FOOD BEYOND NUTRITION: BRINGING POLITICS AND ETHICS INTO NUTRITION CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

Food is a topic that is as enjoyably discussed as it is hotly debated. Its role in day-to-day life is at once scientific, artistic, cultural, and of financial consequence, both for the consumers who eat it and the producers who sell it. As such, food inevitably, if not intuitively, is a topic rife with policy implications and ethical considerations.

From a professional perspective, however, political and ethical issues related to food often are treated as secondary or tangential topics of study. In university nutrition programs that focus on preparing future food and nutrition professionals, such as registered dietitians, students receive training in nutrition science, food science, counseling, communications, and food and dietary management among a variety of other topics. Perhaps because many of these courses offer numerous opportunities to discuss ethical or political issues related to food, nutrition programs less often offer courses that focus specifically on the ethics and politics of food.

This situation is changing. In the past, public and scholarly interest in food focused primarily on nutritional and disease-related aspects of particular foods, nutrients, and dietary patterns. This focus over the last century was punctuated occasionally with heightened interest in issues of ethics and politics. More recently, however, ethical aspects of food production and the sustainability of the current food system are competing for equal consideration with the nutritional issues in a sustained manner. Numerous authors, such as Peter Singer, Eric Schlosser, and Michael Pollan, have seized on these issues, generating even greater public interest. As such, university-level nutrition programs are now responding to this broadened consideration of food with courses focusing specifically on non-nutritional issues, such as food politics, food ethics, and food system sustainability.
The incorporation of these areas of food-related scholarship marks an important change in the delivery of nutrition curriculum. Where once faculty focused the training of nutrition students primarily on food delivery, food consumption, and resulting dietary and health impacts on individuals, programs now offer a wider view of food. A massive food system exists behind the consumer and his or her food choices. This system requires tremendous inputs of raw materials, time, money, and man power, and it generates innumerable questions regarding how the system should run, how it can be sustained, how it should be regulated, and to what extent we can or should make sacrifices to improve its efficiency. The incorporation of such important questions into nutrition curricula across the country means future food and nutrition professionals will be prepared to deal with complicated questions surrounding food with greater depth and sophistication.

**INTEGRATING FOOD POLITICS AND FOOD ETHICS INTO A SINGLE COURSE**

When I joined the faculty of the Nutrition Program at Arizona State University in late 2007, I had the opportunity to combine the related topics of food politics and ethics into a single graduate seminar. I called the course, “The Politics and Ethics of the American Diet,” and I wrote the description for the course as follows: “This course will introduce the student to the political and ethical issues inherent in the U.S. food system. Topics will include food industry, government dietary recommendations and regulations, current issues in food politics, ethical questions of food choice, and investigation of how and why Americans eat the way they do.” Inherent in this course description was the idea that I would treat ethics as a separate topic, to be considered during a brief period of the semester. In fact, in my original charting of the course, I allotted a certain number of weeks during which the class would consider food-related issues in which ethics played a particularly important role. As I organized the course further and identified materials to cover, it became apparent that ethics would actually play a role in most topics covered, and as such would offer a theme to which I would return throughout the course.

I was then provided the opportunity to participate in the Lincoln Polytechnic Ethics Teaching Fellowship program, which afforded the ideal opportunity to guide the implementation of the theme of ethics. To that point, I had not had any training in incorporating ethics questions into nutrition curriculum, and I did not know how to structure such
questions in a formal manner within the context of the course. The fellowship offered the chance to work with, and learn from, colleagues across multiple disciplines, which promised to help me redesign my graduate seminar with ethics as a running consideration. Over the course of the academic year, I participated in regular seminars designed to offer examples and strategies for applying ethics in any field. Through conversations with my fellowship peers and through the study of materials they were developing, I began to re-visualize the structure of my own course.

I started by creating an ‘arc’ of related topics. They would proceed from a foundational consideration of pertinent health-related models and consideration of an important philosophical dichotomy through which other issues could be examined. The arc concluded with the treatment of the role of sustainability in food production. Throughout the fellowship program, most of my peers identified case studies as useful ways to identify and present ethical dilemmas, to get students thinking across multiple arguments related to the same issue, and to get students to consider the general merits and flaws of contending arguments. This same model, I realized, could be loosely applied to most of the topics of my food policy and ethics course, because many of the food-related issues I planned in my arc of topics were of a controversial nature and required a critical consideration of the arguments for and against particular stances. The list of topics, in rough order of presentation, follows below along with a list of related discussion questions.

**Course Topics**

1. The Medical Model versus the Public Health Model: how have these operated to enhance human health and nutrition since the early 1900s?

2. Personal versus social responsibility for health: how do these contending philosophies relate to the models above? What do these philosophies mean when planning interventions to contend with lifestyle-related diseases?

3. Food guidance: how was national dietary guidance developed, and what are appropriate roles for food system players to influence guidance? How does current food guidance relate to personal versus social responsibility for health?
4. The food system: what systems and players interact to create the overall food system? What does this system look like locally, nationally, and internationally?

5. Food industry: what is the food industry, and how does it play a role in the food system? How does it determine the development of new food products? How does it respond to criticism of its products? Are these responses appropriate?

6. The food environment: what are the factors that determine food choices in our food environment? To what extent should this environment be regulated, and how does this relate to ‘responsibility for health’?

7. Food and economics: how is food distributed and how do economics play a role in food access? Is it appropriate to consider food as a ‘commodity’?

8. Food policy: what are the current food policy battles taking place today, and how do they relate to models presented earlier? Where do philosophical or ethical considerations, versus science, come into play?

9. Farm policy: how does the history of development of farm policy relate to the current food environment? Does it require reform? To what extent does the current set of food-related farm policies relate to the medical model versus the public health model?

10. Food and children: what are the major food policy and ethical issues related to child nutrition? Specifically, what are the major policy considerations related to food advertising to children as well as the school food environment?

11. Food and sustainability: what is a sustainable food system and is it different than the system in place today? What is the effect of food production and consumption on the environment? What is the effect of demand for food products on animal welfare? To what extent should environmental and animal issues require regulation, if at all? How do these issues relate to human health?

Beginning the course by discussing the medical model versus the public health model gave students in the class a chance to contextualize future topics of discussion and to relate them to the field of nutrition. Students in the discipline of nutrition are familiar with the medical model because nutrition as a science developed as medicine did. It took a reductive approach leading to discoveries in the early 1900s of individual nutrients that, when deficient in the diet, led to the development of
nutrient-deficiency diseases, such as pellagra, scurvy, or rickets. Such diseases could be identified and treated on an individual basis. In the same way, the reductive approach of medicine led to the discovery of particular pathogens that caused disease and could likewise be treated. The medical model remained extremely successful through the twentieth century in dealing with nutrient deficiencies that plagued Americans; later in the twentieth century, it led to success in identifying other food-related compounds that could enhance health as well, such as phytochemicals.

The public health model, by contrast, has enjoyed greater favor only recently. The treatment—and individual—focused medical model has yet to offer a strong response to the growing problem of non-communicable, lifestyle-related conditions and diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. As such, many researchers are turning to the public health model, which focuses on changing external or environmental factors to which populations might be susceptible. An example might be the reformulation of popular snack foods to offer a better nutrient profile. Such a change might cause only a slight improvement in one's dietary intake, but that improvement could be profound if it affects millions of individuals at once.

Comparing the medical model with the public health model leads directly to the primary philosophical question of the course, which founds much of the ethical discussions that would follow. That question is: who is responsible for health? If responsibility lies with the individual, then the medical model should be employed, external regulation of the food environment minimized, and the inability to maintain health can be placed on the shoulders of the individual. If responsibility lies with society, then the onus of maintaining population health lies with government and public health organizations that employ the public health model to effect change at the population level. Depending on how policy makers fall on this philosophical question, responses to the growing problems of lifestyle-related conditions and diseases will be very different.

From here, it is easy to see how the rest of the topics could be addressed in this course. An examination of current government food and dietary guidance would allow students to understand the extent, and the lengths, to which the individual is expected to go to maintain health. Subsequent consideration of the food system, the role of food industry, the resultant food environment, and the economics that underpin that environment, offers a sense of what individuals must contend with in order to maintain their health through diet. For example, MyPyramid, the
government’s primary model for dietary guidance, suggests a diet based on a great variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. However, the production and availability of these whole foods is far outweighed by the production and availability of processed food products that are less likely to contain as rich a nutrient profile. And, whole foods are often more expensive and less accessible in poorer urban areas than are processed food products. The food environment is therefore out of balance with current government dietary recommendations. Students must consider the situation and determine whether guidance is poorly fitted to the situation, whether greater regulation of the food environment is necessary, and whether nutrition education is enough for an individual to succeed in health maintenance. These questions provide excellent fodder for in-class discussions as well as out-of-class assignments (see Notes for examples of assignments).

These questions naturally lead to some of the more controversial topics that expose the greatest political and ethical divides among students. Should the utilitarian public health model be employed and particular policies be effected to control the food environment in which individuals operate? A good number of recent attempts have been introduced along these lines. Recent menu-labeling laws and policies have been passed in places such as New York City and the state of California. Trans fat bans have been introduced as well. Municipalities are also considering sugary beverage taxes and limits on sodium in certain foods. All of these are examples of government intervention to improve the food environment, but they also limit personal choice. Students must consider the extent of the problem of obesity and other diet-related conditions. They must consider the effectiveness of the medical model versus the public health model. And, they must decide whether or not an individual can and should maintain his or her autonomy in making decisions about what to eat given the circumstances of the food environment.

The question of course becomes ever more complicated as other topics are introduced. To a great extent, farm policy over the course of the last century helped shape the way food industry operates today and, as a result, the way the subsequent food environment looks. Farm policies were developed over time to help keep farmers in business while simultaneously creating an uninterrupted supply of cheap food for Americans. The latter goal, at least, has been accomplished in amazing fashion. Food, whether healthy or unhealthy, is relatively ubiquitous for the majority of Americans. And, many foods are available quite cheaply.
But with a food environment filled with cheap food—food that might not normally fall into the category of ‘healthy’—have we created a situation in which it is nearly impossible to maintain weight and health? Over two-thirds of Americans are now overweight and nearly one-third are considered obese. Is this the result of policies that lead to a vast and cheap food supply? Students again must consider the situation and potential causes, and they must return to the issue of personal versus social responsibility to think about how the situation could be changed for the better.

The picture is further complicated when considering more vulnerable populations. Children must operate in a similar food environment as adults. Children, however, are not as well equipped to deal with the onslaught of advertisement, do not have the purchasing power or the mobility of adults, and cannot speak for themselves politically. And so, to what extent must food industry be regulated to disallow exploitation of children? Can industry successfully police itself? Should industry be allowed into schools, and if so, what foods and beverages should it be allowed to sell? A great number of ethical issues arise related to each of these questions.

The impact of food production on the health of the environment is no different. Food production requires large amounts of land, water, and natural and synthetic inputs. It requires labor both within the United States and abroad. And, it requires a tremendous amount of energy to produce raw ingredients, ship them to food producers, process them into food products, and package and ship them to consumers for purchase. Every step of the way throughout the food system, the environment is impacted. But, because some foods impact the environment to a greater extent than others, questions arise as to whether or not those foods should be produced in as great a quantity. Who has the right to decide on such questions? Questions also arise as to how best to produce and purchase food to minimize its impact. For instance, are organic foods better than conventionally grown foods? Can they be mass-produced with enough efficiency to ‘feed the world?’ Should one consider buying foods more locally instead to minimize the impact food can have if it travels far?

**Conclusion**

The initial delivery of this course was a successful one. The major reason for its success was the systematic consideration of ethical
problems related to food policy, food system, and sustainability issues. The course moved students outside of the standard individualistic medical model in which nutrition students are normally trained, and it forced them to consider food from social, ethical, and political perspectives. Moving outside the mechanistic medical model meant looking beyond biology, biochemistry, and behavior, and instead considering broader ethical consequences of dealing with health from a personal responsibility or a social responsibility perspective. Considering topics from a variety of perspectives also put students squarely into the gray areas that inevitably exist in policy debates, forcing them to consider not only the scientific merits of arguments, as they are generally accustomed to do, but also to consider the philosophical and ethical merits as well.

Indeed, students responded to the initial teaching of this course with overall positive comments in course evaluations. Themes identified among these comments included the appreciation for the critical thinking required in tackling unresolved ethical or political food issues. Students also noted that they enjoyed navigating debates that often were politically charged while maintaining respect for others’ opinions in the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, students suggested they felt a sense of ownership over course content, as they themselves engaged in, and attempted to answer, many of the important questions raised related to these issues rather than rotely memorizing a number of predetermined conclusions.

REFERENCES

NOTES

Assignment Examples:

Midterm paper topics

• Soda tax: Recently, the New York state governor suggested a tax on non-diet sugary beverages and sugary juice drinks. He says the tax would generate revenue to help fight obesity and perhaps drive down consumption of these beverages. The beverage industry is not happy. The question is, would such an ‘obesity tax’ work? Why, or why not? Is it fair or appropriate for government entities to regulate food products in this way?

• Trans fat bans in restaurants: In recent years, municipalities and the state of California have moved to ban trans fats from foods in restaurants. Trans fats are not good for health, but should the government be regulating the types of ingredients that should or should not be in foods? New York City and California say yes. The restaurant industry says no. What are the arguments?

• Menu labeling: New York City and other areas of the country have recently considered or passed regulations to force restaurant chains of a certain size to label their menus or menu boards with calorie and/or fat information. The idea is to provide the consumer with nutrition information at the point of purchase. Health officials say this will help individuals make good decisions. Does science support this claim? The restaurant industry says this is burdensome and costly, and it will not change individuals’ behaviors. Is there science to support this claim? What other arguments does each side make?

• High fructose corn syrup: Recently, there has been a lot of talk about high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). Some researchers say it is associated with poor dietary habits and health outcomes, and they have demonized it. Others say it does not make a difference to health when part of an overall healthy diet, and besides, it’s an all-natural product. What does the science say? Which arguments are supported by research?

• Food and economics: Obesity is a complex issue. Some say it is a matter of personal choices and whether or not the individual eats well and exercises. Others point to the association between obesity and poverty. There are suggestions that obesity is an issue of food availability and access, and the price of healthy foods versus less
healthy foods. The question becomes: must we also fight poverty in order to fight the obesity epidemic?

• Pouring rights: In some schools, beverage companies such as Coca-Cola or Pepsi, develop ‘pouring rights’ agreements with the school administration. In these cases, the beverage company has exclusive rights to that school or school district, such that its competitors cannot sell their products in the same locations. Some argue this is bad for children as they are susceptible to ‘branding’ and perhaps made to become life-long consumers of a company’s products. Others say these contracts provide budget-strapped schools with much needed cash to make important programs, such as band, art, and music, run. What are the arguments on either side, and is there science behind the arguments?

**Media Fact or Fiction**

Choose 2-3 media pieces (these can be videos, podcasts, articles, etc.). Provide these to the class at least 1 week before your presentation. In your presentation, summarize the information in the media clips and discuss the arguments made on both sides of the issue. Identify research that supports or does not support various arguments. Discuss how the research is relevant. Determine, based on research and your own reading, which arguments hold up best. Based on this analysis, determine which side of the issue you fall on and discuss with the class why this is the case.

**Twenty Minute Oral Report**

Introduce the issue you have selected. Identify key players on both sides of the issue and whom they represent (if possible, identify their sources of funding as well). Discuss the arguments made on both sides and from various key players. Identify research that supports or does not support various arguments. Discuss how the research is relevant. Identify arguments for which there is little science as well. Consider both the underlying philosophical issues at hand (e.g., personal versus social responsibility for health) AND the ethical issues at hand (are there ethical arguments being made? What are they and how do they play a role?). Determine, based on research and your own reading, which arguments hold up best. Based on this analysis, determine which side of the issue you fall on and discuss with the class why this is the case.