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Cal Poly Professors, Student Part of Gates-Funded UC Davis Project

SAN LUIS OBISPO - Two Cal Poly Agribusiness professors and a student are taking part in a UC Davis research project on improving child nutrition in developing countries and plan to travel to Africa this summer as part of their work.

UC Davis is leading an international network of researchers at public and private institutions in the U.S., France, Finland, Malawi, Ghana and Burkina Faso in finding ways to prevent malnutrition. Specifically, the group is developing a cost-effective, fortified peanut butter-like nutritional supplement (LNS, a lipid-based nutrient supplement) to improve nutrition for children and women in impoverished nations.

The project recently received a five-year, $16 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"More than 3 million children die each year of malnutrition, due not just to a lack of calories but also to poor diet quality, particularly insufficient intake of micronutrients like zinc and iron, which are so critical to healthy growth and development," said UC Davis nutrition professor Kathryn Dewey, the project's lead researcher.

The Cal Poly connection comes in the research into the socioeconomic factors that would influence people's willingness and ability to buy the supplement. Steve Vosti, a UC Davis adjunct professor and the lead economist on the project, approached Cal Poly Agribusiness professor Jenni James in June about taking part in the research. James knew Vosti from Davis, where she earned her doctorate.

James performed economic experiments in research projects while teaching at Penn State University, prior to coming to Cal Poly. She said Vosti approached her because the UC Davis project will require similar methods to study the supplement's market potential.

James, along with fellow agribusiness professor Marianne McGarry Wolf and student Morgan Howe-Cobb, will perform market experiments in which the LNS product will be sold on a limited basis in one or more of the project's target areas, and customers will be surveyed on why they did or did not buy it. The aim will be to determine if the product is priced at a level affordable to its target consumers and whether there are other issues influencing consumers' willingness to buy the product.

Wolf said the Cal Poly group will help determine how to inform consumers about the expected benefits of the supplement.

"You can't just put a product on the shelf and expect that people are going to start buying it," Wolf said. "People don't go to the store looking for new products. Determining the best ways to make people aware of this product and its benefits will be an important aspect of our work."

The launch of the supplement into the market experiment is still a couple of years away, James said. First, project researchers must scientifically determine the effectiveness of LNS products in preventing malnutrition in children

and in pregnant/lactating women. In addition, social science research accompanying the nutrition trials will determine, among other things, whether the supplement is perceived as a food or a medicine, the best ways to communicate the benefits of the supplement, and where and how it will be sold.

James, Wolf and Howe-Cobb are just beginning preliminary work on their portion of the project - and they said that will take them to Africa this summer. There, they will begin to assess market conditions in the study areas and to look for potential retailers with whom to partner for their research.

Visiting Africa will be a dream realized for James, who said she has a keen interest in battling the problem of hunger and malnutrition in impoverished countries there.

"There is so much hunger in that part of the world, and I don't think it has to be that way," James said. "I want to do anything I can to make a difference. The possibility of my research helping to reduce hunger, even for a few people, is a big motivator for me."

For Howe-Cobb, the project provides a unique opportunity for undergraduate research that can have a tangible impact.

"I considered several research opportunities," said the third-year agribusiness student. "This project has the potential to make an immediate difference."

The project involves a core group of about 10 researchers and 20 or so graduate students at several universities and organizations around the world. Both James and Wolf said it is the largest research project in which they have ever participated.

The Cal Poly group joins researchers from Davis; University of Tampere, Finland; University of Malawi; University of Ghana; Institut de Recherche en Sciences de la Sante, Burkina Faso; Washington University in St. Louis; Nutriset, a French company that specializes in nutritional solutions for humanitarian relief; Project Peanut Butter, an organization in Malawi that produces ready-to-use foods for therapeutic and supplementary feeding; and Helen Keller International, a technical-assistance organization focused on eliminating the consequences of malnutrition and blindness.

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