Selling consumers on healthy eating

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Tulane University School of Medicine has opened up a new front in the battle against obesity and diet-related disease: the kitchen.

The Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine is a groundbreaking program of the medical school that trains future physicians in the fundamentals of food, nutrition and cooking so they can better help their patients make practical dietary changes. The center boasts the world's first full-time teaching kitchen owned by a medical school, and its curriculum has to date been licensed to a dozen medical schools across the country.



Marketing professors Harish Sujan, left, and Mita Sujan, center, are working with Dr. Timothy Harlan, right, executive director of the Goldring

Center for Culinary Medicine, on research to help doctors better assist their patients in achieving diet-related goals. (Photo by Tricia Travis)

“We’re trying to teach physicians to have a different conversation with their patients about food,” says Dr. Timothy Harlan, executive director of the center, associate clinical professor of medicine and an accomplished chef.

While food and nutrition are the focus, the center also incorporates research from other disciplines, including — perhaps surprisingly — business. For the last several years, Harlan has been working with Harish Sujan and Mita Sujan, marketing professors at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, to use insights from consumer behavior research to help doctors communicate their health recommendations to patients more effectively. Their most recent study investigates how healthy individuals achieve their diet-related goals.

“There’s a lot of research that looks at self-regulation, but researchers have not systematically studied what good self-regulators actually do in life,” says Mita Sujan, the Malcolm S. Woldenberg Chair of Marketing at the Freeman School. “We’re trying to figure out what people who are good self-regulators do to regulate their eating and then build those skills and strategies into the curriculum.”

Last year, Sujan co-authored a study that looked at what successful participants in an exercise program did to achieve their goals. What she discovered was that good self-regulators also tend to be good planners.

“What we show in the paper is that giving people planning aids is really big,” Sujan says of the study, which was published in Journal of Consumer of Psychology. “It really, really drives their ability to self-regulate.”

Sujan says that individuals who have difficulty self-regulating can significantly improve their outcomes by focusing not on distant goals – such as lowering cholesterol or losing weight — but rather on specific short-term strategies. Those tactics include planning ahead (such as packing a lunch instead of dining out), substitution (opting for fresh fruit instead of cake), moderation (ordering a small size instead of a large), restraint (eating only half a dessert or entree), and developing intrinsic interest (resolving to find a recipe to make a better-tasting, healthier dessert).

Instructors at the Goldring Center are already using Sujan's recommendations in their classes, but Harlan says the long-term goal is to conduct tests to determine which strategies are the most successful. Those strategies can then be formally incorporated into the curriculum to help improve its efficacy.

For Sujan, who has studied the ways consumers make decisions for 30 years, it's rewarding to see her research being applied so quickly and for such an important purpose.

"I think the academy is changing, especially in marketing, which is such an applied field," Sujan says. "We've moved from lab studies to field studies that tell us what people actually do to make good decisions, and our work with Tim is a great example of that shift."