

# Converting a community cooking program to a virtual format during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Background

Home cooking frequency has been associated with better diet quality and lower food costs.

Cooking education is an increasingly popular approach to community-based health promotion, but most programs rely on in-person classes taught in community or formal teaching kitchens.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the conversion of in-person health promotion curricula to online formats, creating unique challenges for culinary education programs.

## Objective

The purpose of this communication is to describe lessons learned during the conversion of a long-standing community-based cooking program to a digital format during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## Sustainable Food Center

### The Happy Kitchen / La Cocina Alegre®

The Sustainable Food Center's mission is to cultivate a just and regenerative food system so people and the environment can thrive.

The Happy Kitchen program has offered healthy cooking and nutrition classes in the Austin area since 1995, both in the community and at their headquarters in Central East Austin.

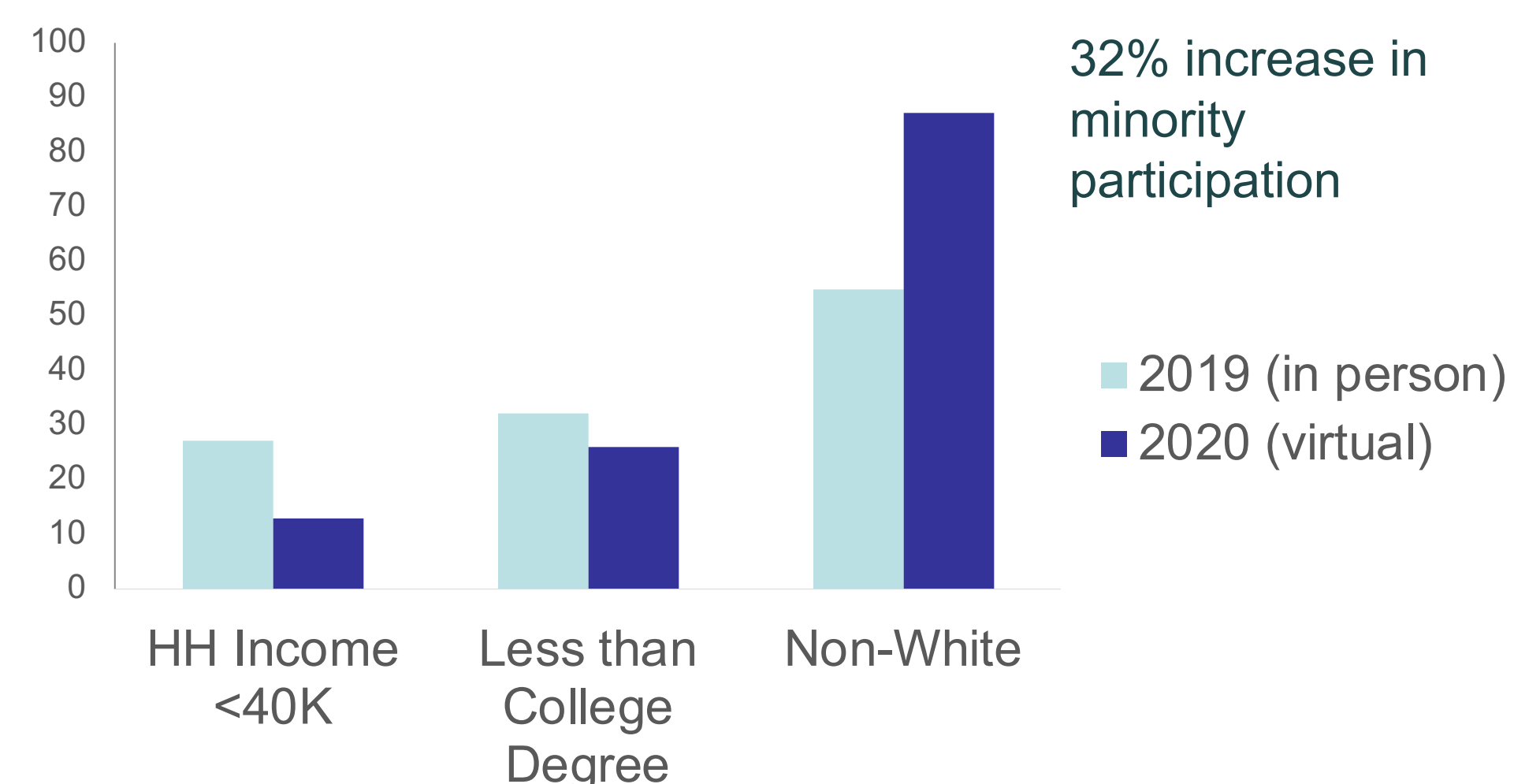
The Happy Kitchen program includes 4 main components, structured to improve downstream health behaviors including cooking frequency, diet quality and sustainable food stewardship (Figure 1).

F1: Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre 6 Week Class Components

## COVID-19 Happy Kitchen Program Adaptations

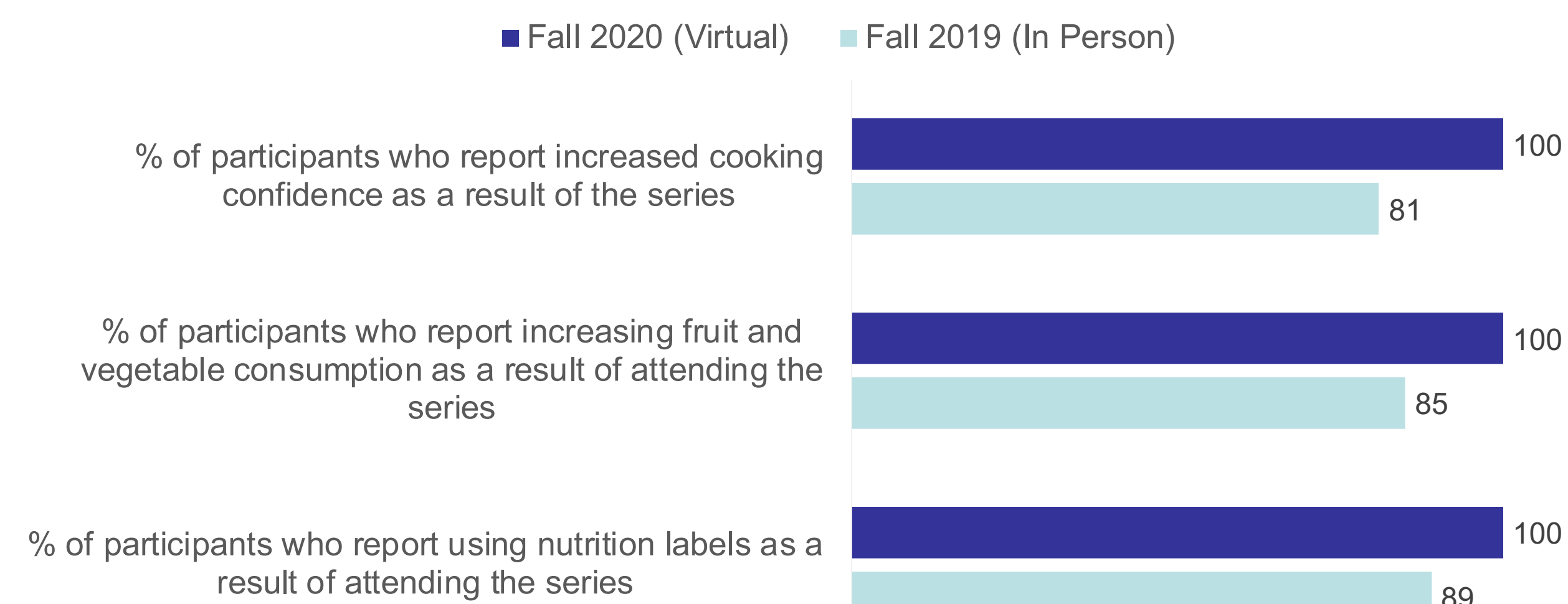
Program Element	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid
Length	6, 90 minute sessions	12, 30 minute sessions
Frequency	Weekly	Bi-weekly
Platform	In person	Zoom
Class Size	25	15
Grocery Distribution	Weekly distribution of ingredients post-class in person	3 grocery pick ups at community pick-up points
Nutrition Education	In person led by health educator with handouts	Open access to Google Drive with handout PDFs plus discussion with health educator on Zoom
Cooking Demonstration	In person led by chef-facilitator with group participation, recipe hand-out	Short video of chef-facilitator demonstrating preparation plus discussion with chef on Zoom, recipe on Google Drive

## Pre and Post COVID-19 Participant Characteristics



*“It was great that the class was offered online because I live in North Round Rock, and with work, kids, traffic, etc. it would have been hard to go in person” \_ 2020 Happy Kitchen Participant*

## Pre and Post COVID-19 Participant Reported Outcomes



## Findings Summary

Several significant adaptations needed to be made to convert the 6-week series to a virtual and pandemic-safe format (see table left).

Additional staff training and pre-recordings of cooking demonstrations required resource and time investment.

Participant characteristics varied mainly in the increase in minority (non-White) participation (see pie chart left). The remote approach may increase access for racial/ethnic minorities that have left central Austin, but a digital divide remains for some groups.

Most participants reported positive health behavior effects of the intervention including fruit and vegetable consumption and nutrition label usage (see bar chart left).

## Future Plans

*Short term: Spring classes continue online with the following modifications*

- Taught in 8, 45-minute sessions
- Enroll 20 participants per series
- Update class materials to tailor to virtual classes

*Long term:*

- Explore ways for virtual classes to extend the program's reach; virtual classes open new possibilities for sharing the curriculum with other organizations and/or sharing class recordings with interested individuals.
- New evaluation opportunities, such as comparing impact of virtual and in-person classes and identifying which class components are most important to the program's success
- Offer future series as a hybrid: participants attend the nutrition lessons online and come in once or twice to cook together

## Conclusions

The success of the SFC initiative during COVID-19 has shown potential for engaging with a larger and more diverse audience.

More research is needed on how online cooking programs impact diet and food security among low-income individuals.

## Acknowledgements

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