HPAC COURSE · MODULE 5

One project, start to finish

Everything from the first four modules, applied to a single HPAC team's project.

Health Professions Affinity Community · Student research track

WEEK 1

The team and what they noticed

Five students. Their school serves free breakfast to everyone. The cafeteria is nearly empty at 7:40 and the trash cans by the gym door are full of untouched cereal by 8:15.

It started as an annoyance

Nobody assigned this. Two of them were on the breakfast line duty roster and were tired of throwing food away.

It was already personal

One student said she skips because the line makes her late to first period. That sentence turned out to be the whole project.

The first instinct was wrong

They wanted to run a poster campaign telling students to eat breakfast. They had no idea yet why students were not eating it.

The facilitator's move

Do not fix it yet. Find out what is true first. That is the whole difference between a service project and research.

THE MAP

Twelve weeks, twelve moves

Weeks 1 to 2	Sharpen the question	Notice, inventory what you already have, write a question you cannot close with one search.	Module 1
Weeks 3 to 4	Learn what is known	Search well, judge sources, read three papers, build an evidence table.	Modules 2 and 3
Weeks 5 to 7	Collect your own	Choose a method, get permission, pilot, run the survey and the focus group.	Module 4
Weeks 8 to 12	Make it mean something	Analyze, decide what you can honestly claim, build the poster, take it to someone who can act.	Module 1 again

Twelve weeks is realistic if permission starts in week one. It is impossible if permission starts in week five.

STEP 1

Sharpening the question

First draft

Why don't kids eat breakfast?

Too big, not about anywhere, and already answered by a hundred articles. Nothing for this team to add.

Second draft

Do students at our school eat breakfast?

Local now, but it is a yes or no. The food service office can answer it from meal counts in one email.

Third draft

Our school serves free breakfast. Which students are not eating it, and what is stopping them?

Two parts. The first part has an answer in existing data. The second part needs people, and that is theirs to find.

It took three sessions to get from the first draft to the third. That is normal, and it is the most valuable time in the project.

STEP 2, BEFORE ANY SEARCHING

What did they already have?

Start with what is already in the building. Most student teams go to the internet first and discover in week nine that the answer was two doors down.

People who already know

- Cafeteria manager, who has watched the line for nine years
- Attendance secretary, who knows who arrives late and why
- Two coaches with early practice
- The custodian who empties the gym-door trash

Data that already exists

- Daily meal counts by period, kept by food service
- Bell schedule and late-arrival records
- District free and reduced eligibility rate
- Last year's climate survey

Assets already working

- A grab-and-go cart nobody tracks
- Student council with agenda time
- A principal who has said yes to pilots before
- The HPAC facilitator's standing meeting

The meal count data answered half the question in one conversation, for free, in week two.

STEP 3, APPLYING MODULE 2

What they searched, and what came back

`site:cdc.gov school breakfast participation`	A national overview and the term universal free meals, which became their best search word.
`"breakfast after the bell" high school`	The name of an actual intervention. They had been describing it without knowing it had a name.
`school breakfast participation barriers filetype:pdf`	Two state agency reports with survey instruments in the appendix, which they borrowed questions from.

The move that changed the project

The phrase breakfast after the bell came from a CDC page. Once they had the right words, the same search engine that had been useless returned a research literature.

This is why Module 2 spends time on search terms. Students conclude there is no research on their topic when what is missing is the vocabulary.

STEP 4, APPLYING MODULE 3

Their evidence table

Source	Who was studied	What they did	What they found	Why it mattered to us
Peer-reviewed cohort study, 2024	1,200 high school students, four districts	Compared breakfast served before the bell with breakfast served after	Participation rose substantially after the schedule change	Our school still serves before the bell. Testable here.
State agency report, 2023	Statewide, all grade levels	Survey of students and food service directors	Time and stigma were the two most cited barriers	Gave us questions we could adapt instead of inventing
Systematic review, 2022	Studies across several countries	Weighed 30 studies of school meal programs	Free meals raise participation; the size depends on how they are served	Told us free was not the variable. Delivery was.

Three papers was enough

Not thirty. Three good sources, read properly and put in a table the whole team could see, carried the entire background section of the poster.

STEP 5, FINDING THE GAP

What the literature could not tell them

What was already known

- Free breakfast alone does not raise participation much
- Timing and stigma are common barriers nationally
- Serving after the bell works in several districts
- Older students participate less than younger students

What nobody could tell them

- Which barrier matters most at this school
- Whether their students feel the stigma at all
- What the gym-door cart is actually doing
- What students themselves would change first



The right-hand column is the project

You do not need an original topic. You need a real question about your own place that the existing literature cannot answer. That is what makes a student project worth doing rather than repeating.

STEP 6, APPLYING MODULE 4

Method, and the permission calendar

What they chose, and why

- A short survey, for how many and which barrier
- One focus group, for why and in whose words
- Existing meal count data, for free, as the baseline
- No interviews. No time, and the survey covered it.

The ethics call

They emailed the district research office describing the project in one paragraph. The answer: because it was a program improvement effort for their own school, it did not require full review, but any presentation outside the district needed a second look. They kept that email.

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

Week 1
Ask the principal

Week 2
Email the district office

Week 3
Send parent forms home

Week 5
Chase the missing forms

Week 6
Collect data

STEP 7

The instruments they actually used

Survey, 8 questions, 4 minutes

1. In the last week, how many days did you eat school breakfast?
2. What time do you usually arrive at school?
3. How do you usually get to school?
4. On days you skip breakfast, what stops you? Choose all that apply.
5. Have you used the cart by the gym door?
6. If breakfast were served during first period, would you eat it?
7. What grade are you in?
8. What would make breakfast easier for you? (open)

Focus group, 5 questions, 8 students

1. Tell us your name and what you ate before school today.
2. Walk me through your morning from waking up to first period.
3. What is it like to go through the breakfast line here?
4. If you ran the school, what would you change about breakfast?
5. What did we miss? What did you expect us to ask?

Eight questions and five questions. Every draft before this one was twice as long, and the pilot cut it in half.

STEP 8

What they found

Themes from the focus group

- The bus arrives eight minutes before the bell
- The line and the bathroom are on opposite ends of the building
- Nobody knew the gym cart was for everyone
- Two students said eating in the cafeteria marks you as needing it

The number and the quote together

Forty-one of eighty-four students marked no time. In the focus group a student explained why: the bus arrives eight minutes before the bell and the line runs the length of the cafeteria. The survey found the size of the problem. The focus group found the cause.

STEP 9, HONEST REPORTING

What they could and could not say

Defensible

- Of the 84 students who responded, 41 said time was a barrier
- Meal counts show participation drops after ninth grade at our school
- In our focus group of eight, nobody knew the gym cart was open to all students
- Research from other districts suggests serving after the bell raises participation

Not supported

- Most students at our school skip breakfast because of time
- Students in this district are ashamed to eat breakfast
- Moving breakfast after the bell will fix this
- Our project increased breakfast participation

Their limitations paragraph, in full

We surveyed 84 of about 600 students, recruited during lunch, so students who leave campus or eat elsewhere are underrepresented. Our focus group was volunteers. We cannot say what students who did not participate think.

STEP 10

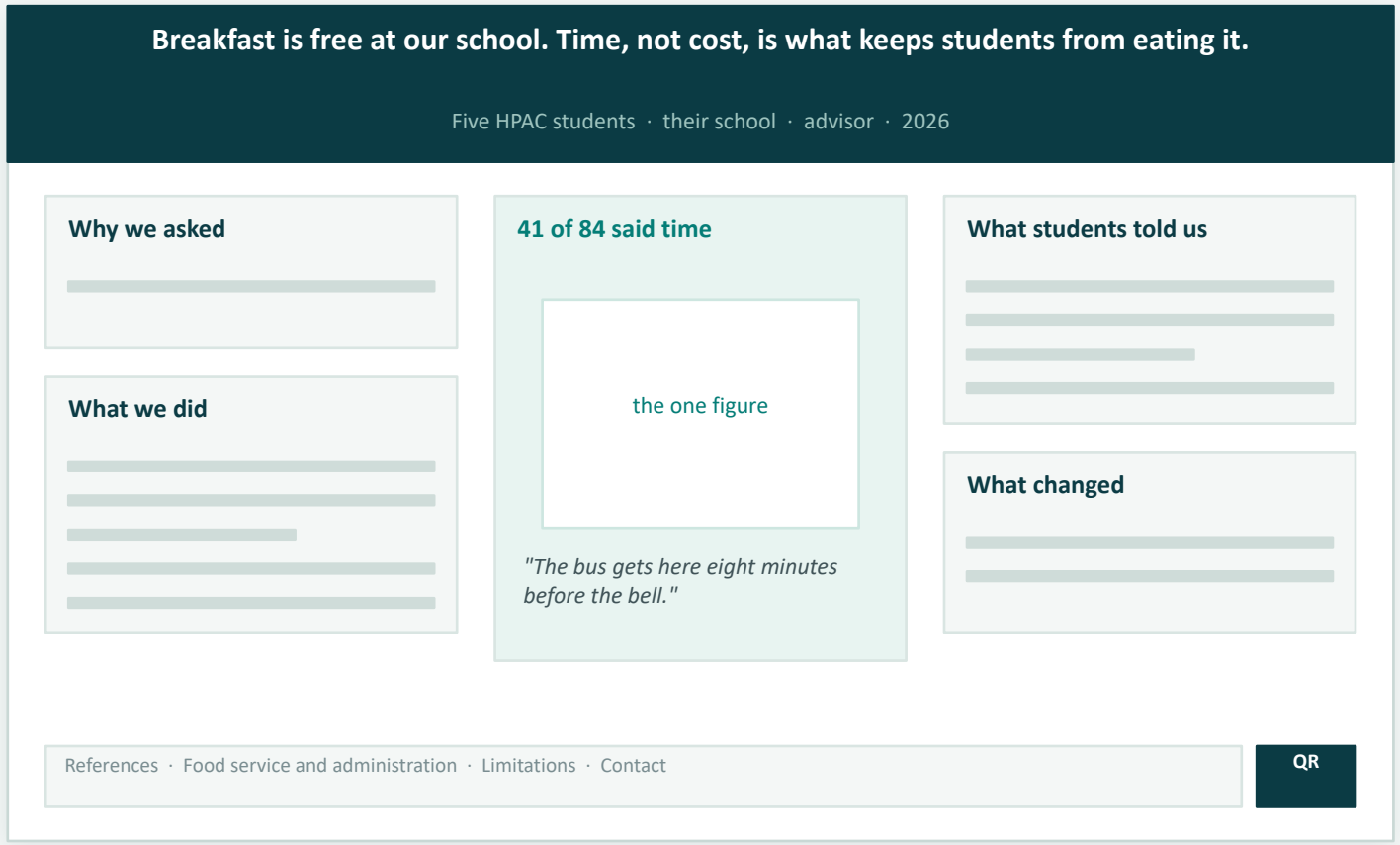
From findings to something that changed

1	**What they recommended**	Two things, both small: move the cart to the bus door and label it clearly, and pilot serving in first period for one grade for three weeks.
2	**Who they took it to**	The principal, the food service director, and student council. They brought one page, not the poster.
3	**What actually happened**	The cart moved in two weeks. The first-period pilot took a semester and one more meeting, and it happened for ninth grade.
4	**What they measured after**	Meal counts before and after the cart moved. That comparison became the strongest number on the poster.

Ask for the smallest change that follows from your evidence. Small asks get said yes to, and a yes is what lets you measure something.

STEP 11, BACK TO MODULE 1

Their poster



1 **The title is the finding**

Not An Examination of Breakfast Participation. A reader ten feet away already knows the answer.

2 **One number, huge**

41 of 84 sits in the middle column at eye level, with the denominator right in it.

3 **One quote, chosen**

The bus sentence explains the number better than a paragraph could.

4 **Limitations on the poster**

In the footer, in plain sight. Judges look for it.

STEP 12

Their sixty seconds, written out

15 sec

We are HPAC students at our school. Breakfast is free here, and most students still do not eat it. We wanted to know why.

20 sec

We surveyed 84 students, ran a focus group with eight, and pulled two years of meal counts from food service.

15 sec

Forty-one of the 84 said the barrier was time, not cost. The bus arrives eight minutes before the bell.

10 sec

So we moved the grab-and-go cart to the bus door. Counts are up, and we are piloting first-period service for ninth grade.

Notice what is not in it: no methods jargon, no apology, and a number with its denominator attached.

EVERY PROJECT HAS THIS SLIDE

What went wrong, honestly

The first survey was 22 questions

Nobody finished it. The pilot with five students revealed it in ten minutes. They cut it to eight.

Two weeks lost to forms

Parent permission went home in week three and came back in week five. Plan for the gap, do not be surprised by it.

A question nobody understood

Do you experience food insecurity? Every pilot student asked what that meant. They rewrote it about skipping meals.

The first focus group had 14 people

Too many. Four students never spoke. They split it and ran a second one, which was better than the first.

One member did all the analysis

The rest of the team could not answer questions at the poster session. Two people should code every transcript.

They almost claimed too much

The first draft said our project increased breakfast participation. The counts rose, but they could not rule out the weather, the season, or the new cafeteria staff.

Tell your students this list before they start. Every one of these is normal, and every one of them is survivable.

YOUR TURN

Same twelve moves, your project

Notice

What bothers you here that you could actually measure?

Inventory

Who in this building already knows something about it?

Read

Three sources, one evidence table, by week four

Ask

One method, one instrument, permission started this week

The thing worth stealing from this project

They did not invent a new topic. They took a question everybody in the building had an opinion about, found out what was actually true at their school, and asked for the smallest change the evidence supported. Then they measured whether it worked.

Due next session

Your third-draft question, your asset inventory, and the name of the first person you need permission from.