

Dear Review Committee of the Advancement of Health Education

I am honored to give my highest recommendation for **Taia MacEachern for the Foundation for the Advancement of Health Education (FAHE) Scholarship**. Taia entered our doctoral program in Health Education and Promotion in Fall 2023, and I was immediately impressed by her academic readiness, initiative, and dedication to the field. Transitioning from master's-level to doctoral-level work is often challenging, yet Taia not only adapted quickly but excelled. By the end of her first month in the program, she was already deeply engaged in Dr. Wallace's research program (her PhD mentor), actively contributing to her coursework, and fostering connections within the local community. Since then, Taia's growth and contributions to health education have been exceptional, particularly in advancing the health and well-being of historically marginalized youth. I am excited to share how her commitment and achievements align with the goals of the FAHE Scholarship.

For the past year and a half, Taia has been a graduate assistant in the MATCHED research lab, where she focuses on physical health education and research aimed at reducing the long-term consequences of concussions among high school football players in Alabama. This work is critical given the prevalence of concussions and the disparities in symptom recognition and treatment among Black and White athletes. Each week, Taia visits two high schools to deliver educational sessions to football teams, emphasizing the importance of early symptom identification and recovery strategies. She takes particular care to highlight how concussion symptoms may manifest differently across racial groups, empowering both players and coaches with the knowledge needed to address these disparities. Taia's efforts not only enhance concussion awareness but also promote equity in health education—an essential step toward reducing disparities in youth health outcomes.

Complimenting her work with concussion, Taia is also passionate about addressing Alabama's high rates of chronic diseases by promoting healthier eating habits among youth, further underscoring her potential to make lasting contributions to child and adolescent health. Specifically, Taia spends her summers leading nutrition camps for middle school youth across Alabama. Each week, she visits different schools to design and deliver engaging, active-learning sessions aimed at fostering students' understanding and enthusiasm for healthy eating. For example, she developed a session called "Taste the Rainbow," where she teaches students to build balanced meals by including a variety of colorful foods on their plates. Using this approachable framework, Taia explains that if their plates are primarily white or brown, they should aim to "add the rainbow" to improve nutritional balance. This activity exemplifies Taia's ability to tailor health education to her audience, effectively translating complex health behavior principles into practical, actionable strategies for middle schoolers. Her thoughtful approach demonstrates her exceptional capacity to connect health behavior theories to the unique needs of her target populations.

In addition to her impactful community work, Taia is also a health educator within our department, where she teaches a core public health course for undergraduate students. In this course, she guides students in analyzing various health behaviors and identifying strategies to improve health outcomes. To enhance their learning, Taia invites community health education professionals to share real-world insights, showcasing the diversity of health education careers. For instance, she recently hosted a health educator from the local STI/HIV clinic to discuss condom use and HIV prevention, as well as a representative from the local sexual assault center to speak about prevention strategies for sexual assault. These guest lectures provide students with tangible examples of health education in practice, bridging classroom learning with real-world application. Taia's innovative teaching not only deepens her students' understanding of health promotion but also inspires the next generation of health educators by illustrating the impact they can have in the field. Her remarkable ability to

create engaging, practical, and meaningful learning experiences is a testament to her dedication to advancing health education.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not highlight Taia's exceptional achievements as a scholar in our program. Taia is one of the highest-performing students in our Health Education and Promotion PhD program, maintaining an excellent GPA and consistently earning praise from faculty for her insightful writing, deep knowledge, and critical thinking skills. She excels at integrating health education concepts with teaching, research, and service, making her a well-rounded and impactful student. As her health behavior theory mentor, I have been particularly impressed by her initiative and intellectual curiosity. Taia regularly meets with me to deepen her understanding of health behavior theory, often focusing on intersectionality and exploring how to incorporate this lens into individual-level theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior.

Taia's scholarly contributions extend beyond the classroom. She has already published two articles in peer-reviewed journals in health education and promotion, a significant accomplishment for a doctoral student early in their program. Additionally, she actively disseminates her work at professional conferences, sharing insights from her community-based research program. Through these efforts, Taia demonstrates her commitment to advancing the field of health education and ensuring that youth, particularly those in underserved areas, have access to high-quality physical health education and nutrition programming. Her dedication to addressing health disparities and promoting equity in education underscores her potential to make a lasting impact on the health of children and youth.

In summary, **Taia MacEachern is an outstanding candidate for the FAHE Scholarship**, and I feel deeply privileged to support her as she develops into a health education leader. Taia is bright, creative, and organized, with a clear vision for her future as a university professor focused on improving the lives of historically marginalized youth. Please do not hesitate to contact me at tlmarcantonio@ua.edu if you have any questions about her candidacy.

Sincerely,



Tiffany Marcantonio, PhD
Department of Health Science
College of Human Environmental Sciences