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Teens CAN Program Builds Food Literacy, Leadership, and Community Across San Francisco Schools

A growing collaboration between Scherr Nutrition Science Consulting, San Francisco State University, Ida B. Wells High School, and John Muir Elementary School is demonstrating how nutrition education can do far more than teach healthy eating habits. When incorporating aspects of community, it can strengthen leadership, mentorship, and connection across generations of students.

The *Teens CAN: Comprehensive Food Literacy in Cooking, Agriculture, and Nutrition* curriculum, a hands-on food literacy program, was recently highlighted in a study published in the journal, *Nutrients*. The study explored the program's impact on nutrition knowledge and dietary behaviors, while the broader collaboration has illuminated an equally powerful outcome: community-building through near-peer mentorship and shared learning.

The pilot study documented the program's first year, during which student interns from the San Francisco State University Family, Interiors, Nutrition & Apparel Department facilitated nutrition and cooking lessons for students at Ida B. Wells High School. Going beyond the initial scope of work, those high school students then applied what they learned by teaching younger students at John Muir Elementary School.

In the program's second year, the focus shifted to increase ownership among the high school students and empower them as emerging leaders. A new cohort of SF State student mentors guided Ida B. Wells students through the process of designing their own nutrition education lesson from start to finish. The growth in the high school students was noticeable—through observation and self-reflection. A graduating senior from Ida B. Wells High School, Michael Koon, stated, "This whole project has been really good for my public speaking. I think I did well last year, but I feel like this year, specifically, I did way better when I was presenting in front of all the kids. I just evolved so much in a year."

Michael went on to discuss how important the relationship with the SF State students was for him. He hopes to be a Gator one day in the near future and it helped him to be able to learn more about current students' college experiences. Another student noted how meaningful it was to cultivate the near-peer relationships. He thoroughly enjoyed playing the part of mentor at John Muir Elementary School and equally relished the role of mentee.

According to Raina Meyers, the Peer Resources teacher at Ida B. Wells High School, "Teens CAN has played an instrumental role in connecting our students to their future selves; they can firsthand talk to SF State students, interact with them and become comfortable with them. This personal relationship is key for our population of high school students to connect effectively with other adults and then from that place of personal connection, see a possible future for themselves. After the lesson implementation the high school students felt connected not only to the SF State students, but they also felt connected to the elementary school community. They

were proud of the important and fun lesson they taught and saw themselves as role models for the younger students. What a meaningful partnership this has been, connecting the dots between college to high school to elementary school. I hope we can further deepen this partnership and embed this infrastructure into our classroom and school community.”

The program has generated benefits at every level of participation:

- SF State student interns gained hands-on experience in community nutrition, teaching, and mentorship.
- Ida B. Wells students strengthened their food literacy, confidence, leadership skills, and self-efficacy around cooking and education.
- John Muir Elementary students benefitted from engaging nutrition lessons and from seeing older students from their own community serve as positive role models.

Organizers say the program highlights the importance of empowering young people not only to learn about nutrition, but also to teach and lead within their communities.

By creating a mentorship pipeline rooted in food literacy and experiential learning, *Teens CAN* demonstrates how nutrition education can foster meaningful relationships, strengthen youth leadership, and create lasting impacts for the community and its health.

For more information about the *Teens CAN* curriculum or the published study, visit:

[Nutrients Study DOI](#)

This project has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. CalFresh Healthy Living, University of California (SA21-5967-01), a USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This institution is an equal opportunity provider. University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources (UC ANR) is an equal opportunity provider.

The remainder was funded by Scherr Nutrition Science Consulting.

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