



Evaluation of Nutrition Education Policy

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Issue. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the lead government department charged with providing nutrition education information. With a growing consensus on the link between diet and health on one hand and expansion of educational programs on the other, it is becoming increasingly important for USDA to critically assess and evaluate its nutrition education activities.

Context. Broad legislative authority for providing nutrition education and information by USDA originated in early acts of Congress, providing statutory sanctions for extension activities, such as the Organic Act of 1862 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, and more recent enactments, such as the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 and its 1981 and 1985 amendments. In addition, statutory authority is given by specific program enactments, creating nutrition education components in existing programs, such as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Consequently, a minimum of five different USDA agencies conduct hundreds of nutritional education/information activities. One of USDA's most visible nutrition education efforts relates to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which was developed in cooperation with the Department of Health and Human Services. In 1991, an Ad Hoc Committee, appointed by the Human Nutrition Board of Scientific Counselors, recommended that evaluation activities expand beyond descriptive and qualitative assessments to more quantitative assessments that would result in obtaining positive, measurable changes in target groups' nutrition-related knowledge, attitudes, and/or behavior. Survey results, reports of food intake, and measures of health status would quantify the research.

At Stake. USDA support for nutrition education rose from \$132.7 million in FY 1986 to \$212.4 in FY 1992, an increase of approximately 60 percent. This represents an increase of approximately 19 percent in real dollars. Most of the funds for these activities are distributed to and managed by State agencies. As money on food assistance and nutrition education increases, it becomes increasingly important for USDA to objectively assess program effectiveness. USDA spent approximately \$33.5 billion on food assistance in FY92. Effective nutrition education would help ensure that those funds actually contribute to recipients' health.

Alternatives. The Ad Hoc Committee cited a number of reasons why USDA agencies were not focusing more attention on quantitative/impact evaluations. In some instances, evaluation efforts were narrowly viewed as being program specific and frequently focusing on operational measures of performance, such as the number of clients contacted or brochures circulated, in keeping with the parent agency's management information needs. Other limitations cited were inadequate resources and staff expertise in communications and evaluation. Policy alternatives to address evaluation include:

- (1) Status quo with little change in emphasis on program evaluation.
- (2) Increase evaluation activities via increased funding or reallocation of program dollars. A redirection could strongly encourage agencies to provide measurable indicators.
- (3) Alter program regulations. Currently, State and local agencies have considerable autonomy in terms of evaluation methodology employed. USDA agencies could require more objective evaluations

in programs that rely on State and local agencies to carry out program implementation. For example, they could require that all evaluation efforts conform to some minimum criteria and/or produce specified measures.

(4) Improve interagency cooperation and evaluation. It has been argued that agencies must move beyond their individual mandates and begin to develop cooperative, cross-cutting programs and activities capitalizing on the unique expertise in each agency. Improved cross-program coordination would contribute to the development of enhanced evaluation methodologies and educational materials. Cross-program evaluations could be designed to improve overall program assessments, and thus Department-level planning and program implementation.

Agenda. Although nutrition education may be a legislatively mandated component for certain USDA programs, no specific legislation exists that provides guidance on how the agencies should document the overall effect of their respective programs; none is expected. However, USDA agencies could specify evaluation in program regulations.

Information Sources. Annual Reports to Congress on USDA Human Nutrition Research and Education Activities, from 1986-91; Ad Hoc Committee Report to Human Nutrition Board of Scientific Counselors to Review Education Programs for USDA Nutrition Education Programs and Materials, Oct. 1991.

A daily food guide

Food group	Suggested daily servings from entire group
Milk, yogurt, and cheese	2-3
Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans and peas, eggs, nuts, and seeds	2-3
Vegetables	3-5
Fruits	2-4
Breads, cereals, and other grain products	6-11

Source: The USDA Food Guide in *Preparing Foods and Planning Menus Using the Dietary Guidelines*, HG-232-8.