

AWIN-GMIG International Student Mini-Grant Recipient: Lupita Silva

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Introduction

I have always dreamed of traveling the world and experiencing the way of life of other cultures and communities. When I read about the opportunity to study abroad in Barbados with Nutrition Abroad 4 Nutrition Students (NA4NS), I knew I had to apply, especially knowing there are not many opportunities for nutrition students to study abroad. This program allowed me to combine my love for cultural exploration with my professional goal of learning how to support diverse communities through nutrition. While finances often make studying abroad challenging, the Alice Wimpfheimer International Nutrition Foundation (AWIN) and Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Global Member Interest Group (GMIG) service trip mini-grant allowed me to study abroad and support my growth as a future registered dietitian nutritionist.

Program Summary

During the two-week community program in Barbados, West Indies, our focus was nutrition education through health fairs hosted in collaboration with local libraries. At these events, I helped lead sessions for children in summer camps, teaching them about obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. We used interactive methods like nutrition-themed Jeopardy on a poster board, a lemon experiment, and a fat, sugar, and sodium guessing game. I helped lead a lecture in which complex topics, such as risk factors and prevention of non-communicable diseases, were simplified for the age range we were working with (5-12 years old). I also worked alongside a graduate student from Michigan and several students from the University of the West Indies (Barbados), where I saw the power of collaboration in making nutrition education engaging, culturally relevant, and impactful.

We presented in four of the Barbados National Libraries and more than 60 children attended our program, titled “Food Fight”. Most children participated in all the interactive activities, including games, questionnaires, and assessments. We obtained anthropometric measurements on some of the children. After graphing them on the WHO BMI charts for age, we found that 22% of boys and 11% of girls were overweight, and 33% of boys and 27.8% of girls were classified as obese. These results reflect the growing problem in Barbados, where nearly 67% of adults are overweight or obese and 80% of their annual deaths are related to non-communicable diseases (Pan American Health Organization, 2024). Seeing this pattern arise in children less than thirteen years of age demonstrates how important it is for educators, practitioners and the Barbados government to provide health and nutrition education and interventions in this age range.

This data also reflects the pattern I see in the wider food environment where imported ultra-processed foods are widely available, and fast-food chains like Chefette and KFC are extremely popular. Convenience, long work hours, and cultural cooking practices often involving high sodium, sugar, and fat ingredients further contribute to the problem. My understanding of the situation was further deepened by having conversations with residents. A health practitioner described community attitudes toward health as “poor,” noting that many people ignore or forget health information. Additionally, a taxi driver shared that he simply does not seek health advice, despite the nation’s growing prevalence of obesity. Hearing these

perspectives highlighted the challenge of not just sharing knowledge but also creating meaningful connections that inspire people to act.

At the same time, I saw unique strengths. Barbados has a national school policy that eliminates sugar-sweetened beverages, 20% tax on sugary drinks, and fruit trees grown in home yards. (The mangos there are the best I have ever had!) However, with only about eight registered dietitians on the entire island, nutrition services remain limited, leaving much room for improvement in public health nutrition support for Bajan residents.

Personal and Professional Growth

The most transformative part of the experience was learning to be comfortable in the uncomfortable. I was challenged with having to present material that was not my own, adapting to time constraints, and engaging with audiences ranging from four to twelve years old and of a different culture than my own. At first, I was afraid of not being understood or not fully understanding them. I also found myself navigating a cultural environment where I was one of the few people of Latino descent on the island. These challenges pushed me to think creatively and quickly about how to make information meaningful and accessible, ultimately helping hone my skills as a future health educator.

The impact on the community was just as rewarding. I will never forget a three-year-old boy who eagerly shouted “chicken!” when asked to name a healthy protein. I was amazed at how someone so young could already identify nutritious foods. Moments like that showed me how early nutrition knowledge can begin, and how important it is to build on that foundation. Another moment that stayed with me was when a nine-year-old girl listened to us explain comorbidities. When she heard that one could have obesity, hypertension, and diabetes all at once, she gasped and asked with wide eyes, “You could have more than one?” The concerned and almost fearful look on her face reminded me of the power education has to spark awareness, even at such a young age.

Looking Ahead

This experience taught me how to make nutrition education both fun and engaging. The activities we used—such as games and interactive demonstrations—can easily be adapted for different age groups and learning levels. I also learned how important organization, structure, and teamwork are when working in community settings. Our team faced some challenges in consistently recording measurements, and it reminded me that attention to detail is essential for ensuring that health programs are both effective and measurable in evaluating impact.

Once I am in a career, I see myself working in community settings with underserved populations, where I hope to help people build the skills needed to make realistic, healthy lifestyle changes that improve their overall quality of life. To other students interested in studying abroad, my advice is to go with an open mind. The beauty of the experience lies in keeping an open mind, because that openness allows you to truly learn from the knowledge, traditions, and wisdom of other cultures. I also hope to continue my involvement in global nutrition. During my time in Barbados, I spoke with Dr. Avery-Grant, the director of the NA4NS

program, about the possibility of returning in the future—not only to give back as a mentor for other students, but also to support the Bajan community in new ways.

Reflection and Gratitude

All in all, this transformative experience reminded me that the world is vast and filled with both opportunities and challenges in nutrition across the globe. I learned that helping others requires not only science, but also connection and kindness, and that change often begins with a single spark of awareness. Whether it was a three-year-old proudly naming “chicken” as a healthy protein or a nine-year-old girl gasping at the realization that someone could have more than one non-communicable disease, I saw how knowledge can shape both curiosity and concern. For this reason, I am deeply grateful to AWIN, GMIG, and the NA4NS program for making this opportunity possible. By supporting students like me, AWIN, GMIG, and NA4NS help create future dietitians who are not only trained in nutrition but also in cultural humility and global awareness, skills that are essential for the Academy’s mission. This journey has strengthened my long-term goal of becoming a registered dietitian who not only provides nutrition guidance but also advocates for accessible and culturally relevant education.

References

Pan American Health Organization. (2024, October 20). *Barbados - Country Profile*. Health in the Americas. https://hia.paho.org/en/country-profiles/barbados?utm_source=chatgpt.com