, you know, stature than, you know, gigantic like muscle builder people, I just think it's kind of silly. But, yeah, just 'cause I'm a girl and I don't want to have like gigantic like, grr! [Chuckles]

Many, but not all, noted that they did not necessarily want to gain more muscle (or as Christy described it, "scary bulging muscles"), rather wanted to firm up their body and keep things from "flapping." I asked some of the weight lifters whether they were careful about how much weight they lifted (Dworkin's [2003b] notion of "holding back") and several responded that they did not worry because they knew that women could not get large muscles and/or it would take a lot more effort than they were putting into their routines or eat a lot more to get large muscles.

Because many women said they were intimidated by the weight room (and because of the success of women-only private gyms in recent years) I asked women if they might be more comfortable lifting weights in a women-only weight room. Although responses varied, the majority said no, with many indicating that such a set-up would be less comfortable. Regardless of whether or not they felt comfortable working out in the weight room, there was a widespread opinion that women might be as or more prone to watching other women workout as men. Several noted that men tend to be self-focused when working out, which is opposed to the idea that they are competing with one another or checking out women, but in agreement with the general perception that they are not

paying much attention to the women in the room. In describing why such a situation would be less comfortable, Erin brought it back to the issue of comparison:

‘Cause women are very judgmental and I know that and I know that they would be watching, more so than, when I’m with, when you’re around a bunch of guys if you blend in in that fact that you’re not, you know, you didn’t do yourself up or something, you can blend in and they don’t pay attention to you, which I like. I like just blending into a crowd when I’m, I don’t wanna stand out and I really feel like that if I was in a weight room full of girls that I didn’t know that I would be watched all the time. And I know it’s true because I do it, you know. I watch, girls are just that way. We like comparing ourselves to one another.

Both Sandra and Sara said that they had gotten unfriendly “looks” from women they did not know at the Rec. Sara said she thought it being co-ed actually made things better because the males provided women with something else to focus on besides other females. However, several women noted they might like such as a space, citing the possibility of better availability of equipment, improved cleanliness, and less or more equal competition in terms of strength.

Summary and conclusions

In the past several decades there have been great changes in the administration of institutes of higher education in response to socioeconomic trends. These changes have resulted in the contracting out of many auxiliary services and the construction of new student-centered facilities in the hopes of drawing new students and their money to campuses.

This trend is particularly evident within university food service. At the UA fast food franchises have become part of the food service offerings since 1995. While several informants thought that food court options were cool at first, many soon tired of having to

eat what they considered to be fast food every day. However, overall there was a lack of spirited concern about the healthiness of food on campus. All recognized the limited range of healthy options and the plethora of unhealthy options, but seemed to shrug their shoulders about it. Because there were healthy options available, this ethic of personal responsibility, and feelings that they did not have control of their immediate environment, most were resigned to having to deal with this for the duration of their freshman year. In addition, for about half the informants, the healthiness of the food they were eating was not at the forefront of their minds when making food choices. However, from what many of these older women said, this concern grew over the course of their freshman year as they gained weight or in subsequent years when they had more control over what they ate.

When talking about the types of food available in their parents' homes (see Chapter 4), most of the women seemed to evaluate it based upon what foods were eaten at dinner. Those who ranked their family's food more highly tended to cite the fact that one of their parents cooked dinner most nights. This is important, particularly when thinking about perceptions of the healthiness of the food on campus. In many ways the perception of the increased relative healthiness of home-cooked food is reflective of anxiety over the products of modernity (Beck 1996), such as artificial preservatives and sweeteners (opinions expressed by several informants). In this way home-cooked symbolizes something natural, wholesome, and trustworthy. This perception is also reflective of health messages they have received concerning the relative unhealthiness of eating out compared to eating at home.

An ethnographic study conducted by Sassatelli (1999) of gym goers in Italy reflects what I heard in my discussions with women. Sassatelli argued that gym goers will find it difficult to continue if they measure themselves against others in the gym or some body ideal. The informants she talked to who infrequently or ceased going to the gym reported that they understood the workouts to be useful, but could not get into it because of feelings of boredom, or being exposed, alone, and unfocused. These people were unable to focus solely on the activity and suspend fitness objectives.²⁷ She wrote:

[W]hile training is not an occasion for unfettered physical and emotional expression, neither is it a prison of deferred gratifications which participants can enjoy only when their bodies begin to conform to ideal measures. Precisely by appropriating the rules which frame fitness activities, regular participants seem to [experience] some pleasure, both as immediate fun and as satisfaction for their capacities. [Sassatelli 1999:para 7.4]

Using Goffman's concept of "frame" (way that things are organized to govern events and people's participation in them), she said that regular gym goers experience of the gym is framed, they feel that their actions are natural. The concept of "framing" reminds me of Bourdieu's habitus, which is something I thought of when talking to women about their experiences at the Rec. For the most part, women who had previous experiences in gyms or had knowledge of how to use gym equipment were much more successful at maintaining a regular exercise regimen because they did not think about it as much in terms of specific fitness objectives, rather it was something that was part of their usual routine and something that gave them pleasure.

²⁷ In a similar way, White and colleagues (2005) suggested that women who maintain physical activity programs might see engagement as primarily important for overall quality of life rather than for weight loss purposes.

There are two important points that I would like to address with regard to informants engagement in activities at the Rec. First, is the idea that you engage in the kinds of activities that you are familiar with. In his discussion of inequalities related to embodiment of physical educational knowledge, Shilling (1993) has argued that differences in physical abilities relates both to unequal opportunities to get “skilled” in physical activity and to the differing bodily orientations and values instilled in different groups of people during this education. Rather than thinking about exercise engagement as solely a matter of cognition (e.g., self-efficacy)—as it is often framed in studies—I think that Shilling, along with Bourdieu, points us in a very useful direction. This takes into account how bodily orientations are embodied through past physical activity experiences and are a deeply engrained phenomena that come through in our everyday practice. Moreover, bodily orientations are differentially acquired based upon social identity; in this case we can see how gender plays a large role in determining what opportunities women have for becoming skilled in certain things (e.g., weight lifting).

The second observation I would like to highlight is how informants often mentioned not doing certain exercises because they were concerned they would injure themselves if they did it incorrectly. Young (1990) mentioned in one of her essays that women are often less fluid and open in their physical movements not just due to lack of practice, but because they are told from an early age not to get dirty or get hurt. Thus timidity towards engaging their bodies is something that is embodied at an early age for some women.

Although some women engaged in lifting weights it was apparent that most of the participants perceived lifting weights as something males were more likely to do. It is

important to keep in mind that although young women are exposed to strong normalizing forces (e.g., intimidation in using weight room), the standards of acceptance for physicality are done by degree and open to “negotiation, dispute and redefinition” (Kirk and Tinning 1994:618). Thus some, particularly those who had previous experience, did lift weights to a degree. Like some of the women in Dworkin’s (2003b), though, they were generally not attempting to gain muscle, but to firm up their bodies, which was in line with specific feminine body ideals (for a discussion of this topic in relation to high school girls see Taylor 2006).

In the seventh and final chapter I offer a short summary of the findings of this study, describe its limitations, and point to areas for future work.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

The Freshman 15 was a concept that most informants were well aware of prior to entering college. While they were not keen on the prospect of gaining 15 pounds, most were not overly concerned, either citing disbelief that such weight gain was common or not seeing it as something relevant to themselves. Informants' perceptions of whether they were at risk of gaining weight, however, were dynamic. Concern increased at what might be called "fateful moments" (Giddens 1991) wherein the individual realized changed risk and possibility for weight gain. Generally this point was several weeks into or near the end of the first semester at which point the informant became aware of actual weight gain or the potential for weight gain. For many, this led to a questioning and changing of habits, such as watching what they ate (particularly cutting back on portion sizes) and engaging in more exercise. Overall, though, informants reported a variety of weight changes, with the greatest changes occurring during the first semester; the older students reported a mean weight gain of a few pounds.

In terms of eating patterns, many noted how the increased opportunities for eating fast food as well as snacks negatively impacted their consumption patterns and contributed to weight gain. Often these food opportunities occurred during social situations, which in themselves were significant aspects of informants' experiences. Eating late at night was also common especially because informants were staying up much later studying, socializing, and sometimes partying. Many noted that these were unhealthy habits, but also seemed to imply that it was normative for college students living on campus and thus was hard to avoid.

Eating and exercise patterns were strongly influenced by family habits and orientations, as well as previous physical activity experiences. Particularly in terms of exercise engagement, those who had had opportunities in the past to build up physical capital were much more likely to express comfort and confidence in exercising in the Rec. Importantly, for informants who had been athletes in high school there was a noticeable shift in the intent of their exercise engagement. Whereas previously their exercise had functioned to prepare them for their sport, exercise in college took on more significance as a means body management. However, former athletes were more likely to mention non-aesthetic reasons (e.g., stress reduction) for engaging in exercise than other informants.

Self presentation was also an important topic discussed during interviews. Although perceptions varied, many discerned an increased emphasis on appearance in college compared to high school; many specifically noted that the UA has an unusually attractive and scantily clad student population. While most of those expressing this view derided the superficiality they found on campus, it also caused them to experience a heightened concern with their own appearance and weight. Much of the concern for self-presentation emerged during discussions of the Rec, where people's consciousness about their bodies was evoked and where issues related to gender played out.

Important to note are the socioeconomic changes exerting pressures on universities to provide certain types of dining and recreational services and facilities to students. This is a point sorely missing from the academic literature on college student weight and health practices. By looking at these as risky lifestyle practices, we neglect the structural

factors that produce them (Lupton 1993). While informants did acknowledge some of the structural limitations they encountered, many professed a viewpoint in line with the ethic of personal responsibility which in turn moralized their behavior.

Study limitations

There are a number of limitations to consider when thinking about these conclusions. Most obviously is that the data was gathered from a small sample that is most likely not representative of the UA population or college students in general. Thus I would caution against using it to make any generalizations about either of these groups.

The inclusion of both prospective and retrospective methods (that is, interviewing both freshman and upper classmen) could be considered both a strength and a weakness in my study design. I generally detected a removal of feeling and emotion in the accounts of the older students. Moreover, they often had difficulties remembering their freshman year and their recollections were based upon a much different perspective than the younger students. For their part, the younger students had fewer college experiences to draw upon in answering my questions. This was especially true for those in the pre-college program wherein they had only experienced a quiet, slowed down version of the university campus. In addition, as some may have been first generation college students in their family, this may have limited their exposure to concepts such as the Freshman 15.

The cross sectional nature of the study allowed me to gather this prospective and retrospective data, however collecting data at one point in time has many disadvantages. For example, I was unable to collect information on how perceptions and behaviors changed over the course of the year. The understanding of changes I was able to glean

came from retrospective accounts which are not always accurate or nuanced. In addition, people's understandings of events change depending on time and space; hence my design would have been better had I interviewed women multiple times over the course of their freshman year to track how accounts changed.

The study also suffers from a lack of more comprehensive and systematic observational data, which is often a strength of anthropological research. Most of my analysis rests upon what informants told me; however, as one of my professors likes to say, what people say and do are not always the same thing. I do not think anyone intentionally provided me with incorrect information, however, sometimes people lack the words and awareness to say or explain certain aspects of their lives. In addition, sometimes the interview space might not feel safe enough to disclose certain issues or an individual may have provided me with an account that she thought I wanted to hear. Incorporation of a broader set of observational data would have benefited this paper and helped to verify some of the trends apparent in interview data.

One great limitation to my work is a lack of analysis of the impact of ethnicity and class. While I thought about how ethnicity might have impacted my informants' experiences, I did not detect any real differences in orientations or behaviors. However, the one African American informant did say outright that there were differences between female African Americans and other women in terms of the ways they thought about their bodies and beauty. This is confirmed by various other studies on body image and eating and dieting behavior (e.g., DeBate et al. 2001; Nichter 2000; Pereira et al. 2005). With

regard to class, I did collect information on parental employment; however I did not use it. Both these areas deserve consideration.

Despite these study limitations, a number of strengths deserve note. First, by conducting in-depth interviews with women I was afforded insight into how college women experience and understand the concept of the Freshman 15; this is a perspective missing from the literature. The study also begins to discuss the political-economic aspects of college student eating and exercise patterns; again, this is an integral component absent from discussions of college student health.

Possible interventions

While conducting this research a number of potential interventions or changes that could help support students in healthy lifestyles came to mind. Several of the studies cited above found that significant weight gain during the first semester of the freshman year could be attributed to consuming just a few hundred calories more than expending (Hajhosseini et al. 2006; Levitsky et al. 2004). Because this is relatively small, it follows that making small behavioral and/or environmental changes can prevent and/or reverse weight gain (Levitsky et al. 2004).

In general I am hesitant to offer any suggestions because I believe an effective intervention should be a collaborative effort between students and whoever is in charge of implementing the intervention or change. In addition, some past health promotion interventions have helped produced more eating disorder symptoms in participants (Mann et al. 1997; Zabinski et al. 2001) or reinforced a “culture of slimming” (Germov and

Williams 1996). With this in mind, I cautiously offer up the following as possible directions for supporting healthy eating and exercise among college students.

Supporting healthy eating

Cooking for themselves was often viewed as more trouble than it was worth. However, as Erin noted, cooking with friends was better because the effort involved could be distributed. Perhaps residence halls could facilitate forming small cooking groups that could cook and eat together. This would allow those with more experience cooking to teach those wishing to learn to cook. It would also establish a way for students to socialize while eating, but not having to eat out at a restaurant, which might be preferable to some. Because eating out is something that people do to socialize, it is important that interventions attempting to replace it do so with something that would fill a similar need.

Many informants mentioned that the healthy foods on campus seemed to cost more than the unhealthy foods. Generally they compared the university-produced foods (usually perceived as being healthier) to franchise food options. While I applaud the food services for providing students with more healthy options, as representatives implied during the Healthy Foods Challenge I attended, students either do not seem aware of the variety of healthy options available or are not willing to try something new. One of the ways that these foods can be promoted is through highlighting them through special sales or promotions. As several informants noted, they are often attracted by sales and using incentives to increase purchasing of healthy food choices on college campuses has been suggested by other researchers (Holdsworth and Haslam 1998). In addition consideration

should be given toward requiring that contracted food services provide certain amounts of healthy food options and limited amounts of unhealthy options.

Koszewski and Kuo (1996) suggest that colleges provide students with resources for transportation in order to increase the availability and affordability of foods. I agree with this, although I understand that there are competing pressures on universities, particularly to keep students food dollars on campus. However, because food on campus is expensive, for money-conscious students, this facilitates eating whatever is cheapest, which often might be something from McDonald's Dollar Menu. Having a weekly farmer's market is a positive step forward in helping make healthy foods more available to students, however only time will tell how much this is utilized by students. It might be possible to use university shuttle service vehicles to transport students to nearby grocery stores on the weekends for a fee.

Promoting exercise engagement

One of the ways in which physical activity endeavors could be supported is by targeting social networks (Craft et al. 2003; Gyurcski et al. 2004). Many of the informants who said they had trouble establishing a consistent exercise practice noted that they would have liked to have had someone to exercise with. A woman I spoke with informally told me that the women in her dorm had established group runs and workout buddies to help keep them from gaining weight during the year. It might be possible for residence halls to facilitate such activity organization to help those students wishing to exercise with others.

Several other barriers that informants noted related to safety in walking to the Rec and not knowing how to use equipment at the Rec. With regard to safety, students should be made aware of the school's Safe Ride program, which provides free, safe rides at night. Establishing exercise buddies could also help with this. With regard to learning about Rec equipment, general orientation programs for the Rec could be useful for some students. While the Rec offers personal training packages, these are quite expensive and thus not an option for many students.

Fundamentally, though, increasing physical activity in young adults should involve helping children develop healthy orientations toward their bodies and physical activity. This means that physical education programs in primary and secondary schools need to be given more funding, support, and recognition. These programs also need to take the focus off of student performance and accountability, and away from "elite sports" (Ellis 1988). It should be recognized that the negative experiences that young people have in physical education can "deprive them of the knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm" necessary to continue to be active outside of the physical education setting (Shilling 1993:56).

Areas for future study

I undertook this project with the notion that it represented a first step in gaining a more contextualized account of women's weight, eating, and exercising experiences during their first year of college. As such, now that I have finished, I would like to offer up a few areas for further research.

In general, longitudinal, ethnographic research is needed to explore how women's behaviors and attitudes change over the course of their freshman year and beyond. In-depth study of the specific historical and economic factors that shape university food and recreation services are also needed. This would include interviews with administrators, managers, and staff associated with these operations, as well as more systematic observations of the ways in which they are conducted. Attention should be given to the interaction of different departments on campus, such as dining services and campus health. In addition, changes occurring within these sectors should be examined. For example, I wonder for whom creation of healthier eating options are geared to. From my own observations, it seems that many of these changes are being made to present to parents of students rather than students themselves.

Particular social networks and social settings deserve more attention. I only interviewed one woman in a sorority, but she and others indicated that appearance and weight issues are heightened within the Greek system. How the specter of the Freshman 15 is experienced, the ways that weight management practices are shared, and how weight issues are discussed in general amongst sorority and nonsorority women are issues that could be explored more fully. In addition, several informants indicated that weight issues were also heightened among women living in the largest residence halls and on single-sex floors.

Similarly, the ways in which eating and exercise change when in the presence of males would be important to examine in future research. There was some indication that a segment of informants felt more relaxed among men because they found women to be

more critical. Those in a steady relationship also indicated that they felt less worried about their appearance because they were not thinking about impressing or attracting other males. At the same time, other informants said that their concern about weight and appearance increased in college because they were more serious about finding a potential mate.

An issue I did not explore is what college women do when they feel hungry. Chloe indicated that if she felt hungry and it was not meal time, she would try to convince herself that she was not hungry. Blair described taking long daily naps in part to avoid her hunger. Within this is a need to explore people's beliefs about hunger and how it is experienced and dealt with. Moreover, how do these issues differ by context and what are the repercussions? Another issue that I found interesting, but did not have time or space to explore, was the ways that women explained how food, vitamins, diet pills, and other supplements worked on their bodies.

One thing that bothers me about the physical activity literature is the neglect of the embodied pleasures that can be derived from engaging in movement. Instead physical activity, particularly in terms of health policies, is constructed as an activity part of health management, which is an individual's responsibility (see Fullagar 2003). I think that it is important to promote physical activity not just for its health benefits. Through physical activity one gains "embodied knowledge" that can aid in a new definition of self (Bolin and Granskog 2003). Movement can also facilitate self-expression and self-transcendence (Fahlberg and Fahlberg 1997). The ways in which young women gain pleasure and a

sense of self from physical activity is an area that should be explored and that can perhaps help inform more positive interventions.

Although I gathered some information on participants' physical activity during their senior year, it became evident during interviews that women's past experiences being physically active were very important in shaping their physical activity during their freshman year. As such future studies would do well to examine in more depth how previous physical activities impact college physical activity.²⁸ This work will need to closely examine how opportunities for physical activity are often limited according to gender, social class, and ethnicity/race and how physical education often reproduces gendered and racialized discourses about the body (Azzarito and Soloman 2005). Connell (1982) has also provided insight into how sports are an important practice in the construction of gender.

In a similar way I think that more work is needed on young women whose physical activity increases when they go to college. Fox (1994) has suggested that researchers examine the positive strategies that young people use to enhance factors that positively support participation in physical activity and to eliminate negative factors. While I believe that such an approach focuses too much on the individual and cognitive processes, I think that it could be helpful in a study also looking at broader social issues affecting physical activity patterns. In general I think that research into why certain

²⁸ A few studies have retrospectively examined adult women's experiences in sport and physical education (Hill and Blackenridge 1989; Thomas 1985); however, none to my knowledge have examined how these experiences directly affect physical activity patterns in college.

individual's adopt healthier practices in college could be a fruitful area for helping to identify ways in which to construct health interventions.

Because so many informants were using machines in their exercise, I think that more work could be done on how the machines are used in people's exercise practices. One informant noted that she preferred working out on machines because she liked to be able to monitor how long she had been exercising and how many calories she had burned. The issue of control also came up in terms of exercise machines. One said she felt she had more control over her exercise when on a machine because she could directly vary the intensity of her workout, while another said she felt controlled when working out on a machine. I would be interested to know whether people perceive that the quality of their workout differs when they workout on machines compared to when they do not. I have personally found that running inside on a treadmill and running outside are very different experiences that provoke dissimilar orientations towards exercise.

Something interesting that I noticed when looking back at the transcripts was this idea of what did and did not constitute significant weight change. I did not probe into this specifically, so I only have qualifiers that people would use when talking about their weight change (e.g., "I only gained 10 to 15 pounds," "only lost eight pounds, it wasn't drastic"). Future studies should investigate college students' perceptions of what is a significant weight change and how past weight change (or weight change in friends and family) might impact this.

Maturational body changes ("becoming a woman") and contribution to weight gain was brought up by several informants. This is an area that future researchers can

examine. Particularly, how do young women understand the ways in which their bodies mature? How do women use this to explain weight and body changes? One informant described these body changes positively, while another said she was learning to accept it, indicating the changes were experienced negatively. Women's opinions as to how potential mates view changes such as these are another area that could be explored.

The affect that sleep has on weight change during the first year of college deserves study. Although I asked a few questions about sleep during interviews with women, they were not sufficient for me to use in my analysis. However, as women indicated, they tended to eat more on nights when they stayed up late. This was due in part to snacking in a social situation, being hungry, and eating as a way to stay awake. What was less clear was how getting less sleep impacted (or did not impact) their daily eating patterns. A study by Wells and Cruess (2006) indicates that the amount of calories consumed and food choices might be affected by at least short-term sleep deprivation (four or less hours of sleep per night).

I would like to add a note on using the Freshman 15 as a model for the obesity epidemic. Levitsky, Halmaier, and Mrdjevnovic (2004) wrote:

[I]f the phenomenon of the freshman weight gain is an amplification of the same process that is occurring among the public, then it should be possible to study various methods and techniques that might prevent freshman weight gain in the hope that they might be effective to reduce or even reverse the secular trend toward increasing body weight and obesity in the general population. [Levitsky et al. 2004:1439]

The problem with this is that it leaves out very important contextual factors about the first-year of college. These include living in a controlled environment, possible acute stress associated with adapting to new environment and being away from loved ones, a

particular developmental age, and dynamic and sometimes unstructured schedules. I do not think that what happens here can be used as a model for obesity in the general population. Moreover, there is evidence that for at least some students, weight gains are reduced or stabilized in subsequent college years (Hovell et al. 1985). Anecdotally many informants also told me that that specifically their eating practices had greatly improved after their freshman year. These points of adjustment deserve further inquiry, particularly into the reasons for healthier shifts in behavioral patterns.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

First of all, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions to get to know you a bit

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. Who did you live with while in high school?
4. Do you have any siblings?
5. What does your mom do?
6. What does your dad do?
7. Now I have some questions about your eating and exercise when you were still living at home during your senior year.
 - Think about the kind of foods that you ate at home. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most healthy and 1 being the least healthy, where would you rank your family?
 - On a typical week, how many times did your family eat dinner together? How many times per week did someone cook a meal?
 - On a typical week, how many times would you eat fast food with your family? What about with your friends?
 - Did you exercise when you were a senior? What did you do? How about the summer before college?
 - If you think about yourself as a senior, on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being the least and 5 being the most, how concerned were you with your weight and body shape? What were you most concerned with? (e.g., weight, height, thighs, stomach, etc.)

Pre-college weight concerns.

1. Had you heard about the Freshman 15 before entering college? Do you remember who you heard it from and what they said about it?
2. What comes to mind when you hear "Freshman 15"?
3. Were you concerned that your weight might change during your freshmen year?
4. Did anyone (e.g., parents, older siblings or friends) give you advice about what you could do to avoid it?
5. So what happened: Did your weight change over the course of the year? Did you gain / lose weight? How much?

Now, I have some questions about how and where you were eating during your freshmen year

1. First, were you on a meal plan? If so, which one?
2. On a typical weekday, where and what did you eat for breakfast? Lunch? Dinner?
3. Was your eating different on weekends than on weekdays? If yes, how? (explore whether they ate less to consume less calories before a night of partying)
4. On a typical day, how many sodas would you drink? Is this more or less than you drank during high school?
5. Compared to high school, do you think you ate more or less fast food during your freshman year?
6. Most of the time, did you eat alone or with friends? Do you think that impacted where you ate or how much you ate?

7. Did you have concerns about eating in the student union? If yes, what were they? Where was the healthiest place to eat? Unhealthiest? Did you think about that when buying food?
8. What did you like about the food that was available to you? What didn't you like?
9. Did you have a refrigerator or microwave in your dorm room? If so, did you use it/them? What kind of things did you keep in there? What other food did you keep in your room?
10. Did you ever cook in the residence hall? If yes, what did you cook?
11. How much did your friends influence what you ate? Did you find yourself eating or drinking more when in social situations? (e.g., parties, study sessions, meals out with friends)
12. Did you order pizza at night? Why might you order pizza?
13. Did you take vitamins or supplements to stay healthy or to counterbalance the way you were eating? Whose idea was that?
14. Did you eat energy bars instead of meals? If so, how often did you do that?
15. In general, how did you feel about your eating habits when you were living in the residence hall? How was your eating different than when you lived with your family?

Exercise during freshman year

1. Would you call yourself someone who exercises regularly, someone who exercises every once in a while, or someone who hardly ever exercises?
2. Did you exercise when you were living in the residence hall? What did you do?
3. Was your exercise dependent upon what your friends were doing? How much did your roommate exercise? How did that influence you?
4. Where did you exercise? Did you go to the rec center? If yes, what did you do there?
 - Some people say the recreation center is only for people who are really fit. What do you think about that? Have you heard that?
 - How comfortable are you working out at the rec center?
 - Do you feel comfortable exercising in co-ed spaces? Would you prefer exercising in women-only spaces?
5. Were you happy with your level of exercise? Why? If not, what would you have liked your exercise patterns to look like? What kept you from doing that?

Weight changes

1. Earlier you said that you gained/lost __ pounds over the course of the year. How did you know your weight changed? Did you have a scale in your dorm?
2. How did your weight change make you feel?
3. Did anyone comment about your weight? If so, who and what did they say?
4. Did you discuss your weight changes with friends? Family?
5. When you were living in the residence hall, did a lot of women talk about their weight, dieting, or exercising? What kinds of things would they say?
6. Did a lot of women complain that they were too fat?
7. When people talk about dieting, does that make you feel like you need to diet?
8. Previously you said that you thought your weight changed because ____, is there anything else that you think caused your weight change?
9. Did you try to do anything to change your weight, like watching what you ate, dieting, or increasing your exercise? If yes, what did you do?
 - Did you ever skip meals as a way to control your weight?

- Do you ever smoke as a way to control your weight?
 - I've heard that some young women use medication as appetite suppressants, have you ever heard of or observed that?
10. Do you think there's more pressure to look good in college than high school? Do you think women compare themselves to one another more or less in college than high school?
 11. Were you more concerned about your weight your freshman year of college or your senior year of high school?
 12. Do you think some girls might lose weight (not gain weight) because there are fewer people monitoring what they eat?

APPENDIX B. DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Alias	Age	Class Year	Ethnicity	Region Lived Before College	Weight Change Freshman Year (in pounds)
Anna*	18	Fr	Latina	Southwest	-8
Belinda	19	Jr	Caucasian	Southwest	0
Blair	19	Jr	Asian American	West Coast	Fluctuated 20
Chloe	20	Jr	Caucasian	Southwest	0
Christy	20	Jr	Asian American	Southwest	0
Colette	18	Fr	Caucasian	Midwest	5
Erin	21	Jr	Caucasian	West Coast	Peak 8
Gretchen	18	Fr	Caucasian	South	Unknown
Helen*	18	Fr	Caucasian	Southwest	2
Isabel*	18	Fr	Latina	Southwest	-2
Jenny	20	Jr	Asian American	South	10-15
Jessica	19	Sph	Caucasian	West Coast	-26
Kisha	19	Jr	African American	Southwest	Peak 8.5
Michelle	20	Jr	Latina	South America	20
Natalie*	18	Fr	Caucasian	Southwest	Unknown
Rachel*	18	Fr	Caucasian	Southwest	5
Rebecca	19	Sph	Caucasian	West Coast	Peak 15
Regan	18	Fr	Caucasian	Northeast	-6
Rosa	18	Fr	Latina	Southwest	0
Sandra	19	Jr	Latina	West Coast	Peak -14
Sara	19	Jr	Caucasian	Midwest	25
Valerie	20	Jr	Caucasian	Southwest	-8

*: Indicates individual involved in the pre-college program.

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