

Evidence and Inquiry Certificate

The College of Natural Sciences Honors Center
Home of Polymathic Scholars

Food Culture in America

"...I intend to examine the psychological, sociological and economic factors specific to the United States that allow eating disorders, the obesity epidemic, childhood hunger and historically unparalleled food waste to coexist."

Jackie Roth
Natural Sciences
Neuroscience BSA

● ***Describe your field of study. What are some of the questions you would like to answer, and what academic disciplines do you think will be useful in answering them?***

In “Food Culture in America,” I intend to examine the psychological, sociological and economic factors specific to the United States that allow eating disorders, the obesity epidemic, childhood hunger and historically unparalleled food waste to coexist. Ultimately, I hope to understand the numerous levels of our food system and identify opportunities to reverse or prevent its paradoxical consequences.

Statistics reveal one in ten U.S. women struggle from an eating disorder, and the United States tops all other industrialized nations with the highest death rates for anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. At the same time, over two-thirds of Americans are classified as overweight or clinically obese, and researchers fear millennials will comprise the first generation in which their parents outlive them due to childhood obesity and the surge in Type II diabetes.

Additionally, about 20% of children live in food-insecure households, meaning they have no stable source of proper nutrition, depend on school lunches and either rely on cheap, fast food or starve. Childhood diet patterns establish lifelong metabolic needs, and if inadequate, may prime a child for illness in adulthood. While many families struggle to place food on the table, Americans waste as much as 40% of the food produced, primarily along the processing chain.

The food culture in our country is one of stark contradictions. One can walk down a city street and encounter provocative perfume posters promoting thinness idolatry, while nearby advertisements for Wendy’s Baconator tempt all who pass.

Consider the following example: as fat-free diets gained popularity in the 1990s, skim milk sales rocketed and a surplus of skimmed fat accumulated. Subsidized dairy farmers had no alternative but to convert this into hard cheeses. Subsequently, the government began incentivizing large food corporations to integrate the cheese into their products; Pizza Hut cheesy bites pizza crust and other exorbitantly cheesy products resulted. Eventually, a trend aimed at fat loss prompted the government to fund the creation of the kinds of foods that caused Americans to gain weight in the first place.

How has our blessing of abundant resources translated into an abundance of public health issues? Are such inconsistencies inevitable, or avoidable? How does the current food system shape our relationship with food? These are the complex questions I wish to untangle.

To tackle such a multidisciplinary topic, I turn to the fields of Nutrition, American Studies, Geography, Government and Sociology.

● ***Why are you interested in studying this topic?***

I first struggled with an eating disorder the summer after fifth grade. A close friend and I experienced a falling out, and destructive coping behaviors ensued. At such a young age, I saw

no problem with this; diets were the norm, counting calories seemed essential, and all signs pointed to thinness as a one-way ticket toward respect and admiration.

I was raised in a food-infatuated household. My dad's dad founded and ran a butcher shop, and my mom's dad managed a grocery store distribution chain. I grew up on beef and potatoes and listened to my parents' incessant proclamation that "fat equals flavor." They expressed concern over my sudden loss of 25 pounds, and I quickly cleaned up my act. An abnormally high metabolism throughout puberty flung me to the opposite end of the feeding spectrum: I ate out of boredom, gorged on processed foods and only stopped when stuffed.

Then, REbeL came along. This high school club, named for its "rebellion" against the media's unrealistic expectations of beauty and encouragement to "be" oneself, sought to prevent eating disorders using a peer education model. Lessons highlighted the prevalence of negative body image and reinforced the fact that after 1-5 years, 95% of dieters regain all lost weight. Most importantly, I learned the entirely foreign concept of mindful eating: simply eating when hungry and stopping when full, all the while appreciating the unique taste of each bite.

Stressors junior year once again sparked my disordered eating. To a dangerous degree I obsessed over where my foods came from, every ingredient within them, and the myriad effects they triggered. Accommodating these obsessions required vast knowledge of the food system, agriculture, GMOs, and plant, animal and human biology. I applied to college nutrition programs with the intent of studying the gut-brain connection, i.e., how the chemicals we ingest alter our mood, thoughts and perceptions.

Shortly after, I realized that, beyond the biochemistry between bite and thought, external factors dominate body image and dietary choices. In the past half century, our culture advanced towards faster, cheaper, easier pleasures, while society's ideal forms of man and woman mutated into something impossible. Our dwindling awareness of our foods' origins, a drastic shift in society's expectations for weight and shape, combined with rising income inequality, has devastated citizens' health and self-compassion. The unending irony exasperated me, and I dreamed of reconnecting people with their bodies, the environment, and abolishing our pervasive problems.

- Name two faculty with research interests in your area. Include their home departments and relevant research interests. If a research interest isn't obviously related to your topic, explain its relevance.**

Jaimie Davis

Assistant professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences, registered dietician
Jaimie Davis studies the impact of food intake, physical activity and behavioral changes in reducing obesity and metabolic disorders. She has researched the link between diet, primarily consumption of added sugar and dietary fiber, and body composition in overweight adolescent Latinos. In the next two years she will measure the effects of community gardening, cooking lessons and nutrition interventions in low-income minority elementary schools around Austin.

Raj Patel

Research professor in the LBJ School of Public Affairs

Raj Patel studies the global food system and its alternatives. He previously worked for the World Bank, World Trade Organization and United Nations, and testified before the U.S. House Financial Services Committee on the global food crisis in 2008. He authored *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* and *The Value of Nothing*, a New York Times bestseller. He is currently collaborating with director Steve James on a multimedia documentary *Generation Food Project*, which examines global communities' and organizations' attempts to feed themselves sustainably and innovatively.

● ***Explain how each course is relevant to this field. What do you hope to learn from each?***

Primary Courses

NTR 312

Introduction to Nutritional Sciences

This course explores the biochemical breakdown of nutrients, vitamins and minerals in the body, and how these processes provide a basis for current nutritional recommendations. I feel it unreasonable to make any judgments of existing dietary guidelines in America until I have a basic understanding of how our bodies digest different foods.

AMS 370

American Food

The cuisine of a particular country reflects that country's cultural and historical roots. This course investigates food traditions across race, gender and class in America, and how they developed through religious, political, regional or other affiliations. I am passionate about cooking and love researching how a nation's distinct history and agricultural resources shape its delicacies, but have never properly examined the United States in this way. I hope to take away a sense of American identity in studying our nation's food, and how our culture influences the simple act of eating on an individual level.

SOC 308S

Introduction to Health and Society

To supplement my other food-focused courses, this will offer a broader study of society and how it functions to optimize, or degrade, the health of its constituents. Food comprises the core of human health; without adequate nutrition, everything else falls apart. I plan to fill the theoretical framework provided by this course (what does it even mean to be a healthy society?) with insights into how food policy, community interventions and national initiatives can improve health for the masses.

GRG 326K

Feast or Famine? Food Supplies in a Crowded World

The Undergraduate Catalog describes it best: the course covers “[f]ood as a necessity, a commodity, and a bond of community; planetary production potential; and the challenges of population growth, climate change, land degradation, and food politics.” Scientists predict our world will hold 9 billion people by 2050. How on earth will we feed all of them? Large corporations such as Monsanto and General Mills propose expanding their existing operations to developing countries, but this may not be the most efficient plan. How will the attitudes of these U.S.-based companies influence future agriculture around the globe, and how will this impending food crisis affect agribusiness at home?

GOV 370L

Food Politics in America

Food is a fundamentally political topic. Everything grown, harvested, distributed, bought and served throughout the country is a result of decisions by lawmakers. Food stamps, for instance, are a subject of hot debate in Congress. How do the decisions of State Representatives and Senators - people distanced from a lifestyle requiring food stamps - trickle down to affect the members of society who actually need them most?

NTR 365

Obesity and Metabolic Health

This course assesses the prevalence, prevention and treatment of obesity in children and adults and the concomitant metabolic disorders. The U.S. boasts the highest rates of obesity across the globe, and a culture of fat-shaming has resulted. Are obese people to blame for their condition, is our food system as a whole at fault, or is the answer somewhere in the middle?