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Students' Food Acquisition Struggles in the Context of South Africa: The Fundamentals of Student Development

Yasmine Dominguez-Whitehead

This article situates food at the heart of the fundamentals of student development, based on qualitative case study research. Food acquisition and food-related struggles in the context of the South African university are examined. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data, and are discussed in detail: depletion of food funds, acquiring food on campus, and awareness of others' food struggles. The findings suggest that students struggling to acquire food are dominated by food acquisition issues and that inaccessibility of food on campus has a potentially detrimental impact on student development and involvement on campus.

While South Africa is one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, it is among the most unequal countries in the world, with severe discrepancies between the rich and the poor (Bhorat, van der Westhuizen, & Jacobs, 2009; May, 1998; Nattrass & Seekings, 2001; Sanders & Chopra, 2006). Of particular concern is that the conditions of the poorest 50% of the population have failed to improve (Robins, 2005) since the end of apartheid (a system that undoubtedly contributed to severe inequalities). Although it is necessary to acknowledge that monetary resources are tied to food acquisition, the focus at hand is not family income or socioeconomic status. These figures are important, but they tell us little about students' food experiences and practices. Instead, an in-depth examination of participants' reports as they pertain to food acquisition and consumption (or lack thereof), allows for a student-centered analysis. Thus, this article is centrally concerned with university students' food acquisition and food-related struggles, and it links these to student development.

WHY FOOD?

Food research is perhaps an overlooked area of study within the literature on college student development because it is generally assumed that the basic needs of students are being met. If students have managed to gain access to an elite institution such as a university, then surely they must have access to the bare necessities (food, shelter, and clothing). Accessing the necessities generally requires money, or resources such as land, to live on and produce food. When it is the case that students have access to credit, adequate financial aid, full scholarships, or family (or other network) resources, the assumption that students' basic needs are being met is likely valid; however, this is not always the case.

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Conducting food-related research at the university, particularly in the context of South Africa, is appropriate because little is known about the experiences of students who struggle to acquire and consume food on a regular basis. It has been suggested that food for university students in the United States is a matter of personal choice (Counihan, 1992), but this cannot be assumed to be the case everywhere, and students' food practices thus warrant further investigation across different national and social contexts. What are some of the pressing concerns of university students in South Africa with respect to food issues? What are their experiences in relation to food acquisition and consumption? To what extent is food affordable and available on campus? Research in this area is critical, given that there has been a trend over the past few decades for many university residence halls in South Africa to no longer provide catering services, ostensibly in order to make accommodation more affordable.

Although the association between food and academic achievement is significant, Weaver-Hightower (2011) espouses a broader view in making a case for food research in educational settings. He has urged education researchers to investigate food issues because school food (or lack thereof) affects students' health, social justice, and teaching and administration, in addition to being relevant to a host of societal and economic issues. I argue that food issues are at the heart of the fundamentals of student development. Although food may be taken for granted in some contexts, food issues become critical concerns when students face food acquisition struggles, thus motivating student affairs professionals to tackle these problems.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Maslow's (1943, 1989) hierarchy of needs is perhaps most relevant in addressing food acquisition struggles. I draw primarily from his work to ground food acquisition within student development. Maslow is not a student development theorist per se, but his theory has implications for the various needs of university students. Researchers have previously drawn from his work to develop theoretical frameworks that advance research on student development (see, for example, Branan, 1972; Conyne, 1983; Love & Talbot, 1999). Maslow's theory is built on the premise that basic physiological needs must be met before higher order needs for safety, belonging, esteem, and actualization are met. Accordingly, "if all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background" (Maslow, 1989, p. 21). In other words, when one is unable to acquire food, water, sleep, and other basic needs, these needs will become dominant and be at the forefront of an individual's existence, with higher order needs possibly becoming irrelevant or nonpriorities.

From a student affairs perspective, meeting physiological needs is inextricably related to issues of fundamental sustenance. It is difficult to imagine that students can succeed academically, learn, grow, and develop without adequate food, shelter, and clothing. However, much of the student development literature has focused on psychosocial aspects of student development and draws from, among others, Erikson's (1959, 1968) stage theory, Chickering's theory of identity development (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), Marcia's theory of identity achievement (1966), and Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). These pinnacle figures focus on the cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial aspects of university students' trajectories, and not necessarily on their material conditions. Although the abovementioned theorists have

made great contributions to the discipline, their prominence can be attributed, at least in part, to taking for granted that students have access to basic necessities. Identity formation, psychosocial crises, and the cognitive transition from childhood to adulthood can be the focus of attention when students and student affairs professionals do not have to concern themselves with food, shelter, and clothing acquisition, but can instead attend to higher order needs.

It is not so much that the student development literature has sidelined food, but instead that the availability of food has become a given, with psychosocial aspects taking precedence. If we take Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs into account, it is appropriate for the emphasis to be on needs associated with belonging, esteem, and self-actualization when it is the case that physiological needs are being met. Nonetheless, it is befitting to acknowledge that issues of food and other basic necessities have been taken up by Maslow as being at the very fundamental level of an individual's development.

POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY AMONG STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Although there is a dearth of research on university student poverty, the experiences of impoverished university students in the context of South Africa have been documented (see, for example, Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010), and poverty in higher education has been discussed as it relates to policy issues (see, for example, Maile, 2008). Impoverished university students experience hopelessness, internalized oppression, and shame, and they utilize strategies to conceal their poverty (Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010). It should therefore come as no surprise that the mental stressors experienced, coupled with the lack of material resources, often result in underresourced students not performing well or dropping out of university. Letseka and Maile's (2008) research, which surveyed university drop-outs and their families, indicates that approximately 70% of the families of drop-outs are classified as having low economic status. Furthermore, these figures intersect with racial inequalities, with families of African students who had dropped out earning meager wages—some as little as 1,600 rand* (approximately US$230) per month (Letseka & Maile, 2008).

A limited but growing research literature exists with respect to food insecurity at South African universities. Despite its limited scope, the research in this area raises critical concerns. For example, it has been found that students are more likely to experience hunger at the end of a term near examination time and that financial aid recipients are significantly more vulnerable to food insecurity compared to their counterparts who do not receive financial aid (Munro, Quayle, Simpson, & Barnsley, 2013). In addressing factors that affect the academic performance of Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds, Jama, Mapesela, and Beylefeld (2008) have noted the detriments of not having access to basic necessities such as food, clothes, and accommodation. A lack of adequate accommodation, the inability to purchase books, and difficulties in acquiring food could result in student academic failure (Africa, 2005). Although it has been noted that individual staff members and university offices respond to some of the needs of students struggling to acquire food and other basic necessities, current student funding schemes and strategies do not offer sufficient or adequate support (Munro et al., 2013). The

* The rand (R) is the South African currency and is referenced throughout this article. During 2008–2011, when interviews were conducted, $1US traded at approximately 6–8 rand.

responses and efforts of individual staff and university offices are well-meaning; however, such efforts are often not securely funded and therefore not sustainable or formalized.

METHODOLOGY

This research, which is part of a larger study on university student experiences, employed a qualitative, case study design. The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of students attending some of the most distinguished universities in the country in post-apartheid South Africa. As such, two distinguished research universities were selected as "bounded systems" that could be homed in on for study (Merriam, 1998, p. 12). The epistemological assumptions that guided the research are grounded in the traditions of critical theory and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, knowledge production is underpinned by an interactive link among the participants and between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In other words, knowledge is constructed and developed via interaction. The interactive link between the participants and the researcher highlights the significance of the researcher's positionality. Milner (2007) has warned about the dangers of educational researchers not heeding the racialized and cultural systems associated with the ways in which they and their participants come to know and experience the world. As a foreigner in South Africa, I was particularly cognizant of my outsider status, and alerted my participants to this. Despite being an outsider, prior to undertaking this research I had approximately three years of experience as an educational researcher residing in South Africa. During this time I gained familiarity with the country's history and the varied cultures it embodies. I thus aimed to conduct research in a manner that was consistent with egalitarian principles and that acknowledged sociocultural difference (cf. Lincoln, 1995).

Research Site

Given the study's focus on examining the experiences of students attending some of the most distinguished universities in the country, two universities were purposefully selected as case studies. For the purpose of this research, *distinguished universities* are characterized by a strong focus on research production and international recognition. The universities selected both fit the description of a distinguished university. The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was then selected on the basis of it being one of the oldest universities in South Africa, embodying a rich history that dates back to the founding of the South African gold mining industry. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was chosen based on it recently coming into being (in 2004) as a result of a merger between two formerly disparate universities. Thus, in many ways Wits represents a historic university with an enduring legacy, and UKZN represents a newly formed promising university. The two case studies thus potentially offer information-rich participants situated respectively in historical legacies and new beginnings.

Participants

Student participants were recruited in introductory courses as well as advanced courses and participated on a voluntary basis. In order to encourage students to participate, they were assured that their identity would remain anonymous and that their participation might serve to better understand the experiences of university students. Students interested in participating were asked to invite peers who attend the same university as them to take part in focus group interviews. Friends of students who did not attend the same university were not included in the study,

nor were students who were not comfortable being video- and audio-recorded during the focus group interviews. This approach was utilized to intentionally obtain focus groups of participants who were well acquainted with each other and would likely feel comfortable discussing their experiences with familiar peers. It is noteworthy that the only demographic category of a priori interest was students attending distinguished universities. Other demographic categories were only considered in the analysis to the extent that the participants themselves treated them as relevant in the focus groups.

The student sample was not intended to be representative of university students throughout South Africa. However, the study sought to obtain a range of student participants, and thus a purposive sampling procedure was utilized to ensure that student participants included first year, second year, third year, and Honours (fourth year) students, who were studying in the disciplines of humanities, social sciences, science and engineering, and health sciences. A total of 15 student focus groups were conducted (10 at Wits and 5 at UKZN), and one individual interview was conducted.* A total of 66 students participated: 28 from UKZN and 38 from Wits. An overview of general demographic descriptors of the sample is provided for illustrative purposes: 40 identified as women, 26 identified as men; 64 were between the ages of 18 and 23 years old, 2 were between the ages of 24 and 29; 43 identified as Black/African, 22 identified as White, and 1 identified as Coloured.† It is worth noting that the socioeconomic status of participants was purposefully not requested or captured.‡

In addition to student participants, two student affairs officials (one from each university) participated in the study. The student affairs officials were purposively selected because they each headed one of the multiple student affairs offices at their university and had extensive experience serving students' needs. The student affairs officials participated in individual interviews (which were approximately one hour in duration) that focused on the duties they perform, the types of students they serve, and the challenges that they witness students experiencing.

* One individual interview was conducted as a result of a student expressing a desire to participate, but whose peers were not available to participate with him.

† These racial categories were historically employed by the apartheid government to arbitrarily categorize groups of people and continue to be employed by the current government for statistical purposes. "Coloured" was a category used to refer to people, usually of mixed race, who were not classified as members of any of the other racial categories (which included "Black," "White," and "Indian"). For a historical examination of the construction of these categories, see Posel (2001). While it is acknowledged that race is a social construct and that individuals do not necessarily fit neatly into these categories and can resist them, the categories have also been entrenched in South African society.

‡ Socioeconomic data were not elicited, as it was determined that requesting this type of data could be viewed as overly invasive. It was found in the data analysis that socioeconomic status was not necessarily viewed as a good indicator for capturing the resources (monetary or otherwise) that participants have at their disposal. What proved to be more compelling was participants' interactively produced constructions and reports of their own experiences in terms of having or lacking resources to acquire food. Thus, any analytic claims about the significance of a socioeconomic category should be grounded in participants' orientations to their relevance, rather than by a researcher categorizing participants in particular ways and then using those categories to account for their reports (Schegloff, 1997).

Focus Group Interviews With Student Participants

Focus group interviews were selected as a research tool because they hold great promise for application in educational investigations, by providing a format for interactive discussion that has the potential to attain more in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences from multiple points of view (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Additionally, focus group interviews allow "research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). By virtue of involving multiple participants in an interactive environment, focus groups offer the advantage of enabling examination of how issues are interactionally negotiated between participants, and how matters of significance for participants emerge from their discussions with each other (Wilkinson, 2006).

During the focus group interviews, participants were asked open-ended, noninvasive questions with respect to their favorite things about being university students, the strengths of the university, the challenges and difficulties they experience, what could be done to improve their lives as students, what kinds of events/incidents had been particularly important for them during their time as university students, and how their background and life experiences had impacted their university experience. While the study focused on students' experiences in general, a focus on nonacademic factors was pursued. Thus, students were particularly probed about nonacademic factors that facilitated their university experiences or presented obstacles for them. It is noteworthy that participants were not specifically questioned about their food practices as part of this broader study. Nonetheless, the inductive nature of the study demanded that topics of interest pursued by participants, which included matters surrounding access to food, be further and purposively explored by asking specific follow-up questions that elicited more depth and description. Although the larger study did not specifically set out to examine food issues, food acquisition and consumption emerged as significant. That food issues emerged as significant, without students being specifically questioned about them, is compelling and points to food as a critical area of concern for students.

Data Analysis

Student interviews were video- and audio-taped to capture interaction among participants. The individual interviews with student affairs officials were audio- but not video-taped. The data corpus consisted of more than 14 hours of student video recordings and more than two hours of audio recordings with student affairs officials. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by adhering to an inductive approach to data analysis. In utilizing this approach, the data analysis did not stem from theories or predetermined hypotheses, but instead from the content of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Themes were constructed from the assessment and systematic examination of the data by employing the constant comparative method. More specifically, the aim was to analyze the data to construct themes that identified recurring patterns detectable throughout (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The strategy for inductively analyzing data was to work toward unitizing and categorizing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unitizing data requires seeking a unit of information (typically a phrase or a few sentences) that sheds light on, or possibly provides an understanding of, the phenomenon being researched (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit of information should

be the "smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself" (p. 345). In other words, a unit of information needs to be understood within the context of the research being carried out, but it also has to be interpreted in its own right without supplementary information. After unitizing the data, units were grouped by placing similar units into tentative or "provisional categories" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 347). Comparing one unit of information with subsequent units of information was utilized to seek "recurring regularities in the data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). This use of the constant comparative method requires the comparison of bits of data (or units) with other data for their similarities and differences (Charmaz, 1983). The aim of categorizing was to place units into an ideal fitting category. Accordingly, each unit was compared to other units to determine what category each individual unit would fit into best. The initial tentative categories became more fixed once some underlying characteristics were determined that served to define the category (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to ensure consistency, it was important to verify that each category was unique with respect to other categories and that all categories differed from one another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The emerging categories allowed for the generation of themes that were detectable throughout the data. Three overarching food themes emerged: *depletion of food funds*, *acquiring food on campus*, and *awareness of others' food struggles*. Selected excerpts that exemplify these themes are included below.

Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor and trustworthiness are key when engaging in qualitative research (Krefting, 1991). Producing credible findings and interpretations is one way in which trustworthiness can be ensured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation—that is, accessing and interpreting data from multiple sources (Mathison, 1988)—was sought by conducting focus group interviews with students and individual interviews with student affairs officials. In this way, perspectives were considered from two vantage points. As a result of triangulation, convergence was evident with respect to the food-related challenges that students face. Additionally, the interactive nature of focus group interviews allowed for multiple participants to agree or disagree with each other, and thus provided opportunities to confirm or reject reports by fellow participants, thus enhancing the study's trustworthiness. Trustworthiness can also be ensured by taking measures that allow for the accumulation of sufficient data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The study did not predeterminately set out to conduct a fixed number of interviews. Instead, data collection proceeded until saturation was obtained. In taking this approach, the data collection process ceased only when additional data did not lead to new information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

Depletion of Food Funds

This section examines selected excerpts that illustrate the emerging theme of *depletion of food funds*. Participants' reports indicate that the depletion of their funds has an impact on their food acquisition and consumption. They make a connection between depletion of funds and going without food. In the following excerpt* a group of men discuss depleting their financial aid funds and going to sleep

* Each excerpt is labeled by referencing the university and the individual focus group interview. All transcripts were produced by utilizing a simplified version of the conversation analytic conventions developed primarily by Gail Jefferson (see Jefferson, 2004).

without consuming food. They report living in noncatering university residence halls.

Excerpt 1, UKZN 8–15–08

> P4: There's this thing called financial aid, right? It's like, it's sponsoring us as a student . . . The money (.) I I don't know how to to put it but to me. I find it like it it's not enough. In meal allowance it's not enough (.) to me cause sometimes eh, eh, eh ((chuckles)) when there was this res I use to stay at, at Malherbe you know? Some eh, during those [days
>
> P3: [Ey
>
> P4: Sometimes ja, we like, we go like to sleep without chowing, without getting a food cause we've run out of money from like he said ((points to P1)) the background is not ok. Our parents doesn't have money. They don't have the money.

In this excerpt P4 discloses that he and others receive financial aid, and he proceeds to report that the "meal allowance" provided is insufficient. He displays hesitation in disclosing that he and others go to sleep without eating. This hesitation is marked by stating, "I don't know how to to put it." It is also marked by his repeated use of "eh." This perhaps suggests that it is difficult to disclose to the researcher, a stranger, that he and others go without food. P3's "Ey" utterance might indicate that he is aware of what P4 is about to disclose and could perhaps be a sign of his discomfort with this disclosure.

Going to sleep without eating is attributed to "run[ning] out of money." Participants further indicate that accessing money from their families is not an option. P4 notes that their parents "don't have the money" and points out that P1 previously disclosed that they come from underresourced backgrounds. Based on the reports of students in Excerpt 1, it is difficult to ascertain whether the participants do not have funds to purchase and consume dinner (which is typically the final meal before one goes to sleep) or whether they go without food for an entire day. Irrespective of whether they consume other meals besides dinner, P4 suggests that if they had sufficient funds they would not elect to go to sleep without eating. He implicates a lack of money, and not free will, in his report of him and others going without food by noting that "we go like to sleep without chowing, without getting a food cause we've run out of money."

In Excerpt 2 below, a group of male and female participants discuss not having money or food, and the related food theft that takes place in the residence halls. Some of the participants in this group disclosed living in noncatering university residence halls, while others in the group disclosed living in off-campus accommodation. Students in this excerpt had previously discussed depleting their financial aid funds toward the end of the term, which is also when examinations take place.

Excerpt 2, UKZN 8–18–08

> P3: And (.) at that time you don't have any kind of money .hh ((P3 laughs)) ((group laughs))
>
> P3: You're broke. You don't have any food.
>
> P7: And something, sometimes, people sometimes s-steal.
>
> P4: Ja, too much.
>
> ((group laughs)).
>
> P7: In res, ah, in res you put your food in the fridge and sometimes it gets stolen.

In this excerpt, P3 notes that "at that time" (toward the end of the term) they "don't have any kind of money." This suggests that money is not available to purchase any necessities. A lack of food, however, is what is worthy of mention. This is particularly concerning as the end of the term—examination time—is a time of year when students perhaps most need

nourishment in order to study and perform well academically. Participants' collective reports make an association between not having any food and stealing food. P7's report that "people sometimes s-steal" points toward desperation surrounding food scarcity. This report appears to be consistent with Maslow's (1943, 1989) postulation that if physiological needs are unmet, one would be dominated by these needs. When one is dominated by these needs, questionable activity might be engaged in to meet the needs.

Participants in Excerpt 2 bring to light a new dimension that is not apparent in Excerpt 1, that is, the lengths that students will go to acquire food when they have depleted their funds, do not have access to food, and likely experience hunger. Although participants in Excerpt 2 discuss the phenomenon of stealing food, they do not report that they themselves steal. Instead, they report that "you put your food in the fridge and sometimes it gets stolen," thereby simultaneously reporting the phenomenon and situating themselves as occasional victims of food theft. Excerpts 1 and 2 indicate that participants experience food scarcity against their own will and attribute food scarcity to depletion of funds. The excerpts illustrate that food and going without food is tied to money (or lack thereof).

The reports of the student affairs officials also indicated that underresourced students deplete their funds and experience food scarcity. Both of the student affairs participants noted that students not only deplete funds that are necessary to acquire food but also deplete funds to purchase basic hygiene supplies. It was noted that challenges exist in terms of students "not having food, soap, washing powder, and things of that sort." More so, they attribute this problem to students being underfunded.

Acquiring Food on Campus

The following excerpts exemplify the theme of *acquiring food on campus*. Food concessions, the price of food, food quality, and the type of food available are discussed. While some participants report that food on campus is expensive, others focus on the attainability of food on campus, thus the following two subthemes are examined: *expensive food on campus* and *attainability of food on campus*.

Expensive Food on Campus. The group of women participants in Excerpt 3 discuss expensive food on campus. In particular, they complain about the high cost of fruit. Some of the women in this group reported living in off-campus accommodation and others reported living in noncatering university residence halls.

Excerpt 3, Wits 9–2–11

P1: Ay the shops are expensive

P3: [Ja

P2: [( )

P4: [Very, (everything) is expensive

P2: You'd rather go to Pick n [Pay

P1: [A simple banana is like five rand.

((group laughs))

P1: One banana, five rand.

((group laughs))

P1: [It's too expensive.

P4: [( )

P3: So you'd rather just go outside.

In this excerpt P1 notes that the shops on campus are expensive, P3 displays agreement with this statement, P4 proceeds to emphasize the extent of how expensive it is by her use of "very," and P2 suggests that it is preferable to go to Pick and Pay, a local grocery store. These participants suggest that due to the high cost of food on campus they opt to leave the campus to acquire food: "so you'd rather just go outside." Although this would appear to

be an inconvenient option, the high cost of food on campus compels these participants to seek food elsewhere.

An example of the high cost of food is provided by P1, in noting that "A simple banana is like five rand." This information is worthy of being stated a second time by P1, thus emphasizing the exorbitant price for a single piece of fruit. It is noteworthy that P1 focuses on a banana, a type of fruit that is high in energy and typically comes from a farm, and not, for example, a processed candy bar that might be considered a more expensive food item since it requires processing and manufacturing. Focusing on a banana serves to highlight the unduly expensive price of basic produce that students are expected to pay on campus. The complaints of students in this focus group are echoed by several participants from other focus groups. For instance, in a different focus group at UKZN participants noted that food on campus is expensive and that it should be subsidized by the university, with one of the participants noting that "you can't get anything under ten rand" on campus.

For these participants, what is worthy of mentioning is the expensive food sold on campus and its related inaccessibility. However, the acquisition of food more generally does not appear to be problematic. These participants' reports have implications for how much time they spend on campus. Given their reports that food is expensive and that cheap food is inaccessible on campus, can these students be expected to study, socialize, and take full advantage of their time on campus? The reports of these students suggest that while food on campus is available, it is not necessarily attainable. These participants do not report experiencing hunger, going without food, or depleting their food funds, but the high cost of food on campus is nonetheless a concern for them that is directly related to food acquisition.

Attainability of Food on Campus. Not all participants report inaccessibility to food on campus. Some participants report that food is easily attainable. The participant in Excerpt 4 below reported that food was amply available to him at his residence hall, which provides catering. It is noteworthy that this student previously disclosed being on a scholarship that covers his university-related expenses, including fees and room and board.

Excerpt 4, Wits 7–27–11

> P: So (1.3) I eat good food. Like the food is great . . . Breakfast, lunch, and supper and th-they have all variety of things. Like if I don't want to eat fast food and chips I can go to the cooked food.
>
> R: Mm.
>
> P: You know I can go to eat some pap, like if I let's say I, aah, I miss my mom so I go for pap. My mom loves pap so I go for pap. But now, if I'm, if I'm in a hurry I take a pack. You know I just go there, five seconds I'm out. You know?
>
> R: So the pack has like, what is, what is inside?
>
> P: Oh, the pack it's like (.) you have (.) different options. You can have a pack with some sandwich and some cold drinks, some Simbas and chocolate. You can have a pack with some pie and juice. It's a variety of stuff, ja.

The participant in this excerpt reports that the food available to him at his residence hall is "great." He has a variety of options at his disposal, including pap (a traditional South African maize porridge), sandwiches, Simbas (a brand of potato chips), and chocolate. He thus indicates that he can make choices about the kind of food he consumes. Additionally, he reports that food is available to him even when he is "in a hurry." When further questioned about the "pack" that is available, he discloses that it offers "different

options" and "a variety of stuff" that appear to be suitable for transportation and later consumption as a lunch.

It is noteworthy that this participant does not mention money as a resource or obstacle to attaining this food. This is perhaps attributed to the food being available at the residence hall where he is housed. Such accommodation typically requires students to arrange and purchase meal options on a term-by-term basis and does not require students to purchase food on a piecemeal basis each time it is consumed. Additionally, it may be the case that the cost of food is not mentioned because he does not personally pay for it, as he is the recipient of a scholarship that assumes responsibility for his university expenses.

In a different Wits focus group, a participant who reported living with his family, not in a residence hall, notes that the university houses what is perhaps "the cheapest restaurant in this world." While he and his coparticipants debate the quality of the food, they do not contest that the food is cheap and affordable for them, thus providing further evidence that for some students food on campus is attainable, whether it be at the residence halls or the general food concessions. Excerpt 4 in particular highlights the essential service that catering residence halls provide to students with respect to providing a variety of food on a regular basis. In this excerpt the participant reports having access to "breakfast, lunch, and supper," and mentions that various options are available. It is, however, noteworthy that in order for students to potentially benefit from the services that catering residence halls provide, they must successfully secure a place in a residence hall that provides catering. This proves to be difficult, as at the time of writing Wits provides university housing for approximately 17% of its total student body and UKZN provides university housing for approximately 19% of its total student body, with only a portion of residence halls providing catering services. Moreover, students who secure a catering residence must also have sufficient funds to pay for this type of accommodation.

Awareness of Others' Food Struggles

The third theme that emerged, *awareness of others' food struggles*, is related to participants' knowledge and understanding of food issues that do not necessarily pertain to their own experiences, but that impact other students. Participants in Excerpts 5 and 6 do not disclose that they themselves go without food or that they deplete their food funds, but instead report that they are aware that other students do not have sufficient funds to acquire food. The participants in Excerpt 5 display having knowledge that some university students on their campus go without food or make do with limited food.

Excerpt 5, Wits 9–2–11

P3: So (.) it's hard for some people cause you-

P2: Ja, cause there's [people (here who like) can't eat. [(We were discussing it in class today)

P3: [Ja. [That's-

P2: There's people who actually have no meal. They can only [afford to just be here, (and) pay rent

P3: [Ja.

P2: and that's it. They go for days, they (, they can't afford to pay for their)

P1: (Others think they) just cook pap. Eat it in the morning and then settle (for it) all day.

P2: ((Nods)) (I think[ )

P4: [But I think that Wits is wasting a lot of money on entertainment.

P2: Ja. ((laughs))

P1: ((laughs))

P4: Cause it's like (freshers) party, all res picnic, Engineer breakfast whatever.

In this excerpt P3 begins by noting that some people experience difficulties and P2 elaborates on what those difficulties are, stating that some people at the university "can't eat" and "actually have no meal." P2's statement "they go for days" suggests that they are aware that some students go without food for days. P1 contributes to this conversation by noting that some students survive by eating pap (South African porridge) in the morning and suggests that they eat nothing else all day. While the conversation initially focuses on students going without, or having only a limited amount of, food, P4 implies that the university (Wits) does not act responsibly: "Wits is wasting a lot of money on entertainment." P4 thus makes an association between students' lack of food and Wits' irresponsible use of money. As such, P4 alludes to the university having resources to assist needy students, but not taking adequate steps to do so.

In Excerpt 6 below, students complain about the cost of course notes and in doing so display awareness that these costs are potentially tied to some students not having sufficient funds for food.

Excerpt 6, UKZN 8–20–08

P2: Um, (.) for the course, and then you get charged for n- course notes. You get charged about I don't know 300, 200 rand (.) a semester for course notes (.) And I dunno- someti[mes] I don't know (.) where that

P5: [Ja.]

P2: [money goes because]

P1: [Ja, we don't get any] [of that.]

P5: [We don]'t get any.

P2: We don't- you don't see that money. (0.4)

P2: They put up slides and you copy down or whatever, but you still get charged for

[those no]tes.

P1: [It's like] score a extra 200 rand from [all] the [people at vars]ity and

P2: [Mm.] [Each student.]

P2: And I mean uh- n- uh- [we're um]

P1: [For each course.] (0.6)

P2: .hh We're sort of (.) lucky enough that it doesn't make t- I mean a huge difference in our life, but some of the students there are- like 200 rand is the difference between eating and not eating that month.

In complaining about the cost of course notes, P2 displays ownership of the group's food privileges. She notes that they are fortunate enough that the cost of course notes does not make "a h*u*ge difference in" their lives. However, she reports that for some students the cost of course notes, which is reported to be approximately "200 rand, is the difference between eating and not eating that month," thus making an association between the cost of course notes and food consumption for some students. The collective reports of participants suggest that the fee imposed for notes is illegitimate since references to not "get[ting] any of that" and not "see[ing] that money" are made by P1 and P2 respectively. According to these participants, course note fees should not be imposed. Thus, similar to participants in Excerpt 5, participants in Excerpt 6 allude to the university being in a position to address the food struggles of some students (by not imposing unjustified costs), but failing to do so.

The participants in Excerpts 5 and 6 refer to a group of students who face food acquisition and consumption struggles. The participants display they have knowledge that "some" face these struggles, as opposed to discussing this phenomenon as one that

is faced by a single particular student. For instance, they do not report that a friend of their classmate goes without food. Instead they speak about a group of people that share a similar experience. This possibly signals that food acquisition among students is a known problem that is not attributed to the specific circumstances of a single student, but is perhaps instead a systemic problem in need of being addressed.

Student affairs officials also reported being aware of the food struggles experienced by students who had very few resources at their disposal. In fact, they were not only aware of such issues, but also reported helping students in the face of limited institutional resources at their disposal. One of the student affairs officials noted that there are "insufficient systems in place to deal with very real and disconcerting problems."

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that student participants experience various levels of food acquisition struggles, with some reporting depleting their funds and going without food, others reporting food acquisition problems on campus, while still others reporting the lack of attainability of food on campus. It is also evident that students who did not report food-related problems were aware of the food struggles endured by other students. The findings indicates that some students deplete their food funds at the end of the term during examination time. What is more, evidence exists that some students engage in questionable activity (food theft). That some students either go without food at the end of the term or engage in questionable activity to acquire food should be of much concern, and is consistent with Munro et al.'s (2013) finding that students are more likely to experience hunger at the end of a term.

Food has been cited as one of the basic needs, taking precedence over higher order needs (Maslow, 1943, 1989). As mentioned earlier, when physiological needs such as food are not satisfied, individuals become "dominated by the physiological needs" (Maslow, 1989, p. 21). Evidence of some students being dominated by such needs is apparent. Participants reported that food issues, in particular, are worth noting in the struggle to meet basic needs, with going "to sleep without chowing" being specifically mentioned. Associations were not made between a lack of funds and struggles to acquire books, miscellaneous academic supplies, or entertainment. Books, miscellaneous academic supplies, and entertainment are not unrelated to higher order needs, such as love/belonging and self-actualization, as put forth by Maslow. For instance, belonging to a club or a group of friends may mean that bonds are built and maintained by engaging in social activities that require entertainment funds (for example, going to the movies with friends, taking a trip to a local attraction, or simply engaging with others over coffee). This is not to say that students cannot engage in bonding activities that require no money. However, students with no entertainment funds may be excluded from engaging in at least some activities that bring people together and contribute to students' sense of belonging. The findings are thus consistent with Maslow's postulation and have serious implications for the university experience of those students who struggle to acquire and consume food.

Additionally, struggles to acquire and consume affordable food on campus should be a major concern. For some participants, food on campus was reported to be expensive, with them preferring to acquire food off-campus. It would follow that if students cannot access food on campus, they are likely to spend less time there. Food inaccessibility on campus because of cost undermines student

involvement. It is well known that student involvement, that is, "devot[ing] considerable energy to studying, spend[ing] much time on campus, participat[ing] actively in student organizations, and interact[ing] frequently with faculty members and other students" contributes to academic and social development (Astin, 1999, p. 518). In developing his theory of student involvement, Astin specifically notes that eating facilities, among other factors, can significantly impact how students spend their time and energy (1999, p. 523). It must be acknowledged that eating together is a resource and conduit for socializing (Mitchell & Hall, 2003; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996). Communal eating has the potential to be a potent social glue because the "social relationships that develop while eating meals with others build a sense of community and belonging" (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006, p. 526). Breaking bread with others on campus can promote and enable student involvement. Participants who report struggling to acquire food in general, and more specifically on campus, are quite possibly missing out on the benefits that accompany communal eating on campus. It would be unreasonable to expect that students can succeed academically, learn, grow, and develop without first having their basic food needs met. It becomes apparent that food is at the heart of the fundamentals of student development, and that without basic sustenance students will likely struggle to take full advantage of their university experience.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that catering residence halls offer basic but critical services, with them providing "great" and a "variety" of food. It is, however, unfortunate that within the past two decades many South African universities have moved away from the catering model and have instituted self-catering residence halls to purportedly make university education more affordable. The findings indicate that participants living in noncatering residence halls (as well as some of those living in off-campus accommodation) struggle to acquire food. Catering residence halls not only offer food, but also offer convenience. As noted by one participant, his catering residence hall accommodates his food needs even when he is in a hurry. Catering services within residence halls offer students ready-prepared food that is convenient, allowing them to focus their time on scholarly demands. Students may not necessarily have the time or tools to shop for food and prepare their own meals. Indeed, convenience is the most important food motivation for students living in catering residence halls (Marquis, 2005). The impact that catering and noncatering residence halls have on university students cannot be underestimated, and further investigation in this area in the context of South Africa is warranted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student affairs professionals can work toward lobbying for nonprofit food concessions that offer quality food at affordable prices. Expensive outsourced eateries can be part of the university community, but should not be allowed to run a food monopoly. Given that catering residence halls offer students a valuable service that provides them with convenient food access, student affairs professionals can work toward lobbying for more catering residence halls. Efforts to transform noncatering residence halls to ones that offer catering services should focus on affordability and providing a variety of food suitable for the dietary needs of a diverse student body. Irrespective of whether students live in catering or noncatering residence halls, off-campus with their families, or independently, they should not go without food. Student affairs professionals in financial

aid offices should work toward ensuring that the financially neediest students can access the funds required to eat on a regular basis.

The findings implore student affairs professionals to be activists that champion students' most basic needs, particularly those directly related to food acquisition and consumption. Care must be taken that these endeavors are sustainable, formal, and institutionalized, and that they take human dignity into consideration. Efforts with a focus on charity, donations, and unreliable funding might be helpful in the short run, but will likely place high demands on a relatively few number of staff members, as well as being unsustainable and potentially damaging for students.

With respect to policy making, several areas require critical attention. The amount of funds provided by NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) to needy students should be reassessed based on realistic food prices and the cost of living. Insufficient funding and scarce resources have been the focus of complaints about the higher education system in South Africa, as is the case in many other parts of the world. However, it needs to be acknowledged that South Africa's higher education attrition rate is approximately 50% (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2008). The system is experiencing dire inefficiencies that not only have a devastating impact on drop-outs, but also translate to a massive waste of national resources. The extent to which students can access the support needed to succeed academically must be investigated and assessed from multiple angles that extend beyond a narrow view of teaching and learning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the special care that has been taken to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on volunteer participants who were willing to be video-recorded; thus the sample of participants may have consisted of individuals who were not particularly bashful and were more inclined to be helpful or open to sharing their views. Second, the number of student affairs officials who participated in the study was minimal, and the study targeted those with the most experience. The views of novice student affairs officials are therefore not included. Lastly, the findings are restricted to the case studies in question and are not generalizable. They nonetheless highlight food acquisition struggles experienced by some students and point toward a need for further research in this area.

CONCLUSION

Student food acquisition and consumption in the context of South Africa has been addressed by examining participants' reported experiences. The data indicate that some students face food acquisition and consumption struggles and must make do without food. Although the findings indicate that not all students experience food acquisition struggles, it is apparent that, for some, campus food is expensive and inaccessible. The study also indicates that some students have ample access to food on campus, which is provided by residence halls. It is significant that there appears to be awareness of others' food struggles at the university, thus indicating that this is a prevalent phenomenon that should be addressed by the university and the higher education system.

That food has dire consequences for student development has been discussed. For those students who struggle to acquire food, food emerges at the forefront of their existence. This is apparent in that a lack of food was worth mentioning by participants, as opposed

to a lack of books, miscellaneous academic supplies, or entertainment. Additionally, a lack of acquirable food on campus may lead to students spending less time there, being less involved, and having fewer opportunities to socialize with fellow students in an academic environment. Food acquisition struggles at the university have been identified by the study's participants and are a pressing concern that undoubtedly presents major challenges for student affairs professionals, policy makers, and the higher education system, but they also present opportunities to improve student life and create environments that facilitate academic achievement, growth, and development.

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