

Education

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

MBA students work and study with City Harvest to create healthy eating options for all

By ERIKA PRAFDER

WITH natural resources in increased demand, food sustainability is a hot topic — and an academic focus of study. The case for buying locally produced, unprocessed, in-season healthy food is strong, but these products are not always affordable in lower income neighborhoods throughout New York City. Consequently, the diet of residents in these locales place them at risk for nutrition-related diseases.

At one area university, this issue is being attacked from the ground up — literally. MBA students in the Leonard N. Stern School of Business's Consulting Corps (SCC) program have taken on City Harvest, New York City's food rescue organization, as a client. As part of their pro-bono work and learning experience, SCC students tackle real business challenges and opportunities outside of the classroom, as well as receive mentoring from leaders at top-tier consulting firms and from faculty advisors.

This past fall semester, students focused on City's Harvest's Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative, which aims to provide affordable access to nutritious food and produce to low-income communities.

"In these areas, the obesity and diabetes rates and related diseases are prevalent. We want to improve the retail environment so people have better access to better food options," says Keith Carr, assistant



L to R: NYU Stern grad students Meredith Bunche, Ann Rocco, Ryan Armijo and Shloke Mittal work with City Harvest's Keith Carr to encourage bodega store owners to stock healthier products.

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Stern MBAs have been devoting approximately 10 hours each week to field research and data collection in Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of four target areas in the metro-region. In particular, the select locations have the highest density of middle school and junior high school students, corner stores and bodega operators, according to Carr.

"We know that that one out of four students here is munching on something they got at a corner store after getting off of the bus," says Carr.

"We're trying to find out the buying patterns of these kids: What time of day do they grab a snack, what do they purchase?" says Carr.

"If we can show area store operators that it makes business sense to add healthier products (like fruit cups, whole wheat bagels or frozen yogurt), or replace products that are collecting dust on their shelves with such selections, they might be more likely to do it," says Carr. "We can inquire about which incentives (such as funding to change store layout) might be favorable."

Once the data is collected, Stern consultants will analyze it and provide a final report to their City Harvest faculty advisor, which will include market and customer analysis, recommended snack types and price points, according to Jamie Rose, associate director for Stern's Office of Student Engagement.

For Stern students, the

hands-on work experience with City Harvest has been invaluable.

"Our students are using their business skills from the Stern MBA program to help provide greater access to healthy food choices in these communities," says Rose.

City Harvest is a first-time client of the SCC, which receives far more project proposals than it ends up staffing, according to Rose.

"We look for projects that require thoughtful and actionable recommendations to address complex business or societal issues," says Rose.

Since its inception in 2002, the consulting group has worked with such organizations as the William J. Clinton Foundation, ACCION International,

Alzheimer's Association, the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation and UNICEF, according to Rose.

When Ryan Armijo, a first-year Stern MBA student, heard about SCC and, specifically, the City Harvest consulting project, "It was a clear opportunity to bridge my academic program with real-world experience," he says.

A native of Colorado, "Food has [always] been a focal point of my family," he says. "We have farms and are keen on having family reunions on them and eating food grown on them."

So far, in speaking with store owners, Armijo and his student colleagues are learning that, "Kids are coming in in the morning before school and trying to get as much food for as little [cash] as possible," he says.

In trying to attack the global issue of healthy snacking, "My biggest challenge is knowing how large of an issue this really is and trying not to get caught up in solving all of the problems that exist but to stay focused on the micro-level, which is our specific project," says Armijo.

After spring break, SCC students plan to speak with kids to learn what healthier snack options may be of interest to them. Once this feedback is gathered and the demand is known, store owners will hopefully perceive and fill this new business opportunity.

"If we can find a product we know these kids will purchase instead of potato chips and pastries, there is a business opportunity," says Armijo.



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