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Optimizing the Process for Establishing the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* The Selection Process

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA)* is a report that provides nutritional and dietary information with the intention of promoting health and preventing disease. Updated every 5 years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the *DGA* serves as the basis for all federal nutrition policies and nutrition assistance programs, as well as nutrition education programs. The complicated process of updating the report begins with an assessment of relevant scientific data by a federal advisory committee of nationally recognized experts, called the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC).

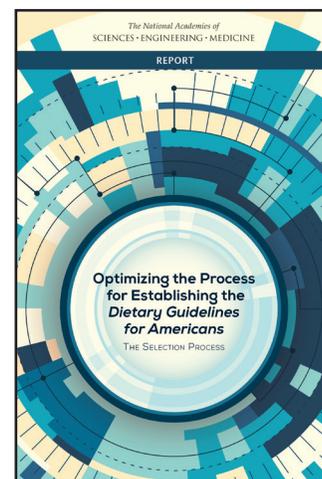
When the 2015-2020 edition of the *DGA* was released, some of the content received criticism from different stakeholders leading to questions about the advisory committee's composition and membership selection processes. Further questions were raised about the breadth of the advisory committee's scope, the processes it used to evaluate the evidence, and the completeness of its work.

In response to such concerns, Congress mandated that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine produce two reports evaluating the entire process used to develop the *DGA*. In this first report, *Optimizing the Process for Establishing the Dietary Guidelines for Americans: The Selection Process*, the ad hoc National Academies committee examines how the DGAC selection process can be improved to provide more transparency, eliminate bias, and include committee members with a range of viewpoints.

MODELS FOR COMPOSING AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In its exploratory search of other advisory committees' selection processes, the National Academies committee found few objective measures to assess the effectiveness of a selection process. It found a lack of standardization for how experts are nominated, screened, vetted, and appointed to a committee, and no set of best practices to promote transparency and engage a broad set of viewpoints and expertise could be identified.

One important difference identified among advisory committees is the approaches used to address biases and conflicts of interest. The National Academies committee concluded that inclusion of both financial and nonfinancial conflicts of interest is important for the



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purposes of selecting DGAC members. Nonfinancial conflicts of interest may include organizational affiliations; advisory roles; intellectual, academic, or professional advancement or commitments; and research or publications. Defined this broadly, entirely eliminating conflicts of interest on a panel of experts may not always be possible.

The ultimate goal of limiting and managing conflicts of interest is to develop a trustworthy process and create reliable guidelines, independent from undue influences. The National Academies committee concluded that in addition to avoiding significant conflicts of interest, it is necessary to identify, disclose, and manage the influences in question in cases where the required expertise cannot be found without some conflicts of interest.

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD TRUST

The National Academies review aims to develop a trustworthy process for updating the *DGA*. The committee identified a set of values to enhance the integrity of the DGAC selection process:

1. Enhance transparency;
2. Promote diversity of expertise and experience;
3. Support a deliberative process;
4. Manage biases and conflicts of interest; and
5. Adopt state-of-the-art processes and methods.

In comparing these values to the current DGAC selection process, the National Academies committee found that over all, the selection process is thoughtful and works within the bounds of the relevant laws to serve USDA and HHS, as well as the American public. However, the lack of transparency in the process could lead to perceptions that the membership is inequitable. Specifically, the step currently used to “conduct a review of nominations and propose a slate of candidates” was found to be largely subjective and could be improved. The National Academies committee’s recommendations are primarily offered in response to this step (see figure at left).



FIGURE

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine committee's proposed process for selecting the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee.

NOTE: Steps highlighted in red are new, proposed steps.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCED TRANSPARENCY

To improve transparency of the process, the initial screening of nominees should be separated from the appointment authority. Removing USDA and HHS from involvement in narrowing the field of candidates would reduce political bias—both the perception and reality. Thus, the committee recommends an external third party review and narrow the candidate pool to a list of primary and secondary nominees.

The composition of the advisory committee should be dictated to a great degree by the content areas under review, while also representing a wide variety of perspectives. In the current process, the DGAC develops priority topics for review rather than for an a priori process to identify which updates and reviews are most critically needed, thus influencing the expertise needed on the DGAC. The National Academies committee discussed the potential value of focusing on specific areas that need revision or updating in the *DGA*. This issue will be addressed upon a full examination of the DGAC's charge and the overall process.

A reasonable amount of time for feedback is critical to a transparent selection process. The public should have an additional opportunity to comment after the initial solicitation of nominations. To increase transparency during the selection process, the National Academies committee recommends that USDA and HHS make a list of provisional appointees open for public comment—including short biographies and any known conflicts—for a reasonable period of time prior to appointment.

The National Academies committee also makes recommendations to USDA and HHS to improve identification and management of biases and conflicts of interest. These steps include:

- creating and publicly posting a policy and form to explicitly disclose financial and nonfinancial biases and conflicts;
- developing a management plan for addressing biases and conflicts for the panel as a whole and individuals, as needed;
- certifying that a federal ethics officer independently reviewed and judged the advisory committee's biases and conflicts of interest; and
- documenting how conflicts of interest were managed in the DGAC report.

USDA and HHS will need to dynamically improve the DGAC selection process to drive toward positive change and contribute to enhanced trustworthiness of the *DGA*. Development of a system for quality improvement and changes to the advisory committee selection process will take time and commitment, but it will allow future selection processes to be grounded in evidence. The National Academies committee recommends that USDA and HHS adopt a system for continuous process improvement to enhance outcomes and performance of the DGAC selection process.

The National Academies committee's recommendations aim to help inform the 2020-2025 *DGA* cycle, which begins in early 2017. As part of an overall, comprehensive review of the process to update the *DGA*, additional findings and recommendations about the selection process may be made as part of this committee's next report.

To download and read a full copy of this report, please visit nationalacademies.org/DGAreview.

**Committee to Review the Process to Update the
Dietary Guidelines for Americans**

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