Senior nutrition students in NHM 485 Supervised Practice in Dietetics
Management and Communications partner with nonprofit organizations, using knowledge gained through years of classes at UA to enlighten lives.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER | PHOTOS BY HARISH RAO, ZACH RIGGINS, SHANNON AUVIL AND ERIN REILLY

Witnessing a 10-year-old happily holding a heaping plate of salad is a rare experience for anyone, but for Hannah Henrichs it had special meaning – because she was the reason behind it.

“To see a kid eating salad and not even wanting dressing was very rewarding to me as a nutrition major,” says Henrichs. “He had a huge plate and even took a plate home. I learned that kids really like vegetables.”

Henrichs was part of a group of UA students who cooked, gardened and held taste-testings with children at a community-housing complex for an hour and a half each week throughout the Spring 2014 semester. In Spring 2014, 23 students devoted 6,900 service hours to these projects.

Lori Greene, instructor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences and director of the Coordinated Program in Dietetics, added service learning to the NHM 485 course after participating in the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility’s Faculty Fellows in Service Learning Program. NHM 485 is the culminating course in UAs Coordinated Program in Dietetics, which gives students who want to become registered dietitians the opportunity to combine a bachelors degree with a required internship that otherwise takes place after graduation. This allows them to achieve their goal in four years instead of five.

The internship is comprised of eight or nine rotations, which involve working in hospitals, clinics and other settings, and NHM 485 makes up the community rotation. Each student must complete 300 service hours as part of the course.

Greene says the addition of service learning has revolutionized the class, and many students now say it’s their favorite rotation.

“Even though in all of these rotations, they get real-life experience, this is another level,” Greene says. “They create the programs. They come up with the ideas and then carry them out. They are like real professionals out in the field. They get to decide what they think is best, based on their training. That just doesn’t happen a lot. Usually, they’re being told what to do.”

In other rotations, students typically are paired with registered dietitians in health facilities. Students in NHM 485 mainly work with community-agency administrators. “In these cases, there isn’t a registered dietitian at the agency,” Greene says. “They really get to use their knowledge and be the experts in food and nutrition at those facilities.”

Central Alabama Food Bank; set up a nutrition booth at the Children’s Hands-On Museum in Tuscaloosa; created recipe cards and a cookbook for the nonprofit Druid City Garden Project, which operates school gardens; and planted fruit trees at a Tuscaloosa youth detention facility. In Spring 2014, 23 students devoted 6,900 service hours to these projects.

Previously, NHM 485 had a research and analysis focus, and that aspect was incorporated into the service-learning version of the course, Greene says. Whereas before, students partnered with research faculty and conducted surveys in classrooms, nursing homes and other facilities, they now complete an assessment through the community organization where they work – researching what the organization’s clients eat or their nutrition knowledge, for instance – and present a related literature review to the Alabama Dietetic Association and at the UA Undergraduate Research Conference.

At the end of the fall semester, students organize themselves in groups of four to six and, with Greences guidance, select community partners from listings in Service Learning Pro, UAs service-learning database.

“Because we were able to choose our own organization to work with, this gave us a chance to focus on our possible career interests,” says Becky McGuigan, a food and nutrition major who graduated in 2014.

Students worked with the following community partners in Spring 2014.

- Community Food Bank of Central Alabama
- The Community Food Bank of Central Alabama operates in 12 counties and distributed 11.3 million pounds of food in 2014 through member agencies such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters and food pantries that served 520,211 people.

- Students assessed communities served by the food bank to determine nutritional needs; discovered the primary need was for nutrition education related to the most common disease states – diabetes, heart disease and hypertension – and developed handouts and delivered one-on-one education sessions in response; provided quick, easy and economical recipes to food bank participants and, based on their work over the semester, created a program that is available to the food bank’s members.
Druid City Garden Project

Druid City Garden Project is a nonprofit organization that operates schools garden in the Tuscaloosa area and leads classes in six schools. Each year, more than 3,300 children learn about healthy eating, community gardening and sustainability through weekly, garden-based lessons.

Nutrition students created a farm-to-table cookbook for students in DCGP-participating schools that contains 24 recipes (six for each season); made 15 recipe cards for garden-based lessons.

Good Samaritan Clinic

The Good Samaritan clinic provides free primary health and dental care, medication and health information to people who live in seven West Alabama counties and do not have health insurance. Many of the clinic’s patients are employed but still struggle to pay for health care.

Students held one-on-one nutrition counseling sessions with patients at the Good Samaritan Clinic; conducted nutrition education presentations, including information on serving sizes, cooking tips and tips for incorporating fruits and vegetables into one’s diet; in the clinic’s waiting room; held a four-week series of classes about diabetes and how to manage it; collected business clothing donations from UA faculty and staff; and developed and coordinated Women’s Empowerment Day, an event offering the clinic’s patients haircuts, manicures, massages, cooking and exercise tips, nutrition counseling, clothing organized in a boutique-like setting and food and gift baskets and assistance in writing resumes.

Students collaborated with organizations including the Brown House, Panera Bread and the Tuscaloosa Area Career Center in order to provide services for Women’s Empowerment Day. Our main objective was to build confidence and provide resources to our female population, says Kristen Guenther, a food and nutrition major who graduated in 2014.

They identified a great need for classes and nutrition education. “I now have a well-rounded background to assist me in my future career,” Robertson says. “It is amazing the drastic difference between learning something on paper and actually implementing the action.”

Strawberry Muffins, Spring Turnip Frittata, Basil Blackberry Crumble, Bacon Turnip Mash and Crispy Swiss Chard Tart

At the magnet school Magic Festival, students set up a fruit and vegetable booth with a station where children could pick out seeds and plant them. “They were able to take the planted crop home with them,” Smith says. “We also gave them recipe cards corresponding to the fruit or vegetable they planted.”

Smith says working with DCGP changed her outlook on nutrition education. “I took for granted so many small facts and details that my group and I may have known having majored in nutrition education in the fall 2014, I would assume that our community already knew things like how to cook rice or that different-colored produce contained different varieties of vitamins and minerals. Now, I always start from square one whenever I hold a nutrition-education session.”

Children’s Hands-On Museum of Tuscaloosa

The Children’s Hands-On Museum in a nonprofit organization that gives children the opportunity to learn through play by exploring numerous interactive exhibits.

UA students worked with the museum to create a booth where they hosted activities including cooking demonstrations, taste testing and games where kids guessed what food was being presented based only on touch or smell.

The Brown House

The Brown House is a nonprofit organization that operates in the West Circle government housing development in Northport, Ala. The group offers children’s programs and works to revitalize the neighborhood.

UA students worked with 10 to 15 first through eighth graders every Thursday from 3 to 4:30 p.m., cooking, taste testing vegetables and fruits, gardening in the neighborhood’s community garden, conducting nutrition lessons. At the end of the semester, students hosted a family dinner and invited the children’s parents. They prepared some of the kids’ favorite recipes and presented a video with highlights from the semester.

UA students will return to 10 to 15 fresh fruits and vegetables. Students taught 10 to 12 corresponding nutrition lessons.

Lessons were simple — this food helps with vision, this is good for your skin, etc. — but Henrichs says, because research shows children don’t retain the details, but will remember that something is good for them and be interested in eating it if they like the taste. “So we focused on taste,” she says.

Before volunteering at the Brown House, students researched problems with children’s diets and found a lack of fruits and vegetables was the biggest issue. They also discovered that the earlier kids are exposed to fruits and vegetables and the broader the variety, the more likely they will be to eat these foods throughout their lives.

Recipes students and the children prepared together included cauliflower mashed potatoes, beet brownies, green smoothies, fruit mixed with yogurt, pear sauce and kale chips — a universal favorite, Henrichs says.

“Kids were skeptical of trying things at first,” she adds. “But they began to trust us after finding they liked the way much of the food tasted. By the end of the program, they would try anything.”

“Kids studied for the required course, but the most important thing was that students learned how to provide education and important serving the community is and want to do that as nutrition counselors and to make cooking an aspect of her work with clients. “I think it’s very important to show people that they can cook healthy things so they taste good,” she says.

“Working at The Brown House taught Henrichs strategies that are effective with kids and the fundamentals of running an initiative. “I gained a lot of confidence from creating a program that works,” she says.

Greene meets with each group once a month to discuss assignments and tasks related to the NHM 485 course as well as how things are going at their community organizations. Students complete weekly journal entries and submit midterms and final reports.

At the end of the semester, students bring junior nutrition students to visit their community agencies and explain their work so juniors can continue the following year, if they choose.

Greene says the goal for the service-learning version of the course is two-fold. “I want them to be able to work independently and be able to use the knowledge they’ve gained over their four years with us,” she says. Instilling a sense of lifelong learning and service to community also is key. “The things they do, they probably wouldn’t get paid for, but they will hopefully see how rewarding and important serving the community is and want to do that once they become dietitians.”

The course seems to be meeting both objectives. “I definitely feel the need to get involved in my community to provide nutrition education to those who otherwise would not be exposed to it,” says Smith. “I hope to find a place in my new community where I can help out.”

To learn more about NHM 485 Supervised Practice in Dietetics Management and Communications, contact Lori Greene at 205-348-4710 or lgrenne@hbs.ua.edu.