Executive Summary

Faith in Fat: A Multisite Examination of University Students’ Perceptions of Fat in the Diet

Using dining halls as living laboratories to explore students’ perceptions of fat
Table of Contents

3 About the MCURC
4 Introduction
5 The MCURC Research Model
6 Research Question
7 Study Design
8 Results
9 Opportunities for Impact
10 Academic Publication
11 Acknowledgements
12 Learn More
ABOUT THE MCURC

Co-founded and jointly led by Stanford University Residential & Dining Enterprises, Stanford Prevention Research Center, and The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) – and as an extension of the groundbreaking Menus of Change initiative presented by the CIA and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Department of Nutrition – the Menus of Change University Research Collaborative (MCURC) is a collaboration of forward-thinking scholars, foodservice leaders, executive chefs, and administrators for colleges and universities who are accelerating efforts to move people toward healthier, more sustainable, and delicious foods using evidence-based research, education, and innovation.
For the last 30 years, public health policies globally have focused on reducing the consumption of fat, leading to a false perception that “fat is unhealthy.” More recent research shows that all fats are not equal, and that unsaturated fats have a positive impact on human health. The Mediterranean Diet, and its flagship ingredient, olive oil, is a prime example of a healthy diet that promotes a healthy consumption of fat. However, “fat” still has a bad reputation in most eaters’ minds. Based on this observation, Rutgers University students developed a research project to evaluate the perception of fat among their peers.

This pilot study became a quick, plug-and-play “seed study” -- research that could be easily implemented throughout the Collaborative -- called the “MCURC Faith in Fat Seed Study.” This was the first MCURC research project to gauge perceptions of the Menus of Change Principles -- in this case, “Go Good Fat, Not Low Fat” and “Choose Healthier Oils” – within the student population.

Involving the MCURC members--from students and faculty to chefs and dining directors--in the research process is key to achieving our goals. Democratizing research allows us to embrace the operational constraints of data collection, collaboratively develop the research protocol, and allow for a more direct application of the findings into the dining environment than is possible with traditional academic research.

The MCURC research model is built on these ideas. In this model, the MCURC Student Fellows have a key role in collecting and analyzing the results. Their participation in the research process--from inception to publication--allows them not only to learn how to conduct field research, but also to contribute to the research process with insights and ideas from the very population being studied. By welcoming Fellows to be immersed in the research process, the MCURC removes the historical barrier of research being left to only seasoned academics.

- The Faith in Fat study aimed to investigate if students would consider a food item healthier if it were made without fat, with unsaturated fat, or with saturated fat.
- This study was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board.
The MCURC has pioneered a groundbreaking behavioral research model to scale innovative research projects from one university to multiple universities across the MCURC network.

Rutgers University
Faith in Fat Pilot Study 2018

1 Institutions
201 Participants
603 Diner Decisions

MCURC
Faith in Fat Seed Study 2020

6 Institutions
533 Participants
1,599 Diner Decisions
The Faith in Fat Study Asks:

Would students consider a food item healthier if it were made without fat, with unsaturated fat, or with saturated fat?

The study was implemented using dining halls as living laboratories in six colleges and universities across the United States.
Interactive Booth

The Faith in Fat study aimed to investigate if students would consider a food item healthier if it were made without fat, with unsaturated fat, or with saturated fat.

Three food items (salad, chicken, and cookie) differed in the type of fat described in the recipe: no fat, olive oil, or dairy based (butter or ranch dressing).

The foods used in this experiment were chosen because they are regularly available in campus dining halls and represent three major categories of dining options: appetizer, entrée, and dessert.

Students were asked to look at the menu and choose the option they thought was the healthiest. This picture shows the display used at Rutgers University. The five other participating institutions used booths and table set-ups that looked the same.
“No Fat” is Seen as the Healthy Choice

Results

Most participants chose the “no fat” option for the salad (71%), chicken (73%), and the cookie (68%), confirming Rutgers University’s data from the 2018 pilot.

49% of participants chose the “no fat” option for all foods.

Conclusion

- For students, foods with no fat are seen as the healthiest options.
- The type of dishes tested did not impact the perception of fat.
- Students lack knowledge regarding the role of healthy fat in the diet.

![Graph showing frequency of fat option choice per meal type.](chart)

*Figure 1. Frequency of fat option choice per meal type in the Faith in Fat Study. Across all meal types, the no fat preparation option was chosen 73% of the time.*

The “no fat” options were selected as the healthiest for each of the dishes.
Educate Students on Menus of Change Principles

College and university students lack knowledge regarding the vital role played by healthy fats in the diet.

- Nutrition education, such as food literacy programs or teaching kitchen classes, are needed to help students understand that **the type of fat is more important than the total amount of fat**.
- Experiential education—such as using healthy dishes with and without fat on interactive **Tasting Tables** placed in dining halls—could show the importance of fat in eating healthier foods such as salads, legumes, and lean proteins.
- Providing chefs and operators with information on the origin, quality, and usage of fat can **increase dining leaders’ knowledge and expertise** around fat, which, in turn, can help them educate the students they serve.
- Recognizing that students turn to coaches, chefs, and teachers as trusted sources for nutrition and sustainability information, tools must be provided for these groups to **promote evidence-based information to their athletes, diners, and students**.
Faith in Fat: A Multisite Examination of University Students’ Perceptions of Fat in the Diet


The article was published on August 24, 2020 in the peer-reviewed journal *Nutrients*. The publication is available on the MCURC website: [www.moccollaborative.org/mcurc-academic-publications](http://www.moccollaborative.org/mcurc-academic-publications)
Acknowledgements - Participating Universities

Rutgers University
Peggy Policastro, PhD, RDN
Director of Behavioral Nutrition
Tiffany Chen
Lead Undergraduate Research Assistant

University of California, Santa Barbara
Jill Horst
Executive Director
Campus Dining
Danielle Kemp, RD
Dietitian, Purchasing, and Systems Manager
Residential Dining Services

North Carolina State University
Lisa Eberhart, RD, LDN
Director of Nutrition & Wellness
Lesley Schatz, MPH, RD, LDN
R&D Chef
Dining Nutrition & Wellness team

University of California, Los Angeles
Healthy Campus Initiative
Al Ferrone
Senior Director
Dining Services
May Wang, PhD
Professor
Department of Community Health Sciences
Hannah Malan, PhD
Researcher
UCLA Fielding School of Public Health
Reina Black, MPH
Doctoral Student
Megan Muller, PhD
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
UCLA Fielding School of Public Health

Lebanon Valley College
Robert T. Valgenti, PhD
Professor of Philosophy & Director of EAT Research Group

University of North Texas
Peter Balabuch
Executive Director of Dining
Samantha Krysiak
Registered Dietitian
Dining Services
Andrew Klipsch
Assistant Director
Dining Services

North Carolina State University
Priscilla Connors, PhD, RDN
Associate Professor, Hospitality

University of North Texas
Derrick Cripps
Senior Director
Dining Services
Brennon Turner
Senior Foodservice Manager
Dining Services

We wish to thank the MCURC co-founders: Shirley J. Everett, EdD, MBA, of Stanford University, and Greg Drescher, of The Culinary Institute of America, and its co-founders and co-directors: Eric Montell and Sophie Egan, MPH, for their vision and support, as well as the Collaborative’s generous sponsor organizations.
To learn more about the MCURC--and take advantage of our vast portfolio of resources for research, education, and innovation in support of healthier, more sustainable food choices--please visit:

moccollaborative.org