

BRACE'd to reopen: Med students help businesses operate safely

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(Left to right) Tulane medical student Stephanie Shea, Bourrée at Boucherie events coordinator Sara Roberts, Chef Nathaniel Zimet, Tulane medical student Erika Moxley discuss COVID-19 practices outside of the restaurant Bourrée at Boucherie. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The emergence of COVID-19 as a threat to the health and safety of people all over the world has also brought about much uncertainty and unprecedented economic hardship for businesses. As business owners attempt to reopen amid the continued threat of the virus, many are in need of resources to assist them in their task. The BRACE program (Business Resilience and Community Education) was created in May 2020 by Tulane University School of Medicine students and their faculty adviser, Dr. Jonathan Gugel, as an educational program for businesses reopening during the pandemic.

“When the pandemic first began, I went into a couple of places that weren’t being managed very well from an establishment standpoint. This was very early in the pandemic, and people really didn’t fully grasp what was happening; it was such an unusual situation that people didn’t quite understand what to do, frankly. I thought about it like, they’re just trying to survive and what can I do to help? What can I do to help them survive and practice good public health and prevent the spread of COVID?” said Gugel.

BRACE began with six students, who have become the executive committee, and recruited another

10 students over the last three months, increasing their capacity to offer in-person consultations. They are currently conducting three to four consultations a week, working in groups of two to three students to evaluate the business's COVID-19 practices. Once at the business, they walk through with owners and managers, brainstorming ideas on how to manage the space to keep employees and customers safe, developing a plan that is unique to each situation.

BRACE provides valuable information on their [website](#), including a resource packet and the guidelines for taking the BRACE Pledge, which was created in partnership with the New Orleans Culinary & Hospitality Institute (NOCHI) and the service industry advocacy organizations Shift Change and H.E.A.R.D. Cooperative. Once a business takes the BRACE Pledge, they are included on a nationwide map showing businesses that have agreed to follow guidelines, educate themselves and embrace best practices. The map allows customers to find businesses that have committed themselves to high COVID-19 standards.

Stephanie Shea, a fourth-year medical student, is the student leader and has participated in the consultations with businesses since the program started and has helped develop online resources.

“We wanted to have concrete resources for everyone to be a bit more at ease when they are doing good things and to get help when problems arise. Since we can't visit every business around the city and around the country, we wanted to make sure that the information that we're distilling can easily be distributed to everyone. And we wanted businesses to feel confident to be able to use our method to analyze their own space, and to scale up our positive change. So we created the pledge,” Shea said.

BRACE's dedication is indeed having a positive result, as more and more businesses educate themselves and learn to operate safely during the pandemic, Shea said. In addition to positive feedback from businesses, BRACE has been endorsed by Louisiana Department of Health Assistant State Health Officer Dr. Joseph Kanter for its work.