NUTC 0285: Current Controversies in Nutrition  
Summer 2018

Class Meetings: Online, primarily via Canvas

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Office Hours: Online, by appointment

Graduate Credits: 3 credits

Prerequisites: None

Course Description: Virtually no discipline attracts more public attention or generates more controversies than nutrition. The reasons for this vary. Food and nutrition can be viewed through multiple lenses: the personal, familial, communal, cultural, political, historical, and scientific. This course explores the scientific underpinnings of several hot topics and controversies, which will be examined from the perspectives of scientists and consumers (of food and media), with an undercurrent fostering self-understanding of implicit biases. The class will engage in debates and discussions designed to illuminate different perspectives. Students will have the opportunity to research, evaluate, and present their findings on a nutrition-related topic that is of concern to them.

Course Objectives: By the end of the course, students will be able to identify their own biases in approaching current hot topics/controversies, in approaching sources of information about these topics, and where such biases/world view originated; recognize and describe how they personally, as well as the average consumer, currently make informed decisions about the healthfulness of foods for themselves and/or for others; relay the scientific and historical underpinnings of select current topics/controversies in nutrition; develop skills to critically evaluate sources of non-scientific nutrition information and misinformation, including traditional and “new” media, as well as the nutrition information itself, to become more informed consumers; summarize the current state of scientific evidence and the gaps in knowledge of a given topic; and explain the scientific, social, cultural, media, and/or political origins of the controversial nature of a given topic.

Texts or Materials: With the exception of the book (below), all assigned readings listed on the schedule will be available for the duration of the semester on Canvas (https://canvas.tufts.edu), or via the Hirsch Health Sciences Library access system, in cases where finding the literature is part of the assignment. In this course, we rely primarily on popular media and similar readings, supplemented with peer-reviewed articles published in major medical and nutrition journals for those hoping to gain more depth of understanding (these are marked as “Optional”). Reading studies will be new to most of you, and you are not expected to approach these articles as scientists, or to understand every part of them. You will be briefly introduced to how to scan a paper and how to approach it for the purposes of this course.

The required book, available on Amazon or from your favorite bookseller:

**Academic Conduct:** Each student is responsible for upholding the highest standards of academic integrity, as specified in the Friedman School’s Policies and Procedures Handbook and Tufts University policies (http://students.tufts.edu/student-affairs/student-life-policies/academic-integrity-policy). It is the responsibility of each student to understand and comply with these standards, as violations will be sanctioned by penalties ranging from failure on an assignment and the course to dismissal from the school. You are expected to complete all assignments independently, that is, without the assistance of another human (including fellow students, faculty, anonymous online folk, etc.), unless otherwise noted. All documents used in preparing your work must be properly referenced, or else risk being identified as plagiarized work. Instructors and other university personnel may request that students submit written assignments to plagiarism prevention resources, websites, or other authoritative databanks, such as (but not limited to) “turnitin.com,” or a similar site. These services compare student-produced documents with web content, newspapers, journals, magazines, books, student essays, and other data to determine the originality of student work.

**Assessment and Grading:** The assignments and discussions for this course are designed to allow you to practice and demonstrate that you understand the course and module objectives. They are both reflective and evaluative. Please refer to the “Schedule of Lectures, Readings, and Assignments” later in this document for details.

Contributing to your final grade are:

**Grading Range:** Grading for the course will be based on the below distribution:

- Summarize and Question (10 total, 4 points each) ~28%
- Discussions (5 total, 5 points each) ~17%
- Assignments (8 total, 10 points each) ~55%

A passing grade in the course is B- or better. Final letter grades (A+ though F) for the course will be assigned based on the following criteria (rounded up):

- 90–100 A range (90–<93 = A-, 93+ = A, A+ given for superlative work)
- 80–89 B range (80–<83 = B-, 83–<87 = B, 87–<90 = B+)
- 70–79 C range (70–<73 = C-, 73–<77 = C, 77–<80 = C+)
- 60–69 D range (60–<63 = D-, 63–<67 = D, 67–<70 = D+)
- <60 F

**Instructions for Submission of Assignments and Exams:** Written assignments, except for discussion transcripts/videos, should be submitted in Word, 1-inch margins, 11-point font, single-spaced, on the Canvas site. All assignments, quizzes, discussion postings, etc., must be submitted by Sunday the week they are assigned, no later than 11:59PM EST/EDT or your local time, whichever is later, unless otherwise specified (e.g., term assignment has an end-of-semester due date). Please let me know if you are taking the course in a time zone other than the east coast of the U.S. Late assignments will be accepted; however, 10% will be deducted for every day late. That said, if you have extenuating circumstances, please notify the instructor.

**Accommodation of Disabilities:** Tufts University is committed to providing equal access and support to all students through the provision of reasonable accommodations so that each student may access their curricula and achieve their personal and academic potential. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations please contact the Friedman School Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at 617-636-6719 to make arrangements for determination of appropriate accommodations. Please be aware that accommodations cannot be enacted retroactively, making timeliness a critical aspect for their provision.

**Diversity Statement:** We believe that the diversity of student experiences and perspectives is essential to the deepening of knowledge in this course. We consider it part of our responsibility as instructors to address the learning needs of all of the students in this course. We will present materials that are respectful of diversity: race, color, ethnicity, gender, age,
disability, religious beliefs, political preference, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, citizenship, language, or national origin among other personal characteristics.

**Course Topics and Assignment Schedule at a Glance:** The course begins on May 23 and continues through “Final Exam Week” (August 20–26). This 14-week course is primarily organized around a handful of current hot topics/controversies, presented as case studies supported primarily by popular media pieces, accompanied by relevant research for those willing to explore and learn at a deeper level. These topics are organized in a way to allow each student to acquire greater skill in understanding the origins of putative controversies, how media often drives controversies, and how nutrition scientists understand and approach these topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK NO.</th>
<th>WEEK OF</th>
<th>COURSE TOPIC</th>
<th>ASSIGNMENTS DUE BY END OF WEEK (11:59PM ET SUNDAY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>May 23</td>
<td>Course Introduction</td>
<td>Getting to Know You Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>May 28</td>
<td>Personal Biases and Reading Nutrition News</td>
<td>A1. My World View</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>June 4</td>
<td>Casting a Critical Eye on Nutrition Information</td>
<td>A2. Is This Legit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>June 11</td>
<td>Topic 1: Saturated Fat, Part 1</td>
<td>SQ1. Summarize and Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>June 18</td>
<td>Topic 1: Saturated Fat, Part 2</td>
<td>SQ2. Summarize and Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>July 2</td>
<td>Topic 2: Grains, Gluten, and Celiac, Part 1</td>
<td>SQ4. Summarize and Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>July 9</td>
<td>Topic 2: Grains, Gluten, and Celiac, Part 2</td>
<td>SQ5. Summarize and Question Online Discussion #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>August 20</td>
<td>Topic 5: Hydration, Part 2</td>
<td>A8. Final Project due Online Discussion #5 Please complete the Course Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This schedule is subject to modification at the instructor’s discretion.
Detailed Description of Course Topics, Assignment Schedule, and the Learning Objectives for Each Class Session:

**Weeks 1 through 3**

In this first part of the course, we cover the introduction to the course and the course’s theoretical approach, and, moreover, begin to explore the world view with which you enter this exploration of hot topics and controversies. Your own beliefs and biases will predispose you to accepting or arguing against contradictory evidence, information, or sources. Therefore, becoming aware of these is key to your understanding how you approach the topics that follow.

**Week 1: May 23-May 27 (half-week)**

**Class Topic(s):** Course Introduction

**Required Lectures/Materials:**
Watch 1 lecture:
- Course Introduction

Read:
- Introduction in *The Gluten Lie*.

**Assignments Due:**
Review the syllabus. Organize your schedule. Get familiar with the work ahead. Complete the “Getting to Know You” survey available at [URL and password on Canvas only](http://www.canvas.com).

**Week 2: May 28-June 3**

**Class Topic(s):** Personal Biases and Reading Nutrition News

**Learning Objectives:**
- Identify and describe your own personal beliefs about specific topics in food/nutrition.
- Investigate some of the origins of these beliefs, and recognize how these beliefs affect your daily dietary practices.
- Explore the rigidity or fluidity of these beliefs in the face of supporting or contradictory evidence.

**Required Lectures/Materials:**
Watch 2 lectures:
- Understanding Your Nutrition and Media World Views
- Wheat from Chaff: How to Read Nutrition News with a Critical Eye and Identify Nutrition Experts and Imposters

Read:
- Chapters 1, 2, and 3 in *The Gluten Lie*.

**Assignments Due:**
**A1. My World View.** This assignment is geared toward helping you understand your own world view, beliefs, and biases regarding nutrition and media about nutrition. Please respond using the document/guide on Canvas.
Week 3: June 4-10

Class Topic(s): Casting a Critical Eye on Nutrition Information

Learning Objectives:
- Identify signatures of nutrition quackery versus nutrition expertise.
- Review and practice strategies to identify misleading nutrition information in popular and social media, blogs, infomercials, etc.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 2 lectures:
- Whom Do We Trust and Why?
- Casting a Critical Eye on Nutrition Information

Read:
- Chapters 4, 5, and 6, and the “Unpacked Diet” sections in The Gluten Lie.

Assignments Due:
A2. Is This Legit? Find four articles about nutrition sourced from (“legitimate”) popular news media, blogs, health web sites, etc. Two of these should be articles in which you trust the information, two of which should be articles in which you do not trust the information. Every pair of articles (trusted and not trusted) should be on the same topic (of your choice). For each article, provide:
  a) the title, author, and URL/hyperlink,
  b) a paragraph about the content and approach of the article (e.g., the objective or “why” of the piece, its central thesis/argument, length, reading level, etc.)
  c) a paragraph about each source (e.g., target audience of site, who the authors are, etc.), and
  d) a personal statement about what makes YOU trust the information or not — in other words, what makes a given article trustworthy (or not)?

Weeks 4 through 6

During these weeks we begin investigating our first topic: saturated fat and specifically its role in heart health. We begin with a high-level overview of how nutrition science is conducted, how scientists accrue evidence in a given field, and how they rank different kinds of evidence. We then move into an exploration of evidence and arguments for/against the role of saturated fat in human health, including a brief review of basic lipid-related physiology.

Week 4: June 11-17

Class Topic(s): Saturated Fat, Part 1

Learning Objectives:
- Explain the basics of the scientific method/approach.
- Distinguish the major types of research studies and describe the hierarchy of scientific evidence.
- Describe how nutrition scientists tend to view research and accruing evidence.
- List the different types of dietary fat and their dietary sources.
- Broadly summarize the current view of the physiological role of dietary fats in human heart health.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 3 lectures:
• How Does “Science” Work?
• Getting the Gist of Nutrition Research When You’re Not a Nutrition Scientist
• The Physiology of Saturated Fat and Heart Health, in Brief

Read:

Assignments Due:
Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 4-5 sentence summary of your thoughts on the Executive Summary of the report of the US DGAC. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the DGAC and/or the remaining reading materials. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Week 5: June 18-24

Class Topic(s): Saturated Fat, Part 2

Learning Objectives:
• Summarize readings from nutrition science literature.
• Outline the history of dietary fat recommendations in the US, including the general timeline of evidence and the current state of the evidence on saturated fat.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 2 lectures:
• Dietary Fat: A Brief History of Guidelines and Recommendations
• Saturated Fat: A Closer Look at the Timeline of Evidence, Part 1

Read:
Assignments Due:

Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Week 6: June 25-July 1

Class Topic(s): Saturated Fat, Part 3 (Conclusion)

Learning Objectives:
• Examine methods used in the nutrition science literature.
• Outline meta-analytic methods, their uses and their limitations.
• Identify the central arguments for/against current guidelines on saturated fat in human health.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 2 lectures:
• Saturated Fat: A Closer Look at the Timeline of Evidence, Part 2
• Saturated Fat: Whence the Confusion

Read:

Assignments Due:
A3. What Topics Do You Think Are Controversial? Provide a list of four items that you think are hot topics/nutrition controversies that are NOT explicitly a part of the current course. Provide the following for each topic:
   a) the topic and the central controversy/sides of the topic,
   b) a one-to-two sentence explanation for why you think this topic is hot/controversial (e.g., public health? personal health? experts vs. public opinion? etc.),
   c) what you think would be required to for the topic/controversy to reach a conclusion (e.g., more studies? If so, what kind? More expert opinion? If so, whose?), and
   d) your current opinions/beliefs about each topic.

Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.
Discussion #1 on Canvas.

Weeks 7 through 8

Our second topic is the healthfulness of grains, with the related topics of celiac disease and gluten sensitivity. As students are undoubtedly aware, most healthy diet recommendations include avoiding refined grains (white flour, pastries, white bread, etc.). But there are several popular dietary movements that go further and shun grains altogether, whether wheat, oats, rye, etc. The arguments underlying the grain-free approach vary but primarily focus on the evolution of humans and their diets. We explore this literature and some of the popular diets to assess the evidence about the healthfulness of grains.

Week 7: July 2-July 8

Class Topic(s): Grains, Gluten, and Celiac, Part 1

Learning Objectives:
• Distinguish grains from non-grains (i.e., other seeds), including their refining processes, and list what makes a grain a whole grain
• Describe celiac disease and contrast it with “gluten sensitivity” and related gastrointestinal conditions

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 1 lecture:
• Grains, Gluten, Celiac: Understanding the Basics

Read:

Assignments Due:
Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Week 8: July 9-July 15

Class Topic(s): Grains, Gluten, and Celiac, Part 2 (Conclusion)

Learning Objectives:
• Discuss evidence regarding the healthfulness and potential unhealthfulness of grains
• Assess the validity of some of the arguments for/against including grains in the diet
**Required Lectures/Materials:**

Watch 1 lecture:
- Gluten: Hypotheses vs. Hysteria?

Read:

**Assignments Due:**

**Summarize and Question.** On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

**Discussion #2** on Canvas.

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**Weeks 9 through 10**

We will spend these two weeks learning about the health and related effects of organic versus conventional foods, with a slight tangent into the GMO debate. You may be surprised about what the science has to say about differences so far, and this may be one area where personal beliefs and socioeconomic status play bigger roles in food choices than does science.

**Week 9: July 16–July 22**

**Class Topic(s):** Organic vs. Conventional Foods, Part 1

**Learning Objectives:**
- Define the “organic” label.
- Identify characteristics of “organic” foods and food production.
- Summarize the current state of the evidence of organically vs. conventionally farmed foods with respect to the domain of nutritional quality/content.

**Required Lectures/Materials:**

Watch 3 lectures:
- What Does “Organic” Mean?
- Understanding GMOs and “Frankenfoods”
- Evidence on Organic vs. Conventional Foods: Food Quality

Read:


Assignments Due:
Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Week 10: July 23-July 29

Class Topic(s): Organic vs. Conventional Foods, Part 2

Learning Objectives:
• Summarize the current state of the evidence of organically vs. conventionally farmed foods with respect to the domains of environmental impact and human health.
• Appraise GMO foods and labels and debate the merit of the arguments for/against the use of GMO and respective labeling.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 2 lectures:
• Evidence on Organic vs. Conventional Foods: Environmental Impact
• Evidence on Organic vs. Conventional Foods: Human Health

Read:
Assignments Due:

A4. Identify a Final Project Topic. Provide a list of 4-5 controversial topics near and dear to your heart that you would consider for your final assignment. For each topic, tentatively outline 2-3 legitimate arguments both pro and con.

Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Discussion #3 on Canvas.

Weeks 11 through 12

In these two weeks our attention turns to multivitamins in an attempt to answer the seemingly simple question: should I take one? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the evidence isn’t clear cut, particularly when it comes to potentially elevated risk of certain cancers due to select dietary supplements. On the other hand, in certain populations that are at risk of being undernourished, multivitamins are likely beneficial... But can they optimize health or promote longevity in generally healthy people? That’s a multibillion-dollar question the supplement industry wants to answer in the affirmative.

Week 11: July 30-August 5

Class Topic(s): Dietary Supplements, Part 1

Learning Objectives:

• Describe the supplement market, its major players, and other vested interests.
• Use labels and key online resources to identify quality supplements.
• Identify instances when supplements may be helpful in health and disease.

Required Lectures/Materials:

Watch 2 lectures:
• A Glimpse of What Is at Stake in Supplements
• Understanding the Evidence around the Supplement Debate: Foods vs. Supplements

Read:


Assignments Due:
A5. Supplement Claims. Find a questionable nutrition supplement product either online or in stores. Evaluate the label/online claims for the product and its ingredients using reliable internet sites, including Medline herb/supplement indices, NIH Office of Dietary Supplements, etc.

Summarize and Question. On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

Continue working on your Final Project (Outline is due next week).

Week 12: August 6-August 12

Class Topic(s): Dietary Supplements, Part 2

Learning Objectives:
• Debate for and against taking multivitamin/mineral and/or other dietary supplements.
• Critique nutrition quackery regarding supplements.

Required Lectures/Materials:
Watch 2 lectures:
• Understanding the Evidence around the Supplement Debate: Supplements as Health vs. Disease-Promoters
• Identifying Quality Supplements and Combating Supplement Quackery

Read:
• Raymond, Joan. “Is it OK to take vitamin supplements every day?” TODAY. March 24, 2017. Accessible at https://www.today.com/health/it-ok-take-vitamin-supplements-every-day-t1376

Assignments Due:
A6. Outline of Final Project. Your final project is to debate, in essay format, using valid, reputable, ideally science-based arguments and reasoning, the controversy of your choosing. You must present both sides of the controversy with equal evidence (to the extent possible), and moreover, gravitas. At this point, you are to turn in an outline of the essay, including the major arguments on both (or more) sides of the controversy, and including at least 10 references supporting the various sides of the controversy. Be sure to also consider the various stakeholder relationships to the controversy.
**Summarize and Question.** On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

**Discussion #4 on Canvas about Final Project.**

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**Weeks 13 through 14**

In this closing part of the course, we focus on hydration. This is an area of research that is actively being pursued as it potentially relates to a number of different health outcomes, from weight loss to cognition. This is less about controversy, per se, than about the gaps in our knowledge. That’s not to say that advice about hydration in the popular media isn’t all over the map: it is!

**Week 13: August 13-August 19**

**Class Topic(s):** Hydration, Part 1

**Learning Objectives:**
- Describe the health consequences of hydration status.
- Relay the history of the “8 glasses of 8 ounces of water per day” recommendation and its scientific merit.

**Required Lectures/Materials:**
Watch 2 lectures:
- Hydration Health, in Brief
- Origins of Hydration Recommendations and the State of the Current Evidence

Read:

**Assignments Due:**
**A7. Video Presentation of Final Project and Response.** Generate a 5-8 minute video describing your final project for your classmates. Respond to another classmate’s video with 2-3 questions of your own on their topic.

**Summarize and Question.** On Canvas, provide a 2-3 sentence summary reflecting your understanding of this week’s materials. In addition, provide 2 questions that you have about the materials/subject. Read through classmates’ questions and reflections.

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**Week 14: August 20-August 26**

**Class Topic(s):** Hydration, Part 2

**Learning Objectives:**
- Outline the current consensus on hydration as well as the gaps in our knowledge.
- Explain the confusion in popular media, and why hydration myths persist.

**Required Lectures/Materials:**
Watch 1 lecture:
- Why Do Hydration Myths Persist?

Read:

**Assignments Due:**

**A8. Final Project due.**

Discussion #5 on Canvas about Final Project.

Please complete the Course Evaluation.