Background and Objectives

Awareness of the popular notion of "the Freshman 15" is pervasive among first-year college students, but its value vastly exceeds empirically-derived estimates of the average amount of weight gained during this developmental juncture. An emerging line of research has validated the heightened concern about weight gain at the onset of college predicts greater perceived weight gain in conjunction with greater eating and body image disturbance in prospective cohort analyses of predominantly White first-year undergraduates.

Recent evidence suggests that greater body image dissatisfaction is associated with positive body image and an adaptive intuitive eating style in college females. Thus, this preliminary investigation sought to examine whether BMI status affects perceived first-year weight change expectations, concerns about gaining weight or losing weight, and at the same time members of this racial/ethnic group purportedly endorse accepting a diverse range of body sizes.

Conversely, data has shown that experiences of weight discrimination may ultimately enhance the design and effectiveness of healthy weight management initiatives among ethnically and weight-diverse first-year women during the early college adjustment period.

Methods

The data reported here were drawn from a larger multi-site investigation on Adjusting to College Life: Expectations of 4611 first-year female students who identified themselves as Black of African American and were enrolled in the North Carolina A&T State University (N = 719), North Carolina Central University (N = 483), and North Carolina State University (N = 3371). The Institutional Review Board at each institution approved the study.

Procedures and Measures

Participants completed the study measures, administered through SurveyShare which administered the information: Basic demographics (including race and sex), self-perceived weight status (underweight, normal weight, overweight), and body shape perception (very thin, just right, too heavy), and body dissatisfaction (moderate to high), and body mass index (BMI) status was distributed as follows: 7% UW, 49% NW, 19% OW, 25% OB.

Statistical Analyses

ANY OUTCOMES were computed to evaluate associations between BMI status and 1) perceived first-year weight gain norms, 2) concerns about first-year weight gain and weight loss expectations about male and female college students’ acceptance of body diversity. Chi-square analyses were performed to explore the relationship between BMI status and first-year weight change expectations. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0. Armonk, New York: IBM Corp.

Results

On average participants were 17.8 years old (SD = 0.7, range = 17-19). The mean BMI of the sample was 25.6 (SD = 4.6, range = 16-49).

BMI status was distributed as follows: 7% UW, 49% NW, 19% OW, 25% OB.

Self-perceived weight status was distributed as follows: 41% “too skinny”, 61% “just right”, 31% “a little heavier than average, 1% “a lot heavier than average.”

Awareness of the popular notion of “the Freshman 15” is pervasive among first-year college students, but its value vastly exceeds empirically-derived estimates of the average amount of weight gained during this developmental juncture. The relatively modest size of the Freshman 15 and the fact that up to 49% of incoming first-year female students were expected to gain weight while 17% were concerned about their body weight during the first year of college while the same percentage reported having no expectations about their weight change.

BMI status was not associated with perceptions of the average norm of typical first-year weight gain (p = .001; see Figure 1) and concerns about first-year weight gain (p = .001; see Figure 2).

Conclusions and Implications

Pervasiveness of “the Freshman 15” with friends to young ethnically minority women preparing to attend college.

However, most college-bound students expected to either lose or maintain their current weight.

Black prospective college women with elevated body weights expressed greater concern about both first-year weight loss and weight gain and a greater number of them expected to lose weight relative to their UW/NW peers.

Preliminary findings have implications for evaluating traditional stereotypes surrounding “the tolerance of fatness” among members of the Black community.

Results also suggest the value of raising awareness about the context of first-year weight gain which may ultimately diminish the design and effectiveness of healthy weight management initiatives among ethnically- and weight-diverse first-year college students during the early college adjustment period.

Limitations

The relatively modest size of the Freshman 15.

Use of self-reported height and weight to calculate BMI.

The exclusively female sample precludes generalizing findings to Black prospective first-year male students.

Future Directions

Assessing whether results are generalizable to those generated from White/European American prospective college female students.

Exploring to what extent and under what conditions BMI status affects perceived weight gain norms, weight-change expectations, weight-loss expectations among ethnically diverse first-year college students.

Conclusions and Implications

Psychosocial outcomes of weight stigma among college students.

Exploring whether and under what conditions BMI status affects perceived weight gain norms, weight-change expectations, weight-loss expectations among ethnically diverse first-year college students.

References

4. Use of self-reported height and weight to calculate BMI.
5. The exclusively female sample precludes generalizing findings to Black prospective first-year male students.