OP-ED

Target Public: College students who don't have the best eating habits or are interested in bettering their eating habits.

Demographics:

- Age: College students, people of ages 18-24
- Gender: All genders, but mostly women
- Location: college towns, campuses, urban areas where young adults/students are living on their own
- Lifestyle: busy students, managing work, school, and other activities

Psychographics:

- Busy/stressed students: students that are overwhelmed often rely on quick meals or no meals because of the time constraint
- Budget-conscious students: students often prioritize cheap meals like ramen or cheap snacks to be more economical
- Health-conscious students: those who want to stay healthy while in college or with their busy schedules but don't know where to start
- Those influenced by social media and body image culture: people influenced by the fitness culture or extreme dieting for the "perfect body"

Motivating self-interests:

- Energy and focus for schoolwork: young adults wanting to feel more energetic and alert throughout the day instead of tired and mentally foggy
- Better physical and mental health: having a desire to reduce stress and improve mood/emotions through better eating habits
- Breaking free from body image pressure: learning to appreciate the body that we've been given and adopt eating habits based on well-being, not appearance

Target Outlet: The Daily Universe

The hidden dangers of college students' eating habits: Why snacks and one meal a day aren't enough

I lost 20 pounds in three months during the fall of my junior year of college. It was the first time I had stepped on a scale since the previous summer. My clothes had been getting looser, but I brushed it off. At the doctor's office, they encouraged me to take care of my body—but they didn't know I had drastically cut back on eating. That appointment was a wake-up call.

Soon after, I realized that under-eating is far too common among college students, especially women. Stress, academic pressure, unrealistic beauty standards, rising food costs and hectic schedules quietly fuel a crisis of poor nutrition and declining physical and mental health—often dismissed as "just part of college."

A key driver of this crisis is affordability. A 2020 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that 3.8 million college students experienced food insecurity—and that more than half of those students skipped meals or went without food multiple times a day because they couldn't afford it. As food prices continue to rise, it's understandable why students would hesitate to spend money on meals. However, amid the difficulties with food insecurity and more, young adults need to prioritize their health and nutrition. We can't continue to ignore the consequences of normalizing unhealthy eating habits—college students are facing a growing nutritional and mental health emergency.

Today's world offers price-effective "solutions" to help those struggling with food insecurity. But these cheaper options are often highly processed and packed with ingredients that do more harm than good. Processed, fast foods typically contain excess sugars, refined grains and unhealthy fats—ingredients associated with a heightened risk of obesity, a condition that can follow students for the rest of their lives. The combination of being unable to afford nutritious food and relying on processed alternatives only worsens health and academic outcomes. The hidden cost of saving money on food may be far greater than students realize.

A Yale Medicine review found that consuming higher amounts of ultra-processed foods may increase the overall risk of death and is associated with 32 different health issues, such as heart disease, mental health challenges, type 2 diabetes and more.

Researchers who studied 237 undergraduate students at a large mid-Atlantic university found that food insecurity impacts academic performance, retention and graduation rates. While students spend thousands to attend school, those benefits might not materialize if they don't have the nutrition or energy needed to thrive.

Under-eating—whether driven by food insecurity or societal pressure—affects mental health just as much as physical well-being. Poor nutrition is linked to increased anxiety, fatigue and trouble concentrating. I experienced all of these symptoms. So did Caroline Young, a registered dietitian and nutrition counselor, who described the toll under-eating took on her in an article she wrote. After spending many years of her life in a calorie deficit, she never stopped to consider what happens when you don't eat enough. She didn't understand that her mind, body and emotions were all being affected by living that way.

"I'm not being dramatic when I say that every part of me was drastically and negatively impacted by undereating," Young said.

Young isn't alone. The National Eating Disorders Association estimates that between 10% and 20% of college-aged women and 4% to 10% of college-aged men suffer from an eating disorder—and those numbers are rising. Media, especially social media, only fuels the problem.

The internet and social media have turned restrictive eating into a trend, further feeding toxic diet culture. Often disguised as "wellness," many influencers push rigid beliefs and social expectations centered around the "ideal" body type. But the truth is, there is no ideal body. Each person's healthy body looks different.

The Bulimia Project raises awareness about the dangers of diet culture, noting that most weight loss tips promoted online rarely address the health consequences of forcing the body to shrink to an unrealistic size. One of the most glaring offenders is "SkinnyTok."

"SkinnyTok" is a cluster of videos on TikTok where users promote restrictive, unhealthy advice that encourages disordered eating and portrays food as the enemy. These messages are often masked as motivational content but can be deeply harmful. These "tips" encourage unsustainable and dangerous behaviors that are close to disordered eating.

I have a friend who has been deeply affected by "SkinnyTok." Her feed is filled with videos, memes and posts promoting unrealistic body standards and harmful "tips" to get skinny. By almost anyone's standards, she's already thin. Still, she makes self-deprecating jokes, eats just a snack a day and constantly criticizes her body. As someone who has been there, I get it—but I've gained so much clarity on the other side of this issue.

The combination of food insecurity, under-eating and toxic media messaging has created a nutritional crisis for students across the country. Instead of gaining knowledge and life experience, students are gaining fatigue, brain fog, deteriorating mental health and long-term physical consequences.

On the other hand, some argue that under-eating or fasting has benefits. A Yahoo Life article outlined the positives of intermittent fasting, such as longevity, maintaining muscle mass, boosting heart health, reducing diabetes risk, improving hunger signals and enhancing immunity.

While those benefits may sound appealing, they don't apply equally to everyone. In fact, fasting done improperly can lead to intense hunger, fatigue, mood swings, headaches—and even malnutrition. In trying to gain health, some may unknowingly be hurting themselves.

The motivations behind under-eating—such as weight loss, food insecurity, lack of affordability, diet culture, or trying to meet aesthetic ideals—may be understandable, but the consequences of

doing it the wrong way are serious. College students deserve more than a culture that romanticizes burnout and starvation. They need affordable, nutritious food and support systems that prioritize their well-being.

So next time someone skips breakfast—or dinner—don't just let it slide. Ask if they're OK. Invite them to eat with you. Let's stop treating this issue as a college cliché and recognize it for what it is: a crisis.

Author Bio:

Ashlee Sevilla is a BYU student studying public relations with a business minor. When not occupied with work, school, or her other extracurriculars, she enjoys listening to music, going to concerts, cooking, and spending time with friends.