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12-5-2012

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#### Recommended Citation

Kuhn, Steven, "A Look Inside The Freshman 15" (2012). *ISU Ethnography of the University Initiative*. 4.  
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# A Look Inside The Freshman 15

## Steven Kuhn

This paper seeks to explore the factors that lead to freshman weight gain as well as the services the University provides to combat weight gain. This paper provides a detailed study through the perils of the freshman lifestyle.

Note: This paper was completed for the course Anthropology 302, Ethnography, in affiliation with the *Ethnography of the University Initiative*, [www.eui.uiuc.edu](http://www.eui.uiuc.edu). Research was conducted in compliance with IRB Protocol #2012-0267 at Illinois State University.

## **Introduction**

Most college students have probably heard of the infamous phrase "The Freshman 15" referring to the weight that some gain after their first year as a college student. The phrase is used so often that incoming students may expect the 15lbs of weight gain to be eminent. Whether freshman weight gain is unavoidable or not is very unclear and can hardly be measured in a precise fashion. However, I plan to use certain ethnographic methods of research to paint a clearer picture on certain factors that contribute to freshman weight gain, how students can utilize certain services the university offers to combat weight gain.

## **Weight Gain In College In the US**

Contrary to popular belief the "Freshman 15" is an exaggerated number. A study conducted at Auburn University examined 4,191 students at the beginning, middle, and end of their freshman year. The average weight gain students experienced was far below the popularly perceived 15 pounds, but the study did reveal that weight gain, in general, was a common trend in first year students. The data reveals a fundamental increase not only in freshman weight but BMI and body fat percentage as well.

This study also examined both female and male students and their body satisfaction and how it corresponds to the weight gained after entering college. The study shows statistically that on average both men and women will experience weight gain after entering college. The results from the data that was gathered indicated that women who gain weight after college report a significant amount of dissatisfaction with their self image while the males who gained weight tended to show less dissatisfaction with their self image (Simmons et. Al 2011). While the studies reveal differences in self image between the sexes the results still reveal that weight gain is a common occurrence among incoming freshman.

College students' health and diet is the subject of the National College Health Assessment. Although the study is not restricted to freshman the data presented can provide a general outlook on the health of an average American college student. For instance, around 60% of students eat only 1-2 servings of fruits and vegetables per day, well below the recommended amount of 5-9 servings per day in which only about 6% of students consume daily (ACHA: NCHA 2012: 12). Roughly 60% of all college students log 1-4 days of moderate aerobic exercise which is probably a higher percentage compared to the working adult population (ACHA: NCHA 2012:12). However, only 30% of students do moderate to intense cardio or aerobic exercise for 20 minutes or more and this type of aerobic activity is far more effective at burning fat and increasing metabolism than the previous category of moderate aerobic exercise which the general college population seems to prefer (ACHA: NCHA 2012:12). When it comes to the Body Mass Index chart 61.4% of college students fall into the healthy weight category. The second leading bracket of the BMI chart however is the obese bracket which is composed of 21% of the college population (ACHA: NCHA 2012:13). It should be noted though that BMI is simply a score derived from height to weight ratio that is not always an adequate representative of the general body composition of an individual.

The previous statistics reveal information on some health trends of college students but none are as profound as the alcohol statistics. Half the college population reported having 1-9 alcoholic drinks in the past 1-9 days (ACHA: NCHA 2012:6). Also 70% of students reported that the last time they "partied" they estimated that their Blood Alcohol Content was greater than 0.10 which is well over the legal limit (ACHA: NCHA 2012:6). Although the survey indicated that there is little evidence that suggests the average college student has a poor diet and exercise

regime that would lead to weight gain, it is safe to say that alcohol consumption could contribute to freshman weight gain.

There certainly is no definitive evidence to suggest that an unavoidable amount of weight gain will be inevitable for every entering freshman nor a degradation of one's health. What the national statistics do reveal is not certainly a general tendency for college freshman to gain some weight and to drink alcohol, which is without a doubt detrimental to one's health. So although the phrase freshman 15 may be somewhat debunked it is safe to assume that the physical and social environment of college life can certainly act as a catalyst for weight gain.

The Freshman 15 is expected by so many that there are books written to help incoming freshman from gaining weight upon entering college. Daphne Oz, daughter of the famous Dr. Oz, wrote a step by step guide book intended to help college freshman avoid gaining the infamous freshman 15 (Oz 2010). Daphne Oz establishes her credibility not by alluding to an overwhelming amount of scientific data nor does Daphne have a PhD in medicine like her father, rather she writes this book as young adult shortly after graduation. Oz writes that despite being surrounded by a family of doctors who readily bombarded her with health tips and information, Oz constantly struggled with her weight, especially in her early college years. Oz then changed her diet, exercise regime and most importantly her mindset and has since been able to keep off the pounds (Oz 2010: 10).

Daphne discusses in detail the phrase "freshman 15" and the implications behind it. Daphne first debunks the phrase itself and reveals that on average only 6% of college students gain 15 or more pounds after their first year of college. A more accurate phrase would be the freshman 3 since around 50% of college freshman report a 2-5 pound gain after their first year. Oz also writes how the popular phrase "freshman 15" has a tremendous psychological impact on

entering freshman. Since the term is used so frequently and addressed toward freshman many students entering college often think the "freshman 15" is inevitable. Oz argues that the time in which students are in college is a crucial time to develop a healthy lifestyle that will most likely continue throughout adulthood if established solidly in the college years. Daphne Oz emphasizes that the ultimate factor that leads to either the health or health deprivation of college student is the mind set. Daphne's main objective of this book is to provide a step by step guide that will aid in creating a mindset that will promote health during the college years and ultimately continue later on in life.

All in all I believe Daphne Oz's "Dorm Room Diet" could certainly be portrayed as the Bible of deterring freshman weight gain. Daphne discusses not only scientific data about the weight gain but offers insights on how to deal with the social atmosphere of college and still come out a healthy adult with a solid base of health that will more than likely continue throughout adulthood. There are obviously solutions to freshman weight gain as well as avoidance techniques that can enable good health in the early college years which ultimately may continue on throughout one's lifetime.

More locally in the October 24, 2012 issue of the *Daily Vidette*, writer Brittany Tepper of the *Vidette* teams up with the ISU Campus Recreation center to provide students with essential tips to health in the article "10 Essentials for a fruitful, healthy college experience". A few of the articles top ten health essentials are things such as drink plenty of water, eat fruits and vegetables, have a good pair of shoes, and to lift weights. The health tips on this list are without a doubt all no brainers. Anyone could find all these listed tips from a simple Google search. While the idea behind these tips is good in effort to help students live a healthy life while attending the university, I certainly believe the *Vidette* and the ISU campus recreation team could have dug a

little deeper and attempted to provide some health information more specific to ISU students . In fact, the list above does not seem to show any discretion towards college health but rather just health in general.

### **Redbird Freshman: Different From The National "Average" Students?**

There certainly are noticeable trends that occur throughout all colleges across America. But are these certain trends exhibited more or less or in different ways at ISU? Illinois State was founded in 1857 as public teachers university and today enrolls over 20,000 students. ISU is located in Mclean County in central Illinois and is surrounded by large agricultural farms producing mostly corn and soybeans. First year students are required to live in dorms at ISU each of which have their own dining center. Since there are no grocery stores within walking distance of campus the dining centers are the main food provider for many of the students living in the dorms. Every college definitely has its own atmosphere and social environment that differs from every other college. There are certain aspects of ISU student life that could lead to weight gain but at the same time the University does offer an array of services for students to optimize their health during their time on campus.

### **Life as an ISU Student Today**

Most of the incoming freshman at ISU are required to reside in one of the dormitories on campus. Dorm life is quite different than living in a house or apartment, to say the least. Living in a prison cell like room with no personal kitchen, bathroom, living room, or adequate amount of space at all definitely is an adjustment for most freshman. However there are numerous services provided to students residing in the dormitories and in my opinion the most important of these services is the dining services. The dining services serve as a key component of student life simply because they provide the food that fuels the students throughout their academic journey at

the University. On the same hand, the dining services offer both healthy and unhealthy food options that can make or break the well being of a student. Now ultimately the choice of food is up to the student to chose, but that choice to deny that piece of pizza or fried chicken sandwich may be easier said than done.

According to the article "Food and Addiction" in *Nutrition Action*, there lies many psychological and biological factors that play a large role in our food selection that occur at a subconscious level (Liebman 2012:3). The article discusses that it is advantageous for humans to crave calorie dense foods because in a time of famine this trait will likely increase the survival of one who seeks the most calorie dense food items. Essentially what this article is saying is if Twinkies were to grow naturally in nature, our ancestors would have harvested them to an extreme. Beyond the physiological itch humans have for calorie dense foods there are also chemicals in many of the foods available today which are literally addictive as cocaine. The article states that " Clearly, there's no single cause of the obesity epidemic. Our 24/7 exposure to calorie-dense food and long hours at a desk or dashboard play a role. But new evidence suggests that some foods may keep us eating by hijacking the brain like an addictive drug" (Liebman 2012:3).

So although the ISU dining services does offer a variety of healthy food options, one can not dismiss how many unhealthy foods there are to chose from as well. On October 2, 2012 I observed the Watterson Dining Center to seek popular trends in student food choice throughout the dining center. I walked into the Watterson Dining Center, grabbed myself a quick meal then began to take notes on what I observed for the next 30-45 minutes. While taking notes I found certain things to be quite surprising, and having a meal plan myself , I also noted things that fit my common expectations I hold about the dining center. The things I noted that were no surprise



to me were the rush of people and the chaos that coincides with the 11 o'clock lunch rush. The students who either have an 11am wakeup call or who just got out of class around 10:50 often head right to the dining center. The lines for the card swipes began to back up then a few particular food lines begin to back up as well. The food line that is the first to back up is the Tex-Mex station which serves nachos, tacos, quesadillas, and burritos fresh to order. Since I am a dining center regular myself I feel that I always notice the Tex-Mex line being long despite the time, but I am interested to see if the time of day plays any role in which food lines get the most traffic. Since there is so many people during the 11 o'clock rush I can understand how one might choose their food choice based upon which line is shortest. But from my observations and own personal experience the salad bar and fresh bites (a low calorie, lean meat and cooked vegetable station) almost never backed up compared to the Tex-Mex and Home-style stations. So although each food station varies by line size during the lunch rush, people still tend to generally choose whatever food they want and are willing to wait longer in order to get it.

It may be the case that unhealthy foods such as tacos and pizza will always have the popular vote there is not distinct evidence that suggests that the unhealthy dining service food options will automatically cause a widespread weight gain in ISU freshman.

To gain an understanding of the freshman experience at ISU besides my own personal experience, I talked to a freshman boy and girl about their personal experiences as ISU freshman. When I asked both freshman if they believed the college environment at ISU perpetuates weight gain both responded that they believed certain aspects of college life such as partying, late night eating, and poor food choice are common among freshman students. Both freshman also stated that they were cognizant of gaining weight and make certain choices to prevent weight gain from occurring. When I asked both freshman what they believed would be the number one reason for

freshman to gain weight they both identified poor diet as the culprit. The only major differences I noted from the male and female responses were that the male said he is less concerned with putting on weight. The main themes I highlighted from both interviews is that students are aware of the college risk factors that could lead to gain weight, but also believe that the weight gain is definitely avoidable.

### **ISU Services Recognizing Student Health Needs**

University concern for student health and exercise is far older than current discussions about the Freshman 15. While conducting research on health related topics throughout ISU history I came across an archive that dates back to June 27, of 1865, just shy under the first ten years of the University. The archive is an Illinois State Board of Education proceedings hearing which addresses the need for physical exercise among students. The proceeding discusses how there is a need for students to exercise while attending the university, yet how the university provides little to no services that would encourage students to participate in physical exercise. The proceeding states that exercise such as playing ball, manual labor and walking would account for easy means of exercise at the University but there is an absence of playgrounds, sidewalk networks are not adequately structured for easy walking distances, and manual labor after a hard day of study may be too much for the students. The proceeding not only discusses how one's physical health can improve by exercise but also how it can improve the general well being of a student thus increasing one's academic performance as well. The proceeding then suggests the construction of a gymnasium to provide for the students' exercise needs.

I find this article to be fascinating mainly due to the point that health, in particular physical activity, is a priority for the University long before dining centers, our shift in food

production, and far before the term freshman 15 became a popular phrase. There are several parallels that can be drawn from the University today that relate to archive as well.

Despite the many attributes of a college campus that promote various activities that ultimately cause weight gain, the University does provide excellent services to aid students in healthy living. The ISU Health Promotion and Wellness center frequently posts flyers with health information across campus. A particular "toilet talk" flyer from the Health Promotion and Wellness center in which I confiscated for my research discuss "fat talk" and ways to promote healthy body image. The flyer gives tips on how to boost self esteem and also discusses how to ignore media portrayals of body images that are un realistic. An interesting statistic in which the flyer reveals is that Americans spend \$40 billion on dieting and diet related products each year. The sad truth behind this is these products probably are not that effective and that money spent toward dieting products would surely be better utilized in weight loss if that money were spent on fresh fruits and vegetables.

The ISU dining services also recognize the need to provide students with assistance and information on how to maintain health while living in the dorms and utilizing the dining services. The Illinois State University Dining Services has a Freshman 15 page informational page through the nutrition section of the Dining Services website. The Freshman 15 pages offers nutritional tips, motivational messages, exercise suggestions, and even offers professional help from a registered dietitian on campus. The Freshman 15 page focuses on 7 main points of advice to prevent freshman weight gain. The 7 tips are to eat when you're hungry and stop when your full, eat more often and avoid skipping meals, design a plan to stay active, eat fruits and vegetables, allow a variety of food without feeling guilty, avoid emotional and stress eating, and to not diet. These 7 tips do offer some decent advice and information on combating weight gain,

however I feel that these 7 tips in which the Freshman 15 webpage offers are very vague and fall short of offering students with an adequate amount of specific advice and information on how to prevent freshman weight gain. I would also venture a guess that very few students, if any, are even aware that this webpage even exists!

There are some tips the website suggests which will certainly combat effectively against weight gain. I think it is safe to assume that most people know the health benefits of exercise and daily activity and also know that a diet high in fruits and vegetables is far less likely to result in weight gain than that of a diet high in things such as pizza and Twinkies. However there are many tips the webpage offers in which hold little scientific integrity, and after all weight loss and gain is a purely physiological process so in this case science is important. Dr. Mike Rousell who founded the company Naked nutrition, states that the notion of dietary variety is overemphasized and more times than not the leaner, healthier people tend to eat the same things quite frequently (Rousell 2012.) Also the webpage believes students should not diet. My question to that belief is to what degree can students follow these simple guidelines and not gain any weight and should diet still be avoided even if an individual's weight gain is severe and poses other serious health risks besides just obesity?

There is also a service called the Healthy Campus Coalition which seeks to provide a strong network for students seeking assistance for health and wellness. After viewing the ISU "Healthy Campus Coalition" mission statement the aims of the coalition are clear: to provide a support network that enables health and wellness for ISU students. The coalition states it takes a synergistic approach and recognizes the interconnections among individuals and their environments. However the coalition states it is made up of two main components, one being the Alcohol Task Force and the other being the University Wellness Council. I believe a slight

contradiction exists within the coalition considering the Alcohol Task force has a pretty narrow minded view on the subject of alcohol. I would argue that this fails to recognize the interconnectedness among students and their environments as partying is without a doubt a huge staple in social activity among ISU students. For students to read and analyze the Healthy Campus Coalition and believe the statements to be true, students would have to assume the Healthy Campus Coalition accurately recognizes the connections between students and their environments. In my opinion no coalition or organization could adequately capture the student-environment connection as there are far too many variables that exist among the ISU population that create the student environment.

### **Student Exercise at ISU**

The University just recently opened up a brand new multimillion dollar fitness facility to provide not only for the increase in students but also for the increased demand of the university to have a centrally located, well equipped fitness center for the students to exercise. The University's fitness center prior to the new one was essentially located off campus and was also much smaller than the new fitness center. The fact that the student health has been a concern since ISU had 200 students in the 1800's to now a days when ISU provides health services for 20,000 plus students, emphasizes the fact that the University does recognize student health as a major concern and take action to provide these services for the students. Although it is apparent that the University does recognize the need to maintain and improve student health, the question still remains, does the services that the University provides do an adequate job on preserving and improving health and does the college life in general lead to common health problems such as obesity that not even the university health services can impact?

Exercise is can be a crucial component of keeping those pounds from forming. The transition from high school to college usually is accompanied by a decrease in activity levels for most students. The head of Student Services, Jan Patterson states that 81% of students entering ISU were active in some type of extracurricular activity in their high school prior to their entry as an ISU student. With the absence of these daily extracurricular activities in the college life exercise is pretty much a necessity in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle and also to prevent freshman weight gain. The University does provide an adequate amount of services to accommodate students exercise needs. Although colleges and universities are certainly ran in a business like fashion, it is safe to say that the Illinois State University provides numerous services to assist their students. The same can be said in the realm of health services, and those services can even be limited to assist students with problems concerning weight gain. A few years ago the campus recreation center was located a fair distance away from campus and was also much smaller than the current fitness center. Again, the University killed two birds with one stone when they opened up their brand new multi-million dollar fitness facility in the heart of campus because the new facility not only provides a state of the art fitness center in which students can exercise but also is a huge marketing point when targeting incoming freshman.

### **The Social Atmosphere at Redbird Nation: The Nation's 49<sup>th</sup> Ranked Party School:**

#### **Weight Gain and Alcohol Metabolism**

Despite the fact that the commonly perceived goals of higher academic institutions are solely to provide students with an environment in which one can receive an education and prepare themselves for the future ahead of them, the fact of the matter is students chose institutions for reasons far beyond the realm of academia. I believe the social environment of an university can make or break a student's decision when deciding which school is "right" for a

prospective student. College is a often a monumental time in one's life as they leave their parents and comfort zones behind and essentially start a new life all on their own. The transition can surely be a tough one for some students therefore the social environment of an university can provide a student with a tremendous amount of comfort and also aid in creating a sense of belonging for students.

Whatever the social atmosphere may be at any given university, the atmosphere itself certainly plays a major role in attracting students. Students entering Harvard University and students entering Illinois State would certainly not expect a social environment that would be similar one another. Students most likely are completely aware of what type of social atmosphere they are entering in when they come to school and more often than not that particular social environment even played a large role in dictating the students' decision to chose their particular school.

Here at Illinois State University there are certainly numerous fields of studies and there exists a decent amount of student diversity. However it is quite commonly known that the majority of Illinois State students are from the Chicago area and surrounding suburbs and that historically majors in the business and education realm are fairly common choices of incoming students. The social atmosphere at Illinois State is certainly no exception. Illinois State ranks 49th on College Prowler's "Most Raging Party Scene" list of schools. Students entering the University are certainly aware of the partying that goes on and may have even choosing the school for such exact reasons! Even University officials at Illinois State are well aware of ISU's status as a "party school". University Enrollment officer Dr. Jonathan Rosenthal admits that the University is well aware of its reputation as a party school.

Illinois State University may be perceived as a party school but does that mean that its reputation reflects reality? It goes without saying that some amount of partying will take place at most college and universities, but the alcohol statistics at Illinois State would indicate that ISU students reveal a higher frequency of partying and alcohol use. 87% of Illinois State students have drunk since entering Illinois State and 54.6% of students reported binge drinking the last time in which they drank.

The general statistics on alcohol use at the University indicate the prevalence of alcohol use but the next few statistics I plan to share I find especially profound because of the social implications behind student alcohol use. The most astounding statistic I found was that around 90% of students view drinking as the center of social life, therefore whether or not drinking is the actual center of social life it is definitely perceived as such. Also, 68.4% of students believe the social atmosphere of the University promotes the use of alcohol.

It is an obvious fact that alcohol is certainly not a healthy habit but it may be unclear how alcohol can cause college freshman to gain weight. However, the body's process to metabolize alcohol will ultimately result in the accumulation of body fat. According to D'Elia (2012) alcohol metabolism goes as follows:

Alcohol → Acetaldehyde → Acetaldehyde Dehydrogenase → Acetyl CoA → Fatty Acids → Fat (tryglicerides)

It is quite clear how if the body is frequently undergoing the process above, let alone the other negative health effects of alcohol and late night pizza orders that coincide with alcohol use, that weight gain is a definitely a possible end result. Ordering late night food after partying is almost



a part of the partying process itself. Also, the hangover the day after partying is sometimes enough to leave students at their bedside for the entire next day and certainly does not yield adequate work out energy. Since the social process of partying can kick start a physiological process that could potentially lead to weight gain, if both the students and the university should work towards becoming educated on more in depth and practical methods to combat weight gain.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

After conducting my ethnographic research I have found that the issue of freshman weight gain can best be seen as a variable. Some students may gain more than 15 pounds and some may gain no weight. Although the college atmosphere may pose several unhealthy threats to freshman there is certainly room for a very healthy lifestyle at ISU as well. Since it is merely impossible to stop college students from partying or eating a diet of pizza and chicken wings, I believe ISU can best help it's students from gaining weight from providing information that will help students find a middle ground where they are comfortable both practicing healthy habits along with still participating in the activities that students chose to despite the health outcomes of those activities. If the University provided information such as how to beat a hangover or how to drink while managing calories rather than simply deterring drinking, students might have an easier time finding their own healthy balance. I believe the various health services that the University provides for students are definitely beneficial for students who wish to improve their health, but I believe these services can be improved and become more readably available to students as well. After exploring all of the tenets of college life that could potentially cause weight gain, I still believe the University provides enough services to ultimately leave the choice of a healthy or unhealthy lifestyle up to the students themselves.

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