

Internship Final Report

This summer, I interned at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (HPDP). I worked closely with professors, researchers, PhD students, and many other leaders on three different research projects that revolved around public health and nutrition. One dealt with cost-offset Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) where I was on conference calls with multiple universities involved in the project and was responsible for revising consent forms, surveys, contingent valuations, extension education research and other study related documents. I also conducted interviews with farmers who either did or did not have CSA's in the local area for study purposes. Another project, called SMARTLife, was based on a prior study that showed proven success of a Chronic Disease Health Self-Management Program for post-retirement aged population. Now, it is being tested in Cumberland, Durham and Wake Counties to see if it will also be successful for a pre-retirement age population. I conducted research on potential community and business facilities for advertisement and recruitment of participants and was involved in providing assistance for materials and knowledge needed to obtain a diverse population. And the third study, called Food Explorers Family Edition, was an extension of the original Food Explorers study that successfully provided elementary kids in Rockingham County, NC with more fruits and vegetables as well as increased their exposure to such. This study expands that project into the home and to the parents at a charter school in Henderson, NC through a 12-week text message and social media program. Being the project I spent the most time on, my responsibilities included creating health education based text messages and a Facebook group for parents, conducting focus group and in-depth interviews with parents and students, transcribing interviews, revising and creating surveys, and entering and analyzing data. I will continue to work on this project throughout my senior year at Sewanee.

As stated above, I developed many skills necessary to conduct a successful and strong research project. All being in different stages of the process, I learned about what it takes from the beginning to the middle and potentially the end of a research study. I came to understand truly the amount of time and considerations required of both the researcher and participants. I gained an understanding of the legalities and technicalities such as working with IRB's, consent and ascent forms, and finances that require much attention. Along with the many requirements prior to the onstart of the study, I learned about the documentation and confidentiality measures taken to maintain secure, well-kept information post formative research, trials, and pilots. The importance of participant's privacy is the main reason behind the technicalities. In order to get strong responses and information, that must be upheld during interviews and once transcribed.

Also, having read and analyzed many published studies in classes and for research, it is rewarding and worthwhile to now understand the hard, diligent work that goes into the final paper. I look forward to learning more about the latter end of a project once the twelve week project is conducted in the fall for Food Explorers Family Edition.

Through these multiple projects, I have been exposed to many different aspects of research in public health and nutrition as well as facets of the food and agricultural industries that play a vital part in human health. I have gained skills in creating interview guides, surveys, and evaluations that are supported by the social cognitive theory. With that too, opportunities to test the interview questions and surveys in-person with participants has increased my ability to connect and successfully respond to people of different demographics in various scenarios. There were times in those interviews where it was hard to restrain from stating my own thoughts and opinions in response to their answer but also times where I learned something new from the participants. We had many times where we wished participants would expand more on their feedback in order to get the data we were really looking for but we were not there to force answers or alter their opinions and beliefs, only to ask and observe. Overall, patience is and was a virtue for all fields but especially ones working directly with communities. As I have learned through my community outreach work, time and communication can be very difficult and a lot of times comments are misinterpreted, so being able to take a deep breath and be flexible with other people's schedules and opinions is necessary for a successful partnership in the community and in research.

Another lesson that I took from this internship is to say yes when people offer you a chance to learn whether you know much about it or not. I had many opportunities to learn from other people in different aspects of the public health field that I didn't know much about and my mind was blown from what they taught me. I was able to make connections I had never been able to. Also, learning something new never hurts even if it pertains to your interest or not. It can be refreshing and open your eyes to vastly new ideas. An example of this kind of experience from this summer was the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification course. No, I'm not a farmer or have an interest in becoming one, on a large scale, so I thought before going that this would be interesting but would not have a ton to do with what I'm interested in. Well, I was wrong. It has a ton to do with how our produce is being grown, supported, and sold in terms of chemicals, care, and protection. I learned about farming practices and how farmers can provide the safest produce to their customers as well as how these practices can bring them more profit. I was happily surprised that I said yes to that opportunity because now I have a stronger appreciation and understanding for farming and the work that is needed to grow safe and nutritious produce.

In terms of my future, I have greatly expanded my knowledge of research in general but specifically in the public health/nutrition field. My knowledge about CSA's, school nutrition

policies, the use of technology and social media in promoting better health, and self management programs has greatly increased. I have solidified my interest in nutrition and am planning on attending graduate school for a Master's in Public Health and a Registered Dietitian degree. Though I discovered that I do not want to necessarily do research for my career and will most likely work in a clinical setting, I am forever grateful for the experiences I gained this summer and the opportunities I was exposed to. Each individual I engaged with taught me something new and widened my knowledge about what is possible with an interest and degree in public health. Being a broad field that is highly recognized and needed these days, I look forward to seeing where my passion will take me and I am thankful for my experience this summer as it showed me a plethora of opportunities for careers and future growth.