

Supporting Healthy Habits Among Young Adults

About 30 million Americans are between the ages of 18 and 26. This stage of life is associated with changes in living and social situations and often involves declines in healthy behaviors. For example, many young adults live on college campuses, where there may be limited access to healthy foods and physical activity as well as high stress and peer pressure. Broader environmental, societal, and economic conditions also affect young adults' access to healthy lifestyles.

Researchers and educators at land-grant universities across the country are working together to assess the healthfulness of college campuses, develop tailored health promotion programs, and disseminate information that helps campus leaders, policymakers, and others make decisions that support healthier environments and healthier habits for young adults.

Supporting healthy behaviors in young adults can have long-lasting effects on physical and mental wellness. Reducing the risk of chronic diseases like obesity, heart disease, hypertension, and Type 2 diabetes can lessen the burden on the healthcare system.



After creating assessment tools to better understand the unique needs of young adults, the team developed interventions that teach and encourage healthy behaviors and tools to make environments healthier. The team trained researchers, educators, college administrators, and paraprofessionals to use these tools. These tools have been used to assess the health behaviors of more than 16,000 college students and 5,000 high school students in recent years.

- Web Health provided a 10-week online nutrition and physical activity program. This non-dieting program led to lasting increased intake of fruits and vegetables. Participants also maintained levels of physical activity.
- Project YEAH led to significant increases in fruit and vegetable intake, minutes of vigorous physical activity in women, and hours of sleep. Participants also reduced their percentage of energy (calories) from fat.
- The team developed the Healthy Campus Environmental Audit, which measures: food access and availability in vending machines, convenience stores, dining halls, and restaurants; walkability; bike-ability; recreation facilities and programs; and health-related policies. 75 communities have used the audit to measure, monitor, and advocate for environmental changes that make healthy habits easier and more sustainable for more young adults.
- To assess individuals' views of their environment, the team developed the Behavior Environment Perception Survey. The team surveyed over 2,000 college students from 10 universities. Results indicated that college students would like better support for mental health and healthy eating options on campus, but are mostly satisfied with physical activity resources. Seeing how perceptions compare to reality can help identify which environmental changes to target so that resources are used efficiently and impactfully.
- 90 college campuses and 22 high schools used the Get FRUVED toolkit to identify campus needs and create a targeted local campaign to promote healthy behaviors, environments, and policies. Get FRUVED led to increased fruit and vegetable intake as well as decreased waist circumference, systolic blood pressure, blood cholesterol, and body mass index among participants. These kinds of reductions during young adulthood can significantly reduce the likelihood of chronic disease development over a lifetime. Participating campuses received a personalized narrative describing the local impacts so they can easily share success stories with stakeholders.

* *Through focus groups and interviews with paraprofessionals and stakeholders, researchers determined that these tools need to be reconceptualized for low-income communities.*

Team Excellence

This project has involved collaborations among 40+ researchers and 1,000+ students and resulted in 50+ collaborative publications and presentations. In the last five years, team members have leveraged \$20.8 million to support project objectives. In 2020, the team received the Excellence in Multistate Research Award for the North Central Region. Individuals have been recognized for their advising, teaching, research, service, programming, professorship, and diversity. Members have also received awards from national professional organizations and journals. In addition, team members have trained hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students in research, leadership, mentoring, and health promotion. These transferable skills strengthen student resumes and job applications.

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