Calorie Labeling of Dining Hall Menus to Decrease College Obesity

Nutritional information labels for food on menu in Rutgers University Dining Halls in attempts to improve students health and eating habits.

Tag Words: Rutgers Dining Halls calorie labels, Displaying calorie content at Rutgers University, Improving nutritional status of Rutgers students

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Summary
The issue have decided to tackle is that of college obesity, which is becoming an increasing widespread issue throughout the United States. We modeled our service project to improve the nutritional status of Rutgers Students around the 2008 New York City Board of Health law that forced chain restaurants to display the calorie content of their food. We proposed the idea to have index cards with the calorie content of each food displayed in the dining hall. When we met with the head of the Rutgers Healthy Dining Team, we were told they provide a website with nutritional information and a computer in each dining hall for the students to use. This resource is not adequate because students do not know about it and do not want to take the time to look up the calorie content of their food before they even decide what they are going to eat for that meal. We made the calorie content cards for each food ourselves and displayed them at Neilson Dining Hall for lunch. The cards were a success and students seemed to make healthier choices for their meals.

The Issue: College Obesity (JK)
The phase “freshman fifteen” is something every college student can relate to personally. The majority of students gain weight when they come to college, mostly in their first year while they adjust to their new environment. There are many factors that cause this weight gain, including irregular sleep and eating schedules, high stress, high consumption of alcohol, and most importantly the buffet style dining halls.

The reality is that college obesity is a growing epidemic and it is only going to get worse. Obesity is defined as a BMI (body mass index) of 30 or greater. BMI is a ratio of weight to height in kg/m$^2$. There are a variety of complicating factors to being obese; it does not just mean being overweight. Hypertension, dyslipidemia, insulin resistance, diabetes mellitus type 2, breathing difficulties, cancer, osteoarthritis, and coronary heart disease are all issues that follow obesity.

A recent study done at the University of New Hampshire in 2007 provided horrifying information about this mounting issue. 800 students were included in this study between the ages of 18 and 24. Shockingly enough, one-third of the participants were found to be overweight or obese. 8 percent of the men were found to have metabolic syndrome, while 60 percent of men had high blood pressure. More than 66% of the women were extremely deficient in iron, calcium, and folate.

The results found at the University of New Hampshire will most likely be found at universities across the United States as further studies are performed. It is safe to conclude that college students are not consuming the right kinds of food and in the right proportions. This can largely be attributed to the buffet style dining halls that offer unlimited amounts of food to students unaware of its nutritional status.

Service Project: Work with Rutgers Dining Services to have calorie and nutrition information for each dish served displayed on a card in the dining halls. (AP & JK)

In July 2008 New York City Board of Health passed a law that went into effect, requiring all chain restaurants in the city with standardized recipes to post calorie information on their menu boards. The idea is that this will encourage consumers to order healthier items on the menu. Studies conducted at Starbucks, in particular, have shown that the average number of calories per order has dropped since the calorie labeling law has gone into effect.

However, the drop in calories ordered overall hides a few trends that are undoubtedly related to customer psychology. It seems that during the holidays (November-December) consumers tend to indulge and ignore calorie counts. Subsequently, after January 1st reports indicate that consumers once again begin ordering less. As this data was gathered from Starbucks, it is interesting to note how they cater to their customers offering 90-calorie lattes in the New Year, likely because of many people’s new years resolution to lose weight.

We can use this information to our advantage at Rutgers. By prominently displaying calorie and nutrition information, we can help students to make informed decisions about the food they use to fuel their bodies. It is also important to indicate appropriate portion sizes, as we live in a society where bigger is conveyed as better, this could help to re-establish how much food is enough to sustain your body. Knowing most consumers’ tendency to over-indulge in the holiday months, Rutgers could take a pre-emptive stance on student’s winter weight gain. By
emphasizing healthy choices and focusing on adding nutrients, rather than deprivation, we can encourage students to make lifestyle changes that will hopefully stay with them for years to come.

Fresh fruits and vegetables do not even need individual labels. There could be a general fact sheet promoting the benefits of these foods and inviting students to fill up on fruits and vegetables. These types of unprocessed, fresh foods should be the focus of a healthy diet. Promoting this type of food will hopefully help to show students that there is no need to be hungry in order to stay healthy. Combating college weight-gain and obesity should be about adding awareness and better options, not taking away choices. After all, college is about expanding horizons and what better way to add to student independence than to empower them with the freedom to make informed decisions about the food that fuels their bodies.

After meeting with Peggy Policastro, head of the Rutgers Healthy Dining Team, we were told that their website containing the nutritional information of each food on the menu and the single computer they provide in each dining hall an adequate resource for the students. This is obviously not the case, since most students do not know about the nutritional website, let alone why there is a computer in the dining hall. Since I was a freshman I have eaten at the dining halls for every meal and I have never seen anyone use the computer and I never knew about the nutritional website until I started doing research for this project.

We decided to make the calorie content cards for food on the menu ourselves and display them at Neilson Dining Hall for lunch on Wednesday, April 7th. We observed the students take note of the displayed cards and even interviewed various students to see if they learned anything from the information we displayed and if it changed their decision on what to eat and how much of it. One student we interviewed was Venice Nollara, a senior at Rutgers. When we asked her if she knew about the nutritional website or what the computer in the dining hall is supposed to be used for she said, “Haha, nope never knew about that and wow I am a senior. That definitely could have helped me with my diets over the years!” We then asked her if the information we provided on the cards changed her choice of foods or portion sizes. She responded, “Well I definitely skipped the alfredo sauce I normally get on my pasta. From now on I will be eating Marinara. There are like 300 less calories in it!” Our project was a success and if we can get our editorials printed in the Daily Targum maybe the Rutgers Healthy Dining Team will make some changes!

References

Since 2008 New York City Board of Health has been enforcing a new law that requires chain restaurants to display the calorie content of the items on their menu. Coffee shops like Starbucks are an example where the consumers largely underestimate the caloric content of their drinks. Starbucks is strongly adverse to this legislation because it has caused their business to drastically decrease. Often times people overeat without even realizing they are. This is where a fellow Rutgers University student and I thought up the idea to have calorie content displays in the dining hall as you get your food. If students see how many calories are in each of the chicken nuggets they are about to put on their plates, they will probably take 4 instead of 10. While on the make-your-own pasta line, after received a humongous portion the students can read the calorie labels to discover there are 6 serving sizes on their one plate. The more information the students know the healthier they will be. We are paying for our meal plans at our university; don’t we deserve to know what we are eating?

This project can easily be completed because on the Rutgers University Dining Services website there is a complete nutritional analysis for each food on the menu for any particular day. The only obstacle we are faced with is getting the Dining Services to post these nutritional labels where the students are served the food, because the chances of students looking up the caloric intake and serving size for a particular food before heading to the dining hall is very slim. After meeting with Peggy Policastro, head of Rutgers Healthy Dining Team we were told they will not support our project and that the resources they are providing for the students already are adequate.

To demonstrate the benefits of our idea we made the calorie content index cards for foods on the lunch menu at Nelison Dining Hall on Wednesday, April 7th and displayed them ourselves. We observed the students take notice of the information provided and even did some interviews. When we asked Venice, a senior at Rutgers if she knew about the nutritional website or what the computer in the dining hall is supposed to be used for she said, “Haha, nope never knew about that and wow I am a senior. That definitely could have helped me with my diets over the years!” We also asked her how she felt about the calorie content cards and if it changed her decision of what to eat for lunch. She responded, “Well I definitely skipped the alfredo sauce I normally get on my pasta. From now on I will be eating Marinara. There are like 300 less calories in it!”

The calorie content cards were a success. Although we can not personally make and display the nutritional information for every meal in every dining hall, our hope is that this project will show the Rutgers Healthy Dining Team that they are not doing enough to help with the nutritional status of Rutgers students.

(Editorial by Jenika Karcich)
Promoting Healthy Eating Habits in Dining Halls

Obesity in college has been overlooked, as most current research focuses on childhood weight issues, and rightly so, as childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed in recent years. But as these obese children age and move through life, they are still facing a lifetime of being overweight if something is not done to educate them and reset the gauge of appropriate food intake. College is the perfect time to start healthy eating and exercise habits to accompany a student’s new lifestyle. It is all too easy to become complacent, indulging in a daily pizza and French fry habit, as many college students are known to do. Not only will this expand student’s waistlines now, it sets the precedent for a lifelong struggle with weight and healthy eating habits.

To help students sift through the wide array of options at the dining hall that run the gamut from French fries to Hostess pastries to baked fish and salad, I propose that Rutgers Dining Services display calorie and nutrition information prominently beside each dish. Currently Rutgers posts calorie and nutrition data for all dining hall dishes online, but few people know of this and those who do will not always have the time to check the facts before heading to a meal. After meeting with the head of the RU Healthy Dining Team, it was pointed out that there is a computer available in every dining hall to check calorie and nutrition information for the food being offered. We talked to senior, Venice, who has frequented the Rutgers Dining Halls and takes an active interest in living a healthy lifestyle. When asked if she knew that there was a computer in the dining hall that was meant to be used to check nutrition information Venice replied, “haha, nope never knew about that and wow I am a senior. That definitely could have helped me with my diets over the years!”

My partner in this project and I took it upon ourselves to print nutrition cards and spoke to students at the dining hall to get a sense of the students reaction to this change. By posting the information on data cards next to the food in dining halls it seems that it would help students in making healthy food choices. As Venice pointed out, “I definitely skipped the alfredo sauce I normally get on my pasta. From now on I will be eating marinara. There are like 300 less calories in it!” As we talked with other students who echoed her sentiments, it is clear how much of a difference it would make to have calorie and nutrition information prominently displayed beside the respective dishes in the dining halls. If we can get Rutgers cooperation to make the information readily available, I hope that students will take the initiative and take steps towards better nutrition now and healthy habits for life.

(Editors by Alex Poggi)
## 12" Hoagie Roll

### Nutrition Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount/Serving</th>
<th>%DV*</th>
<th>Amount/Serving</th>
<th>%DV*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>10.1g</td>
<td>Tot. Carb.</td>
<td>90.7g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. Fat</td>
<td>2.3g</td>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
<td>4.7g</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trans Fat</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Sugars</td>
<td>12.6g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>0mg</td>
<td>Protein</td>
<td>13.9g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>860.6mg</td>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percent Daily Values (DV) are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

**Ingredients:** Roll Sub 12" Sliced

## Turkey Breast

### Nutrition Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount/Serving</th>
<th>%DV*</th>
<th>Amount/Serving</th>
<th>%DV*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>1.3g</td>
<td>Tot. Carb.</td>
<td>0g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. Fat</td>
<td>0g</td>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
<td>0g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Fat</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Sugars</td>
<td>0g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>50.4mg</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>1360.8mg</td>
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<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percent Daily Values (DV) are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

**Ingredients:** Turkey Breast Catering S/OFF