

**Evaluating the Application of NFSMI Training on  
the HealthierUS School Challenge  
in School Nutrition Operations**



National Food Service Management Institute  
The University of Mississippi  
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# **National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi**

## **Building the Future Through Child Nutrition**

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Information Services and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

### **MISSION**

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

### **VISION**

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

### **Headquarters**

The University of Mississippi  
Phone: 800-321-3054  
Fax: 800-321-3061  
[www.nfsmi.org](http://www.nfsmi.org)

### **Education and Training Division**

#### **Information Services Division**

The University of Mississippi  
6 Jeanette Phillips Drive  
University, MS 38677

### **Applied Research Division**

The University of Southern Mississippi  
118 College Drive #5060  
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001  
Phone: 601-261-2480  
Fax: 888-262-9631

# **Acknowledgments**

**WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY**

**Keith Rushing, PhD, RD  
Research Scientist**

**Applied Research Division  
The University of Southern Mississippi**

**NFSMI EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
Katie Wilson, PhD, SNS**

**EVALUATING THE APPLICATION OF NFSMI TRAINING ON THE HEALTHIERUS SCHOOL CHALLENGE IN SCHOOL NUTRITION OPERATIONS**

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A research project to evaluate the application of NFSMI HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSCC) training in school nutrition (SN) operations was included in the Grant Year 2013 Statement of Work for the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD). In 2004, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established HUSCC to promote healthier school environments. The HUSCC initiative is voluntary, with four levels of achievement and monetary incentives for implementing various nutrition and physical health-based standards in school environments (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014). In 2010, NFSMI began providing HUSCC training to SN directors/managers, SN staff, and school wellness team members for the purpose of equipping them with the tools and resources necessary to successfully apply for a HUSCC award. The NFSMI HUSCC training program, which is a six-hour, face-to-face format, consists of instructor presentations, group discussions, and individual activities (NFSMI, 2014). In the spring of 2012, HUSCC training was put on hold pending the release of the final rule for the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. In 2014, after revisions were made based on the latest standards, NFSMI re-introduced HUSCC training. Currently, NFSMI has a process in place for training attendees to evaluate the trainer and the training session upon completion of a training program. However, there is no formal process in place to evaluate the application of HUSCC training. Therefore, the goal of this project was to evaluate the application of NFSMI HUSCC training in local SN operations. The specific research objectives were to determine the impact of NFSMI HUSCC

training to support school districts in the following areas:

- Achieving a HUSSC award;
- Earning the six-cent certification; and
- Meeting the current nutrition standards and meal pattern requirements for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

To meet the goal and objectives of this project, it was decided that a case study approach would be employed. In order to develop the case study protocol, the NFSMI, ARD project coordinator attended the revised NFSMI HUSSC training. The research plan was to develop the case study protocol utilizing three data sources (structured interviews and/or group discussions with SN stakeholders, documentation, and observation) and pilot test this protocol in one school district. Based on the results of the pilot, the protocol would be revised and implemented by four regional researchers in four different USDA regions. Each researcher would be responsible for collecting data in a minimum of three school districts from two-three schools within the district, for a total of 24-36 schools. A request for application process was planned for identifying and selecting the regional researchers. Once the regional researchers were selected, they were to be trained on the research protocol. The regional researchers would be responsible for identifying and securing approval to collect data in individual school districts; developing, submitting, and securing approval of Institutional Review Board applications; and collecting data. Once all the data were collected, the regional researchers and the NFSMI project coordinator would meet as a group to discuss the findings, coordinate data analysis, and plan the development of a technical report by the entire research team.

In August 2014, representatives from NFSMI, ARD at the The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) met with the NFSMI Executive Director and other NFSMI staff at The

University of Mississippi (UM) to discuss the project. During this meeting, the specific research goals and objectives identified above were agreed upon. Further, it was decided that an NFSMI staff member at UM would send the NFSMI, ARD project coordinator copies of all the sign-in sheets for HUSSC trainings that had occurred prior to the spring of 2012 when the trainings were put on hold in. The purpose of reviewing the sign-in sheets was to select a school district for the pilot study, and to determine what regions of the country had received HUSSC training.

Upon receipt of the HUSSC sign-in sheets, the project coordinator met with the NFSMI, ARD director and the USM Director for Research Support/Statistician to determine the next course of action. It was decided that to best conduct this evaluation study, the project coordinator must first subdivide the population that attended the HUSSC training from when it began in 2010 until it was put on hold in 2012 into one of three categories:

- Schools/districts that received a HUSSC award on the first attempt after a representative attended NFSMI HUSSC training;
- Schools/districts that received a HUSSC award, but not on the first attempt, after a representative attended NFSMI HUSSC training; and
- Schools/districts that did not receive a HUSSC award after a representative attended NFSMI HUSSC training.

Once these groups were subdivided, the researcher would develop structured interview and/or group discussion questions for stakeholders specific to each category to utilize as part of the case study protocol. This protocol would then be utilized in the pilot study and revised for the regional researchers to collect data.

In order to subdivide the attendee population into the three categories presented above, the project coordinator would need to develop and send a short e-mail survey to one or two

attendees from each school district and one or two state agency staff members from each state that attended the HUSSC training from when it began in 2010 until it was put on hold in 2012. To accomplish this, the project coordinator would first need to determine the feasibility of collecting the following contact information to facilitate sending e-mail surveys: attendee names, position titles, school districts, and current work e-mail addresses. This process would involve examining the sign-in sheets for a period of two days in an attempt to identify the contact information for the above mentioned NFSMI HUSSC training attendees. Further, the project coordinator would be required to gather contact information only on individuals that were currently employed at the same school district when they attended the training. The protocol for collecting the contact information involved entering a training attendee's email address in Google. In many cases, this Google search led to the identification of the school district where the attendee worked at the time of the training. If it was possible to ascertain the necessary contact information via the school district Web site, no further action was taken. If it was not possible to ascertain the necessary information via a search of the school district Web site, a phone call was made to the school district to gain that information. Several obstacles arose during this process.

First, it was observed that not all the sign-in sheets captured similar information. Most of the sign-in sheets contained a header listing the city, state, and date where/when the training was provided. However, one sign-in sheet did not provide any information associated with the date or location of the training. Most of the sign-in sheets instructed attendees to print and sign their name and provide their e-mail address. However, several sign-in sheets did not ask for an e-mail address. There was one sign-in sheet where attendees were asked to initial next to the following typed contact information: name, school, school address, school phone number,

and e-mail address. Another sign-in sheet instructed attendees to sign next to the following typed contact information: last name, first name, position title, school or district name, and work e-mail address.

Next, it was observed that usability of information provided by the attendees on the sign-in sheets was limited. The legibility of some attendees' handwriting was undiscernible. Other attendees did not provide their e-mail addresses, and some attendees provided personal e-mail addresses that could not be tied to a school district through a Google search.

The amount of information provided during the Google searches using attendees' work e-mail addresses was often limited. In most circumstances, if there was an e-mail address provided by an attendee that was associated with a school district, it was possible to identify the school district. However, many school district Web sites did not have a staff directory or they did not have a listing of child nutrition staff anywhere on the Web site. Some school district Web sites provided a system for sending staff members an e-mail without revealing the actual e-mail address.

If it was not possible to verify an attendee's contact information based on information provided on the school district Web site, a phone call was made to the school district. Many times these phone calls revealed that the attendee had retired or changed employers since the date of the training. A few of the attendees that were reached when calling the school district indicated that too much time had gone by since they had attended the training for them to reasonably evaluate how attending the HUSSC training affected their HUSSC application process.

During the two-day data collection period, the project coordinator reviewed six sign-in rosters and 218 names. From this list and based on the protocol utilized during this evaluation, the contact information for the following individuals was identified:

- Twenty-nine attendees representing 28 school districts, 28 schools, five states and five USDA regions; and
- Seven state agency staff members representing four states and four USDA regions.

Once this data was gathered, the project coordinator met with the NFSMI, ARD director, the USM Director for Research Support/Statistician, and the NFSMI Executive Director to determine the next course of action. It was agreed that due to the barriers encountered in identifying HUSSC training participants and the length of time that has passed since the HUSSC training period, that it was not feasible to continue this project. However, it was noted that much was learned in the process of attempting to conduct this project.

Based on the barriers encountered during this project when trying to identify contact information of NFSMI training attendees, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Implement a system that utilizes the contact information gathered at the time a participant registers for NFSMI training (name, position title, school district name, and work e-mail address) to create a typed sign-in sheet that only requires a signature adjacent to the typed name.
- Identify a process for the sign-in sheets described above to be provided at all NFSMI trainings, remote or on-site at NFSMI, and secured at a central location at NFSMI once the training has been completed.

- Determine the optimal time period for conducting an evaluation of the application of NFSMI training programs after the training has occurred based on individual training topics. For example, with some NFSMI training programs, the evaluation could occur directly after the training. However, with training programs that require a period of time for program implementation, an optimal evaluation period might be set at six-twelve months after a participant has attended the training.

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**National Food Service Management Institute**

The University of Mississippi

University, MS 38677-0188

[www.nfsmi.org](http://www.nfsmi.org)

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