

UC Researchers Awarded Nearly \$2 Million for Childhood Obesity Prevention Project

USDA Grant to Support Evaluation of Technology, Design Innovation in SF Public School Meal Programs

Berkeley, CA (April 1, 2015) – Researchers at the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ Nutrition Policy Institute and UC Berkeley School of Public Health will use a nearly \$2 million childhood obesity prevention grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to evaluate a two-year school meal technology and design innovation project developed by the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The project will measure the impact of 21st century student-centered strategies based on behavioral economics to increase student participation in the school lunch program, reduce plate waste, improve dietary intake and reduce obesity among low-income youth.

The “Technology and Design Innovation to Support 21st Century School Nutrition” project will assess the impact of using a “SmartMeal” technology platform, distributed points of sale and staff promotion of school meals at 12 SFUSD middle and high schools. Sixty percent of the district’s students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, as part of the National School Lunch Program, the country’s largest child nutrition program. The researchers say that improving dietary intake among low-income youth is essential to reducing obesity, and schools are arguably the most important venue for change.

“Improving school meals is critical for addressing social inequities to healthful food access,” said Lorrene Ritchie, PhD, RD, Nutrition Policy Institute director, Cooperative Extension specialist and co-primary investigator. “Poor nutrition is a primary cause of the obesity epidemic that threatens the health of American children, especially in low-income communities. We are targeting schools for interventions because most school-age children spend half of their waking hours and consume up to half of their daily calories in school.”

The project will use cutting-edge strategies reflecting scientific knowledge about behavior change among teens to increase school meal participation and reduce plate waste. For example, research has shown that convenience is a primary determinant of student behavior, and long meal lines and hectic cafeterias are a barrier to student participation. The project seeks to circumvent these hassles by giving students access to healthy foods in mobile food carts and vending machines outside the cafeteria. It also will feature a SmartMeal e-application that delivers nutrition education and school meal promotion to students on their smart phones and tablet computers provided by the district. Students who use the app to pre-order nutritious meals will be able to bypass long lines by going to an express food pick-up location.

“This project will test whether we can change behavior by addressing the reality of today’s adolescent lifestyles,” said Dr. Kristine Madsen, MD, associate professor in the School of Public Health and co-primary investigator. “Mobile phones are ubiquitous among teens from diverse economic backgrounds, which makes this technology an ideal tool for promoting healthful food choices and nutrition education.”

The Nutrition Policy Institute was created in 2014 by UC Agriculture and Natural Resources, the division of the University of California system charged with sharing research-based information with the public about healthy communities, nutrition, agricultural production and environmental stewardship. NPI seeks to improve nutrition and health in low-income communities in California and the nation by engaging in research and communications that inform, build and strengthen policy. Visit NPI online at <http://npi.ucanr.edu/>. SFUSD’s Future Dining Experience (<http://www.sfusdfuturedining.org/>) is funded by USDA and the Sara & Evan Williams Foundation.