

Eating On and Off Campus: EIU Students and Access to Food during COVID

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone worldwide, from job losses and lockdowns, to causing many individuals and families to experience food insecurity. The focus of this poster is to map out how individuals majorly affected by COVID-19 in Coles County Illinois—specifically college students attending Eastern Illinois University—had access to food during the pandemic. Many college students lived on campus when COVID first started spreading, potentially limiting their access to food sources. The poster will discuss the experiences of a small group of friends who lived both on and off campus, and how their access to food changed during the beginning of the pandemic.

Methods

The methods used in this research stemmed from personal observable experience and brief interviews from prior and current roommates along with me. When the pandemic first started, my roommate and I lived off campus and both held on-campus job positions. So many questions went through our heads, “Are we still able to work?”, “Are there still shelves stocked with food at the grocery store?”, which were very real, concerning questions. We depended on our biweekly paychecks to buy food and our other day-to-day needs. It was scary to think about because at the time, people were stocking up on food and especially toilet paper, so we didn’t know what was going to be available to us. Although we couldn’t work due to the lockdown, the school still paid us our average biweekly wage, so we still had an income for the remainder of the pandemic. We were still nervous about the food availability and if there was going to be a shortage.

We ended up shopping at all three grocery stores in Charleston, which include Walmart, Aldi and County Market. Walmart was pretty much always bare with empty shelves. County Market was mainly stocked, but there was a limit on how much could be bought. The downside of County Market was how expensive food was to purchase. Items that could be bought at Walmart and Aldi were almost three times the price, causing us to spend more money and not buy as much. Aldi was our savior. The shelves were always stocked with the food we wanted to purchase, and it ended up saving us money because the prices were so low.

Because the grocery stores didn’t always have what we wanted, my roommate and I were also dependent on local restaurants. It was a bit more expensive to eat out, but it was more convenient than going to the grocery store everyday. We also wanted to do what we could to support these local restaurants due to the lockdown and indoor eating being restricted.

Although the unknown was scary, our food sources living off campus weren’t as limited compared to those living on campus. My current roommates talked about how their food access changed at the beginning of the pandemic. Both of my roommates lived at our sorority chapter house in Greek Court. Both had an on-campus meal plan, so their daily meals came from the dining halls. Once we went into lockdown, they had to move back home, potentially restricting their food sources. It was more difficult for them, because they didn’t have to worry about buying groceries on a weekly or biweekly basis since their meals were provided through their meal plans. After leaving campus, they were concerned about how they were going to be affected by the food shortages in their hometowns. Their households have between five and six people each, so their families had to buy more food with them being there. It was a financial burden on their families that no one was expecting. The University reimbursed the students who lived on campus for housing and dining, which was a financial relief for these unknown times.

Conclusions

The beginning of the pandemic was a scary, unknown time. Being a 21-year-old college student who didn’t have a steady income made the experience more intense. Thankfully, my roommate and I were able to get through the end of the Spring 2020 semester with our income from the school. We were still able to grocery shop and get the necessities we needed until we moved back home for the summer.

My two current roommates also managed to access food once they were home for the semester. It was tricky, due to their households increasing with another mouth to feed, but with the dining and housing reimbursement from the school they were able to use that money to buy food.

As the pandemic continued to get figured out, the grocery stores started putting limits on the number items that were in high demand (mainly canned goods, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, etc.). These limits allowed more people to access the items that were in high demand and made them more available to everyone. Although there were limits, the prices on these items increased due to the high demand.

Food drives were also provided by different organizations that helped those who have suffered from job-loss and could not afford to buy groceries on a weekly basis.

Now that the pandemic has been going on for a year, people aren’t stocking up on food and household items as much. The high demand items have been readily available for the past few months, making it easier for people to buy them when needed.

The Fall 2020 semester allowed students to move back on campus, so those who had limited access to food at the beginning of the pandemic no longer faced those limitations. The University dining halls and Student Union opened, allowing students to utilize their meal plans and continue to have food access.

