

SESSION III: THE CHALLENGE OF OVER-NUTRITION AND OBESITY

October 14, 2005 - 9:00 a.m. to Noon
The Challenge of Over-Nutrition and Obesity

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First let me say that the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges is the oldest association of higher education in the United States, with a membership of about 214 of our public research universities. Traditionally, a major part of the NASULGC program agenda has been focused on issues associated with our food system.

In 2001 the Association, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, implemented a food and society project with the following objectives:

To develop a strategic plan to increase public and federal support within NASULGC institutions for research and extension programs related to food and wellness, food and sustainable communities, food and global economic development.

The second objective – developing partnerships within organizations, agencies and institutions that reflect the relationship of food and agriculture to human wellness, environment, science, technology, education, sustainable communities, and global economic development.

And the third objective – to convene effective forums to foster dialogue between stakeholders and the decision-makers to increase their awareness of the need for greater support for food and agriculture.

And the fourth objective – to recommend appropriate education advocacy, organization and the strategy to pass legislation and obtain increased funding.

To accomplish these objectives, NASULGC organized a series of stakeholder meetings to identify the priorities that are relevant to the objectives of the project. We utilized the federal database to look at existing funding streams in support of food and agriculture research in the nation and concluded that there was significant decline in the federal support for food and agriculture when compared to other scientific disciplines.

These stakeholder sessions brought forth the need for the Land Grant and Public Universities to focus their research on the following priorities:

A. Food and health, and within food and health, diet and health, diet and chronic diseases, and obesity.

B. The second area – food and the global environment, focusing on adoptive ecosystems management, genomics and water; and

C. Food safety and nutrition, including food and globalization, conflict resolution and national security.

At a follow-up meeting with the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, Dr. Marberger suggested that the issues we had presented were extremely broad and should be more focused and suggested that a meeting with the National Academy of Sciences be our next step. And we asked the Academy to assist us in arranging a national dialogue on food and its relationship to health, the environment and globalization.

This meeting was arranged, and the Academy worked with NASULGC to bring together the National Institute of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Health and Human Services, the USDA, and university scientists to discuss the issues and identify the priorities.

The entitled, “Exploring a Vision – Integrating Knowledge, Food and Health,” was held in May of 2004. And the publication with the major outcomes and papers from that workshop has been issued and can be found on the NASULGC website.

There was a strong endorsement for a national agenda to address the critical problems of food negatively affecting the health of Americans. The participants identified the problem areas of food and its relationship to a healthy society. And they are: obesity, diabetes, chronic diseases, as well as food safety and biosecurity.

It was concluded that an agenda focused on food and health, if it is to be successful, cannot be achieved by a single agency or a single unit or universities working by themselves. The approach must be one of true cooperation to address the major problems surrounding the chronic disease, obesity.

It was suggested that the Office of Science and Technology Policy bring together the relevant agencies in a multi-agency effort to address the problem. And secondly, the government must declare obesity as a national priority, and it must be a part of a national agenda as published with the support of the multi-agency task force to implement recommendations that will address all aspects of this chronic ailment.

Several constituency meetings were held. The latest was a partnership meeting between NASULGC institutions and USDA to identify specific areas relating to research and education to address the problem of childhood obesity. We concluded that the issue must be comprehensive and not focus exclusively on food but include community building, diet and exercise, diet, nutrition and health.

It is also important to note that in a report submitted to USDA by the congressionally approved USDA Advisory Committee to look at funding for food and agriculture sciences research, the committee chaired by Bill Danforth recommended the creation of a national institute for food and agriculture with eight priorities, one of which is obesity. In the FY2006 appropriations language, the senate indicated that further study of federal funding for food and agricultural sciences research and education should be conducted by the National Science Foundation. This

would have a significant impact on future funding and could be an avenue for us to launch a major obesity diet, nutrition and health initiative.

The concluding event of our food and society project looked at integration of community-based programming in the prevention of youth overweight and obesity for the nation. By utilizing a partnership approach among research, extension and higher education in laying out an agenda for the future, we agreed that, from a USDA perspective, these should be the priorities:

1. Enhancing research programs that advance the research questions posed by scholars around the comprehensive nature of overweight and obesity among youth.
2. The USDA agenda should include identifying promising practices and evaluation models to be promoted by USDA and other government agencies that can reduce overweight and obesity.
3. Develop a coordinated policy recommendation at the federal, state and local levels for education that support the reduction of overweight and obesity among youth.

There were some specific recommendations for the land grant institutions, and they are: That the land grant university system agenda should include ensuring the integration of knowledge-based programming into youth, family and community extension programs that address the issue of overweight and obese youth; conducting pilot studies and program evaluations that contribute to the development of policy recommendations at the local, state and national levels; thirdly, strengthening undergraduate and graduate programs in the integration of nutrition and health; identifying Best Practices in higher education that prepare the practitioner's for work in community-based prevention programming in youth overweight and obesity; and five, work closely with local communities to identify and evaluate promising practices which encourage healthy lifestyle and healthy weight for youth.

The Workshop Planning and Implementation Committee laid out a number of strategies, and we are now ready to look at the next steps. We are not at the stage where we can say we are launching a major obesity initiative. What we need at this point is to convene a synthesis group to take our strategies and formulate a concise implementation plan.

Our next steps, therefore, for this synthesis group, include collating the Best Practices that we have identified, having a repository website for these Best Practices, networking with our stakeholders and marketing what we and/or various constituents have done. Our research faculty needs to determine the research gaps and agree on solution interventions that we along with our partners can do. The focus should be on research outcomes that will document these Best Practices, prioritize the science gaps, and include them in our strategic planning and appropriations request.

Our extension and education faculty should be engaged in programs relating to community planning, exercise in the workplace and at home, community development, classroom initiatives, enhancing the learning environment, nutrition education, food consumption practices, and developing incentive and reward programs for building constituencies.

We are also promoting partnerships. There is a need for a high level of leadership to engage the private sector, the food industry, the government through OSDP, other traditional groups that could help us design a comprehensive that we could launch together.

We are about to issue a number of recommendations, and these recommendations are: the land grant system is well positioned to advance an obesity prevention agenda through community-based education interventions well grounded in research. University presidents should be asked to play a leadership role in articulating the role of land grant university research, education and extension in addressing the obesity epidemic, championing the need for increased funding, and promoting greater visibility for faculty in advancing new knowledge and determining Best Practices.

The Farm Bill, which will be coming on the screen shortly, should affirm USDA's role in obesity prevention and assure adequate funding to address research gaps, conduct program evaluation, and to train land grant faculty members to address this major health issue. There is also an immediate need to share Best Practices in extension and research related to nutrition education that leads to healthy lifestyles and prevent obesity.

Cooperative extension should make a commitment to bring the total resources of agriculture, youth development, family and consumer sciences, nutrition and community resource developments together to address the obesity epidemic with a holistic programmatic agenda. Degree programs, professional preparation and service learning opportunities for university students need to be adopted to produce a cadre of professionals trained to address complex health issues such as obesity.

Land grant universities should assume leadership for the coordination of community-based wellness initiatives that influence the adoption and implementation of Best Practices for all citizens, that is, the establishment and implementation of school wellness plans, community asset mapping, etc. And E-Extension community of practice – E-Extension is a new program that we are bringing on screen shortly – this community of practice should be developed to place the land grant university system in a visible leadership position regarding healthy lifestyles including healthy weight and utilize innovative technology to reach the American public.

Land grant universities should provide leadership for public policy education that prepares families, practitioners and community leaders to exert influence on policy developments at the federal, state and local levels to bring about a culture of health and wellness.

What is my take-home message for you today? My take-home message is for you to be engaged in action planning by adopting the slogan, *Childhood Obesity Prevention, Healthy Weight for Healthy Lifestyle*. To achieve this requires sustained efforts in research and intervention. We recommended that phased efforts may provide more meaningful results and change than trying to do everything all at once. We need a phased-in program.

Community-based, multi-dimensional efforts of shared responsibility can yield tremendous success. High-quality interventions that achieve impacts will receive more visibility and resources for replication. The National Land-Grant System and its partners should identify gaps in research, education and extension efforts and re-orient priorities in these areas.

Professional preparation at all levels including informal, continuing education that emphasizes a research practitioner model to effectively deal with obesity, is critical to achieve success and sustain the program initiatives.

Finally, the public sector, the research and education community and funding agencies must share the responsibility to effectively deal with this global problem.