

Title of Project: In the Nutri-Know: Nutrition Literacy and Health Promotion in Gainesville, Florida
Country: U.S.

Sponsoring College: University of Florida

Project Leader: Malinda Gong (U.S., University of Florida)

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

The goals of the project were to expand the accessibility of nutrition education to patients in the Equal Access Clinic Network and community members around Gainesville. In doing so, we sought to increase nutrition literacy and promote a fundamental understanding of practical nutritional knowledge to allow participants to make informed dietary decisions that promote their health.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

N/A

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

As a Nutritional Sciences student minoring in Health Disparities and Sociology, nutrition and health literacy have always been areas of interest for me. Interning with the Equal Access Clinic Network exposed me to the challenges that underserved and low-income patients face when managing their health. In the primary care setting, hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, and heart disease are common, and I realized that many of these chronic conditions can be linked to diet. Speaking with directors and members of the Equal Access Clinic Network made me realize the need for nutrition education and sparked the idea for this project.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

In some ways, the United States' cultural dietary habits have perpetuated an imbalanced outlook on nutrition for many people and have promoted a disconnect between diet and health. Furthermore, nutrition education is not easily accessible for most people. With our busy schedules, many feel that it is not possible to eat healthily and therefore make choices that do not promote their health. Over time, these dietary choices may build up and can contribute to the chronic conditions we see so often.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

I was already familiar with the work of the Equal Access Clinic Network, a free clinic network that provides a wide range of services to underserved patients around Gainesville. Equal Access Clinics provide interprofessional services, including physical therapy, mental health therapy, and more. For these reasons, I felt that they would be a good host site to work in.

What was it like to work in your host site?

Equal Access Clinic Network is a primarily student-run clinic network, so I was able to maintain a great deal of autonomy with my project. They were supportive in connecting me with their community partners and patients, which allowed me to execute my project as I envisioned it.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

There were many roadblocks throughout the project, most of which were logistical. For example, late in the planning, I was informed that the original venue for my classes was no longer an option. This was stressful in that I had to quickly coordinate with Equal Access Clinic Network and community partners to secure a new location. Eventually, I was able to find a new place - the Gainesville Spanish Seventh-Day Adventist Church - that worked well.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Because my nutrition education classes were taking place throughout August, many of the volunteers had last-minute plans to be out of town or unavailable for their shifts. This was a challenge as I had to make sure to communicate effectively with them to ensure that each of the sessions were adequately staffed with volunteers.

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How do you define peace?

I define peace as the absence of conflict, dysfunction, or distress, such as that brought about by ill health. In this case, the In the Nutri-Know project aims to foster peace within individuals by empowering them with practical nutritional knowledge to protect their health in the long-term.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

This project's goals are two-fold: to provide an accessible and practical nutrition education to promote health in the long-term and to address short-term needs like food insecurity by providing tangible resources to all participants. In these ways, the project contributes to peace.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Through working with the Equal Access Clinic Network and speaking with participants, this project has exposed me to health disparities and the challenges that many face when trying to eat healthily. From it, I have recognized the structural barriers in place in the world that lead to disparate health outcomes. This project has reaffirmed my desire for a career in medicine where I can promote health education and lifestyle medicine and reduce health disparities for underserved patients.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

With the pandemic, I gave special consideration to components of planning such as finding a venue large enough to accommodate a group of people safely, enforcing limits on the number of participants per sessions (15 maximum), and planning activities that could be conducted safely. All the participants wore masks at all times, as did the volunteers. Hand sanitizer was readily available, and we cleaned any surfaces that we utilized. For future Projects for Peace grantees, I would encourage them to be very flexible with their plans and be ready to adapt as new challenges present themselves. The pandemic showed me that change is inevitable, so flexibility is essential for a project's success.

"Through this project, we wanted to empower individuals with nutrition education that allows them to make informed decisions about their diet and health. Health and nutrition education can play fundamental roles in facilitating small dietary changes that make a big difference." (Malinda Gong, gongmalinda@gmail.com)

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Myself (blue dress) and class members in the final session.

