



American University builds on America's appetite for understanding food

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (Dec. 11, 2013) –The nation's love affair with food has reached new heights. Nowadays, more consumers are interested in how food is grown and whether animals were treated appropriately. And, despite people's increasingly refined palates, an obesity epidemic has raised awareness about the importance of nutrition and health.

With a raised public consciousness, American University joined the national conversation through the development of a [Center for Food Studies](#). Launched by [Jeffrey Kaplan](#), professor of biology, the interdisciplinary center coordinates collaborative research, programs and more than a dozen academic courses. The program draws on AU faculty and students who carry out research on the social, political, and economic aspects of food.

"What's special about food research is that food really encompasses all of humanity—from the environment and the economy to our taste preferences and purchasing habits," Kaplan says. "It's so diverse."

By studying food from every angle—biological, sociological, economic, environmental—the director of the AU Center for Food Studies program says he hopes to provide valuable research and foster a public dialogue. He also hopes that the research will address important public health and environmental concerns, such as climate change and ensuring the world's food supply for generations to come.

Increasing and protecting the world's food supply

Kaplan studies bacterial infections of crops. He is currently conducting research in collaboration with the USDA and Guangxi University in China to develop genetically-modified infection-resistant rice for the purposes of increasing the food supply to underdeveloped countries.

While there is some criticism about the inclusion of genetically-modified crops (GMOs) in our food supply, Kaplan says that there needs to be more public awareness about the benefits of GMOs.

"There is a public sentiment not to tinker with food, but it's not based on science," Kaplan says. "GMOs offer an attractive and efficient means to mitigate the effects of increased biotic stress on crops due to climate change, and to increase food security, reduce pesticide use, and improve nutrition."

The Center for Food Studies plans to host a GMO conference in April at AU to provide a forum to discuss these issues.

Food labeling misleading

Another research area the Center for Food Studies plans to pursue is obesity. They would like to investigate how children of different nationalities are impacted by obesity.

[Anastasia Snelling](#), an associate dean for the School of Education, Teaching, and Health, has studied health promotion and nutrition for several years. In 2011, she was part of a group that was honored by First Lady Michelle Obama, for helping students and teachers integrate health and nutrition lessons into the curriculum at a Washington, D.C. middle school.

While consumers are paying more attention to what they place in their mouths, Snelling says food labeling can be confusing.

“I don’t think we’ve helped consumers understand because front-of-the-pack food labeling is unregulated,” she says. For instance, a package might say the food is “whole grain,” though only a small amount of whole grains are actually in the product.

The Culture of Food

Although we need food for sustenance, food is now viewed as a potent cultural symbol. AU history professor [Katharina Vester](#) teaches about food and American identity, and is writing a book about social status and food, called “A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities.” While affluent Americans shop at farmers’ markets and cook pricey organic meals, working class families don’t have the money for such luxuries.

“Political decisions have put obstacles in the way of ordinary working people enjoying a healthy diet,” Vester says. “Supermarket chains avoid areas where poor people are concentrated because profits will be lower, creating ‘food deserts’ where residents without cars and free time may need to shop at convenience stores...Congress passes farm bills that subsidize the cost of foods that are making Americans sick from overconsumption, like meat, dairy, sugar, and corn, instead of subsidizing the kinds of fresh fruits and vegetables health researchers urge us to eat...Fast food chains can pay artificially low wages, lowering the prices of their unhealthy products, because so many of their workers are on public assistance—a hidden government subsidy of \$7 billion to keep fast food prices low.”

Vester says there are alternatives to high-priced ‘health food’ marketed to foodies, such as purchasing whole grains and legumes in bulk to grow vegetables in a community garden, but that requires a lot of time, and those working multiple jobs to make ends meet don’t have that flexibility.

“That’s why eating well has become a privilege in this country, and why it will take political will to make this country’s food systems work better to keep more Americans healthy.”

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