



Green and Healthy Choices on Davidson's Campus: Student Perceptions and Preferences

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Introduction

- We asked whether or not students feel that they have the agency to make green or healthy food choices within the options that Davidson College provides them. While Davidson College does provide several different options for students, the school has begun to exert more control on the students' diets on campus through the recently mandated meal plan and the schedules of when students can or cannot use meal-plan.
- Davidson College provides three primary options of eating on campus where students can order food and pay with their Davidson Meal Plan: Vail Commons, the Davis Café, and the Wildcat Den. Students are also able to use their meal plan to pick up snacks and pre-made meals from the Union Station.
- Beginning with the class of 2018, Davidson College has required all students to purchase the minimum 75-per semester meal plan. Students are also required to purchase a 21-meal per week plan during a student's first semester at Davidson.
- "Sustainable eating" includes consuming local and organic foods, such as from the Davidson Farmer's Market, Davidson College Farm or Town market, reducing intake of meat, especially red meat, and purchasing in-season and limited processed foods.
- "Healthy eating" includes consuming nutritious, non-greasy, and unprocessed foods along with an overall diet consisting of a balance of proteins, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Objectives

- Determine if students feel as though they have the appropriate options or means to make healthy or sustainable food choices.
- Determine whether students actively seek out healthy and sustainable options when eating with Davidson Dining Services.
- Determine if students perceive that Dining Services caters their options to meet students desires and needs in relation to healthy and sustainable eating.
- Determine if students feel as though their choices have an impact on larger sustainability movements.

Methods

Survey

- A thirty-one question survey, created through the survey software *Qualtrics*, was sent to a random sample of 400 Davidson students, with 100 students from each class year (2020, 2019, 2018, and 2017) in order to measure students' attitudes towards sustainable and healthy eating on campus.
- In the online survey, students were asked to determine to what degree they agreed or disagreed with certain statements including, "I feel like I can make healthy choices when I eat at Vail Commons," and "I feel like Dining Services provides me with enough information to make sustainable choices on campus."

Photovoice

- A qualitative analysis of the Davidson food system was performed using Photovoice, a community-based participatory research method where participants are asked to use photography to record and reflect on certain questions.
- A total of 9 participants were recruited using snowball sampling where solicitation emails were sent to known campus groups such as environmental studies majors, eating houses, and fraternities, who were requested to suggest other students possibly interested in this topic.
- Participants were asked to take photos over a two week period of their personal food habits while at Davidson.
- Two focus groups were held to discuss themes and ideas within the photos.

Results

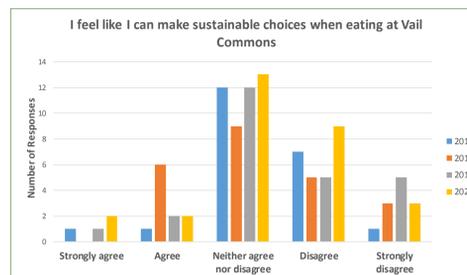


Figure 1: Student responses to the statement, "I feel like I can make sustainable choices while eating at Vail Commons."

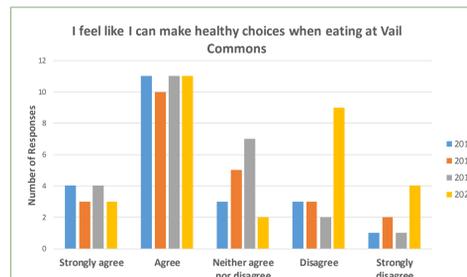


Figure 3: Student responses to the statement, "I feel like I can make healthy choices while eating at Vail Commons."

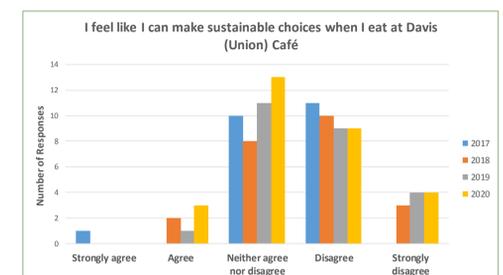


Figure 2: Student responses to the statement, "I feel like I can make sustainable choices while eating at the Davis Café."

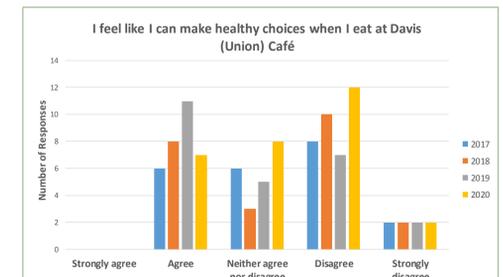


Figure 4: Student responses to the statement, "I feel like I can make healthy choices while eating at the Davis Café."

- The *Qualtrics* survey received a total of 134 respondents; of the 134 respondents, however, only 102 respondents completed every question on the survey, giving this study a response rate of 25.5%.
- Based on the survey, students feel more equipped to make healthy choices as opposed to sustainable ones. Students generally agreed that they could make healthy choices at Vail Commons; whereas, opinions varied in regards to the Union (Fig 1 – 4). Fewer students agreed that they could make sustainable choices at Vail Commons, while a majority of students were either neutral or disagreed with the statement at the Union. This is supported by our results indicating that roughly 53% of respondents don't feel that Dining Services provides them with enough information to make sustainable choices. In addition, our results showed that students' eating venue choice was largely driven by convenience and timing.
- Focus-group participants expressed a general dissatisfaction with the options provided through Davidson Dining Services. When asked about the difference between Vail Commons and the Davis Café, however, one student commented how "Commons has gotten better in the past several years" (Fig. 6). Despite a general consensus on the unhealthy aspects of the Union Café, several participants also noted convenience and speed of service as two reasons they still eat meals at the Union.
- The social aspect of eating was another theme repeated by several of the focus-group participants. As pictured in Figure 5, one student told us about weekly meals they would plan to have together with friends. Others echoed this idea, stating that the availability of friends often influenced where they would eat a certain meal.
- Students in focus groups stated a preference for cooking and preparing their own meals, indicating that they felt they could make healthier and more sustainable choices while shopping and cooking for themselves. Students also indicated that they felt their choices had a greater impact when cooking for themselves.



Figure 5. Participant invites over friends for mac & cheese pot-luck cook-off



Figure 6. Participant meal at Vail Commons

Discussion and Conclusion

- Based on the survey results (Fig. 1 – 4) and discussions held in focus-groups, we have found that a majority of Davidson students do not feel like they have the agency on campus to make sustainable and healthy food choices at Davidson.
- We find that students feel that, while cooking for themselves, they can make more sustainable and healthy choices and that they are more confident that their decisions make a difference.
- We suggest that Davidson Dining Services provide more comprehensive information about the sustainability and nutritional value of different food options. This would empower student's ability to make more well informed choices during their time on campus.
- Davidson should also consider aspects of timing and convenience as a part of Dining Services as students in both the survey and focus group point to timing and convenience as primary factors in seeking out healthy and sustainable foods on campus.
- For further research, we recommend determining to what extent students value sustainable and healthy foods, particularly in comparison with other food trends and qualities.