

Menstrual Equity in Public Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify menstrual hygiene product¹ availability, accessibility, and barriers to access among students at a public university in the triangle area of North Carolina. Utilizing both an online survey and individual interviews with students and campus stakeholders, this paper assesses the menstrual needs of students at North Carolina State University. Based on research findings, recommendations to relevant bodies regarding policy changes and program implementation have been developed.

Introduction

National Overview

In the global movement for equitable female health rights, menstrual hygiene is often overlooked. Research on the topic is particularly scarce in the United States. “This is an issue that has received an increasing amount of attention, particularly in developing countries,” said menstrual hygiene researcher Anne Sebert Kuhlmann. “But when we looked at what was known and documented in more developed countries like the United States, there wasn’t much.”²

In the United States, 79% of menstruating women aged 18-54 have had to use makeshift sanitary items due lack of access to proper menstrual hygiene.³ Further, research suggests that menstruating female youth and adolescents in the United States are “unprepared for puberty and have largely negative experiences of this transition.”⁴ A 2019 survey of low-income women in St. Louis, Missouri found that 64% of respondents had been unable to afford menstrual hygiene products in the past year, and that two thirds of organizations found such products to be a need of

¹ Items used to control one’s menstrual cycle. Including, but not limited to, pads, tampons, and menstrual cups.

² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/period-poverty-tampons-study_us_5c379cbee4b045f6768a2ce4

³ https://www.freethetampons.org/uploads/4/6/0/3/46036337/ftt_infographic.pdf

⁴ [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(16\)30404-9/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(16)30404-9/fulltext)

their clients.⁵ Key populations found to be especially affected by a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products include homeless individuals, members of the LGBT+ community, incarcerated individuals, and students.⁶

Students

According to a 2017 report by NPR, “as the cost of college grows, research shows that so does the number of hungry and homeless students at colleges and universities across the country”.⁷ A 2018 report by the Wisconsin Hope Lab found that among 33,000 students attending community college across 24 states, two in three struggled with food insecurity and about half had insecure housing.⁸ With many students facing barriers to accessing basic needs like food and shelter, menstrual hygiene products are often not prioritized and difficult to obtain. As a student, the inability to access menstrual products is a critical public health issue. Without necessary items, menstruating students are more likely to miss school or encounter stigma than those who have proper access. They are also more likely to experience toxic shock syndrome, cervical cancer, and a myriad of other health concerns if products are used for longer periods of time than intended.⁹ Though little research exists regarding menstruation as a barrier to education in the United States as compared to other countries, leading experts have come to the aforementioned conclusions based on the results of international studies and the socioeconomic status of American students. “The minute you have to ask someone for something that you need

⁵https://journals.lww.com/greenjournal/Abstract/publishahead/Unmet_Menstrual_Hygiene_Needs_Among_Low_Income.97833.aspx

⁶ Nadya Okamoto, *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018). Chapter Five.

⁷<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/02/08/513902272/the-number-of-hungry-and-homeless-students-rises-along-with-college-costs>

⁸ <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.freethetampons.org/the-price-young-girls-pay-when-tampons-arent-free.html>

for your normal bodily function, you're creating a barrier,” said New York City Councilwoman Julissa Ferreras-Copeland in a discussion regarding the difficulty New York public school students face in obtaining menstrual hygiene products. “This is something you shouldn't have to ask for.”¹⁰

North Carolina & Public Universities

Following the national trend, little research regarding menstrual product access exists in North Carolina. However, the work that has been done suggests a high correlation exists between homelessness, poverty, and the inability to access period products. In 2017, the poverty rate statewide was 15.4%, with a disproportionate emphasis on women, children, and people of color.¹¹ According to the previously referenced St. Louis study on menstrual access, which the author noted was representative of a national trend¹², experiencing poverty and homelessness decrease accessibility to menstrual hygiene products. Menstruators in North Carolina are likely to face similar barriers to these products should they become impoverished.

State-run university students in North Carolina follow these trends. For example, in 2018, North Carolina State University (NCSU), the University of North Carolina system's largest college or university with over 23,000 undergraduate students, conducted a study to survey the state of its students' access to food and housing. *Food and Housing Security among NC State Students* surveyed almost 2,000 randomly selected students, and found that 14% of respondents reported low food security, with insecurity slightly higher for people of color. 9.6% of respondents had faced homelessness within the last 12 months.¹³ Though the report outlined

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <http://www.ncjustice.org/sites/default/files/POVERTY%20REPORT%202017.pdf>

¹² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/period-poverty-tampons-study_us_5c379cbee4b045f6768a2ce4

¹³ <https://dasa.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NC-State-Food-and-Housing-Insecurity-1.pdf>

resources available to students in need of them, spaces such as the campus food pantry have little to no menstrual hygiene products available.

Methods

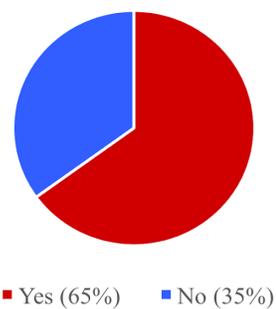
In order to assess college students' access to menstrual hygiene products and how being a menstruating person affects their educational experience, this paper utilizes data obtained from a recent survey administered to NC State students, and in-person interviews with campus stakeholders. An IRB waiver was obtained from the university to insure the survey and interviews were founded upon principles of informed consent. The online survey was completed by 140 NC State students. Students were made aware of the survey through university-sponsored social media pages and email listservs. To be eligible to complete the survey, students must report being (1) at least 18 years or older, and (2) a female menstruating student at NC State. Respondents were asked questions related to their access to menstrual hygiene products on campus, stigma, and suggestions for both campus-level and large scale improvements. The in-person interviews took place with two current NC State students who created campus organizations that aim to tackle the issue of menstrual inequity. Interviewees were asked to discuss their thoughts on the current campus policies related to menstruation at NC State, as well steps their respective groups are taking to enact positive change on campus. Both methods of data collection were anonymous. Qualitative data were analyzed for recurring main themes through brief auditory and visual scanning of the audio recorded interviews and qualitative survey responses.

Findings

Survey

Survey participants responded to questions regarding campus access, purchasing ability, stigma, educational impact, and resources; 65% of respondents reported not being able to find menstrual products on campus when needed (see **Figure 1**); and 37.9% stated that they have struggled to purchase these products in the past, citing cost, availability, and stigma as the three largest factors fueling the lack of product availability and access.

Figure 1. Percentage of female students who have ever needed a menstrual hygiene product and not been able to find one on campus



Furthermore, 58.6% of respondents stated that their period had negatively impacted their educational experience in some way, with missing class and inattentiveness being the greatest impact. One student said:

“Most days I have a full day of classes in Poe [NC State building] and they are back to back. There is not anywhere close to Poe that I could make it to get the products I need if I don't have them on me. I could ask classmates but that's not always accepted. I then spend the rest of the day worried about my own discomfort and the discomfort of others should they find out I am menstruating.” [Survey Respondent 1]

Another student provided a similar narrative to describe the impact of menstruating as a student:

“Countless times that I have been in class or taking an exam unable to focus because I am concerned that my products may be over-capacity/full/leaking and that I am bleeding

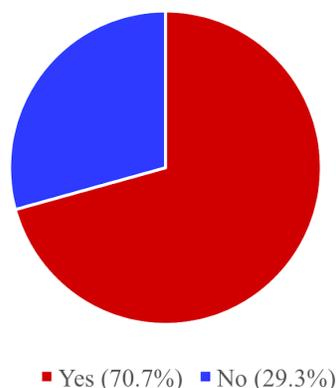
through my pants. I'm not always allowed to run to the restroom, or I'm in a time crunch and can't get up to change it. Also, there were several times one semester where I had to choose between changing my tampon between classes and being late, or being on time to receive my attendance grade. Sometimes my attendance grade had to suffer and I had to show up late to accommodate my flow.” [Survey Respondent 2]

In addition to issues regarding accessibility, 70.7% (see **Figure 2**) of respondents said that they have experienced negative reactions regarding periods or being a menstruating person. Stigma was attributed to lack of education on the subject, societal norms, and stereotypes from people that do not have periods. One student gave their opinion on menstrual stigma:

“I think it’s mostly driven by sexism and the fact that we live in a world and attend a university in which the narrative of our communities are often defined by men who know or care very little about the health of women and other menstruating persons.” [Survey Respondent 3]

Responses to the question of “have you heard members of the NC State community (i.e. students, faculty, staff) describe or talk about periods?” were split almost exactly in half.

Figure 2. Have you ever experienced negative reactions regarding periods for being a menstruating person?



Respondents, however, described these conversations as mainly discussions occurring among menstruators regarding their shared experience, with few mentions of periods in an academic context or among non-menstruating people. Respondent's personal feelings towards menstruation were a spectrum of perceptions, ranging from shy to very open.

Interviews

Both interview respondents were asked to define menstrual equity as it related to them and their experience within menstrual activism. The first respondent stated:

"Genuine and quality access for everyone. NC State is a microcosm of everywhere else; very few free resources, which make it difficult if you're low-income, if you're struggling with job retention, if you're part of the homeless community. That makes it really difficult to then be successful, to have confidence, to have reassurance in the day you're about to take on." [Interview Respondent 1]

The second respondent elaborated by stating:

"Menstrual equity is achieved when you have the ability to get the products that you need to manage your period without facing financial or proximity barriers." [Interview Respondent 2]

Respondents identified stigma as a key issue inhibiting access to menstrual equity. Elements propelling stigma were identified as minimal or miseducation and lack of conversation on the topic. In describing the experience of facing menstrual stigma, one respondent stated:

"[Stigma] makes you think there's something wrong with your body and there's something wrong with you. Periods are very frequently identified with being a woman, and I think there's a lot of shame around being a woman. There's a lot of shame about

our vaginas, there's a lot of shame about periods, there's a lot of shame around all of that, and I think it's to suppress us. The more we talk about it the more we start to remove that suppression." [Interview Respondent 2]

Participants also noted the impact on menstrual inequity in educational settings, sharing similar stories of being caught between classroom obligations and lack of access to appropriate menstrual items. One respondent said:

"Especially in terms of education, universally, it [menstruating] takes people who menstruate out of the equation, which is a huge disadvantage, when there's not access to menstrual care." [Interview Respondent 2]

Barriers to access at NC State, as well as other college campuses, were discussed at length by both respondents, citing stigma and negative responses from individual members of campus, as well as institutional-level roadblocks to providing products to students. One respondent noted that it would only cost less than \$2,000 annually per location to fund free menstrual supplies in student spaces for an estimated 17,000¹⁴ menstruating students. One respondent described the process of working with university administrators:

"We're having to prove to people that menstrual access is necessary and needs to be a sustainable thing has been a barrier to campus access. This is an important part of student life." [Respondent 1]

Existing Initiatives

Two student-led initiatives pertaining to menstrual access currently exist at NC State: *Period* and *We Bleed Red*. *Period* is a national organization that aims to address barriers to

¹⁴ <https://report.oirp.ncsu.edu/IR/Students/EnrollmentData/f18enrol/index.htm>

menstrual equity through over 150 campus chapters worldwide.¹⁵ Founded in the fall of 2017, *Period* at NC State has raised over \$1,000 to serve the needs of over 900 periods. Though mainly focused on the needs of the Wake county homeless population, the organization also works to facilitate dialogue regarding the various aspects of menstruation through guest lectures and community spaces.

We Bleed Red, on the other hand, is an organization focused on serving menstruating students. Recognizing accessibility to period products as a key factor in the the positive educational experience of a menstruating person, the club aims to remove barriers to products by providing them to students free of cost. *We Bleed Red's* initial venture was providing disposable hygiene products, such as pads and tampons, in the bathrooms of student spaces. Since then, the initiative has moved towards advocating for more sustainable forms of period management, such as the reusable menstrual cup, providing 150 NC State students with free menstrual cups as part of a pilot program. Like *Period*, *We Bleed Red* has also been active in student education through workshops and collaborative efforts with other campus organizations.

Limitations

Though this research provides valuable insight into the need for better menstrual hygiene product access, certain limitations exist.. The selected population, NC State, though a diverse campus, is not entirely representative of other public colleges and universities in North Carolina or the United States. The sample size of 140 survey respondents is also a limitation, as a larger sample could provide a more accurate depiction of the student body. Timing limited the ability to

¹⁵ <https://www.period.org/>

thoroughly conduct detailed quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Furthermore, demographic data was not collected in order to keep data as anonymous as possible.

Recommendations

In addition to being asked questions regarding current campus accessibility and stigma, survey respondents were asked to provide suggestions for improvements they'd like to see. This quote encapsulates the majority of responses:

“I would make sure that students and administrators understand that periods are not a personal, private or female issue, they are a health issue. Period products are basic healthcare needs for those who menstruate and making those products accessible and affordable would make a world of difference.”

Based on these findings, the following recommendations for public educational spaces may address this prominent issue of menstrual hygiene inequity:

Free or Reduced-Cost Menstrual Hygiene Products

- Provide free or reduced-cost menstrual hygiene products in campus bathrooms. Implemented by many high school and college campuses across the nation,^{16,17} free product programs may ensure uninhibited access to education.
 - Appeals for such programs may occur on the institutional level, or to governing bodies like the University of North Carolina system.

Conduct Educational Programs and Trainings

- Conduct institutionally-endorsed educational programs and trainings around menstruation and women's health for students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

¹⁶ <https://www.thecut.com/2015/09/free-tampons-new-york-city-high-school.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/11/students-demand-free-tampons-campus>

- Respondents noted that the majority of stigma they faced from non-menstruating peers and educators stemmed from a lack of knowledge and comfort with the topic.

Policy and Legislation

- Ten US states have eliminated taxation on menstrual hygiene products, making them more financially accessible.¹⁸ Adoption of similar legislation to New York State Bill A07555, in which the state's tax law was amended to include menstrual hygiene products under tax-exempt medical devices¹⁹ would eliminate North Carolina's statewide tax of 4.75% from the cost of menstrual products.

Future Research

- Finally, little research around menstrual hygiene accessibility and access exists in the United States, particularly in educational settings. Therefore, more mixed-methods research, both quantitative and qualitative, needs to occur before menstrual equity can be achieved on a larger scale.

¹⁸<https://www.vox.com/2018/11/7/18056648/nevada-question-2-tampon-tax-results>

¹⁹https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?%2520default_fld=&bn=A07555&term=2015&Summary=Y&Actions=Y&Votes=Y&Memo=Y&Text=Y

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