

From Classroom to Community: Empowering Community Health Leaders

Erin Comollo, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Department of Family & Community Health Sciences (Rutgers Cooperative Extension) Internship Program played a crucial role in supporting the Healthy Corner Store Initiative (HCSI), which aims to transform New Jersey corner stores—often the primary food source in underserved areas—into providers of healthier food options. So far, graduate and undergraduate interns have accumulated over 1,039.54 hours of work with Rutgers faculty and staff, receiving training and mentorship in research methods and ethics while engaging in community participatory research. In partnership with the non-profit organization The Food Trust, they built rapport with community members, installed promotional materials, supported nutrition education programs, and effectively conducted environmental analyses of corner stores across the state. Preliminary data analysis highlights the need for ongoing support and strategic interventions. Building maintenance was generally satisfactory, with 60% of buildings well-maintained and 55% free from graffiti; however, only 25% of stores featured pedestrian walk signals and marked crosswalks. All stores offered fruits and vegetables, and 84% had healthy snacks available, yet only 13% provided fresh vegetable packages. Unhealthy foods were visible from the entrance in 95% of stores. The promotional efforts for healthy eating were mixed: 50% of stores displayed healthy promotional materials, while only 20% featured photos promoting healthy eating inside. Produce bins were visible at the front entrance in 50% of stores, and SNAP/EBT cross-promotion could be found in 25%. HCSI interns will continue throughout the 2024-2025 academic school year.

Keywords: Cooperative Extension, Students, Community Participatory Research, Food Access

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

In historically underresourced communities throughout New Jersey, corner stores often serve as the primary food source for residents. This makes them perfect locations for interventions that may improve community nutrition and health outcomes. Research indicates that small grocery and corner stores significantly impact customer purchasing habits, particularly in low-income urban areas (Caspi et al., 2017). Additionally, retail-based interventions can effectively enhance the purchasing and consuming healthier foods by combining environmental changes with community involvement (Karpyn et al., 2020). In partnership with the community organization, The Food Trust, The Department of Family & Community Health Sciences (FCHS) at Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) developed the Healthy Corner Store Initiative (HCSI) internship program to address these community needs while offering valuable experiential learning opportunities for students. Research finds that faculty and student collaborations in community-engaged research improve student learning outcomes and project sustainability (Eyler & Garza, 2019). This approach aligns with best practices in service learning, highlighting the importance of connecting academic coursework with real-world community engagement (Salam et al., 2019).

Institutional Context and Program Framework

Cooperative Extension Context

The Department of Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS) internship program exemplifies the foundational mission of Cooperative Extension: bringing evidence-based knowledge to communities to address critical public needs. As part of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, FCHS operates at the intersection of research, education, and community engagement. These three pillars have defined Extension's work since its establishment through the Smith-Lever Act 1914. The program's structure mirrors Cooperative Extension's commitment to the land-grant university mission through its three integrated branches: 4H Youth Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Family and Community Health Sciences. The FCHS focus on community food systems, chronic disease prevention, food literacy, school nutrition, and wellness initiatives directly advance Extension's contemporary role in addressing public health challenges through research-based interventions and education. During 2023-2024, 52 students contributed over 16,460 RCE internship hours while engaging in research and community outreach.

The Food Trust Partnership

The Food Trust is an essential partner for the Healthy Corner Store Initiative, providing a multifaceted approach, including direct community education through the Heart Smarts program, which offers practical nutrition guidance, critical infrastructure support for implementing healthy food initiatives, and marketing materials and support. Within just one year of implementing the program's initiatives, the Medina Food Market in Camden, New Jersey, increased their sales by \$24,000. This example demonstrates the potential for meaningful change when strategic interventions are carefully designed and implemented.

Program Innovations

Comprehensive Environmental Assessment Framework. The HCSI Internship Program developed a sophisticated three-concept environmental assessment approach beyond

traditional store evaluations. Using components of previously validated surveys, including Retail SLAQ, NEMS-GG, MAPS-mini, and the Corner Store Environment Assessment, an extensive survey was developed on REDCap software. The interior store environment portion focuses on variables such as product placement strategies, how promotional materials are positioned, and the overall layout and navigability of the store space. The exterior store environment evaluation considers broader contextual elements, including the physical condition of the building, the surrounding approach environment, and critical safety features that impact customer experience. Finally, the "grab-and-go" analysis concentrates on the critical first five feet of customer interaction. These environmental analyses may illustrate how store layout and product positioning can nudge consumers toward healthier food selections.

Structured Intern Development Model. The HCSI program goes beyond standard research approaches by deeply integrating community input and participatory principles, making it a unique opportunity for applied learning. Interns play a crucial role in this research process, engaging in tasks challenging traditional academic experiences. The goal for FCHS and HCSI interns is to transform them from beginner researchers to experienced community health practitioners. First, interns are required to complete a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training, ensuring that they understand the fundamental principles of ethical community-based research. Next, they develop and test data collection instruments aligned with research questions for feasibility and reliability. They are gradually entrusted with more advanced responsibilities, including refining and revising research instruments and data analysis. They are encouraged to add to community presentation skills through abstract and research poster development and conference presentations. This experience ensures a deep, meaningful engagement beyond the classroom.

Academic-Community Partnership Model. The partnership with the Food Trust is an excellent example of collaboration transcending traditional academic-community interactions. By joining this national organization, the researchers and interns gained access to evidence-based intervention strategies implemented across hundreds of sites. Systematic environmental assessments form the backbone of the research, allowing for a holistic examination of the factors influencing food access and environmental influences. The research design incorporated comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analyses that provide a nuanced understanding of community food environments. This approach aligns seamlessly with established community-based participatory research principles articulated by Minkler and Wallerstein (2015). By addressing both supply and demand-side factors, as highlighted by Dutko et al. (2018), the methodology offers a comprehensive strategy for understanding and improving community food systems.

Results and Impact

Student Engagement

HCSI Interns dedicated over 1,039 internship hours to this vital initiative, engaging in various activities that connected academic learning with real-world community impact. Their participation went beyond traditional internship experiences, covering essential areas such as store environmental assessments, community surveys, data collection and analysis, and direct program implementation and evaluation. Eight of the ten Fall 2024 interns are continuing into the Spring 2025 semester program, with an addition of six new undergraduate interns who will undergo training. In addition to adding team members, the program will promote two

graduate student members to Student Director roles, where they will further cultivate their leadership and professional development skills. This approach prepares them for public health careers and maintains Extension's tradition of developing community leaders who understand theoretical frameworks and practical implementation challenges.

Store Assessment Findings

Preliminary research demonstrated a challenging picture of food access: A chi-square analysis revealed that stores with unhealthy exterior environments were significantly associated with the availability of unhealthy food products ($\chi^2(1, N=20)=7.179, p=0.007$). Only 13% of stores offered pre-packaged fresh produce, while 95% featured unhealthy foods at store entrances. Infrastructure challenges were equally apparent, with 75% of stores lacking adequate pedestrian access. Despite these challenges, 50% of stores displayed healthy promotional materials, and 20% featured images promoting healthy eating.

Community Impact

Working with FCHS and The Food Trust, the HCSI interns translated research insights into practical community initiatives, emerging as transformative change agents. They supported tailored healthy retail implementation plans for community corner stores, conducted over 20 corner store site visits, and implemented innovative food voucher programs. The interns' work extended beyond data collection, as they facilitated nutrition education programs at local schools and created direct, meaningful connections between store owners and community members. These experiences exemplify an effective model for academic-community collaboration, where interns gain hands-on experience while contributing to tangible food access improvements.

Future Directions

Geographic Expansion

The program's future strategic plan includes geographic expansion to extend the initiative's reach into Northern Jersey, enhancing its impact and understanding of regional variations in corner store environments. In addition, the HCSI program seeks to introduce new intern cohorts, ensuring a steady pipeline of engaged and trained community health researchers.

Research Agenda

Future research intends to assess the long-term impact of The Food Trust's interventions to understand sustained changes in community food environments. A key focus will be evaluating how the duration of partnerships influences corner store policy, system, and environmental changes, providing critical insights into the need for sustained community health initiatives and partnerships.

Program Enhancement

Future program efforts will refine the program's training protocols, ensuring the research design and educational experience remain responsive to emerging public health needs. The initiative is dedicated to continually strengthening community partnerships, recognizing that

the most effective interventions arise from genuine, collaborative relationships between academic institutions and communities.

Conclusion

The HCSI internship program demonstrates how academic institutions can meaningfully impact community food environments while providing valuable experiential learning opportunities to their students. Through training, mentorship, and practical experience, interns develop professional skills while contributing to important public health initiatives. The program's success in engaging stores and collecting baseline data establishes a foundation for future research examining the long-term effects of healthy store interventions.

The program's research and community engagement integration reflects Extension's longstanding commitment to bridging academic expertise with community needs. This model of academic-community collaboration continues to evolve, offering valuable insights for other institutions seeking to address complex public health challenges while developing future community health leaders.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the New Jersey Department of Health, particularly Payal Aurora, Patience Sengby, and Jennifer Hopkins. Thanks to Dr. Sara Elnakib, Department of Family and Community Health Sciences Chair and The New Jersey Healthy Communities Project Director, for her leadership and guidance. Thank you to Dr. Mackenzie Ferrante from the Department of Nutritional Sciences for her role as Co-Principal Investigator. Special recognition goes to our partners at The Food Trust - Nyssa Entrekin, Ramonita Gibson, and Danielle Garcia - for their collaboration and expertise. Finally, we thank the dedicated Rutgers University interns who contributed to this work: Jenna DeSimone, Yaashna Sharma, Kiersten Koch, Emma Hutt, Dash Barany, Huda Memon, Alliyah Jackson, and Sheryn Jacinto.

References

- Caspi, C. E., Lenk, K., Pelletier, J. E., Barnes, T. L., Harnack, L., Erickson, D. J., & Laska, M. N. (2017). Food and beverage purchases in corner stores, gas-marts, pharmacies and dollar stores. *Public Health Nutrition*, 20(14), 2587–2597.
- Dutko, P., Ver Ploeg, M., & Farrigan, T. (2018). *Characteristics and influential factors of food deserts* (No. 1476-2019-2784). U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Eyler, J., & Garza, K. K. (2019). *The power of experiential education*. *Liberal Education*, 105(1), 24-31.
- Karpyn, A., McCallops, K., Wolgast, H., & Glanz, K. (2020). Improving consumption and purchases of healthier foods in retail environments: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(20), 7524.
- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2015). *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Salam, M., Iskandar, D. N. A., Ibrahim, D. H. A., & Farooq, M. S. (2019). Service learning in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20(4), 573-593.

Contact email: erin.comollo@rutgers.edu