

NRI Program Gives High School Students Early Exposure to Nutrition Science Careers

NRI's VIP introduces high school students to nutrition research while helping them envision future careers in science and health.

KANNAPOLIS , NC, UNITED STATES, July 13, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The [UNC Nutrition Research Institute's](#) seventh annual [Virtual Internship Program](#) concluded on June 25, giving 54 high school students an early look at what it means to think, work and communicate like nutrition scientists.

For the first weeks of their summer break, students did what researchers do every day: read scientific literature, evaluate evidence, collaborate with peers and present their findings.

Selected from more than 250 applicants, this year's cohort represented a group of students eager to explore science beyond the classroom and begin imagining where a future in STEM could take them.

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The power of VIP is watching students realize they belong in science. The program gives them access to research, mentorship and career paths that can help shape their future.”

*Carsyn Patton, VIP
Coordinator*

A central goal of VIP is to help students see science not only as a subject they study, but as a path they can pursue. Through the program, students are introduced to nutrition research, precision nutrition, laboratory science, research methods, college pathways and career possibilities in public health and science. The virtual format allows the NRI to reach students across North Carolina and beyond, creating access to research experiences for students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in a university-based internship.



Virtual Internship Program

This year, students worked in pairs to investigate a nutrient of their choice. Each team reviewed scientific literature, synthesized its findings into a professional scientific poster and presented their research to classmates and NRI faculty and staff at the program's conclusion.



Nutrition Research Institute

UNC Nutrition Research Institute

These student posters reflected the diversity of nutrition science. Teams investigated how gut microbes influence nutrient metabolism and explored nutrients involved in fetal development, cardiovascular health or disease prevention. Several projects highlighted not only what scientists already know, but also the emerging questions researchers continue to investigate.

Examples of student research topics included:

- Riboflavin (vitamin B2): How differences in gut microbial communities may influence riboflavin-related metabolic pathways, highlighting the growing connection between nutrition and the gut microbiome.
- Choline: Its critical role in brain and nervous system development during pregnancy, along with how gut bacteria convert choline into compounds being studied for potential links to cardiovascular health.
- Fluoride: Research exploring whether childhood fluoride exposure may influence cognitive performance later in life, beyond its well-known role in dental health.
- Additional topics: Folate's role in DNA synthesis and gene regulation, lycopene's antioxidant properties and potential health benefits, and the importance of iron in oxygen transport, energy production and brain function.

In addition to completing their research projects, students participated in interactive sessions led by NRI faculty, graduate students and staff. They learned about the history of the NRI, precision nutrition, research methods and ongoing studies conducted at the institute. Students also heard from representatives from UNC-Chapel Hill Undergraduate Admissions and the Bachelor of Science in Public Health Nutrition program, offering a practical look at educational pathways that can lead to careers in nutrition, public health, medicine, research and related fields.

For many students, VIP is one of their first opportunities to interact directly with scientists and see how research questions become real studies, posters, presentations and potential careers.

For one student, the experience sparked a new curiosity about nutrition research. In an anonymous feedback survey, the student wrote, "Through VIP, I discovered how fascinating it is to study choline, and it sparked a real interest in understanding how it affects the body. It made me realize how exciting it can be to dive deeper into a specific topic and see how much there is still to learn."

The program concluded with a virtual scientific poster session, where each team presented its findings and answered questions from peers and the NRI staff. Through that experience, students practiced one of the most important skills in science: communicating complex information clearly and confidently.

Several former VIP participants have gone on to pursue studies in science, nutrition, public health, medicine and research, with many continuing their educational journeys at UNC-Chapel Hill. For the NRI, that is part of the purpose of the program. VIP is not only about what students learn during four weeks in the summer. It is about helping students see themselves as future scientists, health professionals and problem-solvers.

Programs like VIP are made possible through the time, expertise and commitment of the NRI faculty and staff, as well as the generosity of supporters who believe in investing in the next generation. By [supporting](#) student programs at the NRI, donors help create early access to science, mentorship and discovery for students who may one day lead the future of nutrition research.

The NRI is proud to provide opportunities like VIP that introduce students to the possibilities of STEM and help prepare the next generation of scientists.

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