

INTRODUCTION



The Gullah people, who currently reside along the southeast coast, are descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the US from Western and Central Africa. They exhibit a high incidence of diabetes, heart disease, lupus, and oral disease. Because of

their geographic and genetic isolation, this population offers investigators a unique opportunity to study genetic factors contributing to these conditions. Several research groups at MUSC are working with the Gullah people to improve health outcomes and to learn more about the diseases that affect them. In this project, our goal is to further improve the relationship between MUSC and the Gullah people.

METHODS

Gullah/Geechee Culture

- Met with Dr. J Herman Blake, a professor at MUSC and a leading authority on Gullah culture.
- Attended “Stay in De Boat,” a College of Charleston student-produced documentary featuring individuals from the Gullah/Geechee community.

Sea Island Outreach Project

- Assisted Dr. Ida Spruill in planning and hosting the Sea Island Community Celebration, an event in which MUSC investigators shared major findings from research conducted within the Gullah/Geechee community.

Health Science Module

- Developed a health science module based on research findings presented at the Celebration and communication with faculty at St. John’s High School to:
 - Educate students in Sea Island Communities about the health risks associated with diabetes, a disease that has high prevalence in Gullah/Geechee population.
 - Develop a sustainable relationship between students at MUSC and St. John’s High School.

RESULTS

Sea Islands Community Celebration

- Held on January 21, 2012 at St. John’s High School with over 200 individuals in attendance.
- MUSC investigators shared research findings from various projects involving the Gullah population.
- Research participants gave positive patient testimonies.
- An oral survey indicated attendees enjoyed the event and had a greater desire to be involved in research conducted at MUSC.
- Event highlights were published in *The Catalyst*.



Participants and Presidential Scholars volunteers enjoying themselves at the Sea Island Community Celebration.



Diabetes Health Science Module

- An interactive health science module was developed based on diabetes research findings presented at the Celebration and current South Carolina health science curriculum standards.
- Effectiveness of the module will be evaluated by teacher and student feedback when the module is presented.



DISCUSSION

Recommendations for Change

- Continuing to facilitate events like the Community Celebration will help to promote a positive relationship between MUSC and the Gullah/Geechee community. Such a relationship will enable clinical research that benefits the Gullah/Geechee population and enables investigators at MUSC to study genetic factors contributing to diseases to be conducted.
- Because diabetes is a significant health risk in the Gullah/Geechee community, the teaching module discusses how activities and healthy food choices help prevent diabetes.
- By reaching out to high school students at St. John’s High School and elsewhere, we can begin to change habits at a young age to impact the health of this community.

Lessons Learned

- Our group learned that an understanding of the Gullah/Geechee culture is necessary to effectively communicate and work with this population.
- Communication between group members and the community partner is also critical to the success of the project.
- To future scholars, we recommend attending the Community Celebration in January 2013; this was a wonderful experience that allowed us the opportunity to interact with the Gullah/Geechee community.

Challenges

- We learned that the Gullah/Geechee people can be hesitant to work with outsiders. In addition to reducing the availability of statistical data about this people, this aspect of Gullah culture limited our ability to work directly with this population. Working with Dr. Spruill on the Community Celebration enabled us to serve the Gullah people and to promote a positive relationship between the Gullah/Geechee community and MUSC.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/REFERENCES

-Our group would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. J Herman Blake, Dr. Ida Spruill, the South Carolina Center for Translational Research, and the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor.

-National Park Service, Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/planyourvisit/directions.htm>