



The
statistics
are
staggering

A national report ranks North Carolina as the 14th heaviest state, with 63 percent of the population either overweight or obese.

An estimated 14 percent of all preventable deaths in North Carolina are related to poor diet and physical inactivity.

“Realistically, probably three-fourths of the population of New Hanover County is overweight or obese because people tend to underreport their weight,” said Terry Kinney, chair of the UNCW Department of Health and Applied Human Sciences and principal investigator of the university’s obesity initiative.

“This is a serious public health problem, manifested in a variety of diseases and disabilities including a diabetes epidemic, and has enormous economic consequences. The United States spends \$78 billion a year on

obesity

by Mimi Cunningham

obesity health-related issues,” he said. In 2004, a number of community nonprofits and health-related service providers in Southeastern North Carolina recognized that obesity was a significant health threat and something needed to be done. Acting independently of each other, they wrote grant proposals to the Cape Fear Memorial Foundation and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Foundation, both of which fund health care initiatives.

Bombarded with a host of fragmented applications, the foundations asked Connie Parker, executive director of Wilmington Health Access for Teens (WHAT), to bring together all the organizations that provide services for obesity and develop a comprehensive plan.

In January 2005, John H. Frank, director of the health care division of

the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, and Garry Garris of Cape Fear Memorial Foundation addressed a forum of nonprofits and health providers. Their message was clear: they were willing to support a joint collaborative project but not individual ones.

In the meantime, under the leadership of Steve Demski, vice chancellor for public service and continuing studies, a group of UNCW faculty and staff began meeting to see how UNCW could address obesity concerns in the area, building on existing faculty research strengths related to obesity and healthy living.

The two groups became aware of what the other was doing as they cross solicited community and university participation in their initiatives. At this point, Demski asked Lynn Smithdeal, faculty liaison for community engagement in

the Division for Public Service and Continuing Studies, to bring the two groups together under the umbrella of a revitalized Cape Fear Healthy Carolinians comprised of approximately 50 agencies in Brunswick and New Hanover counties.

Cape Fear Healthy Carolinians established obesity prevention as one of its three main focus areas, and Smithdeal was selected chair of the Obesity Prevention Committee in September 2005.

A comprehensive regional obesity prevention action plan was developed that includes extensive community education to change eating and exercise behaviors as well as create new and expanded nutritional and exercise programs. Target audiences are school children, families in neighborhoods and adults in the workplace.



With the plan in place, the committee prepared grant proposals. During summer 2006, Kate B. Reynolds awarded \$286,231 to UNCW to be used over a two-year period for projects addressing obesity among lower income and underserved adults and children in New Hanover and Brunswick County. It also provides funds to hire a health educator.

Cape Fear Memorial Foundation provided a \$225,000 matching grant over three years to help fund a full-time coordinator's salary and benefits and a half-time administrative assistant. Grant-funded employees are housed at UNCW under Kinney's supervision.

To fulfill the objectives of the Kate B. Reynolds grant, the committee established partnerships with six nonprofit groups. Full implementation is expected in early 2007. UNCW is managing the grants as well as providing evaluation for these projects:



Lila Lacewell, Carol Carroll and Mary Sisson exercise in the meeting hall of Northwest's Bethel AME Church. Under the leadership of Rev. Patricia Freeman, the "Exercise Your Faith, Walk with Jesus" program partnered with four other churches, local businesses and the town of Northwest to offer the exercise program and to pave a three-quarter mile walking trail around the community's ball field. Freeman reports several people have lost 25 pounds or more through these programs.

1. James Brunson, Francis Simmons and Barbara Jenkins pose with seedlings they hope will sprout enthusiasm for growing healthier foods and a greater sense of community among the residents of Creekwood South in Wilmington. The greenhouse is part of a community gardening project, whose funding is being administered by UNCW, with assistance from the New Hanover County Cooperative Extension Service and the Wilmington Housing Authority.
2. Downtown residents and workers set off from Cape Fear Community College Nov. 17, 2006, to walk the new Downtown Loop, part of the Wilmington Walks project. Cape Fear Healthy Carolinians worked with PPD, Cape Fear Community College, Wilmington Downtown and the Wilmington Hilton Riverside to develop this 2.9-mile walking loop. As the city develops its fitness trail master plan, UNCW faculty will research community attitudes before the trails are built and a year after to see if there is any change.

Photos by Jamie Moncrief

- ▲ 3,510 elementary school children who qualify for free or reduced lunches will utilize Recess Kits to exercise 30 minutes per day.
- ▲ 25 overweight middle school youth will receive nutritional consultations and mentoring at WHAT.
- ▲ 200 public housing youth and their families will participate in nutritional and fitness workshops and activities through the Wilmington Family YMCA.
- ▲ 10 lower income Latino families will receive nutritional and exercise consultations by the New Hanover County Partnership for Children.
- ▲ Child care providers will receive "Ms. Magic Apron" nutrition and exercise education resources from the Child Advocacy Commission for 100 children.
- ▲ Adults and their children in a Wilmington Housing Authority community will start a community garden.



2

UNCW faculty and students are assisting with evaluation and conducting research on these projects. For instance, Leslie Hossfeld, assistant professor of sociology, specializes in community-based participatory research, also called “public sociology.” Interested in poverty in Southeastern North Carolina, she is participating in the community garden and Latino outreach. Michelle D’Abundo in HAHS also is doing research on the community garden and Wilmington Walks.

“The multi-faceted community-focused obesity prevention and healthy living effort is the perfect example of matching faculty research interests with community needs,” said Kinney. “This may be one of the most visible sources of regional public service at UNCW. It advances one of the goals that Chancellor DePaolo has established and also that of UNC President Erskine Bowles, who has challenged the campuses to use the resources of the state’s public universities to embrace the state’s most urgent challenges.”

Kinney became involved in this project when UNCW received the grants. “Steve Demski’s unit was the front runner in getting this project off the ground, but his feeling is that community engagement will work best if it is affiliated with an academic unit. Health and Applied Human Sciences

was the logical choice because of our department’s focus on health, nutrition and physical activity,” he said.

As the project has gained momentum, Kinney has recruited more than 25 faculty from across campus who want to get involved in interdisciplinary research possibilities related to the obesity prevention project. Two of the most promising opportunities for faculty research involve the community garden and the Wilmington Walks.

“There is so much more that comes out of community gardens than produce,” Kinney said. “The intergenerational component brings older folks who know about gardening together with younger folks who think milk comes from a carton. The community garden provides an incredible opportunity to pass on learning. It has the potential to educate about nutrition, but also will build community, because you have all kinds of people planting, pulling weeds, and talking to each other, and they will carry that back to their neighborhood.”

He noted that Wilmington Walks provides an incredible opportunity for field research. As the city develops its master plan to build a number of fitness trails, HAHS faculty are planning to research community attitudes before the trails are built and a year later to see if there is any change.

“Sociologists, health educators, and parks and recreation faculty plan to be involved. We’re also exploring with geographers the feasibility of using the impressive potential of global information systems to get a spatial dimension to our research,” he said.

“This project has ignited interdisciplinary interest across campus, and we want to capitalize on that and perhaps turn this into a Center for Health and Lifestyle Research and Service. Academic departments tend to become compartmentalized, and there’s not enough sharing of talent. The obesity prevention project will allow us to create an infrastructure to build upon that energy and enthusiasm and allow sustainability.”

When Alison Saville came on board in August as coordinator of the Obesity Prevention Program, she brought experience with Cape Fear Healthy Carolinians.

“Although it had existed in the mid-90s, it became inactive and was just recertified in 2006,” explained Saville. “Certification gives credibility to this effort to work with multiple agencies – governments, schools, non-profits – and holds us to strict standards.”

In addition to obesity prevention, Healthy Carolinians has two other priorities – violence prevention and access to health care. UNCW has played a leadership role, particularly to get the obesity prevention initiative started, providing grant writing skills and hiring staff.

“Terry and I want to see faculty and students involved with evaluation and applied research,” said Saville. “Faculty need research and publications, and community agencies need help with evaluation. We believe the obesity prevention initiative will be a model for other projects such as behavioral health and violence prevention.”