

Meghan Hadley
College Scholar, Class of 2018

“Health in the U.S. at the Intersection of Politics, Economics, and Culture”

Biographical Sketch



Born in 1996 to a pair of Cornellian parents, Meghan Hadley has been Big Red from the very beginning.

She was born in Washington, D.C., and she's lived up and down the East coast, but she currently calls Philadelphia home. She has two siblings and two pet corn snakes and thirty-seven pet fish.

Meghan is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences, and through the College Scholar program, she's designed an interdisciplinary major that has allowed her to study health in the U.S. at the intersection of politics, economics, and culture. The course of study she's created draws mainly from the departments of Government, Economics, and American Studies — Government to learn how to create and implement effective public policy, Economics to learn how to facilitate and promote healthier food choices through incentives, and American Studies to explore the ways in which our food system has developed over the years, adapting itself to a changing American culture.

One of her favorite experiences at Cornell so far was the semester she spent in D.C. through the Cornell in Washington program, where she interned for a nonprofit called D.C. Greens, which works to improve food access, food education, and food policy in the city.

At Cornell, she's both a peer advisor and an Ambassador for the College of Arts and Sciences, and she's a member of the executive board for Alpha Phi Omega, Cornell's co-ed community service fraternity. Through APO, she volunteers regularly at the Tompkins County Public Library and at various local elementary schools.

Statement of Purpose

I am applying for a research grant from the Tanner Dean's Scholar program so that I can stay in Ithaca this summer to conduct independent, exploratory research in preparation for writing my College Scholar honors thesis.

The origins of my College Scholar thesis can be traced back to when I was twelve years old and became fascinated with any and all issues related to *food*. As I described in my application essay to the College of Arts and Sciences in January 2014,

“Ironically, my interest in food began out of disgust for food – more specifically, disgust for the meat-processing industry, sparked by a twenty-minute documentary that I watched at the age of twelve. For twenty minutes I sat transfixed, as much in abhorrence as in awe. My curiosity had been piqued. So I read *Eating Animals* and *Fast Food Nation* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. And when we watched *Food, Inc.* in my ninth grade health class, I didn't cringe or avert my eyes like others did; I took notes. My interest rapidly blossomed to encompass not just the meat-processing industry but also the entire industry of food: the production, the processing, the packaging, the advertising, the marketing, the purchase, and the consumption of food. I became convinced that I was living in a society in the midst of a rapid decline: a society struggling in the face of a growing obesity epidemic, a society bogged down by the proliferation of fast food, by the over-commercialization of food in general. Since then, my intellectual hobby has become an intellectual passion, a passion that I would love to explore in the College of Arts and Sciences.”

I came to Cornell with a dedication to “inspire change in the realm of public health and nutrition,” wanting to “aid in the creation of a healthier country and a healthier world.” I understood, however, that it would be difficult to achieve such goals without the opportunity to fully devote my academic efforts to this cause. I wanted to use my undergraduate career to figure out, broadly, how to improve our food system, so when I arrived on campus, the most pressing question that I had was *how*. I applied to the College Scholar Program at the beginning of my sophomore year with that exact question in mind.

In my application to the program, I explained both the importance of the issue I was interested in studying and my goal in studying it:

The U.S. spends more money per capita on healthcare than any other country in the world.¹ The U.S. also has a higher rate of obesity than any other country in the world. It should not come as a surprise, then, that \$190.2 billion — nearly *twenty-one percent* — of our annual medical spending is directed towards caring for obesity-related illnesses.² It's possible, though, that if we were to invest more time and money into methods of proactive healthcare, focusing more on the *prevention* of obesity than on its treatment, we could not only cut medical costs but could also improve the health of this country as

a whole. What we choose to eat has a tremendous impact on our overall health and well-being, so if we could somehow influence the food choices people make, we could improve the overall health and well-being of our society. Obviously, of course, this is not such a simple task — for one, affordability and accessibility play a huge role in determining what choices people can or cannot make in the first place — but it is exactly for this reason that I would like to ask the following question:

“How can we create public policies that will change the current food system and consumer culture in such a way as to facilitate and promote healthier food choices, thereby improving overall public health?”

I explained that my intended course of study, designed to answer this question, would draw mainly from the Departments of Government, Economics, and American Studies, allowing me to study “health in the U.S. at the intersection of politics, economics, and culture.”

Since being accepted to the program, nearly every class I’ve taken was, indeed, selected for its potential to help me answer some aspect of that question. I’ve taken a wide variety of classes, including both broad introductory courses — in psychology, public policy, microeconomics, and sociology — and more unique, specialized classes, like “The History of Consumption,” “The Ethics of Eating,” “Consumer Behavior,” and “Race and Social Entrepreneurship: Food Justice and Urban Reform.”

In the process, I’ve come up with a variety of unique answers to my guiding question, but I have yet to formulate a unified argument. As such, I think my first step toward structuring a cohesive honors thesis is to think critically about what I’ve learned so far — to think broadly about how each of the subjects I’ve studied applies to the study of food and health and to identify the ways in which they all connect to one another. From there, I need to take stock of where the holes in my analysis are and what questions are still left unanswered.

After all, in order to figure out how to create public policies that will “change the current food system and consumer culture in such a way as to facilitate and promote healthier food choices,” there are a number of supplemental questions that need to be addressed, including, but most certainly not limited to:

1. How is our current food system structured? (What works well? What doesn’t? How can/should it be changed?)
2. How exactly should “consumer culture” be defined? (How has it been defined by those who study it? How has its definition changed over time?)
3. What *is* our current “consumer culture”? (What do people think about food? How do people talk about food? How is food portrayed in popular culture?)
4. Where does our “consumer culture” come from? (What forces in our current society have the strongest influence on consumer culture? How has this culture changed over time?)

5. How is consumer culture different in other countries? (In what ways are other countries succeeding where we are not? In what ways are *we* succeeding where others are not?)
6. What constitutes a “healthy food choice”? (According to whom? To what extent are people informed accurately about what is/isn’t healthy? From where do people get their information about health?)
7. How does public policy influence choice? (What are some relevant policies that are in place right now and what do they do? What are some of the procedures by which they could be changed?)

And, most importantly:

8. How *do* people make choices about food?

I’d like to be able to stay in Ithaca this summer so that I can draw from the resources of the Cornell library system to conduct independent, exploratory research that will seek to answer as many of these questions as possible. As such, most of the research grant will be used to cover my living expenses for the time spent on campus.

Over the course of this current semester, I’ll be working with my faculty advisor to assemble a thesis committee of appropriate Cornell faculty members. It is my hope that one or more of these people might be available over the summer for me to check in with from time to time, updating them on the evolution of my thinking and the status of my project.

I’ve been curating a list of books I’d like to read that I believe will help to guide my thinking, and I’ve identified several areas of current research that I’d like to pursue thoroughly, to get a clearer sense of what’s been done already and where my own research would fit in. (I believe, for example, that a deeper exploration of the field of behavioral economics would be beneficial to the development of my project, and I would like to spend some time exploring the research that’s shaped this field, including the pioneering work done by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman back in the 1960s and 70s.³⁴) By further analyzing what I’ve already learned and filling in the gaps with extensive further reading and research, I hope to lay the groundwork for an honors thesis that will be built upon an argument that is complex but unified.

Bibliography

¹ World Health Organization, World Health Statistics 2013.

² Cawley, J. (2012). "The medical care costs of obesity: an instrumental variables approach."

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³ Tversky, A. and D. Kahneman. (1974). "Judgement under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases."

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⁴ Tversky, A. and D. Kahneman. (1973). "Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and

probability." *Cognitive Psychology*, 5 (2): 207-232.