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Recommended Citation

University Relations, "Morris Healthy Eating Changes Food Culture" (2014). *University Relations News Archive*. Paper 75.
http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urel_news/75

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Morris Healthy Eating Changes Food Culture

Summary: MHE has increased access to and availability of healthy foods while reducing obesity.

(June 6, 2014)-Since 2009 Morris Healthy Eating (MHE) has worked to emphasize environmental changes and policy approaches to improve Stevens County's food environment. By doing so, it has not only increased access to and availability of healthy foods, but also reduced overweight and obesity rates.

MHE is a community initiative led by University of Minnesota, Morris Student Affairs with the Morris Area Farmers Market (MAFM), Pomme de Terre Foods, Sodexo dining services, Stevens Community Medical Center (SCMC), University of Minnesota West Central Regional Partnership, and more than 75 collaborating groups on campus, in the region, and across Minnesota. It works to increase access to healthy foods for people of all ages and incomes on campus and throughout Stevens County.

MHE initiatives “make the healthy choice the easy choice” and include expanding MAFM, Pride of the Prairie Fall Feast and Farmers Market, and campus gardening adding new campus dining menus in renovated facilities hosting MORRIS COOKS! classes and more. They respond to research from 2009 that documents a community wanting greater access to affordable, fresh, local, and healthy foods.

“Working as a community toward physical food environment change is the key to improving health through better food choices,” says Mary Jo Forbord, Morris Healthy Eating coordinator.

To do so, MHE's team of education, healthcare, food system, and community leaders has worked to increase access to healthy foods. Their work is having a measurable impact. University students' overweight and obesity rates have decreased dramatically—from 41 percent in 2007 to 34 in 2013—while rates at other Minnesota colleges have risen from 39 to 46 percent. This drop, in Forbord's 35 years as a registered dietitian and nutritionist, is unprecedented. University of Minnesota student health researchers agree, noting “there is clearly something unusual happening in Morris.”

There has been measurable change in the community, too. MAFM shoppers increased from less than 1000 to more than 4000, and 60 percent report eating more fruits and vegetables due to the market. SCMC enhanced onsite dining by offering more healthy choices, and Stevens County Food Shelf expanded its produce offerings and capacity. Sandra Olson-Loy, vice chancellor for student affairs, says these are just a few of the successful extensions of MHE's—and the University's—public mission.

“Morris has moved beyond thinking of healthy eating as an individual responsibility to looking at what we can do together as a community to make a difference,” she says. “MHE has helped us meet the demand for healthier foods on campus and in Stevens County.”

In the wake of MHE's success, [new Prevention Minnesota communications](#) highlight Morris as a community in which

people are pulling together to support residents' good health. Prevention Minnesota, Blue Cross' long-term statewide health improvement initiative, utilizes tobacco settlement proceeds to tackle the root causes of preventable heart disease and cancer.

Many of MHE's partnerships and initiatives are continuing thanks to expanded support from University students and West Central Wellness, a regional Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) initiative in Stevens, Douglas, Pope, Traverse, and Grant counties. New partners will also be welcomed. For more information, visit morris.umn.edu/healthyeating/.

Morris Healthy Eating Coordinator Mary Jo Forbord at the Pride of the Prairie Fall Feast and Farmers Market.

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