

## **The Mason Undergraduate Nutrition for Campus Health (MUNCH) Research Project**

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The college years are critical in establishing autonomous adult dietary habits. Unfortunately, undergraduates often form dietary habits with negative long-term health impact. In an effort to serve as a leader in campus health, Mason joined the Partnership for a Healthier America's (PHA) Healthy Campus Initiative and has committed to introducing nutritional menu labeling (NML) to three Fairfax campus dining halls in Fall 2015.

Prior research primarily examined impact of NML on calories purchased or consumed, without adequate consideration of other indicators of nutritional quality (e.g., saturated fats, fiber, and sugar). NML failed to decrease calories consumed in a recent meta-analysis, with widely varying results in individual studies. Upon deeper inspection, consumers' utilization of NML is tied to restaurant style, label format, food cost, and—importantly—consumer characteristics. Thus, Mason's diversity of student characteristics provides the opportunity to identify the range of consumer characteristics in predicting how NML will impact dietary choices of individuals in our dining halls.

To empirically determine the impact of NML on nutritional quality of meals, and to elucidate where nutritional information falls within the spectrum of factors affecting food choice decisions of our student population, we propose to conduct meal assessment surveys in two Mason dining halls before and after implementation of NML, to assess nutritional quality of students' food choices. Subsequently, we will recruit students for focus group interviews to provide deeper understanding of survey findings, and identify specific motivations and social meanings that inform food selection in dining halls.

Through this project, we will solidify research collaborations between CHSS and CHHS faculty, publish 2 peer-reviewed co-authored articles, collect preliminary data for external funding applications designed to test other interventions to enable positive impact on dietary choices (with funding targets Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and National Institutes of Health-NIDDK), and build the foundation of an internationally-recognized research program for *evidence-based campus nutrition best practices*.

Evidence of NML efficacy in real-world settings is in great demand to bolster support for more widespread implementation. This research promises to impact policy at various levels by filling a gap in the evidence-base for NML policy and practice.