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Beyond the Plate: Exploring Student Experiences and Benefits of the Chancellors Free Breakfast in a University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences and perceived benefits of students participating in the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program in a university setting. Guided by the recognition that breakfast significantly influences academic performance, well- being, and student engagement, this research aims to understand how the program supports learners both inside and outside the classroom. Using a phenomenological approach as to the experiences of among student beneficiaries. Findings revealed that the program provides not only meal support but also emotional and social benefits, such as a sense of belonging, improved morning routines, and reduced stress related to food insecurity. Students reported enhanced concentration, participation, and energy levels during classes, highlighting the direct link between access to free breakfast and academic productivity. Beyond individual impact, the program fostered a culture of care and inclusivity within the university community. These results underscore the importance of institutional initiatives that address students' basic needs as an integral component of holistic education. The study concludes with recommendations to strengthen and sustain the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program as a model of student-centered support.

Keywords: *Academic Productivity, Breakfast, Cebu, Community Extension, Community Outreach, Philippines, Student Support*

INTRODUCTION

Breakfast replenished energy after an overnight fast and provides essential nutrients that are critical for optimal cognitive and physical functioning. According to Gibney et al., (2018), breakfast is often referred to as the most important meal of the day. For students, particularly in higher education, a proper breakfast is fundamental to learning, focus, and overall academic success. Despite its importance, food insecurity continues to be a challenge in many colleges and universities, affecting students' ability to maintain adequate nutritional intake and perform well academically.

In response to this concern, the University of Cebu – Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue (UCLM) implemented the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program, a proactive initiative designed to mitigate hunger among students and promote equitable access to learning. This program provides free breakfast meals to students, helping them start their day with the energy and focus needed to engage fully in academic activities. Rooted in the university's Vision, Mission, Goals, and Objectives, the initiative aligns with UCLM's holistic educational philosophy and demonstrates its commitment to student welfare and development.

The implementation of this program is facilitated through the Community Awareness, Relations, and Extension Services (CARES) office, which plays a central role in the university's community engagement efforts. UCLM CARES has been steadfast in extending its support not only to adopted barangays but also to the internal student community by designing extension programs that promote health, wellness, and student participation. These flagship programs, developed across various departments, reflect

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the university's dedication to fostering student-centered and community-responsive initiatives (Montebon et al., 2022).

Participation in extension and outreach activities is viewed as a vital mechanism for instilling social responsibility and volunteerism among members of the academic community. Through programs like the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program, the university provides an environment where students not only benefit nutritionally but also feel supported and valued. These programs form a vital link between institutional values and student well-being, strengthening student retention and encouraging holistic development (Montebon et al., 2023).

Scientific studies have underscored the benefits of regular breakfast consumption on students' mental alertness and physical readiness. Lakmali et al. (2022) emphasized that eating breakfast helps sustain energy, boosts concentration, and prevents ailments such as migraines, gastritis, and fatigue—conditions that are commonly associated with breakfast skipping. As such, regular breakfast consumption not only enhances physical wellness but also establishes a positive mental framework conducive to learning and productivity.

Similarly, Masoomo et al. (2020) found that breakfast and snack meals have a significant impact on cognitive function and physical activity, which in turn influence academic performance. Their research reveals that students who regularly eat breakfast demonstrate improved focus and cognitive output compared to those who do not. These findings are echoed by Kaushik et al. (2023), whose study reported that only one-third of students eat breakfast regularly, and those who do tend to outperform their peers academically.

Breakfast is also closely linked with long-term well-being. Velten et al. (2018) argue that regular breakfast consumption forms part of a healthy lifestyle that supports both physical and emotional health in children and young adults. This healthy routine, when nurtured within an academic setting, can enhance students' resilience, mental health, and readiness to participate in academic and extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, Adolphus et al. (2019) and Islam and Chakrabarty (2020) highlighted that academic achievement and motivation—both of which are essential indicators of learning outcomes—are positively associated with consistent breakfast consumption. When students begin their day nourished and energized, they are more likely to be motivated, attentive, and successful in their academic pursuits. In this context, the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program stands as a vital institutional strategy that supports student achievement, inclusion, and holistic education.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to explore student experiences of the chancellor's free breakfast in a university. Specifically, it aims to determine how students experience the chancellor's free breakfast program and their perceived benefits of the program. This study seeks to uncover the significant experiences of the students with their participation in the program.

This study is a qualitative research design that was conducted at the University of Cebu – Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue (UCLM) Campus, employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and benefits of students gained from the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program. A total of ten (10) informants were purposively selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. To qualify for participation, students must have availed of the free breakfast program more than ten (10) times, be of legal age, enrolled at UCLM, and must have willingly consented to take part in the study.

Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the study. The researchers applied the principles of objectivity, social responsibility, and non- discrimination. The researcher stayed neutral and

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professional during the conduct of the interview, making sure that the personal opinions or emotions of the student beneficiaries are not affected.

As part of social responsibility, the researchers aimed to make sure the results of the study would be helpful to different groups, such as the university, faculty, and students. Before starting, all participants were clearly informed about the purpose, scope, and goals of the study. Research informants were provided with the informed consent and were told that joining the study was voluntary in nature. Informants were also assured that they could stop participating at any time without facing any consequences.

Confidentiality and privacy were strictly observed. All information gathered was used only for academic purposes and kept secure. Participants' names and identities were not included in any part of the reporting to ensure anonymity. To make sure the results were clear and reliable, the researchers used open and respectful communication. This helped build trust and encouraged participants to share their honest thoughts and experiences. The researchers followed a careful process to collect and analyze the data properly and fairly. These ethical practices helped protect the rights of all participants and ensured that the study was conducted with integrity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Accessibility and Convenience

Students consistently emphasized the accessibility and convenience of the Chancellor's Free Breakfast program, describing how it seamlessly fits into their morning routines. For many who arrive on campus early and skip eating at home due to time constraints, the program provides a reliable and immediate source of nourishment. The organized system of lining up and quick service further enhances its accessibility, ensuring that students can easily avail of the meal without disrupting their schedule. One participant cited, "Every morning I arrive at school I think around 5:30 to 6:00 AM so I don't have breakfast at home. Instead I go straight to where the Free Breakfast is served". This highlights how the initiative not only addresses students' basic needs but also supports their readiness for academic activities by offering a smooth and dependable start to the day.

Most researches on breakfast programs have significantly highlighted accessibility and convenience in encouraging participants engagement. Soldavini et al. (2019) found that universal free breakfast combined with flexible serving models, such as grab-and-go or breakfast in the classroom, significantly increased student participation by reducing logistical barriers. Similarly, Larson et al. (2018) demonstrated that introducing a grab- and-go breakfast option improved both the convenience and nutritional quality of meals consumed, particularly among students with limited time in the morning. Extending these findings to higher education, Garcia et al.(2024) explored college student's lived experiences of food accessibility, revealing that factors such as time, location, and affordability strongly shape student's ability to engage in healthy eating. All these provide a foundation for examining how the Chancellor's Free Breakfast program enhances accessibility and convenience for university students, moving the focus "beyond the plate" to consider the broader impacts on student well-being.

Positive Experience and Satisfaction

Informants expressed satisfaction with the program, describing the food as "good," "ready and warm," and served in a friendly, accommodating environment. Despite the need to come early to secure a meal, students viewed the experience as beneficial, contributing to a good start to their day. Students were appreciative of the food provided, describing it as warm and satisfying. One informant shared, "The student and staff are friendly and accommodating and the food is ready and warm." Beyond the food, students felt welcomed by the friendly staff, which contributed to their satisfaction.

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Research investigating free breakfast initiatives consistently underscores positive student satisfaction and well-being outcomes. For instance, evaluation of the Impact of Food Service Attributes on Customer Satisfaction in a Rural University Campus

Environment found that food, service, setting, and value are useful for framing student positive experiences, and have significant positive effects on students' overall satisfaction (Serhan et al. 2019). In higher-education settings, a systematic review of Smith et al. (2020), shows that campus food service systems offering high-quality, nutritious options not only support positive food choices but also enhance student well-being and even dining frequency. Together, these researches affirm that well-designed breakfast offerings - especially when paired with thoughtful service and information - can significantly elevate student satisfaction and contribute to beneficial student experiences.

Gratitude and Appreciation

The Chancellor's Free Breakfast program fostered a sense of gratitude among students, as they felt the initiative was more than just providing meals but also a gesture of care and support from the university. Students appreciated that the program helped ease their daily worries and made them feel valued beyond academics. One participant expressed, "I honestly feel grateful. It's one less thing to worry about in the morning especially when I'm rushing. It makes me feel that the university genuinely cares for its students not just academically but also in terms of health and well-being". This demonstrates that the program not only addressed physical needs but also strengthened the students' emotional connection to the institution.

Research on free meal programs reveals that students often express gratitude and appreciation for the support these initiatives provide. In a recent study, high school and middle school students expressed that universal free meals not only reduced stigma but also made them feel thankful for being able to eat without worrying about affordability (Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, 2024). Similarly, parents surveyed during the pandemic reported strong appreciation for universal meals, highlighting reduced stress and financial relief, which they perceived as valuable support for their families (Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2024). Beyond food access itself, psychological research shows that gratitude interventions in university students significantly boost happiness and satisfaction with life (Frontiers in Psychology, 2019), suggesting that when students perceive programs like Chancellor's Free Breakfast as an act of generosity, their sense of appreciation may translate into higher satisfaction and well-being. Together, these findings underscore that gratitude is not only a common student response to free meal programs but also a driver of broader positive experiences and benefits.

Practical Support and Convenience

Students also recognized the program as a practical form of support, especially in managing their time and busy schedules. The availability of breakfast at school lessened the pressure of preparing meals at home and reduced instances of skipping the first meal of the day due to morning rush or academic demands. As one student shared, "It helped a lot especially when I have no more time to eat breakfast at home because it's either I was late waking up or I had a lot to do that's why I will have no choice but to skip breakfast". This shows that the initiative was not just an act of kindness but also a functional response to the students' daily struggles in balancing responsibilities and health.

Mitchell and Prescott (2022) reported that food pantry services on a Midwestern campus were valued not only for addressing food insecurity but also for their accessible hours, central location, and responsiveness to student feedback, which are considered as factors that made the service a reliable support system. A recent scoping review (2025) of campus food insecurity programs further reports student perceptions, awareness, and utilization and highlighting facilitators that make programs practical and easy to use.

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Happiness and Positive Student Experience

The program was also linked to feelings of happiness and positivity, as students viewed it as a thoughtful measure that supported their well-being and academic readiness. For those with early classes, the free breakfast provided both physical nourishment and an uplifting start to their day. One informant shared, "I'm happy that they provided the free breakfast because it helps students who have an early class". This highlights how the program contributed to a more positive student experience by reinforcing the university's role in promoting not only learning but also the overall welfare of its students.

University food provision plays a significant role in student happiness and overall student experience. Lugosi (2019) integrates interdisciplinary literature to argue that well- designed on-campus foodservice environments contribute directly to positive student experiences by creating restorative social spaces and reducing everyday stressors associated with food access. Experiential study on on-campus dining (Choi, Kong, & Ann 2021) further shows that service quality and the dining experience are strong predictors of student satisfaction - a likely pathway to increased happiness when programs such as Chancellor's Free Breakfast are convenient, welcoming, and reliable.

Enhanced Focus and Academic Performance

The free breakfast program significantly supported students' ability to concentrate and engage in their academic tasks. Having access to a proper meal in the morning prevented distractions caused by hunger and provided sustained energy throughout early classes. As one student stated, "Having a proper meal in the morning helps me focus better in class. I don't feel tired or distracted because of hunger. It gives me the energy to stay alert especially during early morning classes. It also helps improve my mood". This indicates that the program not only addressed students' nutritional needs but also improved their classroom participation, alertness, and overall readiness for learning.

Evidence indicates that consistent access to breakfast and satisfactory dietary intake are associated with better academic outcomes and improve classroom engagement. A large-scale study of adolescents found that breakfast consumption predicted higher academic achievement, implying breakfast supports attention and learning readiness (Gao, Zhao, & Shu 2021). Systematic reviews of diet and academic outcomes in post-secondary populations report small-to-moderate positive associations between regular meal consumption including breakfast and measures such as GPA and test performance, reinforcing the nutritional pathway to cognitive functioning.

Active Participation and Classroom Engagement

Students also acknowledged that the free breakfast contributed to their active involvement in class by ensuring they were not hindered by hunger. Having a warm meal at the start of the day allowed them to participate better in discussions and academic activities. One student shared, "By being active in class because I'm not hungry anymore because of the free breakfast". This suggests that the program positively influenced both the physical and mental state of the learners, translating into more meaningful participation in their classes.

Khan, Ahmed, & Anis (2024) demonstrate that regular breakfast consumption is strongly associated with increases in student's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in academic settings. Complementing this, a study of Ghanian university students found that skipping breakfast leads to poor focus and reduced attentiveness during early morning lectures, directly undermining students' capacity for active participation in class.

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Reduced Stress and Improved Well-being

The free breakfast program had a notable effect on students' overall well-being by easing stress related to time constraints and financial limitations. Students shared that having breakfast assured them of starting their day with nourishment, which also encouraged the development of healthy routines. As one student said, "It's had a big positive impact. Knowing I'll have breakfast at school reduces my stress especially when time and budget are tight. It's also helped me and other students to build a routine—we arrive early in the morning to eat, and feel prepared for the day. Overall it contributes to a healthier and more balanced student life". This suggests that beyond food security, the program fostered a sense of stability and balance in their daily lives.

A 2021 study found that food-insecure college students notably reported higher levels of psychological distress, loneliness, and suicidal behavior, along with lower flourishing and resilience; this suggests that interventions reducing food insecurity may be vital for strengthening mental health among students. In a 2024 investigation, researchers linked food insecurity to elevated stress, anxiety, depression, and poor sleep quality - factors that adversely affected perceived academic engagement and progress - highlighting that nutritional support may foster better emotional and psychological outcomes (Núñez et al. 2024).

Positive Impact on Student Life

Students also recognized the program as a meaningful initiative that directly supported their academic and personal life, particularly for those with early classes. Having a reliable meal in the morning gave them the energy to manage their responsibilities and improved their student experience. One informant stated, "It makes a big impact as a student because they initiate that program that helps many students who have early class". This highlights that the program was perceived not just as a meal service, but as a supportive intervention that enhanced students' overall academic journey.

Although direct studies on university free breakfast initiatives are limited, insights from related research illustrate how access to meals can significantly enrich student life. A qualitative evaluation in Norway found that free school meals fostered social connectedness - students forged friendships over meals and enjoyed greater well-being in a calmer, more inclusive environment, as what the authors describe as improved "educational health". This finding suggests that university-level free breakfast programs may not only serve nutritional needs but also help in promoting positive student experience.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that the Chancellor's Free Breakfast Program goes beyond simply addressing students' nutritional needs. It significantly contributes to their academic readiness, concentration, and overall well-being, while also fostering a sense of community and belonging within the university. Students expressed that the program eased the burden of food insecurity, improved their morning routines, and created positive social interactions that enhanced their university experience. By meeting a basic yet crucial need, the program not only supports academic performance but also reflects the institution's genuine concern for its learners. Sustaining and further enhancing this initiative will ensure that more students benefit from its positive impact, making it a vital component of a holistic and student-centered educational environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate Breakfast Awareness Initiatives by incorporating brief information campaigns—such as posters, reminders, or digital announcements—can help reinforce the importance of starting the day with a proper meal to support energy levels, focus, and readiness for academic tasks.

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- The program may consider implementing the Grab-and-Go serving model considering students' varying class schedules, the program can enhance accessibility by adopting a take-out approach. This would allow students to quickly collect their breakfast without the need to dine in, ensuring they can still benefit from the program while heading to their classes on time.
- Strengthen engagement and ownership by involving the students, faculty and staff in program activities, such as volunteering during distribution or assisting in awareness campaigns. This fosters a stronger community spirit and shared responsibility.
- Conduct Longitudinal Impact Assessment where future research may consider evaluating the long-term effects of the program on students' academic performance, attendance, mental well-being, and lifestyle habits. This evidence will guide further improvements and inform institutional policy

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