ASU tackles worldwide challenge of obesity in broad research initiative

Arizona State University

Obesity is a bigger global health crisis than hunger, according to a new report published in a British medical journal. It is the leading cause of disabilities around the world, with obesity rates climbing 82 percent globally in the past two decades.

Arizona State University is confronting the worldwide health challenge of obesity head-on, gathering some of the world's foremost experts on its faculty and partnering with Mayo Clinic on an ambitious undertaking, the Obesity Solutions Initiative.

It is a wide-ranging effort that will involve students, faculty, staff and the community, and that is expected to engage thousands of research participants over many years. Funding for the effort comes from the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, which established a $10-million strategic investment fund for ASU to improve all aspects of health care delivery.

Faculty and community members who are interested in obesity-related issues are invited to attend an informal collaborative gathering from 4 to 6 p.m., Jan. 30 in the University Club Bistro. Participants can learn more about the initiative, make connections with others and explore research possibilities.

Already a quarter of the ASU freshman class have been weighed and measured, and faculty researchers are bringing in grants to explore pieces of the solution puzzle. New companies are being formed at SkySong that will offer innovative technologies and products. ASU is exploring a lease at the Downtown Phoenix campus for space for a nutrition kitchen, nursing clinic and a testing center where faculty can do assessments.

ASU is casting a wide net because of the complexity of the problem, according to Elizabeth D. Phillips, ASU executive vice president and provost. She co-directs the obesity initiative with James A. Levine, professor of medicine at Mayo Clinic and a world-renowned leader in obesity research.

"Lots of things affect obesity: genetics, metabolism, social expectations, diet, culture, economics, family rearing, friends," says Phillips. "There are a million factors to consider. It's a tremendously complex problem, and a huge project in that sense.

"No one wants to be obese, and we all know we're supposed to eat less and exercise more. Yet the majority of adults in this country are overweight, struggling to lose weight without success."

Now that the so-called “Western lifestyle” has been adopted all around the world, every country except those in sub-Saharan Africa faces skyrocketing obesity rates, according to the Global Burden of Disease report published in the British journal. The study involved nearly 500 researchers from 50 countries comparing 20 years of health data.

The health burden is high. For the first time, the report said, noncommunicable diseases like diabetes, stroke and heart disease top the list of leading causes of years spent sick or injured. All are often related to obesity.

ASU may be the first university in the nation to tackle the global challenge of obesity on such a scale. This stems from the university’s commitment to transform society, recognizing that research universities are the preeminent catalysts for social change. The breadth of expertise at ASU and its entrepreneurial culture make the daunting effort seem tantalizingly possible.

“What makes ASU able to attempt this is the comprehensive nature of our expertise, and the scale and scope of our research,” says Alex Brewis Slade, a world expert on the growing prejudice and stigma surrounding obesity. “A problem as complex as obesity must have people working across multiple fields, in many different domains. ASU’s coverage is unmatched in the number of different ways we can devise to tackle the problem. Partnering with Mayo gives us the full aspect of the medical field.”

Brewis Slade, who was named director of ASU’s School of Human Evolution and Social Change a year ago, is director of operations for Obesity Solutions. She and Deborah Williams, associate director, are working with groups of ASU undergraduates who are conducting needs assessments and focus groups on obesity among other students.

They’ll branch out to conduct a needs assessment of faculty and staff this summer, to gauge the best solutions to be tested and implemented on campus.

The Well Devils Council, a group of ASU students dedicated to helping other students lead healthy lives, is working with Aramark, the Tempe campus food provider, to highlight healthy menu options at the Memorial Union and residence hall restaurants.

One of the key participants in the work of Obesity Solutions is James Levine, Mayo physician and professor who was persuaded to join ASU this year. He has worked with obese patients at Mayo for 25 years, has written widely on the subject of obesity and has participated in the development of devices such as the desk treadmill, the Gruve and the Zip activity monitors.

“For the first time in my professional career, I found an academic institution that literally wanted to take a societal issue and solve it,” he says. “That literally blew me away. The leadership is so dynamic and so committed to building enterprises that address societal issues in a profound way, I was entranced.

“Here at ASU, having access to the scientists and mathematicians who work in complex adaptive systems, is obviously a perfect fit. It doesn’t take five minutes to look at the breadth of talent here, not just the faculty but the students, and you get a sense of the capacity of ASU. It’s extraordinary.

“It’s easy to become cynical in the modern world. Here I’m meeting students who want to change the world they live in. What a privilege.”

Undergraduates in Deborah Williams’ global health classes have been conducting student surveys for the initiative since last semester, to gauge student attitudes about weight and obesity. They have found that while just over a third of students are concerned about their weight, there is a strong stigma attached to obesity.

“I was shocked that the majority of students would actually give up five years of life in order not to be obese,” says Donny Nelson, a global health major with a minor in sustainability. “The majority seemed to me to be concerned with the social implications of being obese, rather than overall health.

“I believe we need to take a much deeper look at the behavioral patterns of each individual affected. I definitely plan to be involved with Obesity Solutions. One of the goals of the study is to try to understand people’s beliefs about obesity and to create programs and solutions that link affected people with others who have similar backgrounds and experiences.”

ASU students, faculty, staff and alumni also are being asked to come up with innovative proposals for solving the challenge of obesity, in an Obesity Solutions Funding Challenge. The competition will accept applications from Feb. 1 through March 3, with $10,000 in seed funding being offered the winners along with a slot in ASU’s Venture Catalyst cohort. A kick-off event takes place 3-5 p.m., Jan. 31 at Changemaker Central.

For more information about Obesity Solutions, go to https://obesitysolutions.asu.edu [1].

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