

By Christopher D. Cook  
*Illustration by Wesley Allsbrook*

# Nutrition, Inc.



WHEN THOUSANDS OF THE nation's nutritionists gathered in Philadelphia for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' 2012 annual conference, they plunked down \$300 apiece to hear the latest thinking on food and health. Many were surprised to find that this thinking included a hefty portion of nutritional advice from food corporations that were major sponsors of the event.

The conference featured panel sessions led by industry groups such as the National Dairy Council, and some twenty-three speakers with documented industry ties, while the conference center sported tent-sized informational booths featuring an array of America's top food and beverage corporations, which had ponied up thousands of dollars for the chance to share their opinions on nutrition. As longtime dietician Debra Riedesel explains, the Academy's confer-

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ences feature “involvement in educational sessions by the very corporations responsible for creating the worst foods and beverages available on the planet. . . . These multinational corporations were actually teaching the sessions to those of us responsible for educating the public.”

The Chicago-based Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics describes itself as “the world’s largest organization of food and nutrition professionals,” devoted to educating the public and safeguarding the dietetics profession. But a list of its top funders and sponsors reads like a who’s who of the American food and beverage industries—the same corporations that many experts blame for causing chronic, often life-shortening diseases among millions of Americans each year.

The group’s growing roster of corporate backers includes the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, processed food giants ConAgra and General Mills, and Kellogg. Other major funders are Kraft Foods, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, and PepsiCo. A recent in-depth report from the group Eat Drink Politics, called “Now a Word from Our Sponsors,” found that between 2001 and 2011, the Academy’s food industry sponsors shot up from ten to thirty-eight.

**I**ndustry involvement in the Academy is far-reaching—from sponsorship of the institution and its conferences, to co-branding of educational materials and products, to designing curriculum used to certify registered dietitians.

The public health stakes of this influence are high: heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other diet-related ailments “are among the most common, costly, and preventable of all health problems,” according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—killing millions each year and saddling the nation’s health care system with costs in excess of \$100 billion annually.

As the chief institution producing

diet-related advice for Americans, the Academy plays a major role in shaping nutritional opinion and practice. The Academy’s messages “are all science-based,” says media relations manager Ryan O’Malley.

In a detailed response to the Eat Drink Politics report, the Academy stated, “Sponsors do not influence the Academy’s decision-making process nor do they affect policy positions. All materials are reviewed by registered dietitians within the Academy as well as outside member

## The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics lets Kellogg and Pepsi give advice on how kids can eat right.

experts in areas of specialization, as needed.”

But a closer look at the group’s conferences and educational materials shows extensive corporate involvement, often in ways that benefit the products they sell.

The Academy’s charitable foundation sells “nutrition symposia” sponsorships at its annual meeting for \$50,000 apiece, according to the Eat Drink Politics report. In 2012, Nestlé, a top marketer of bottled water, presented a session on “Optimal Hydration.” And at the annual

meeting of the Academy, the Corn Refiners Association (lobbyists for high fructose corn syrup) sponsored three informational sessions.

The Academy’s “Kids Eat Right” program features kids’ meal menus and advice from corporations such as Kellogg and PepsiCo, both makers of products widely criticized for being too sugar laden.

“Through this sponsorship, the companies are attempting to counter any potential criticism by positioning their products as being healthy for children,” the report says.

The Academy also allows major food corporations such as Coca-Cola, ConAgra, Kraft, Nestlé, and PepsiCo to teach accredited continuing education courses to dietitians as part of their professional development and credentialing process, the report says.

“The food industry’s deep infiltration of the nation’s top nutrition organization raises serious questions not only about that profession’s credibility, but also about its policy positions,” the report argues. “The nation is currently embroiled in a series of policy debates about how to fix our broken food system. A 74,000-member health organization has great potential to shape that national discourse—for better and for worse.”

When the report gained coverage in *The New York Times*, Academy president Ethan A. Bergman responded, “For the record, I support the Academy’s [corporate] sponsorship program, as does the Board of Directors and our members. . . . Let me make it clear that the Academy does not tailor our messages or programs in any way due to influence by corporate sponsors, and this report does not provide evidence to the contrary.”

However, independent surveys of dietitians show that support for the Academy’s corporate sponsorships is mixed, at best. In one survey, a majority of respondents agreed that corporate sponsorship has a “negative impact on the public’s perception” of the Academy, their profession, and

their “personal credibility.” Another found that while only 13 percent of dietitians opposed corporate sponsorship categorically, 68 percent said their view would depend on who the sponsors are—and a majority found three current sponsors, Coca-Cola, Mars, and PepsiCo, to be unacceptable.

**T**he Academy’s top funders, called partners and sponsors, not only gain significant access for their dollars. They also get to brand themselves as leaders in health and nutrition.

Coca-Cola’s “Heart Truth Campaign,” for instance, involves fashion shows of women wearing red dresses with Diet Coke logos displayed prominently in the backdrop—a high-visibility marketing event promoted by both the Academy and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Another instance of partner co-branding is the National Dairy Council’s “3-Every-Day of Dairy Campaign,” which the report calls “a marketing vehicle for the dairy industry disguised as a nutrition program.” The partnership consists of several fact sheets that bear the Academy logo, demonstrating the value of the group’s seal of approval.

The Academy insists this co-branding doesn’t compromise its integrity: “All materials that contain the Academy logo are reviewed by the Academy to ensure messages are consistent with Academy positions, statements, and philosophies.”

Other privileges of major funders include marketing and P.R. opportunities like Academy conference field trips to company headquarters. At a pre-conference “workshop” last year, dietitians were invited to “take a trip to Hershey, Pennsylvania, to experience the science of chocolate at the Hershey Company’s Chocolate Lab . . . [and] visit the Hershey Story Museum,” according to a brochure on the Academy website. The visit was billed, “From Nature to Nutri-

tion: A Hands-on Exploration of Natural Cocoa from the Bean to Health Benefits,” and was listed in the program as “Planned with Academy Partner: Hershey Center for Health & Nutrition.” The Academy offered dietitians continuing education units for this full-day field trip to the corporate chocolate factory.

The Academy says the event was “planned in collaboration with Hershey but was funded by the Academy and its Center for Professional Development.” Educational credit, it says, “was given only for portions of the program that met the Academy’s established educational criteria.”

Educating dietitians and nutritionists is one of the Academy’s foremost endeavors: In fact, to become a registered dietitian one must take Academy-affiliated credentialing classes, some of which are provided by food and beverage corporations.

One of the Academy’s many offshoots, the Commission on Dietetic Registration, provides dietitians with Continuing Professional Education credits from a roster of “accredited providers.” These accredited educators include some of the nation’s largest food and beverage corporations, such as Coca-Cola, ConAgra, General Mills, Kraft, Nestlé, and PepsiCo.

Coca-Cola’s Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness, for instance, offers an accredited continuing education course called “Addressing Questions about Aspartame and Stevia Sweeteners.” Among the course learning objectives: “Communicate science-based information about the potential roles of low- and no-calorie sweeteners in a healthful diet.”

Another Coca-Cola continuing education class, “Promoting Healthy Bones: Sorting Out the Science,” obscures the negative role of caffeinated and carbonated beverages in bone health. In one piece of required reading, Coca-Cola interviews an osteoporosis expert about whether caffeine prevents proper calcium absorption and thus diminishes bone health. The

doctor responds, “A moderate amount of caffeine isn’t harmful to bone health as long as people also consume enough calcium.”

Later in the interview, Coca-Cola asks the doctor, “Some people believe that sparkling soft drinks, particularly colas, adversely affect bone health. Is this true?” Her answer: “No.”

The industry’s growing influence on the Academy has sparked a rebellion among many dietitians, both current and former members of the group. They say the Academy’s acceptance of corporations’ dollars and nutritional advice is hurting the dietetics profession—and has real-world impacts as well. Registered dietitian Carla Caccia echoes what many of her colleagues are asking: “How can consumers trust us when our professional organization partners with junk food companies?”

In one high-profile battle detailed in the report, the Academy gave a cold shoulder to New York City’s initiative to limit soda sizes to combat obesity and related health problems. In May 2012, the Academy issued a press release titled “In Wake of New York Soda Ban Proposal, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Encourages Education, Moderation.” Instead of supporting actions to combat the health effects of soda consumption, the nation’s largest nutrition and dietetics institution called for ongoing study, saying it had “convened a working group to examine the effectiveness of measures like proposed bans and taxes that are designed to influence consumers’ purchases and their potential impact on people’s health.”

But piles of scientific research may not be enough to convince the group. As the release went on to say, “Even after we have more science-based information about measures like New York’s, it is vital that we as registered dietitians educate consumers about the components of a healthful eating plan and help people make informed decisions that will positively affect their health.”

# CLOSE GUANTÁNAMO NOW



Mansoor Muhammed  
Ali Qattaa  
Cleared for release 2007

Muieen A Deen Abd al  
Fusal Abd al Sattar  
Held without charge since 2002

Musa'ab al Madhwani  
Tortured in CIA black site

Shaker Aamer  
Cleared for release 2007

Adnan Farhan Latif  
Died waiting  
for justice 2012

Adel Bin Ahmed Bin  
Ibrahim Hkiml  
Cleared for release 2007

Sanad al Kazimi  
Tortured in CIA prisons

Abdul Khaliq Al  
Baidhani  
Cleared for release 2006

**166 men remain imprisoned** at Guantanamo. Most are on hunger strike and for many it is more than 100 days that they have been refusing food. Some are near death, many imprisoned for more than ten years. They have lost hope of ever being released, although a majority were cleared to leave years ago. As Adnan Latif, a detainee, wrote during an earlier hunger strike, "Where is the world to save us from torture? Where is the world to save the hunger strikers?" Mr. Latif was cleared for release as well, but he died in September 2012, still waiting for justice.

**President Obama had said nothing** about Guantanamo for years. Facing a growing outcry, he blames Congress for blocking closure. Even under Congress' existing criteria, however, Obama could have released most of the detainees years ago.

**He closed the office** responsible for processing prisoners' releases; made it harder for lawyers to meet with their clients by recently banning commercial flights to the prison and barring emergency calls by attorneys to the detainees; ordered forced feeding through excruciating means and by strapping prisoners down (a violation of medical ethics and torture in itself); and authorized an April 13, 2013 assault in which guards fired rubber bullets on hunger strikers. Obama does not need Congressional approval: as Commander-in-Chief, he has the power to shut the prison down now.

**The continuing torture** at Guantanamo is part of larger and alarming developments. When he ran for office, Obama promised to restore the rule of law. Instead he has claimed and exercised unchecked executive powers beyond what George Bush used. He refuses to prosecute officials for their use of torture, yet aggressively prosecutes any whistle-blowers who expose war crimes, most flagrantly in the torture, slander and draconian legal charges against Bradley Manning. By signing the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, Obama made indefinite detention, based on merely an accusation, the law of the land. These actions amount to institutionalizing and, in important respects, escalating the "Bush Doctrine."

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**In the name of "security,"** our government has tortured at least one hundred people to death. In the name of the "war on terror," thousands have been detained without a chance to face their accusers or even know what charges they are held under. In opposition to international law, Obama has implemented a policy of killing with drones across sovereign borders, deciding who will die by Hellfire missiles - without charges, trials, or any evidence other than what only Obama and his close advisers deem sufficient.

**At least 176 children** have been killed by drones in Pakistan alone and between 3-4,000 non-combatants have died in drone attacks. John Bellinger, who drafted Bush's justifications for targeted killings, concludes that the Obama administration has decided to kill people with drones so that they don't have to imprison them.

**"PRESIDENTS  
CANNOT BE ALLOWED  
TO ARROGATE TO  
THEMSELVES THE  
POWER OF JUDGE, JURY  
AND EXECUTIONER."**

**Fundamental civil liberties** have been eviscerated. In the name of safety, fear, or revenge, American presidents cannot be allowed to arrogate to themselves the power of judge, jury and executioner. Actions that utilize de facto torture, that run roughshod over the rule of law and due process, and that rain down terror and murder on peoples and nations, amount to war crimes. Such actions cannot in any way be morally justified in the name of "protecting Americans." The lives of people living here are not more precious than any other people's lives.

**It is up to the people to stand up** for principle and morality when their institutions and public officials refuse to do so. The fates of those who are maimed or killed by our government's policies are inextricably intertwined with our own: we must listen and respond to their cry for justice. We demand the release of the cleared Guantanamo prisoners now, and an end to indefinite detention without charge for the others, before they lose their lives. **End the War Crimes and Violations of Fundamental Rights!**

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The Eat Drink Politics report added momentum to resistance among dietitians and nutritionists to industry influence over their profession's most prominent institution. One nascent group, Dietitians for Professional Integrity, launched a Facebook page this February that now boasts more than 3,900 "likes" and features daily stories and statements from dietitians who are criticizing—and sometimes parting ways with—the Academy.

The dissident group, the brainchild of Las Vegas dietitian Andy Bellatti, says it represents current and future dietitians "who do not support the current model of corporate sponsorships held by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. We believe these sponsorships pose a serious conflict of interest for a nutrition organization, and harm our credential and reputation."

Academy spokesman O'Malley isn't worried about industry influence. Members, he says, "are educat-

ed, experienced, and dedicated health professionals who base their advice and services on peer-reviewed science—and nothing else. As the nation's food and nutrition experts, they can distinguish facts from spin, and they follow the facts."

But Eat Drink Politics president Michele Simon says that since the report, "I've heard from many registered dietitians who are disgusted and are either not joining or refusing to renew their memberships in protest. In time, the Academy's leadership will have no other choice but to pay attention to its own constituents' complaints and remove these conflicting sponsorships, or else risk going out of business altogether."

Denise Julia Garbinski, a California-based dietitian, says the Academy's "ongoing demonstration of being in bed with agribusiness big food . . . just disgusts me to the point where I am choosing to vote with my dollars against supporting" it. "I don't attend their functions and am seri-

ously considering withdrawing my membership next year."

Nancy Bennett, a veteran dietitian with more than thirty-six years' experience, says she's also unlikely to renew her membership: "They need to hear the wake-up call from their membership before they are crushed by the stampede of registered dietitians leaving their organization." Bennett says all the corporate influence is destroying the credibility of her profession.

The Academy claims that its engagement with the food and beverage industries is constructive, but a growing number of dietitians aren't buying it. "For all the talk about the Academy sitting at the table with the food industry, I have yet to see one example of the Academy having a positive influence on the industry and public health," says Bellatti. "When you sit at the table with the food industry, they set the table and the menu and leave you with the check." ♦

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