**Initial Assessment of the Obesity Conundrum**

Obesity has been recognized as a major global and national epidemic. An interdisciplinary module was developed to address the obesity conundrum from the viewpoint of various fields of study. The major goal of the module was to evaluate awareness and promote positive change in student perception of several obesity-related topics. The module was used during the 2013-2014 academic year in 2 courses for non-STEM majors: *Food Chemistry* and *Biology of Women;* and 3 courses for STEM majors: *Scientific Communication*, *Nutrition and Cancer*, and *Obesity, Metabolism and Disease*. Individual instructors had the liberty to use the entire module or only a selected part of it. To assess the effectiveness of the module, a questionnaire was created to evaluate the general awareness and attitudes towards obesity and related issues that may be discussed in each course. Students completed the survey twice – once at the beginning of the semester or module and after the course or module was completed. Instructors had the choice to supplement the survey with discipline specific knowledge questions.

The baseline assessment of the module provides us with some insight into the attitudes and awareness of obesity-related issues among a representative sample of Spelman College students. It is interesting to point out that there are not that many notable differences between STEM and non-STEM students when it comes to obesity related attitudes. Overall, based on the results, the module does not appear to have greatly influenced the attitudes or perceptions of the students surveyed. This may be partly due to the diverse methods of its implementation as well as variability in the specific content covered in each course relative to the survey. Therefore, in subsequent use of the module, it may be helpful to include certain points of knowledge that could potentially be covered in each course. The survey may also be modified to reflect the continuity in content across courses, which might better detect potential changes in knowledge and attitudes among the students. It may also be helpful to measure the impact of the module by comparing these student responses to those of students who have not been exposed to the module in any course.

**Data Summary**

Survey questions were divided into the following categories and the data from all students are briefly summarized. Some interesting differences between STEM and non-STEM students are highlighted.

**1. General attitudes towards obesity**

The survey indicates that students believe that there is a stigma associated with being overweight or obese. They do not believe that individuals are pre-programed to be obese (~60%) but at the same time, do not think that losing weight is simply a matter of eating less and working out (~60% disagree with idea that losing weight is mainly eating less and working out) but STEM students changed their opinion after taking the module (51% down to 37% - of students who disagreed with the statement before and after the module respectively).

**2. Awareness of health risks associated with obesity**

More than half of the students (>64%) think that obesity is a disease but do not believe that obese/overweight individuals are addicted to food. On average, >80% of students are aware of the increased risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and stroke associated with being obese/overweight. 95% STEM and 80% non-STEM students were aware of the association between an increased risk of cancer and obesity. However, after completion of the module non-STEM students changed their opinion and only 48% believed in this relationship.

**3. Awareness of norms and recommendations**

Majority of the students (78%) were aware of what BMI is; however, about 75% of them did not believe that it is a good measure of one’s fitness. Even though 90% of students agreed that they have a good understanding of nutritional recommendations, only 41% of STEM and 38% of non-STEM students knew what “choose-my-plate” was. Moreover, students in both STEM and non-STEM fields believe that FDA regulates food related issues (55% and 62% respectively). Only 12.5 % non-STEM and 18% STEM students knew that USDA was in charge of the dietary guidelines. Awareness of the regulatory entity increased in the STEM students to 42% and dropped further in the non-STEM students.

**4. Awareness of the relationship between obesity and socioeconomic status**

When it comes to socioeconomic status and obesity, students are aware that socioeconomic status, education and where one lives impact the person’s risk of becoming overweight (~70-80% of students are aware of this relationship).