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From Formative Research to Fuel & Fit: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Developing Cooking, Nutrition, and Physical Activity Workshop Series for University Students

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Abstract **Objective:** To describe the interdisciplinary process used to develop Fuel & Fit, a student-informed cooking, nutrition, and physical activity intervention for university students. **Design:** Fuel & Fit was developed using findings from prior formative research conducted as part of the broader BeFAB-HBCU initiative. The development process also incorporated interdisciplinary expertise, relevant literature, theoretical guidance, and consideration of available university resources. **Methods:** Formative findings on students' eating patterns, food affordability, cooking resources, and barriers to physical activity were used to guide intervention development. An interdisciplinary team representing nursing, nutrition sciences, kinesiology, public health, and research reviewed these findings and contributed to decisions regarding workshop content, sequencing, food preparation activities, physical activity, and delivery. Social Cognitive Theory, experiential learning, and eating competence principles informed development. Campus space, equipment, food costs, and feasibility for university students were also considered in developing the curriculum. **Results:** The development process yielded an eight-session Fuel & Fit workshop series that integrates hands-on cooking, nutrition education, food safety, and accessible physical activity. Sessions were structured to build skills progressively, beginning with greater guidance and moving toward increased participant application and independence. **Conclusion:** Developing Fuel & Fit demonstrated that translating formative findings into an intervention required more than identifying student needs. Interdisciplinary collaboration, adequate planning time, appropriate facilities, available resources, and attention to feasibility were important in moving the intervention from concept to a deliverable workshop series. These lessons may help guide the development of similar nutrition and physical activity interventions for university students.

Keywords: *culinary workshops, intervention development, formative research, nutrition education, cooking skills, physical activity, university students*

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1. Introduction

Fuel & Fit was a student-informed experiential pilot intervention designed to promote practical cooking, nutrition, and physical activity skills among university students. The intervention was designed to provide students with practical opportunities to build skills related to food preparation, nutrition, and physical activity that they could use in their daily lives. The objective of Fuel & Fit was to move beyond nutrition and physical activity education alone by providing firsthand experiences that allowed students to practice and apply healthy behaviors in a supportive university setting. The purpose of this paper is to describe the interdisciplinary process used to develop Fuel & Fit from previously identified design considerations, including the theoretical and experiential

approaches that guided the intervention's structure, curriculum, and delivery.

1.1. Background and Rationale

Higher education institutions play a key role in students' lives that extends beyond academic learning and degree completion. Universities are also positioned to help foster practical life skills because they bring together young adults at an important stage of life and provide access to the resources, social networks, and environments that can foster healthy habits that continue into adulthood, including those related to food and physical activity [1,2,3]. For many young adults attending university, eating well and staying physically active involves more than knowing what is healthy. They must also navigate when and what to eat, how to obtain and prepare food, how to manage food costs, and how to fit physical activity into busy and often unpredictable schedules [4,5,6]. These decisions reflect skills that are still developing in young adulthood, particularly as many move away from home and assume greater responsibility for choices previously managed or supported within the family home. This transition also creates an important opportunity for health promotion. Universities can reach young adults during a period when lifelong habits are still being formed and can provide access to education, resources, social support, and environments that help foster healthier routines [7,8,9].

Formative research conducted as part of the broader BeFAB-HBCU initiative identified several challenges affecting university students' nutrition and physical activity behaviors. Students reported irregular and inconsistent meal patterns, low fruit and vegetable intake, concerns about food affordability, limited cooking resources, and difficulty fitting physical activity into already demanding schedules [10]. These findings suggested that students may know what healthy behaviors look like but still have difficulty putting that knowledge into practice in their everyday lives.

Engaging young adults in health behavior interventions can also be challenging [11,12]. Academic responsibilities, work, social commitments, and other priorities can make health-focused programs feel less important in the moment. Nutrition and physical activity are important to student health, yet both have received less attention than other areas of university health promotion, supporting the need for continued development and evaluation of interventions targeting these behaviors [13]. University-based interventions addressing nutrition and physical activity have increased, but there is still a need to better describe how these programs are developed and how identified student needs are translated into specific program content [13,14,15]. Describing this process can help other researchers understand why certain decisions were made and how similar programs might be adapted for other student populations.

This paper describes the development of Fuel & Fit, a hands-on cooking, nutrition, and physical activity intervention for university students. The program was developed in response to formative findings highlighting the need for practical, affordable, and flexible strategies that could fit into students' daily lives. This is the second paper in a planned series describing the formative work that informed Fuel & Fit, as well as the subsequent development and evaluation of the intervention. The first paper reports the formative research that identified the needs, barriers, and preferences that informed the intervention's design [16]. The present paper focuses on the interdisciplinary process used to develop the structure, content, and delivery of Fuel & Fit. A third paper will report on the qualitative findings, and a fourth will present the mixed-methods outcomes.

2. Methods

2.1. Intervention Development

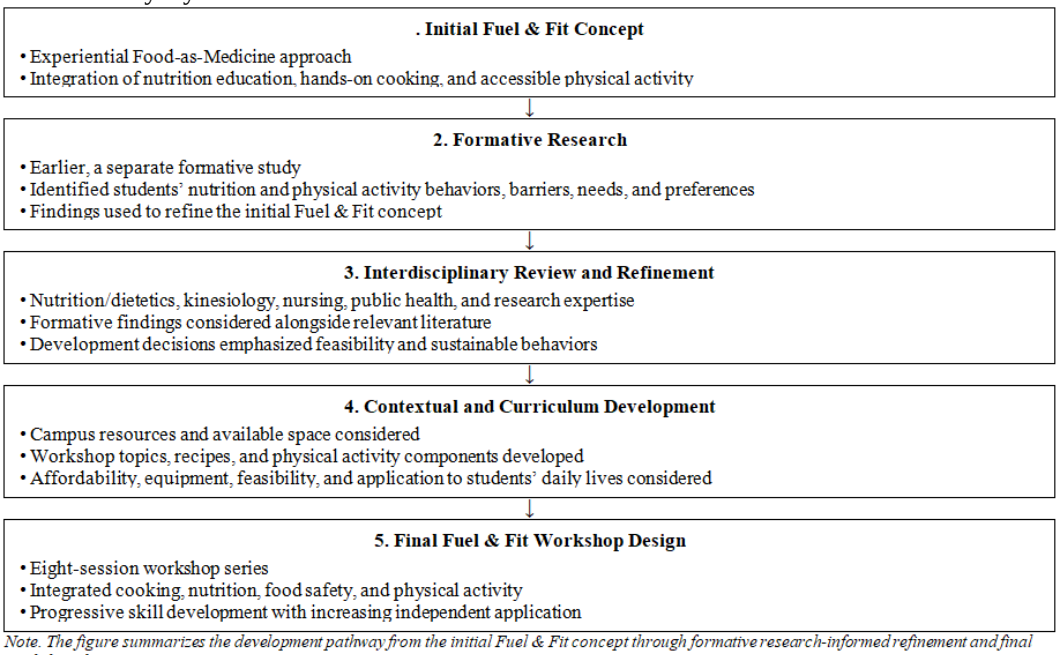

Figure 1. Fuel & Fit Workshop Development Process

Fuel & Fit was developed as a subsequent student-informed intervention informed by formative findings generated through the BeFAB-HBCU initiative. Fuel & Fit originated as a proposed experiential Food-as-Medicine intervention designed to integrate nutrition education, hands-on cooking, and accessible physical activity for university students. The initial concept was informed by Social Cognitive Theory, experiential learning, and eating competence principles, with an emphasis on skill development, self-efficacy, and sustainable health behaviors. Findings from the earlier formative study, together with relevant literature and interdisciplinary expertise, were used to refine the initial concept and guide development of the workshop curriculum, structure, and delivery. The Fuel & Fit workshop development process is summarized in Figure 1. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Interdisciplinary Program Planning

Phase 2 focused on using the formative findings from Phase 1 to develop the curriculum, structure, and delivery of the Fuel & Fit workshop series. Planning began in October 2025 and continued through the spring 2026 implementation period. An interdisciplinary team was involved throughout the development process and included faculty and graduate students from Nursing, Nutrition Sciences, Kinesiology, and Public Health, as well as representatives from campus and research partners.

Discipline-specific expertise was incorporated into workshop development. Two credentialed dietitians and two graduate dietetics students contributed to the nutrition and cooking components, including food selection, preparation, nutritional content, affordability, and feasibility for university students. Kinesiology expertise guided development of the physical activity component, with emphasis on accessible activities that required little or no equipment and could be incorporated into students' daily routines. Nursing expertise contributed to a health-promotion perspective linking physical activity with broader health benefits. Across disciplines, the emphasis was on developing practical strategies that students could realistically integrate and sustain in everyday life.

The interdisciplinary team reviewed the formative findings within their respective areas of expertise and used them to guide decisions about workshop content, activities, food-preparation experiences, and approaches to supporting sustainable nutrition and physical activity behaviors.

2.3. Environmental Scan and Campus Resources

As part of the development process, the team considered the campus environment and the resources available to support the cooking, nutrition, and physical activity components of Fuel & Fit. This included identifying spaces where students could participate in hands-on food preparation, available food resources, and areas of campus that could be used for physical activity.

The environmental scan showed that there were limited spaces on campus that could accommodate a hands-on cooking program for a group of students. The nursing department had a small grab-and-go food-preparation area with basic cooking equipment. The team was also invited by a residence hall manager to consider using a kitchen located in one of the university's residence halls. Although the residence hall kitchen offered an additional option, the space was not large enough to accommodate the anticipated number of students for the program. Based on the resources available, the nursing department's grab-and-go area was selected for the cooking component.

The team also considered other campus resources that could support the program, including the campus food pantry and outdoor areas that could be incorporated into the physical activity component. Reviewing the campus environment during the development process helped the team identify available resources and limitations to consider when planning Fuel & Fit.

2.4. Principles Guiding Program Development

Fuel & Fit was designed around principles that emerged from the formative findings and existing literature. The workshop integrated nutrition and physical activity and emphasized feasible strategies students could apply in everyday life, including familiar foods, affordable ingredients, and hands-on food preparation. Cooking practice was emphasized because cooking skills and self-efficacy are modifiable factors associated with healthier dietary behaviors, and hands-on skill development was prioritized over education alone [17,18,19].

2.5. Development of the Fuel & Fit Curriculum

Once the program structure and location were established, the team used the Phase 1 findings to identify curriculum topics addressing students' nutrition and physical activity needs. These topics included food preparation, nutrition, food safety, affordable meal choices, and physical activity.

The curriculum was organized as a series of hands-on sessions rather than lecture-based education alone [17,18,20]. Topics and activities were sequenced so that concepts introduced in earlier sessions could be reinforced and applied in later sessions. Practical consideration was given to food cost, available cooking equipment, preparation time, familiar foods, and the ability to reproduce recipes outside of the workshop setting [8,21,22].

2.6. Session Structure and Content

Fuel & Fit was developed as an eight-session workshop series integrating hands-on cooking, nutrition education, food safety, and physical activity. Sessions followed a consistent structure and were sequenced so that skills introduced early in the series could be reinforced and applied with increasing independence. The structure was informed by Phase 1 formative findings, interdisciplinary team input, and literature related to university student nutrition, cooking skills, and physical activity interventions [8,17,18,23,24].

Each session followed a similar format that included

nutrition education, hands-on food preparation, food safety instruction, and a physical activity component. Maintaining a consistent format across sessions was intended to provide structure while allowing new concepts and skills to build on those introduced in earlier sessions.

Recipes were selected to support the nutrition concepts introduced during each session while allowing students to practice basic cooking techniques. Recipes were selected to reinforce session nutrition concepts while providing opportunities to practice basic cooking techniques. Selection emphasized feasibility for students and the use of transferable cooking techniques and healthier substitutions that could be applied to familiar foods [22,25,26,27,28,29,30]. The curriculum emphasized transferable cooking techniques and simple, healthy substitutions that could improve the nutritional quality of familiar foods they already enjoyed [22,28,29,30].

Table 1. Planned Fuel & Fit Curriculum Framework

Planned Session	Planned Cooking, Nutrition, and Food Safety Content	Planned Physical Activity
Session 1 Foundations	Balanced meals; macronutrients; protein and fiber; introductory cooking skills; safe food handling and cooking temperatures.	Group walking and stretching
Session 2 Affordable Healthy Eating	Affordable meal strategies; canned and frozen foods; fiber-rich meals; poultry safety and prevention of cross-contamination.	Walking and stretching
Session 3 Building Balanced Meals	Whole grains, higher-fiber carbohydrates, lean proteins, and vegetables; safe handling and cooking of meats and vegetables.	Cardiovascular and group-based activity
Session 4 Meal Planning and Preparation	Meal planning; fruit and vegetable intake; plant-based proteins; produce safety and storage of prepared foods.	Cardiovascular activity and stretching
Session 5 Skill Application	Application of meal-planning, cooking, food handling, and sanitation skills with greater participant decision-making.	Group-based physical activity
Sessions 6–8 Reinforcement and Independent Application	Integration and reinforcement of nutrition, meal-planning, cooking, and food safety skills with increasing independence.	Accessible, low-equipment physical activity

Early sessions were planned to provide more guidance with food preparation, meal balance, food safety, and basic cooking skills. As the series progressed, activities were designed to give students greater responsibility for applying what they had learned. This included opportunities to make decisions about ingredients, develop balanced meals, and apply previously introduced nutrition and food-preparation concepts with less direction from the facilitators.

Physical activity was included throughout the planned workshop series rather than being treated as a separate intervention. Activities were selected to be accessible, require little or no equipment, and provide students with examples of ways physical activity could be incorporated into their daily routines. Walking, stretching, cardiovascular activity, and group-based activities were considered during program development.

Across the eight sessions, planned content progressed from foundational cooking and food safety skills to meal planning, affordable and balanced food choices, and application of previously introduced skills. Table 1 provides an overview of the planned Fuel & Fit curriculum and the major content areas incorporated into each session.

3. Discussion

Developing interventions that combine nutrition and physical activity is complex and requires attention to more than just intervention content. Formative research can help identify the needs, barriers, and preferences of the population for whom the intervention is intended; however, translating those findings into an intervention requires additional planning, collaboration, and consideration of the setting in which the intervention will be delivered. In developing Fuel & Fit, findings from the earlier formative study provided a foundation for intervention planning. Faculty and team members from several disciplines then worked together to use those findings in developing the cooking, nutrition, and physical activity workshop series.

Several lessons emerged through the development of Fuel & Fit. The development process showed that moving from formative findings to a deliverable intervention required additional decisions about content, sequencing, delivery, space, equipment, and feasibility. These decisions required input from the interdisciplinary team and consideration of the university setting. The process also highlighted the importance of allowing sufficient time for intervention planning, identifying appropriate facilities early, and securing the resources needed to support hands-on cooking and physical activity activities.

Interdisciplinary collaboration was also important throughout development. Bringing together expertise from nutrition, nursing, kinesiology, public health, and research enabled the team to consider multiple aspects of the intervention simultaneously. This was especially important when decisions concerned how nutrition education, cooking skills, physical activity, food safety, and health promotion could be integrated into a single workshop series.

The amount of time required for intervention planning was another important lesson. Developing the workshop series required coordination across faculty and team members while also working within existing teaching, service, and research responsibilities. Identifying space, developing materials, selecting activities, and refining the curriculum required more time than was initially anticipated. Adequate planning time may be especially important when interventions are developed within teaching-intensive university settings.

Access to appropriate facilities also influenced the development of interventions. Although spaces with suitable kitchen resources existed on campus, access for intervention activities was limited, and opportunities for collaboration across units were not always available. The team therefore had to identify alternative locations and adapt aspects of the workshop to the available space and

resources. This highlighted the importance of identifying facilities and establishing campus partnerships early in the development process.

Funding and available resources were also important in moving the intervention from concept to delivery. Hands-on cooking and physical activity programming required food, equipment, supplies, and other materials that would have been difficult to provide without dedicated support. Considering these needs early may help investigators better estimate the resources required for similar interventions.

4. Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this work was the use of formative research to guide intervention development rather than relying solely on existing literature or project investigators' assumptions. The development process also benefited from interdisciplinary input across nursing, nutrition, kinesiology, public health, and research, allowing the intervention to address multiple behavioral and contextual influences.

Several limitations should be considered. First, formative findings were obtained from students at a single university, which may limit transferability to other student populations. Second, intervention development was influenced by available campus resources, facilities, personnel, and scheduling constraints, which may affect the feasibility of replicating the program in other settings. Finally, although behavior change principles informed intervention development, the intervention was not initially developed using a formal behavior change technique taxonomy, limiting the ability to systematically specify and compare individual intervention components.

5. Implications for Future Research

Future studies should examine how formative findings can be systematically linked to specific intervention components and behavior change techniques during intervention development.

Similar campus-based intervention development studies have suggested that systematically developed curricula may serve as a blueprint for adaptation in other university settings. In the present study, the combination of formative findings, interdisciplinary expertise, and campus-specific considerations may likewise provide a practical model for developing student-centered nutrition and physical activity programs.

6. Conclusions

The development of Fuel & Fit demonstrates how findings from prior formative research can be combined with interdisciplinary expertise, theoretical guidance, and consideration of available resources to develop a multicomponent nutrition and physical activity intervention for university students. The process also highlighted the importance of adequate planning time, access to appropriate facilities, collaboration across disciplines, and sufficient resources when moving from an intervention concept to a deliverable program. These experiences may be useful for others developing similar campus-based interventions.

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Statement of Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests.

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