REQUEST FOR BRIEF PROPOSALS

2016 Healthy Food Behavior Research Grants:
Using Behavioral Economics to Promote Healthier, Economical Food Choice

Funding for the Period from October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017

Deadline for brief proposal receipt: May 20, 2016 by 5:00 pm EST

Purpose

In alignment with the aims of our Duke-UNC USDA Center for Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Choice Research (BECR) and those of the US Department of Agriculture, we seek brief proposals for the 2016 Healthy Food Behavior Research Grants: Using Behavioral Economics to Promote Healthier, Economical Food Choice. Proposals must draw on behavioral economics theory to develop and test strategies for improving food choice behaviors. In particular, we seek policy relevant research projects related to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants that employ behavioral economic strategies to promote purchase of healthy, economical foods in a variety of food retail environments, including but not limited to supercenters, supermarkets, grocery stores, and smaller retailers such as convenience stores, corner stores, and farmers’ markets. Following the initial application process, selected applicants will be requested to submit a full proposal including a detailed project narrative.

The Duke-UNC USDA Center for Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Choice Research (BECR Center)

The USDA Center for Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Choice Research (BECR) at Duke University and the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill strives to apply behavioral economics theories and concepts to uncover potential interventions to improve food choice behaviors contributing to improved nutrition, food security, and the health of American consumers, and to increase the effectiveness of policies and programs designed to improve diets, especially for low-income households. The BECR team is building the field of behavioral economics around food consumption choices with a particular focus on identifying the most successful levers required to motivate healthy food choices and quantifying their effectiveness with regard to the individual consumer, food retailers, and the food industry. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service and Food and Nutrition Service, the Center has three areas of focus-- the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) clients, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clients, and the general population.
Background on Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Behavior Research

Our Center focuses on using behavioral economics techniques in real world settings coupled with big data analysis to develop low cost nudges that can influence healthy eating, particularly in SNAP and WIC populations. We believe that an important component of changing food choice behavior involves the economically viable transformation of the environment in which the choice is being made. Therefore, we emphasize strategies that would be feasible and acceptable in real-world settings such as the food retail environment.

Traditional economic theory assumes that humans are rational and self-interested, driven to maximize their personal utility. Following this theory, economists assume that people make reasoned, well-informed choices in their best interests - so long as they have all the necessary information. By contrast, behavioral economics recognizes that people and organizations do not always make the seemingly rational decision and aims to explain how and why people make the (rational and irrational) decisions they do. For example, the idea of complete rationality is challenged by repeated observance of cognitive biases such as hyperbolic discounting that can lead to decisions that seem to over-value short-term benefits such as the taste or convenience of foods versus long-run benefits such as health.1 Other factors identified by behavioral economics research, such as mental accounting, loss aversion, satisficing, use of heuristics, effects of framing, precommitment and norms may be relevant to food choice behavior.2 Such insights may have implications for food choice behavior that may be used to design strategies to increase the effectiveness of food and nutrition programs and policies.3

Behavioral economics draws on a wide range of theoretical concepts from the behavioral sciences, from economics to psychology and marketing.4-8 These include non-standard preferences (risk preferences, time preferences, social preferences), non-standard beliefs (overconfidence, over-projection of current tastes), and non-standard decision-making (framing, inattentiveness, responsiveness to social pressure and persuasion, emotiveness). By examining cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of the decision-making process, behavioral economics aims to predict actual behavior and design strategies that help people make decisions that are truly in their best interest. Behavioral economists have shown that small changes in the environment, such as changes in the default setting, or in the context of a decision (e.g., priming) can strongly affect the outcome of that decision.4-8 These small changes in habitual behavior may have important, long-term consequences. For example, small changes in savings amounts may, over time result in individuals having a more adequate retirement income.

USDA-supported behavioral economics-food choice research has generated useful findings that promote greater acceptance of healthy foods provided to children through USDA’s National School Lunch Program.9 Emerging research suggests that the behavioral economics field may also hold strategies that promote healthy food purchases while keeping retailer profit-making incentives in mind.10-11 Such strategies may be particularly beneficial to low-income consumers such as those participating in SNAP. Analysis of national survey data finds that although SNAP participants value nutrition, their time and money constraints complicate the task of making healthy food choices.12 SNAP participants may engage in multiple food budgeting and shopping behaviors, devoting considerable time and energy to food purchasing.13 The cognitive load imposed by this situation,14 along with the heightened sense of economic risk in making a purchase unacceptable to their families may reduce willingness to change food purchases, even when the health value of the change is recognized.15 Further, from the formative research our Center has conducted with low-income shoppers, we know that those with children often make product selects based on what their children will actually eat instead of based on price or nutritional value.

Product placement plays an extremely important role in the food retail environment and has quantifiable effects on product sales, particularly the location of products on shelves and end-of-aisle displays.16 Other placement strategies that are known to increase sales are increasing the amount of facing of the targeted products on shelves, shelving items at eye/arm level, and
placing items in the middle of the category aisle. In addition to placement strategies, product bundling has demonstrated utility in improving healthier product sales. For example, a “vice-virtue” bundle where a healthy product is paired with a less healthy one, can encourage consumers who would typically only purchase unhealthy items to instead choose a bundle with more healthy items than unhealthy ones.

Using behavioral economics techniques, researchers can develop an experimental approach to uncover the behavioral levers required to motivate healthy food choices. Via research using these techniques, we aim to identify the most successful behavioral levers and to quantify their effectiveness, when applied at the individual consumer or program levels, as well as “upstream” via the food industry and food retailers.

Healthy Food Behavior Focusing on Behavioral Economics Approaches Grant Request

BEGR will award up to 6 grants (of between $20,000 and $50,000) to teams of researchers to develop and implement focused field experiments either alone or coupled with secondary data analysis using behavioral economics theory and strategies to improve food choice, particularly among low income individuals. Funding will span a 12-month period. We are expecting that the brief proposals will include clearly presented ideas for innovative interventions, based on behavioral economics theory, that are feasible within the current food environment and, for those focusing on Federal food assistance programs, within existing legislation and regulations. We are interested in interventions using non-monetary interventions, such as changes in the choice architecture, social norms, etc., as described below in “sample research topics,” not in manipulation of price. We are particularly interested in proposals aiming to improve the food choices of low income individuals on food assistance programs, especially SNAP. We also do not fund projects related to the USDA school meal programs or other projects related to the school food environment.

Areas of Research

1. Focused field experiments using behavioral economics methods with pre-post research designs, quasi-experimental designs, or when possible randomized controlled trials.
   a. Experiments should explore novel behavioral interventions related to healthy food choices. The focus should be on identifying behavioral interventions that use behavioral economics methods and have potential to be policy-relevant, scalable in a cost-efficient manner, and persist over time.
   b. We are particularly interested in field experiments in retail settings which serve a sizeable number of individuals on food-assistance programs, especially SNAP. We are particularly interested in interventions implemented in real purchasing environments and executed in collaboration with supermarkets and grocery stores.

   a. A mixed method approach could use a focused field experiment coupled with secondary data analysis.
   b. Sources of secondary data could include transaction records from retailers demonstrating a focus on low-income shoppers or administrative data on food assistance program data such as SNAP at the state or federal level.

Sample Research Topics

Below is a list of sample topics that you may wish to explore. Other topics that apply behavioral economics strategies to promote healthier food choices, especially among SNAP users are also encouraged.
a. Behavioral strategies that provide prompts on purchasing healthful, economical foods as recommended by the Federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans, such as fruits, dark green vegetables, nuts, healthy oils, low-fat dairy or whole grains by SNAP participants.

b. Strategies for encouraging SNAP participants to make effective use of pre-commitment devices to make healthy, economical food choices. Research has shown that planning meals in advance, making shopping lists, and avoiding shopping when hungry are all effective ways to make healthier food decisions, in part because they discourage impulsive purchases.

c. Retailers store designs store to assist SNAP participants in making healthier food choices, such as using store-based symbols or logos that highlight foods that are both healthful and economical, in a manner that simplifies and speeds choice for SNAP shoppers.

d. Technology and smartphone apps to nudge consumers to make healthier food choices.

Total Awards

Up to 6 grants will be awarded. Grants will be for between $20,000 and $50,000 total award (inclusive of direct + indirect costs) for the 12-month funding period (October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017). Please note that the funds are federal dollars and indirect rates are capped at 25%, but lower indirect rates are encouraged.

Eligibility Criteria

- Applicants can be researchers at institutions of higher learning, private research enterprises or state or local public health agencies. Funds will be granted as subawards to the applicant’s institution.

- Applicants are encouraged from a broad range of disciplines including, but not limited to, economics, public health, nutrition, marketing, business, psychology, medicine, or a related field.

- The BECR Center is dedicated to supporting new investigators. Thus, some preference for funding will be given to new researchers in the behavioral economics and food choice fields, defined as individuals who received a doctoral degree within the last ten years or those new to the field of behavioral economics or the application of behavioral economic techniques to healthy food choices. The BECR Center embraces diversity and inclusion across multiple dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation and identity, and socioeconomic status.

- Applicants must be based in the United States or its territories.

- Applicants should demonstrate an understanding of behavioral economics and its application to healthy food behavior.

Application Process and Instructions

We are using a 2-part application process:

1) Applicants will submit brief proposals with project narratives, and

2) Applicants who are selected for the next round will be requested to submit full proposals including detailed project narratives.

The Part 1 brief proposals are due by Friday, May 20, 2015 by 5:00 pm EST. Proposals should include the following.
Complete brief proposals should be converted to PDF in the following order and submitted via email, all as one document (Applicant information, project narrative, references, appendices, scope of work, and key personnel biosketches). Please submit your completed application to the BECR Center at becr@duke.edu.

For questions related to this RFP please contact Terry Hartman, MPH, MS, CCRC at (919) 613-5907 or terry.hartman@duke.edu.

Selection Criteria for Brief Proposal

1. Demonstration of an understanding of behavioral economics and low cost nudges to influence food behavior or the use of secondary data to answer behavioral economics-healthy food choice research questions.
2. A clear explanation and application of behavioral economics to the research question and ability to inform strategies to promote healthy food choices.
3. Policy relevant research projects related to SNAP participants preferred.
4. Innovations to be tested in the food retail environment that are feasible in the current policy environment without requiring major policy changes.
5. Qualifications and experience of personnel, including an understanding of behavioral economics.

Selection Criteria for Full Proposal

For the full proposal round, we will utilize the same criteria as described above and the following additional criteria.

1. Evidence of agreements necessary for completion of the project, e.g. letters of support from retailers that have agreed to serve as an experimental site and/or provide data.
2. Reasonableness of estimated cost and time commitments in relation to anticipated results and the necessity of the funds for the completion of the research.
3. The manner in which funds will be allocated to best serve BECR's goal to provide financial support for the research, including, but not limited to, the level of indirect costs charged by the applicant’s institution.

Reporting Requirements

Recipients of the grants will be required to attend a virtual kick-off meeting, provide a mid-year progress report, and provide a final activity and financial report. Researchers will be required to present final results during a meeting in Washington, D.C. that will be hosted by the Center in late August 2017. Recipients should budget for travel costs to this 1-day meeting. In addition to the usual academic papers resulting from the research effort, recipients will be required to present their findings in
a webinar for the appropriate audience, which will be identified with support from the Center. Recipients of the grants will also be required to provide non-technical Research Reviews and Issue Briefs which the Center will distribute to appropriate stakeholders.

**Brief Proposal Follow Up**

Invitations to submit full proposals will be made and notifications sent by *June 1, 2016*. Full proposals will be due via email July 15, 2016. Further instructions related to the full proposal will be included with the invitation for application. The full proposal will include further elaboration on the proposed project.

**IMPORTANT DATES**

- Applications due: *May 20, 2016 by 5:00 pm EST*
- Notification to all applicants: *June 1, 2016*
- Full proposals are due: *July 15, 2016 by 5:00 pm EST*
- Notification of Awards: *August 12, 2016*
- Start Date of Funded Projects: *October 1, 2016*
- End Date of funded projects: *September 30, 2017*

**Program Direction**

The BECR Center is under the direction of the following:

- Matthew Harding, PhD, *Program Director and Principal Investigator*
- Alice Ammerman, DrPH, RD, *Executive Committee Chair*
- Terry Hartman, MPH, MS, CCRC, *Assistant Director*

For more information, please visit our website at [www.becr.org](http://www.becr.org).

**Acknowledgement**

The BECR Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through its Economic Research Service and Food and Nutrition Service. The views expressed in the Center’s work are those of the investigators and cannot be attributed to the U.S. Department of Agriculture or its Economic Research Service or its Food and Nutrition Service.

**References**


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2. Project Narrative

In this section, be sure to include the following information. This section of the proposal should not exceed 3 pages.

1) Proposed specific aims and hypothesis/research questions, how the application relates to the RFP, and how the findings align with the interests of the BECR Center.

2) Background and significance

3) Methods, including data sources and quantitative or qualitative measurement strategies you propose to use to test the hypothesis/research questions

4) Anticipated opportunities and challenges that are likely to affect the research project, including a plan for how challenges will be addressed

5) Potential impact of the research on improving healthy eating in low income populations

3. Scope of Work

Include relevant experience and roles of research personnel with FTEs. This section of the proposal should not exceed 2 pages.

4. Key Personnel Biosketches

Please include biosketch in the new NIH format for all relevant key personnel.