

How Healthy Is The Student Body?

By Charles H. Harrison
Illustrations by Richard
Thompson

*Charles H. Harrison is a
Communications professor who writes
frequently for national publications.*

College life for most of us used to be synonymous with neglected health: breakfast from a vending machine in Robinson, a 2000-calorie lunch in the cafeteria at 2 o'clock and supper sometime around 10 p.m., courtesy of Joe's Sub Shop or maybe Mazzeo's. Exercise was an occasional sprint across campus to make it on time for an exam.

With body-consciousness and health information more available than ever, that late night cheesesteak smothered with fried onions and washed down with beer has become the curse of calorie-counting, body-watching college students like John Angelucci '98, a health and exercise science major. "I've always been kind of careful about what I eat," he says, "but I discovered I was taking in too many calories. And calories accumulate in the body as fat. A lot of students don't realize that."

In an introductory nutrition course, Angelucci and his classmates conducted self-analyses of their eating habits, which led to Angelucci's dietary change. He suggests students take it easy on alcoholic drinks, substitute a baked potato for french fries once in a while and eat pizza without a layer of mozzarella cheese and all the trimmings.

Angelucci is not alone in being concerned about his health. According to Rowan's professors and specialists who should know, today's students are more likely to eat a salad and lift weights than their counterparts of a decade or two ago.

The bad news is that for some students their motivation is wrong: shaping a better-looking body rather than creating a healthy one. "Both men and women students—but particularly women—are not so much health conscious as they are conscious about looking like skinny models and professional athletes," says Tina Pinocci, Student Recreation Center director.

"It used to be that the typical college freshman would gain 20 pounds or more because mom and dad weren't controlling his or her diet anymore," says Craig Goodrich, general manager for SODEX-HO food services on campus.

Unfortunately, the trend toward better eating habits among some students is not as pronounced as the trend away from mom preparing a traditional dinner for her family. The disappearance of the family dinner

has changed many students' eating habits before they get to college, and those individuals are likely to continue to select the same fast-food menu.

Sharon Cruz '98 was one of those freshmen who put on weight when she came to college—not 20 pounds, but 10—enough to cause her parents to take note when she came home on break. "I ate a lot in high school," Cruz says, "but I was active and never put on weight. The same thing didn't happen in college." Consequently, Cruz started to eat smarter and to do aerobics. Now, she maintains her weight where she wants it and teaches aerobics at the Recreation Center. Also, she lives in an off-campus apartment and



Rowan Magazine

Volume 3, Number 1

Fall '97

Pages 29-32

Copyright ©1997

www.rowanmagazine.com

does her own food shopping. “That way I can read all the nutrition labels.”

College food services at Rowan and elsewhere are responding to a growing student demand for healthier alternatives to fast food and standard meat and potatoes. Meat is grilled more often, which retains less fat than baking. Also, fish and vegetarian dishes have been introduced. Strange as it may seem today, it was downright revolutionary to find a salad bar in a college dining hall just 15 years ago, according to Goodrich.

Although more nutritious food is being offered, some young people’s obsession with losing weight or building muscle causes them to see any calorie as an enemy. “Eating disorders—especially

ever indulge? Sure, there’s an occasional treat with a veggie pizza or frozen yogurt sundae. But one indulgence is particularly ironic: cigarettes.

Renee Jacobs ’94, coordinator of the annual fund at Rowan, saw the paradox when she brought in snacks to keep her student staff going while they worked on office projects in the evenings. “It wasn’t long ago that I was in college and I remember what munchies we liked, so I shopped for Oreos, Doritos and soda,” she said. “When I showed up with the junk food the student workers wouldn’t eat it. They insisted on low-fat chips and uncarbonated drinks.”

But the greatest surprise about the students’ health psyche was yet to come:

dangerous addictions?

Education, which, after all, is Rowan’s business.

The facility that Pinocci manages and which serves some 3,500 regular users is much more than a student recreation center. “The emphasis in the eighties and early nineties was fitness only,” she says. “Now it’s wellness and lifestyle change.” In addition, the University provides counseling services and programs to help students cope with eating disorders.

A new program to help students and employees analyze the state of their health and determine how best to improve their condition has been launched. The Rec Center staff will feed



Many students trying
to lose
weight and look better
tend to focus exclusively
on reducing calories.



among young women—are epidemic,” says Pinocci. Leslie Spencer, Health and Exercise Science Department professor, agrees. “Many students trying to lose weight and look better tend to focus exclusively on reducing calories,” she says. “There are over forty different nutrients that a person needs on a regular basis. When you focus on calories, you lose sight of what your body really needs.”

Russ Simmons ’98 is a body-builder who is careful about what he eats. “I set a goal to compete in body building contests,” he says, “so I started lifting weights. A lot of guys try just to build muscle, but I saw I had to worry about nutrition, too.”

So, do fat-gram-counting students

“After they munched on the carrot strips and baked tortilla chips, they took a cigarette break outside. They refused the ‘unhealthy’ snacks but didn’t hesitate to indulge a nicotine habit,” Jacobs recalls.

Many students have very little knowledge about their body’s vital statistics and their overall state of health, says Pinocci. “They don’t know their blood pressure or cholesterol level, for example. They don’t really consider the effects of smoking. And they don’t understand why we are concerned about their heart rate when they do aerobics or strenuous physical exercise.”

What can be done for students who want to eat better for the wrong reasons, who believe shedding pounds is both the means and the end, who succumb to

into a computer a slew of data about an individual: blood pressure, resting heart rate, excess fat as measured by calipers, flexibility, strength and aerobic fitness. This program, still in its infancy, will be heavily promoted to students, staff members and throughout the campus community, Pinocci says.

Last spring, in the Eat Well...Live Well program, health and physical education majors conducted wellness evaluations at the Recreation Center. According to Spencer, her 24 volunteer students met with their clients (Rowan students or Rec Center members) in five one-hour sessions. The student consultants collected data about eating habits, exercise routine and vital statistics, which formed a health profile. They

then discussed goals the client might set to correct problems and deficiencies.

Angelucci worked last spring with a female employee approaching menopause who had a family history of osteoporosis. In addition to providing her with a health profile, the one-on-one sessions encouraged frank discussions, says Angelucci. He was able to answer questions about off-brand vitamins and to evaluate her weight-lifting program.

Laura McSweeney '98 was one student who volunteered to participate in the program. "I learned that my eating habits were very inconsistent," she says. "One day I might take in 3,000 calories and the next considerably more or fewer." As a result of the program, McSweeney eats more quality foods and drinks more water.

Even if students know their health profile, the lure of consuming pizza or subs with the works late at night will probably never change. Nevertheless, health consciousness is a defining aspect of students' lives today. And although it took him a while, Simmons, like an increasing number of students, knows neither regular exercise nor good eating habits separately is enough for a healthy body. He says, "It's a package deal." ■

Most Student Smokers Just Want to Say No



"I started smoking during my last year in high school," says Mical Alicea '98. "It was the cool thing to do." One drag led to another, and before long Alicea was smoking more than a pack a day. He quit cold turkey this past summer, and primarily for the reason cited by smokers when they thought about quitting: nonsmoking friends. "I have five great friends and none of them smoke. They are concerned about their health; they eat well and work out five days a week," he says. "This summer, I decided that's the direction I want to move in also, so lighting up didn't make much sense anymore."

Alicea's experience coincides with results from a survey conducted by Professor Leslie Spencer of the Health and Exercise Science Department. Seventy percent of Rowan freshman smokers surveyed in 1996 said they would like to quit, but 78 percent said they couldn't easily give up cigarettes just because they wanted to. If the smokers did want to quit, however, they said nonsmoking friends and roommates would be most important in helping them stop.

Spencer's survey was conducted among 550 freshmen and the results mirror the 27 percent national average of 18 to 24 year-olds who smoke.* Of the Rowan students surveyed, 151 (88 females and 63 males) reported they either smoked regularly (more than one day a week) or occasionally. Most smokers said they began smoking at age 16, although a few started earlier or later.

And if the data about the start of smokers' habits are disheartening, the numbers only get more grim in adulthood: half the smokers who began their habit when teenagers will eventually die from smoking, probably prematurely in middle age, cutting 20 to 25 years of life, says a SNAP Technologies, Inc. 1996 report.

While 73 percent of the smokers Spencer surveyed said they smoked to relieve stress, they also were more likely than nonsmokers to report "feeling depressed during the first year of college." And apparently the marketed image of a cool habit still distorts students' self-perception: smokers were more likely than nonsmokers to report being "more popular than the average person my age" and having "more social self-confidence than the average person my age."

*According to a National Center for Health Statistics study, *Health U.S. 1996-1997*.