

Formative Research for  
UCLA EATask Force's  
Body Image Social Marketing Campaign

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## Executive Summary

The authors conducted formative research for the UCLA Eating and Activity Task Force, which will develop a social marketing campaign about body image in the next academic year.

### Methodology

- Students were recruited through the EATask Force, the Student Development Health Education unit Life Skills Courses, and the Academic Advancement Program (AAP).
- Focus groups were conducted with UCLA students enrolled in AAP.
- An interview guide was developed and used in an informal oral discussion format in a UCLA campus classroom.
- The main research questions were divided into three areas: knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, and behaviors. Knowledge: How do students define healthy lifestyle, and what type of sources do students use for health information? Attitudes and beliefs: What is the social norm regarding body image? What is their attitude and belief surrounding the ideal body image? Behaviors: What strategies do students use to gain, maintain, or lose weight? What are behaviors/strategies students use to counteract feelings of negative body image?
- The discussions were transcribed and then analyzed by the authors.
- Authors identified ideas and concepts around specific themes that were related to the main research questions.

### Major Themes

- Participants believe health has multiple facets, in particular: adequate sleep, consuming water, having a nutritious diet, maintaining a healthy weight, and exercising.
- Most students seek health information from the internet, magazines, television shows, and around campus.
- Students engage in unhealthy weight loss and maintenance strategies.
- The ideal appearance for the typical college student is to be thin.
- The norm is for students to express negative feelings about their body.
- Time and money are seen as barriers to health behaviors.
- Both the media and interpersonal relationships reinforce an unattainable body ideal. Negative body image affects students' romantic relationships.

### Recommendations

- Instead of a social norms approach, the authors recommend a social marketing campaign that focuses on self-expression, individuality, and the critical examination of body-related messages.
- The authors recommend replacing appearance and weight outcomes with short-term health outcomes as motivation for health-related behaviors.
- Because students expressed a sense of helplessness, the authors recommend the social marketing campaign focus on empowering students to make wise decisions about their health.

## Introduction

In 2000 the Eating & Activity Task (EATask) Force was established at UCLA. The three goals of the EATask Force are as follows:

1. To maximize student success, both academic and developmental, by minimizing modifiable nutrition and fitness-related health threats.\*
2. To change normative beliefs and behaviors, especially unrealistic body ideals and harmful dieting.
3. To promote a campus environment that enables students to eat well, be physically active, and feel good about diverse body shapes and sizes.<sup>1</sup>

In Fall of 2006, the EATask Force discussed previous research on eating disorder prevention, as well as social norms marketing campaigns that have been successful with college students around alcohol use.<sup>2</sup> Based on this discussion, the EATask Force decided to develop a social marketing campaign focused on positive messages about body image with a social norms approach (see appendix A for preliminary messages the EATask Force developed). The EATask Force plans to begin the campaign with pilot testing in the John Wooden Recreation Center during the next academic year (2007-2008), with the expectation to expand the campaign campus-wide. The authors conducted qualitative formative research with focus groups of UCLA students to assist the EATask Force in developing the campaign.

### Problem Statement

The term “body image” refers to the image a person holds about her/himself. Hutchinson defines it as “the image of the body that allows a person to know about emotions, sensations, bodily needs, and appetites, and to negotiate the physical environment; it is the image of the body a person hears about as she [or he] listens to her [or his] inner speech” (p. 153).<sup>3</sup> According to the National Eating Disorder Association, negative body image includes a distorted perception of one’s body; feeling ashamed, self-conscious, and anxious about one’s body; thinking of one’s body size or shape as a sign of a personal failure; and feeling uncomfortable or awkward in one’s body.<sup>4</sup> Body image needs to be addressed because of its influence on health, nutrition, dieting, and exercise behaviors, and its interference with social relationships and academic performance.

According to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the term “reciprocal determinism” refers to the dynamic continuous interaction between the characteristics of a person, the behavior of the person, and the environment within which behavior is performed.<sup>5</sup> Body image is a concept internal to a person, yet it is influenced by their actual and perceived appearance and is shaped by the person’s behavior, their environment, and their cognitive perceptions of their environment. According to SCT, all of these factors influence and interact with each other. Social influence is recognized as influencing people’s behavior by two means. Positive reinforcement received from others after performing a behavior can increase likelihood of behavior in the future, and observational

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\* Including overweight/obesity, eating disorders, disordered eating, disordered physical activity behaviors, sedentary lifestyle behaviors, size prejudice, and poor nutrition intake.

learning occurs when a person watches the behavior of another person and reinforcement she or he receives.<sup>5</sup>

### **College Students' Beliefs, Intentions, and Behaviors**

According to the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment Spring 2006 Reference Group Data Report, 36.4% of college students believe themselves to be overweight and 51.3% of students were currently attempting to lose weight.<sup>6</sup> According to Healthy People 2010 categories based on Body Mass Index, an estimated 26% of female students and 38% of male students are categorized as overweight or obese.<sup>7</sup> Sixty-one percent of female students reported intentions to lose weight.<sup>7</sup> Within the past month, 34.5% had dieted to lose weight and 55.2% had exercised to lose weight.<sup>6</sup> Also, 5.0% of female students reported taking diet pills and 4.0% of female students reported vomiting or using laxatives to lose weight in the previous month.<sup>6</sup>

Unhealthy diet practices among adolescents and young adults are of concern, as the research of Neumark-Sztainer et al. found these behaviors to predict future outcomes of both eating disorders and obesity.<sup>8</sup> Congruent with the previously mentioned National College Health Assessment, other data show that negative body image and disordered eating practices are present among college students. In a substantial convenience sample of students conducted by Hoerr et al. at a large university, 70% of female students reported eliminating foods based on fat gram content; 36% reported weight cycling; and 19% reported using laxatives, diet pills or diuretics.<sup>9</sup> For male students, 43% reported eliminating foods based on fat gram content, 36% reported weight cycling, and 9% reported having binged. Alarming, 21% of women and 11% of men experienced their concerns about eating or weight interfering with their social relationships, and 17% of women and 10% of men also experienced these concerns interfering with academic performance.<sup>9</sup>

A prospective study by Vohs, Heatherton, and Herrin examining women's disordered eating practices and their transition to college at Dartmouth University found more participants categorized themselves as overweight (even though the majority were not overweight according to national standards) and reported greater body dissatisfaction in college than in high school.<sup>10</sup> In addition, body image is of concern because of its association with smoking to control weight in women<sup>11</sup> and possible influences on sexual risk taking.<sup>12</sup>

### **Environmental Influences**

Promoting a positive body image runs against strong competition in the form of advertising, cultural norms, and gender roles. Individuals' negative body image is summarized in "normative discontent," which Striegel-Moore and Franko refer to as widely recognized pervasive negative feelings that girls and women experience towards their bodies.<sup>13</sup> According to Derenne and Beresin, women have been subjected to unrealistic and difficult standards of beauty throughout time.<sup>14</sup> The current media tell women and girls "that they can and should 'have it all,'" while inundating them with mixed messages about what is sexy (p. 258).<sup>14</sup>

Over the past twenty-five years, both media representations of the ideal male body (which is generally unattainable through natural means) and research on men's desire to lose weight and gain muscle have shown that men are also affected by negative body image.<sup>15,16</sup> Harvey and Robinson describe the current sociocultural ideal standard for men as a "V-shaped muscle structure," characterized by a narrow waist and well-developed chest, shoulders, and arms.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the use of anabolic steroids has increased the upper limits on attainable muscularity, altering the messages that boys and men receive about their bodies.<sup>15</sup> The metrosexual trend has inspired both gay and straight men to pay significant sums of money for hair removal and other appearance improvements.<sup>14</sup>

Renshaw describes how the evolution of modern plastic surgery has affected both men and women.<sup>18</sup> In addition to beauty and fashion advertising, the diet industry is also influential. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, Americans spend more than 40 billion dollars on dieting and diet-related products per year.<sup>19</sup>

## Study Population

### Demographics

In 2005, there were 24,800 UCLA undergraduate students.<sup>20</sup> The majority of first-year students had SAT scores between 1190 and 1400 and the average Grade Point Average was 4.13.<sup>20</sup> Thirty-eight percent of undergraduate students were Asian/Asian American, 34% were white, 15% were Hispanic, and 3% were African American.<sup>20</sup> About half (54%) participated in campus-based organizations, with 17% being active for more than four hours per week.<sup>20</sup> In 2006, UCLA accepted only 22.2% of applicants, the second lowest acceptance rate of all California public universities.<sup>21</sup>

### Knowledge

UCLA undergraduate students are high academic achievers and some study health-related information and body image in academic classes (5% are biology majors and 8% are psychology majors<sup>20</sup>), but it is unknown what specific health related knowledge most students have or what health information sources they seek or prefer, especially nutrition and exercise information. Health information does seem to be a priority to students because information is the top reason patients cite for visiting the Arthur Ashe Student Health and Wellness Center.<sup>22</sup>

### Attitudes and Beliefs

According to data from the 2006 Student Development Student Survey (K. McKinney, PhD, oral communication, presented to the EATask Force January 9, 2007) 30.7% of undergraduate students frequently maintain a positive body image. Nineteen percent of male and 24.9% of female students report maintaining a positive body image rarely or not at all. Forty-one percent of males and 43.8% of females report occasionally maintaining a positive body image. About 74% of Chicano/Latino students, 68% of Asian American students, and 63% of Caucasian students report maintaining a positive body image either occasionally or rarely/not at all.<sup>†</sup>

About half (48.2%) of undergraduates are frequently concerned about weight, and 37.7% are occasionally concerned about weight. Yet only 25.1% worry about health frequently, and 39.9% worry about health rarely or not at all. The discrepancies between percentages of students who frequently are concerned about weight in comparison to health suggest that concerns about weight are not necessarily driven solely by worries about health. The data from the Student Development Student Survey (SDSS) do not provide information about the barriers students face in maintaining a positive body image and the strategies they currently use to maintain a positive body image.

### Behaviors

Most undergraduates report frequently (28.4%) or occasionally (49.0%) maintaining a healthy diet. Considering differences by race and ethnicity, Caucasian students were most likely to report frequently maintaining a healthy diet (41.9%), while Chicano/Latino students were most likely to report maintaining a healthy diet rarely or not at all (31.1%). Data from the SDSS

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<sup>†</sup> Note: The N for African Americans was small and therefore this data was not included. However, the authors do not intend to disregard these students.

show that about a quarter of undergraduate students engage in physical activity one to two hours a week, and 30.5% engage three to five hours per week. About a quarter report exercising less than one hour per week. Fourteen percent engage in physical activity six to ten hours per week, and about 5% engage in physical activity 11 or more hours per week. The SDSS does not ask students to report motivations for exercising or the benefits they perceive from physical activity, nor does it ask why students do not engage in physical activity.

### **UCLA Environment**

There are many messages around the UCLA campus that will be competition to the EATask Force's campaign. The media messages experienced by the students, the close proximity of Hollywood, and messages communicated by the fashion industry are just a few of the environmental influences on UCLA students.

One of the authors (A.H.L.) conducted observational research of students' magazine readership behavior. The most popular magazines among female students are gossip magazines, particularly Cosmopolitan, US Weekly, and People, which typically sell out in the campus bookstores and feature physically thin, tall, and model-like women. The most commonly repeated words in one month's issues of "Cosmo" and US Weekly were the following: wild, beautiful, warmth, touch, perfection, glam, love, sweet, innocent, lovely, connect, sexy, animal, goddess, and bombshell. Women were typically depicted in two polar opposite images, either as an innocent, angelic woman or as a sex object.

Among male students, the most popular magazines are sports-related, in particular Sports Publishing LLC and Sports Illustrated. Common words and phrases in one month's issues of Maxim and Sports Illustrated were the following: action, adventure, innovation, perfection, wild, fun, me, sound body, not ordinary, strong, luxury, maximum, pursuit, liberty, domination, pleasure, seduction, game, power, and uncompromising. Frequently, images and words convey that men are to be physically and mentally strong and dominate others. Besides magazines, students also receive messages about their bodies in the Daily Bruin, which regularly runs plastic surgery advertisements.

Further convenience sample interviews revealed different concerns of students. One student felt images do not affect her and her friends, yet she admitted she feels she can not escape ads and that the BeBe store in Westwood pushes the message to be skinny by having thin mannequins in the window. Another student mentioned it is inevitable to gain weight in college because food is prepared differently than at home.

## Research Methodology

### Main Research Questions

Knowledge: How do students define “healthy lifestyle,” and what type of sources do students use for health information?

Attitudes and Beliefs: What are the social norms regarding body image? What are students’ attitudes and beliefs about the ideal body image?

Behaviors: What strategies do students use to gain, maintain, or lose weight? What behaviors/strategies do students use to counteract feelings of negative body image?

### Recruitment of Participants

Participants were recruited through multiple means. Fliers were distributed to EATask Force members during a monthly meeting. A flier was posted on the window of the Student Development Health Education office. The authors made an announcement about the focus groups during a section of the Life Skills for College Women and Men course, which is an academic undergraduate course offered through the Department of Community Health Sciences. The professor offered extra credit to students for participation in the focus groups.

Students were also recruited through one of the author’s (A.H.L.) employment with UCLA’s Academic Advancement Program (AAP). AAP is a multiracial program serving more than 6,500 students. The program’s goal is to provide nontraditional students access, equity, and an opportunity to excel at UCLA. AAP serves first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and students from underrepresented populations.

Refreshments (pizza, vegetables and dip, drinks, and cookies) were offered to encourage participation. A raffle was also conducted at the end of each focus group. Prizes consisted of a \$25 gift certificate to the UCLA Store and two fifteen-minute chair massages at the UCLA Recreation Center. All participants were offered highlighters and pens. The focus groups scheduled for forty-five minutes (at the suggestion of Kelley Carameli, Special Reader) to increase participation of students, who are busy and pressed for time, especially during Week 9 of the quarter when the focus groups were held. However, in the end, both focus groups lasted about 60 minutes.

### Participants

The final sample of participants came from AAP. A total of 22 students participated; 11 male students and 11 female students. The breakdown of students by class standing was as follows: four first-year, two second-year, 12 third-year, two fifth-year, one graduate student, and one unknown. The breakdown of students by ethnicity was as follows: 11 Latino, three Asian American, two Persian, one African American, and one Garifuna, as well as four students of mixed ethnicity. The first focus group consisted of 12 students and the second focus group had 10. There was a majority of males (nine) in the first group and a majority of females (eight) in the second. See appendix B for detailed participant demographics.

## **Research Methods**

The research instrument used was a group interview guide. The authors met with Jill DeJager, M.P.H, R.D., Nutrition Education Coordinator, for her input on the research questions. One of the authors (E.H.) presented the project to the EATask Force and asked for members' suggestions about information that would be beneficial for the task force in planning the social marketing campaign next year. The authors then developed a guide that was revised with the help of Kelley Carameli. The interview guide was administered orally in an informal discussion format in a UCLA classroom.

Two focus groups were conducted. During the sessions, one author moderated the discussion while the other took notes on the computer. The recorded discussions were later transcribed. Because there were only two focus groups the authors were able to code the themes with ease, therefore an intensive coding procedure such as using qualitative analysis software for coding was unnecessary.<sup>23</sup> In many cases, transcription coding would be processed and filtered through many levels.<sup>24</sup> First coding would be performed on a macro level and trickle down to a micro level, meaning that the coded material has become completely saturated and redundancy of the themes has materialized.<sup>25</sup> The authors followed a similar procedure, yet the process was not nearly as extensive as a professional coding strategy.<sup>26</sup>

The authors initially read the transcriptions aloud and compared the two transcripts to tease out common themes used on a macro level. The interview guides developed for the focus groups were helpful when it came to separating the topics because the questions were already segmented into a progressive flow. The authors then categorized the material, grouping ideas and concepts. The authors identified the themes as follows: Students' Definition of Health; Influences on Health Knowledge and Behavior; Perception of the Ideal Student Appearance, Thoughts about Body Image; Strategies for Maintaining and Losing Weight; and Strategies to Maintain a Positive Body Image.

## Focus Group Findings

### Students' Definition of Health

The students in the focus groups defined “health” and “healthy lifestyle” as multi-component factors. They included the following as the many facets that produce a healthy lifestyle: getting adequate sleep, consuming water, having a nutritious diet, maintaining a healthy weight, and getting plenty of exercise. These were all ideas or words that were mentioned numerous times when defining health. Some ideas or words that were not mentioned frequently, but were heavily emphasized, were “managing good mental and emotional health” and “time management.” Participants’ comments included the following:

*The amount of food you intake with the amount of exercise that you do- in addition to being healthy physically with balancing your time –your study time with your social time- being able to balance not too much of studying and you have to get out there and involve yourself.*

*I think really being healthy is not just having your body be like. It’s actually having nutrition, except it also means being able to stay awake in class and stuff like that. It’s a lot more than just eating. You also need sleep, which is really difficult because it is hard to get sleep, and then also not being able to eat properly and then not being able to make it out to the gym.*

### Influences on Health Knowledge and Behavior

One of the questions Jill DeJager posed for the research was, “where do students get their health information?” Students reported retrieving health information from the following sources: the internet, television, magazines and around campus. Students access health information on medical school websites, webMD site, and other sites such as Hotmail. Some stated that there are headlines for Hotmail websites that pop-up and share health information; however, they are concerned about the credibility of information from these sites.

Television is another major source students turn to for health information. Students watch reality shows such as “The Biggest Loser,” Dr. Oz on Oprah, and Dr. Phil. One of the authors (E.H) viewed several video clips of Dr. Oz and found the information to be similar to conventional medical and nutrition knowledge. However this information is presented with the goals of looking younger and more attractive. Magazines such as Men’s Health, Cosmo girl, Cosmopolitan-yoga sections and other fitness and health magazines were also mentioned frequently as a source for health information. Students said they follow diets and exercise plans presented in magazines.

Another major source to which students reported turning for health information was services on the UCLA campus. The Center for Women and Men, Student Psychological Services, and academic classes were all mentioned frequently by students in the focus groups. Few mentioned the SNAC tents in the dining hall as a resource. They also mentioned that one barrier to accessing resources around campus is that there is not enough publicity surrounding the events. Other sources of health information included health instructors, scare tactics,

and being in tuned with your own body – listening and being aware of one’s own needs. Participants explained:

*Medical schools have web sites- Harvard website you can get Body Mass Index and the amount of calories you need for your weight and height. Even at UCLA website you can find information.*

*In the dining halls they have the little tent things that has information that tells you how much fruits and vegetables you are suppose to eat, but I don’t know how many fruits and vegetables you are suppose to eat. But it has an information sheet and even on the shuttles they have information about classes, hotline, and all that type of stuff. I see it around campus and they have it around.*

*I don’t know, kind of I guess scare tactics for me work. Knowing like what is going to happen and the different types of fat on your body that is bad. Like I didn’t know the fat in your stomach is worse than fat stored on other parts of your body... scare tactics really work for me. I find myself motivated by them.*

### **Perceptions of the Ideal Students’ Appearance**

When first asked to describe the typical college student’s appearance, participants gave politically correct answers such as “we are all different” and “we come in all different shapes and sizes.” However, as the discussion progressed, the participants felt more comfortable and were more honest about how they visualized the appearance of a typical college student. They explained the ideal image of a college student as having blonde hair, blue eyes, and being very thin. Other descriptive words include “over-exercised” and “not overweight.” They frequently made connections between being thin and living in LA and Hollywood. Comments about this included:

*Here at UCLA, it appears that a lot of people seem to be over exercising- they are very, very thin but they are still jogging.*

*Your peers are a big influence- your friend is chasing someone who is blonde and blue eyes- you are not like that... prints in a magazine and the media who perpetuate it. It will psychologically mess with you. Especially the one who you like- likes some one else who are blond and blue eyed and you are dark and they like blonde blue eyed etc. We are not the majority and we don’t look like that.*

### **Thoughts about Body Image**

All of the participants verbalized that they were not satisfied with their own body. Negative words as strong as “hate” were used when asked how they felt about their bodies. No matter what body size each participant had, everyone mentioned some dissatisfaction. Their comments revealed that there was evident unhappiness regarding their weight and they also felt that they could not do anything to change it. The conversations frequently included the idea that everyone constantly thinks about the way their body looks and their desire to change. Participants also stated that they compare themselves to others and to how they have looked in the past. This action would result in either feeling better or worse about themselves. Comments included:

*They are conscious of the fact that they are not satisfied with it, but at the same time they are like I have to do the paper or study for this test. I can't go to the gym, I have to do this.*

*This one student brought up the fact that she wished she was skinnier but then she saw someone else and she wishes she was skinnier and the other student was like, if I looked like that I would be fine with that.*

*The thing is you compare yourself to yourself. People are like, why do you think you are overweight; you look skinny. That is to you, but to me I have my own criteria. I am not trying to offend you by saying I want to be skinnier. I am comparing myself to me, not to you. I have my own criteria. It's not like you aren't good enough.*

### **Barriers to Achieving Health**

Although most students noted that they wanted to change some aspect of their body, they felt there were barriers that prevented them from making those changes. The frequently mentioned barriers were time, money, and school life. Many students felt they do not have enough time to accomplish all the demands in a day. They felt that they were either giving up sleep or exercise. They also agreed across the board that money was an issue. They stated that achieving a healthy lifestyle requires more money. For example, they were frustrated that the campus salad bar cost more than a hamburger meal that includes fries and a large soft drink. They noted that generally it costs money to buy healthy foods and to hire a personal trainer or join a gym. Yet, they also mentioned that there was nothing wrong with walking around the track. The following comments demonstrate this:

*My rich friends are a lot skinner than people who are struggling with their money because they can afford a four dollar loaf of bread that is whole grain or all grain and it's good for them.*

*I went to the salad bar and spent like nine dollars because I got fruit and salad...*

*[Another student interrupts]: that isn't just with food- fitness and everything too. Because I feel like I don't have the money to put into it I don't have the resources to know what kinds of exercises that are really appropriate for my body*

### **Barriers to Maintaining a Positive Body Image**

Many felt that the media, including magazines, music videos, and television shows, are all powerful sources that reinforce the unattainable body. In addition to the media, negative body messages are also delivered and reinforced by the participants' family, friends, romantic partners, and community by commenting on unattractive body parts. This is further impacted by clothing stores such as Hollister that only carry clothing in smaller sizes. Participants said the following:

*But then shopping for clothes like that I think is really difficult for people who are overweight. Because sometimes you don't even know how overweight you even are until you go try clothes on and they don't fit right. And you are like, I used to be this size, like a year ago and I am not anymore. And that is, you feel really depressed.*

### **Strategies for maintaining, losing, gaining weight**

There were many methods listed as strategies students use to maintain, lose, and gain weight. The strategies were the following: not eating, protein diet, laxatives, fiber, liquid diet (Slimfast, smoothies), cleanse diet, eat fruits and small portions, eating healthy, exercising, lower consumption, cereal diets, reasonable portions, supplements, checking in with a doctor, replacing food obsessions, drugs, and having role models (Oprah). Some also mentioned replacing obsessive behavior regarding food with other activity and focusing on being healthy instead of eating healthy to be thin. One female student talked about the need to develop a connection between physical and mental health as a way to have a healthy lifestyle. Comments made by participants included the following:

*I hear people do cereal diets, where they go to the store and just buy cereal and that is their breakfast, lunch, and dinner all day long. Just to try to get thinner. As matter of fact, Special K put out a commercial that says in two weeks you loose 20 pounds if you do this diet where you eat this for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.*

*I have done, like, the Men's health diet. It says that men should not lose a lot of weight more like go to the gym and stay fit. It may be more complicated to do and it is more expensive, but when I do that, like when I eat Creatine and other things, it's expensive, but it is worth it and my body feels good. I want to help my body and eat healthy- I think it is important.*

### **Strategies to Maintain a Positive Body Image**

When asked about strategies they use to counteract negative body image messages, all the students in the first focus group laughed at the question and commented, "What strategies," suggesting that they do not have strategies to alleviate the pressure of feeling bad about their bodies. After probing, they provided a few suggestions. They mentioned focusing on dancing or activities that make them feel good about their bodies. Common themes that emerged in the focus group discussion were watching less television, being more mindful of food consumption, eating healthy foods, and developing a spiritual connection.

An interesting idea that was disclosed was the behavior of comparing themselves to others. Earlier this was mentioned as a cause for participants feeling negative about their bodies, but was then discussed as a strategy used to feel better about their bodies. The reason for this disparity, they stated, is that it depends to whom you are comparing yourself.

Another insightful comment made by a male in the first focus group was to maintain a realistic image of one's self. He mentioned that each individual can not do things in the same way as everyone else. He urged students to accept their own body type and work within their abilities. A girl next to him supported his argument and also added that maturity is a factor in maintaining a positive body image.

Another male talked about how girls need reassurance regarding how they look. To compensate for their lack of self esteem, girls would participate in sexual

activity to get affirmation about their attractiveness. While this type of behavior is acknowledged by the students in the focus group, many participants also mentioned that in romantic relationships, if the girl is not confident, it affects the intimacy of the relationship. Males in the focus groups commented that it is not just the physical appearance of a girl that is important because if a girl does not have a good personality, the relationship will not last. Participants' comments included the following:

*When you compare to someone who is lesser than you, then it makes you feel better.*

*Just maintaining a realistic image about yourself. You are an individual; there are many things about you that are individual so- why would your body be any different. There are certain foods I can't eat that others can eat. There are certain things that I have to avoid. I don't want to pretend that I can. My whole thing is that I have friends who are 6'4" we go to Jack in the Box and we would all order the same thing. After a while I realized that I am a foot shorter than them- They have room to put this stuff and I can't eat the way they do. I had to think through this a bit- I can't order what they order- I am smaller. You have to develop a realistic perspective, you are not going to look like Johnny Depp or Angelina Jolie unless you are lucky.*

*When I hang out with UCLA girls- I feel like they need that special attention- girl needs reassurance by getting sexually active- she may not be cute enough or sexy enough. She might make it sexual when we just want to be friends – by getting that sexual attention they feel attractive.*

## Summary of Findings

From the focus groups, the authors found that all participants were conscious of their weight. Trying to lose weight was common among participants, which is congruent with national data.<sup>6</sup> The strategies used to lose, maintain, or gain weight among the participants were also similar to the strategies used nationally by college students. Both the studies and the participants listed the following strategies as methods to lose weight: exercising, dieting, use of diet pills, use of laxatives, and use of supplements. One method mentioned in the national studies but not mentioned by the participants was vomiting.<sup>6</sup>

Another topic that both the national studies and the participants discussed is that body image interferes with students' lives. In the national survey some students reported that body image affects their academic performance. Although the participants in this study did not mention body image interfering with academics, they did say it deters students from going to the beach, swimming, and other activities. Also participants discussed that weight does affect their social relationships, in particular romantic relationships. Males discussed how low esteem in their girlfriends impedes the development and intimacy of the relationship.

One study found that as females transition from high school to college, they typically greater dissatisfaction about their bodies.<sup>10</sup> This is congruent with participants' reports that they compare their current body size with their previous body size. In addition to comparing their own bodies with others, they analyze and compare their own bodies throughout time. Often, a negative feeling is developed about current body state.

A strong and unforgettable point that was made in the focus group was that everyone said they were dissatisfied with their bodies. The same theme is also confirmed in various studies across the nation that there is a normative discontent among college students regarding their bodies. Currently, this lack of body-esteem not only affects women, but also affects men in large proportions. Another strong point that was made was that most of them feel they experience additional dissatisfaction regarding their body image because they have to deal with the color of their skin (race issues). They said that being a minority they not only have to deal with weight issues, but they also have to embrace being a person of color.

### Recommendations

Based on participants' comments, the authors are concerned that students will not be receptive to a social norms marketing campaign. A social norms campaign could increase comparisons students make between their bodies and those of others, thus further alienating students who do not match the norm. The authors recommend instead focusing on individuality and questioning the messages students receive from the media and peers. The campaign could focus on self-expression, individuality, and the critical examination of body related messages. The authors also recommend including specific strategies to deal with negative self-thoughts because students had difficulty describing strategies they use to maintain a positive body image.

Participants also mentioned that when shifting the focus from weight loss to healthy lifestyle, they want concrete outcomes and results they can recognize. They do not want an intangible idea such as life long mission to optimal health. They would like have markers that will help them witness their progress. The authors recommend a focus on the short-term positive health outcomes, such as academic performance and feeling physically well. Currently, students see appearance and weight as the outcomes of healthy behaviors.

The authors have concerns that without adequate pre-testing of materials a social marketing campaign could unintentionally perpetuate the belief that weight is only a concern for women. Men are also facing pressures regarding weight and this should be addressed in the campaign. The authors suggest complementing the campaign with other interventions that include enhancing the UCLA SNAC website to be more attractive to students as a branded plan specifically developed to meet their needs. The authors suggest the EATask Force build stronger relationships with organizations from student government to help develop health programs that reach out to all students.

The authors are also concerned about the health implications of weight loss and management techniques students use and recommend Ashe Center clinicians receive training to discuss and counsel students about these issues. They conclude that with a comprehensive intervention, UCLA students will be empowered to make wise decisions about their health.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitations of the research were in reaching and recruiting participants, and time constraints of the focus groups. Reaching and recruiting college students was very difficult because the authors were competing with not only the students' school work, but many other social activities. Although many methods of outreach and recruitment were utilized, the two focus groups formed were not representative of the whole campus. Thus the information gathered can not be generalized to the UCLA population.

Another limitation is the limited time used for conducting the focus groups. Typically focus groups last about two hours. Time is a limited commodity among college students; therefore, Kelley Carameli advised the authors to hold the focus groups to 45 minutes due to the fear of losing participants. Although there were enough participants, the time allocated was short and the authors were not able to ask all the questions from their interview guide. In addition, the students had more thoughts to share on the topic than time allowed. Later, some students disclosed to one of the authors (A.H.L) that they continued the conversation after the focus group session on their own.

## **Appendix A**

### **Preliminary Messages Developed by the EATask Force**

- Healthy and fit Bruins come in all shapes and sizes. Challenge size prejudice.
- Enjoy your food. Food is fuel for optimal mental and physical performance. Take time to eat regularly, typically three meals every day with snacks in between if needed.
- Respond to your body's internal signals of hunger and fullness- eat when you are hungry and stop when you are physically full. Be conscious of eating when you are not hungry and identify alternative outlets other than food.
- Avoid labeling foods as "good" or "bad" and view them as fuel for your body. All foods can fit into a balanced, healthy eating plan.
- Live actively, in your own way, each day. Focus on the pleasure of movement and its health and energy benefits.
- Don't overdo it. Too much exercise, like too much of anything, can hurt rather than improve your health and performance.
- Moderate, fun physical activity can fit into a busy college life.
- Take time in your busy day to relax and relieve stress.
- Check your attitude. Give yourself the positive messages you deserve.

## Appendix B

**Table 1&2. Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants**

Wednesday		
Sex	Year	Ethnicity
Male		Latino
Male	Third	Mexican
Male	Third	Chicano
Male	Third	Mexican
Male	Third	Chinese
Male	Third	Latino
Male	Third	1/2Chicano, 1/2Causian
Male	Fourth	Garifuna
Male	Fourth	Latino
Female	Third	Asian American
Female	Third	Latina
Female	Graduate Student	Chicana

Thursday		
Sex	Year	Ethnicity
Female	First	Black and White
Female	First	African American
Female	First	Hispanic/Mexican American
Female	First	Vietnamese
Female	Third	Persian
Female	Third	Persian
Female	Third	Latina
Female	Third	Hispanic
Male	Second	Mixed
Male	Second	Mixed

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

#### Introduction (10 minutes)

- Welcome participants and introduce ourselves.
- Explain the general purpose of the discussion.
- Discuss the purpose and process of focus groups
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment
- Outline general ground rules and discussion guidelines such as the importance of everyone speaking up, talking one at a time, and being prepared for the moderator to interrupt to assure that all the topics can be covered.
- Address the issue of confidentiality.
- Inform the group that information discussed is going to be analyzed as a whole and that participants' names will not be used in any analysis of the discussion.

#### EXAMPLE:

We would like the discussion to be informal, so there's no need to wait for us to call on you to respond. In fact, we encourage you to respond directly to the comments other people make. If you don't understand a question, please let us know. We are here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share.

If we seem to be stuck on a topic, we may interrupt you and if you aren't saying much, we may call on you directly. If we do this, please don't feel bad about it; it's just our way of making sure everyone's perspectives and opinions are included.

We do ask that we all keep each other's identities, participation and remarks private. We hope you'll feel free to speak openly and honestly.

As discussed, we will be tape recording the discussion because we don't want to miss any of your comments. No one outside of this room will have access to these tapes and they will be destroyed after our report is written.

#### The interview section (30 minutes)

1. As a college student, how do you stay "healthy" and what does "healthy" mean to you?
  - Several of you mentioned "losing weight, exercising" so if you want to find out information about a healthy lifestyle, where would you turn?
  - What specific sources do you utilize for health information?
2. When you visualize a typical college student, what is his/her appearance?
  - In your opinion, is this a healthy image?
3. How do you think most college students feel about their bodies?
  - Do you think weight is related to how college students feel about their bodies? Why/why not?
4. What are some strategies your peers use to lose, maintain, or gain weight?

- (some may say: supplements, fasting, exercise, dieting, purging, restrictive eating)
  - Several of you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ tell me more about that?
  - What do you think about it? What's your opinion on that?
  - What's your reaction?
  - What do you think of these strategies?
  - How does this fit into what you think about health?
5. How do you think the strategies are influenced by different events?
    - Example: shopping, watching the Grammy's, awards, exams/study, vacation
  6. What pressures do you feel regarding what you should look like?
    - Where do these messages come from? Please explain.
    - (they might say: friends, family, romantic partners, media)
  7. What are some of the strategies/messages you use to counteract these pressures?
    - What would you like to hear?
  8. What other comments do you have to share that we didn't ask tonight about body image or weight regarding college students?

**The wrap up (5 minutes)**

Closing remarks

Thank the participants

Raffle

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