The Obesity Epidemic Comes to Campuses

With 3 in 10 students fat, chronic diseases could mean a heavy price for colleges

By ERIN STROUT

Katherine Adler had been heavy for as long as she could remember, but when she hit 220 pounds during her sophomore year at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, she finally felt "too fat to do anything."

"I was living with a bunch of skinny roommates and noticing how many friends they had," she says. "I was depressed."

Now a senior majoring in chemical engineering, Ms. Adler has lost 60 pounds by seeking advice from a personal trainer, jogging, cutting her sugar intake, and eating mostly vegetables, protein granola bars, and oatmeal. She packs her lunch to avoid campus food-court temptations, and she drinks less alcohol at parties.

Not only has she taken up a healthier way of life, but her grades have improved and she focuses better in class. "It was hard to pay attention before, when my self-esteem was so low," she says.

It was a challenge that called for more discipline than many students can muster.

It's a challenge facing more college students than ever.

The American College Health Association estimates that three out of every 10 college students are overweight or obese. Both terms denote ranges of weight that are greater than what is considered healthy for a given height and have been shown to increase the likelihood of diseases. Over the past two decades, the number of American children who are overweight has ballooned. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the proportion of 12- to 19-year-olds who are overweight has risen from 5 percent to 17.4 percent.

Now those kids are going to college, and many are bringing along hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and high cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Ms. Adler was one of the lucky ones, she says. Although her family has a history of diabetes, she has shown no symptoms.

"My parents knew what was down the road for me if I didn't lose weight," she says, "and they really supported me in changing my lifestyle."

College officials are certainly aware that obesity is unhealthy, but institutions have been slow to calculate what their cost will be if students' sedentary habits and poor diets continue to harm their health. Nationally the obesity epidemic, as it has been called by the U.S. surgeon general, cost an estimated $78.5-billion in medical expenditures in 2000 (the most recent figure available from the federal government), half of which are paid by Medicaid and Medicare.
Campus health experts predict that some colleges will have to increase health-services staffing to handle an influx of students with chronic diseases related to obesity. And many believe that colleges should play a part in helping students avoid or overcome being overweight.

"Colleges have a responsibility to help students to prosper," says Julian A. Reed, an assistant professor of health and exercise science at Furman University. "It's great if they can learn to write well or their education leads to a successful career, but what good will that do if they're dead at 50?"

**Walk This Way**

The obesity problem is only going to get worse, mirroring what is going on in the rest of the adult population, say campus health experts. But at a time when costs for colleges are already high, the resources that institutions can put into treatment and prevention is limited.

"The financial burden will end up on the students for proper treatment," says Cynthia B. Burwell, chair of the ACHA Healthy Campus 2010/2020 Coalition. "Those without insurance won't have access to the care and prescriptions they need."

A few colleges are starting to redirect funds to provide more-healthful food options, dietitians for students, new walking trails, even private trainers. The next step, college officials say, is to find a way to get students to use what is available.

At Furman, each student is required to take a wellness course, which includes one lecture and two or three days of exercise each week. Students learn about cardiovascular disease, cancer prevention, stress management, nutrition, and the value of physical activity. All students have their cholesterol checked as part of the class — a screening that has caught several potential health risks, professors say.

"It was the single most practical course I had as an undergraduate," says Kate Arrington, who graduated from Furman in 1994 and still maintains an exercise-and-nutrition log she learned to keep in class. "I just recently went to the doctor, and he wanted to compare my cholesterol level to 10 years ago. Because of that class, I could provide that information."

Helping students lead healthy, active lives is part of Furman's mission, Mr. Reed says, which is why the course remains mandatory while other colleges have cut such requirements. In addition, while many colleges provide cheap and convenient campus bus transportation, Furman encourages students to walk by building paths instead of roads and is adding four miles of trails around the campus.

"By doing these things, we're saying that good health is part of who we are, and we'll put our money where our mouths are," says Mr. Reed.

**To the Gym**

But publicizing what is available and showing students how and why to use those resources may be more difficult. Because many students arrive at college without a habit of exercising, they often don't seek out facilities or fitness opportunities. Although colleges, in the competition for applicants, have spent millions of dollars on things like rock-climbing walls and state-of-the-art gyms, many students just don't use them.

Mr. Reed recently published a study of 467 students in the Journal of American College Health showing that 20 percent were unaware of campus playing fields or did not know if they were available, and 32 percent did not know if the university provided aerobic classes in the fitness center. And that rock-climbing wall? Twenty-three percent didn't even realize it was there.

Lee T. Todd Jr., president of the University of Kentucky, has been one of the more outspoken college leaders
on obesity. He agrees that promoting healthful options is vexing, especially in Kentucky, which has one of the highest overall obesity rates in the nation.

The university's student body is reflective of the state's population, but even Lean Cuisine dinners in the dining halls and free personal training at the gym have not enticed many of the most unhealthy students to act. "It's a sales issue," Mr. Todd says. "It has to be a student-driven effort, but even enlisting student leaders to help push the message is difficult, because the student leaders themselves often don't fit in the target audience."

The university is examining ways to help children learn the importance of proper nutrition and physical activity, so that when they arrive on college campuses, good habits are already ingrained. Mr. Todd, who is on a diet himself and has lost six pounds in two weeks, says "getting in front of the problem" by trying to reach children is one way for higher education to help without scrambling for money.

"There are so many other issues in education that cost money," he says. "The concern about the health condition is not as high a priority as hiring the best faculty."

**Cheaper Veggies**

Another way that colleges can battle obesity is by changing the choices of food offered on the campus. Many colleges are renegotiating with their vendors to use produce from local farmers and to lower the price of healthful food for students.

At Texas A&M University at College Station, Nadeem E. Siddiqui, executive director of food services, is gradually beginning to use low-cost ways to offer students more-nutritious food. He acknowledges that making big changes is difficult in a region where people love steak and fried food.

"It's a huge responsibility whether we like it or not," he says. "We can't just promote better health decisions, but we have to make them available and convenient."

Last year the university started holding a farmers' market every Thursday on the campus. At first just a few people showed up, but now hundreds of students and staff and faculty members line up every week.

Texas A&M has also negotiated with its food vendors to get fresh, local, and organic produce. Although such produce is often more expensive for students — who will order a burger to save a few bucks — the university has reduced portion sizes to keep prices affordable.

Changing the eating habits of small groups of students will eventually lead to better health for many of them, Mr. Siddiqui believes. Once a month he cooks lunch for 16 students and staff and faculty members. He goes to fraternities and sororities and cooks meals with them as well, teaching students why they should think about what they're putting into their bodies.

"When you are forced to eat in groups rather than picking up fast food, you have a better shot at eating better," he says. "I started in this business 18 years ago, and it's totally different today, with more health issues like diabetes and high blood pressure. I can't imagine what these kids will see at age 40 or 50."

Students like Ms. Adler, who managed to shed so much weight after her sophomore year at Michigan, also wonder what will become of her generation, given a lifetime of bad habits. Although she was able to overcome her weight problem, she now sees her younger sister struggling as a freshman, reaching for late-night pizza and fast-food options.

"She's gained 30 pounds in the last year," Ms. Adler says. "Now she's asking, 'Can you help me?'''