

Food Diet and Health

Strategic Initiative Committee Report

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The Food Diet and Health (FDH) Strategic Initiative Committee was charged to review current College of Agricultural Sciences (CoAS) and University wide programs and strategic plans. Following that review, the committee was asked to provide recommendations as to opportunities to advance the College's role beyond the more traditional programs the College has had in food production, food science, and human nutrition. The committee appreciates the College's foundational roles in education, research and extension.

Opportunities exist to advance academic issues presented by food, diet, and health both at the undergraduate and at graduate level. Students at all levels would benefit from examining and studying the issues from farm through diet decision making.

Many cutting edge research programs are already ongoing in the areas discussed. Research advances both within departments and between departments could be greatly enhanced by better communication and coordination. The committee examined ways to foster collaboration between departments, across the university, and with like minded stakeholders in government, other academic institutions, and private entities. Efforts to empower collaborative research would strengthen the quantity, quality, and prestige of new knowledge generated by CoAS. Emerging science requires that we broaden our view to take advantage of the new knowledge that is being generated.

Finally, the committee fully appreciates the need to present a more proactive message to a very diverse consumer audience concerning food from its genesis at production through implications for health and wellness that are made by diet decisions. New technologies and techniques can compliment tried and true methods to provide sound science based information, which can help individuals make more informed decisions for a healthy lifestyle. It is important that new program delivery strategies be available through Cooperative Extension for

consumers across Pennsylvania to learn about how food, diet and nutrition impact health and wellness.

The FDH Strategic Initiative Committee proposes the following for consideration by the College of Agricultural Sciences Administration and Faculty.

Summary of Merged and Prioritized Recommendations

Listed in order of importance

Recommendation 1: Designate a point person to lead the Food, Diet and Health Interest Group.

Justification: Currently, Penn State University has a large number of faculty and staff across many colleges and disciplines with expertise in the area of food, diet and health (FDH). While such personnel are located both within and outside the College of Agriculture, the committee recommends that a key, tenured faculty member (point person) be appointed or be hired with sufficient FTE to encourage collaboration within this strategic initiative. Identifying a point person would enable a University-wide interest group to be established. Such a group could promote mutually beneficial areas of research and collaboration. Many faculty have expertise in food production, food manufacturing, diets or health. It is relatively difficult within the current PSU system to find programs that support a “farm-to-fork approach”. This broad approach has been advocated by many government and stakeholder groups and is likely to be an important area for research and funding in the future. Individuals that should be attracted to this approach would include: production agriculture (Horticulture, Dairy and Animal Science, Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences, Poultry Science, etc.), food marketing and availability (Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology), processing (Food Science, Nutrition, etc.), and consumer well-being (Hershey Medical Center, Nutrition Links, FNEP, Cooperative Extension, etc.). A respected point person could facilitate dialogue and cooperation among a diverse but talented group. This could encourage novel solutions and breakdown narrow or personal agendas and promote successful applications for funding.

It is expected that collaborative research would provide opportunities for graduate study and the development of expertise across departmental lines. Eventually such collaborative study may lead to dual title degrees, perhaps at both the MS and PhD level.

The lead person should be cognizant of the current research, teaching, and outreach programs that address FDH issues across the CoAS and University. This awareness would include affiliations with the medical and law schools. The ability to identify one knowledgeable individual as a key representative would be helpful in starting

discussions with these new affiliations. A point person could help develop an interest group of key faculty and stakeholders who could meet several times a year to share research projects and find opportunities for collaboration. Over time, it is believed this group could work collectively to recognize emerging research issues, secure funding from external resources, develop cross-discipline initiatives, organize seminars or conferences, and provide outreach to stakeholders through educational/extension offerings or web-based media. A point person or team leader would be necessary for the initial team building process. It is believed that a number of senior faculty members could be identified as suitable candidates for the lead person as well as for the interest group.

Recommendation 2: Establish a general education course and/or a senior level capstone course with the food system as the theme.

Justification: There is a low level understanding of where food comes from and the path it takes from farm to fork, both amongst the general public and the Penn State student population. Given the centrality of food for human existence and health, this deficit is a cause for concern. Those who do not have an understanding of the food system lack the knowledge to make informed science-based decisions about diet, health and the impact of agriculture on the environment and local economies. Additionally, the committee discussed the importance for CoAS graduates to have an in depth understanding of the complex food system, and the societal and political issues involved on the local, national and international levels. To address these issues, the committee proposes developing two new courses. The first would be a general education course in the natural sciences that examines the entire food system from farm to fork. The primary audience for this course would be students outside CoAS. The committee advocates that CoAS consider implementing this course as an online course to reach the widest audience possible. Secondly, the senior level capstone course would be aimed at undergraduates with majors in CoAS. This course would ensure that all CoAS graduates could have a broad view of agriculture and the food system that extends beyond their major area. If offered at the 400 level, a course of this nature could be of valuable to incoming graduate students.

Unit leaders would have to allocate faculty teaching efforts to development and instruction of this course(s). If one of these courses were delivered online, it would also require allocation of CoAS instructional design team resources. Many faculty could be identified as potential team instructors. A faculty member should be designated as the lead person for Faculty Senate approval. Following establishment of the course, teaching responsibilities could be rotated and new faculty instructors recruited.

Recommendation 3: Establish more effective outreach, including a web presence.

Justification: A FDH web presence can be easily and inexpensively created using social media resources, and this approach can provide excellent opportunities for faculty and staff at University Park, Commonwealth campuses, and Extension offices to better network, interact and learn of one another's expertise. Various departments and educators could contribute to the various FDH web tools, yet a central maintenance point should be determined to facilitate continuity and uniformity among the CoAS FDH messages. Internal marketing of different programs and events will also help communicate about and broadly advertise FDH programs and activities. A FDH enhanced web presence could include the development and execution of online courses, for both resident and extension education.

More flexible and innovative methods must also be enhanced to provide resources to Extension Educators. Extension Educators frequently face diverse audiences and can be challenged to provide training in the broad areas of FDH. Improved methods to collaborate and share materials from different faculty and from different educators can expand the options and enhance educational opportunities. Electronic methods to share resources and encourage collaborative teaching can be an efficient and cost effective method to expand outreach efforts, increase awareness of expertise, and enhance the reputation of CoAS in FDH.