

## Weight discrimination: Are colleges preparing their graduates for successful employment and careers?

Oliver W. A. Wilson, PhD

Melissa Bopp, PhD

Department of Kinesiology, Pennsylvania State University

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Colleges are uniquely positioned to influence both the short and long-term health and well-being of students through implementation of interventions to prevent and/or treat obesity among students; and have a vested interest given obesity has the potential to impact students' matriculation, graduation, and career prospects.

**Aim:** To illustrate the essential roles of colleges to influence obesity prevention and treatment given the potential to influence the students' matriculation, graduation, and career prospects.

**Methods:** The discussion begins with an overview of the prevalence and societal implications of obesity. Next the implications for higher education with respect to matriculation and graduation, the influence of higher education on lifestyle behaviors, and the influence of obesity on academic performance. This is followed by the influence of obesity on students' post-higher education lives, including potential discrimination when seeking employment, and the impact that the nature of the jobs that graduates attain may have on their health and well-being.

**Results:** There exists a great need to reduce the prevalence of obesity and colleges are well positioned to provide leadership and direction.

**Conclusions:** Implications for colleges are set forth, with ways in which they can play a role in promoting student health detailed.

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The prevalence of obesity in the United States (US) continues to increase across all age levels, from children (Fryar, Carroll, & Ogden, 2014) to adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019), including young adults (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2009, 2020). This trend is concerning due to the adverse impact obesity has on physical and mental health (Garipey, Nitka, & Schmitz, 2010; Luppino et al., 2010), productivity, the healthcare system, and quality and length of life (Wang, McPherson, Marsh, Gortmaker, & Brown, 2011). Therefore, addressing obesity is of public concern. Higher education is well-positioned to play an important role in treating and preventing obesity, given the 20 million, and growing number of, students pursuing higher education within the US (Institute for Education Sciences, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the need for intervention and propose potential actions that colleges can take.

An increasing number of matriculating college (university) students are classified as having overweight or obesity (CDC, 2019). This is attributable to various factors, including poor dietary quality and declining levels of physical



activity (Sahoo et al. 2015). Policies targeting diet and physical activity among children and adolescents have proven effective (Driessen, Cameron, Thornton, Lai, & Barnett, 2014; Williams et al., 2013), making the decline in college physical education in the US all the more concerning (Cardinal, Park, Kim, & Cardinal, 2015). Children with obesity experience similar negative physical and mental health outcomes as adults (Lakshman, Elks, & Ong, 2012), and their academic performance may suffer too (Santana, Hill, Azvedo, Gunnarsdottir, & Prado, 2017). Thus, obesity may impact college students prior to matriculation, during college, and beyond.

College is often characterized by increased independence and autonomy (Mulder & Clark, 2002). Consequently, students typically have the freedom to make decisions about their health behaviors, making it a critical time to intervene. Many students experience weight gain during freshman year (Vadeboncoeur, Townsend, & Foster, 2015) and latter semesters (Small, Bailey-Davis, Morgan, & Maggs, 2013). Deterioration in dietary quality, increased alcohol consumption, and decreased physical activity may contribute to weight changes during this period (Small et al., 2013; Wilson, Galascio, & Bopp, 2019). Such behaviors should be targeted by interventions seeking to treat and prevent obesity.

Having overweight or obesity has been linked with poor academic performance in college students (Anderson & Good, 2017). This may be attributable to the mental illnesses, which are among the most common factors reported by students to impact academic performance (ACHA, 2020), and have been increasing in prevalence (ACHA, 2009, 2020). While obesity has been linked with adverse mental health outcomes, the mere perception that one is overweight or obese can also be detrimental to mental health (Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2010). Thus, overweight and obesity may be impacting students' future job prospects from the perspective of lower grades, in addition to any discrimination they may face based on their appearance or mental health status when seeking employment or promotion.

Whether prospective students with obesity are discriminated against during the college application process remains unknown and requires further examination. However, evidence suggests that such bias/discrimination is within the realms of possibility (Flint et al., 2016; Pomeranz & Puhl, 2012; Puhl & Brownell, 2012), may be field specific (Flint et al., 2016; Puhl & Brownell, 2012), and impact women more than men (Puhl & Brownell, 2012). Media, through dissemination of messages that stigmatize and discriminate against those with overweight or obesity appear to be partially responsible for popularizing and reinforcing the beliefs that those with overweight or obesity are lazy (Flint, Nobles, Gately, & Sahota, 2018). Moreover, the misconception that individuals are responsible for their weight means that some consider such beliefs to be justifiable, and that by holding such beliefs they may somehow inspire those with overweight and obesity to adopt a healthier lifestyle (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Such attitudes and beliefs are concerning given their potential impact on the mental and physical health of those with overweight or obesity. Moreover, they ignore that health behaviors and outcomes are impacted by societal and systemic discrimination and not solely attributable to the individual (Mereish, 2014; Panza et al., 2019; Paradies et al., 2015; Simoni, Smith, Oost, Lehavot, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014).

Regardless of whether college graduates have overweight or obesity upon graduation, the nature of many of the jobs that graduates acquire increases the risk of developing overweight or obesity as many will work in white collar, or above, occupations. This is of concern, as white collar workers are less physically active and more sedentary (Smith et al., 2016), and sedentary time is associated with higher, unfavorable, body weight (Lin, Courtney, Lombardi, & Verma, 2015).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGES

The purpose of higher education is to enhance the knowledge and intellect of individuals who can holistically contribute to their communities (Chan, 2016). However, the question should be raised whether higher education is fulfilling its purpose to prepare graduates for long careers where they can make valuable contributions to society if they culminate their education in a state of health (physical and mental) that will ultimately burden them and their communities and diminish their career prospects. While preventing and treating obesity among students is not the sole responsibility of colleges, there are numerous ways colleges can help tackle this problem.

Obesity is largely attributable to environmental factors, more specifically an energy imbalance due to excess energy consumption and/or inadequate energy expenditure. Ultimately, prevention, rather than treatment, offers the best opportunity to reduce the prevalence of obesity and associated complications (Pandita et al., 2016). Population-level interventions are imperative to address this national crisis. With around two-thirds of high school graduates enrolling in colleges upon graduation from high school (Institute for Education Sciences, 2017), colleges represent an ideal setting and opportunity to reach and intervene with a considerable portion of the population. Regular health screening, health literacy education, and integration of health into college mission statements are a few of the ways that institutions can help reduce the prevalence of obesity.

### Health Screening and Referrals

Implementing responsible health screening represents an opportunity to identify those needing health behavior interventions. Coupling screening with referrals to relevant professionals (e.g., fitness professionals, nutritionists, dieticians, health counsellors, etc.) that do not disclose any healthcare information would reduce the burden on healthcare professionals and increase the utilization of existing health promotion resources. Relevant health professionals could provide advice face-to-face or via the internet as both approaches demonstrate promise (Dietz et al., 2020). However, changes to settings (policies and environments) are still needed (Okanagan Charter, 2015).

### Health Literacy

Health literacy refers to the capacity of individuals to acquire, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions (Zoellner et al., 2016). As such, the integration of health literacy into the college general education curricula, orientation programs, as well as the continuing education of health promotion staff are options worth considering given the link between health literacy and obesity from an early age (Chari, Warsh, Ketterer, Hossain, & Sharif, 2014; Shih, Liu, Liao, & Osborne, 2016).

### Evaluation and Monitoring

Another opportunity to improve health at a population-level stems from the ability to identify disparities and monitor trends. The prevalence of overweight and obesity vary based on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g. gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.; CDC, 2019). Identifying such disparities is necessary to inform tailored interventions. Moreover, if colleges were to implement any policies that may influence the prevalence of overweight and obesity, the ability to monitor the prevalence of obesity over time, as well as changes in students' weight while in college would be valuable. For example, the introduction of a "free" campus recreation membership or an increase in the number of vending machines each have the potential to impact obesity prevalence. In addition, publicly

reporting the prevalence of overweight and obesity based on the intersection of sociodemographic characteristics would keep colleges accountable for taking actions to address obesity and associated disparities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, society needs to reduce the prevalence of obesity and colleges are well positioned to provide leadership and direction. College is an ideal time to intervene due to the combination of students' newfound independence and autonomy and because the health behaviors adopted are likely to be maintained for the remainder of students' lives (Sparling & Snow, 2002). If colleges truly strive to produce graduates who can make valuable contributions to society they must look beyond the formal education and actively begin to implement policies educate students regarding healthy behaviors, as well as create environments that promote healthy behaviors and discourage unhealthy behaviors. This will help students to graduate prepared to reach their full potential unencumbered by health issues that may impact physical and mental health and potentially diminish career prospects.

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Address Author Correspondence to:

Oliver Wilson  
23C Recreation Building  
Dept. Kinesiology  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, PA 16802  
Email: [oww2@psu.edu](mailto:oww2@psu.edu)  
ORCID ID - 0000-0002-0174-3813

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