

FOOD AND FAMILY PROGRAM: EXPANDING TO ADDRESS GRAND CHALLENGES THROUGH INNOVATION AND DISCOVERY

Some of the greatest challenges facing families today involve food. Scarcity of food presents serious conditions for far too many families including those with young children. Poor diets increase the risk for chronic health conditions such as obesity-linked diabetes and heart disease.

Expanding the scope and reach of the Food and Family Program here at the University of Illinois will provide data to help prevent childhood obesity and improve child/family health as it is connected to food consumption and food scarcity nationwide and perhaps globally.

The Food and Family Program is designed to support innovative transdisciplinary research that can unravel the complex connections between the family environment and healthy active lifestyles for all. Taking a transdisciplinary approach is crucial because understanding the intersection of food, family, and health demands the collaborative efforts of scholars from diverse disciplines.

OPPORTUNITY:

Now is the time to expand the Food and Family Program to:

- include a broader array of investigators,
- address emerging issues connecting food and family life (e.g., advances in the biology of relationships and nutritional habits),
- extend our reach globally, and
- refine program evaluation methods in the nonprofit sector.



The University of Illinois is uniquely situated to bring together researchers from multiple fields from across the campus—those with expertise in family science, food security, nutrition, social welfare, and health. No other institution is poised to address these issues in such a comprehensive way. Indeed, with current support from the Food and Family Program seed grants, teams of talented researchers are addressing societal problems in innovative ways unsurpassed by any other institution. For example:

- Our investigators are improving family life through comprehensive research that identifies how weekend feeding programs administered through schools are important sources of food for the entire family.
- Another team working in Jamaica is empowering parents and teens to become more educated in and take charge of the Americanized media landscape to improve their overall lifestyle and well-being. The team is providing these parents and teens with a toolbox to resist commercialization of their diet by making healthier food choices.
- The Food and Family Program is also armed with a groundbreaking research team working to identify how the bacteria in the gut formed since birth may affect dietary habits and weight gain during the preschool years.



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With a time-limited gift, the Christopher Family Foundation launched the Food and Family Program at the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois in 2010. Through its seed grant program, there has been an approximate 1000% return on investment. Not only have faculty created new collaborations, supported graduate students, engaged undergraduate students in community-based and lab-based research, but they have gone on to expand their research programs with additional support from the National Institutes of Health and the USDA. The impact and the reach of the program is summarized in a video prepared for the first Food and Family conference, at go.illinois.edu/foodfamily.

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

To maintain the excellence and quality of the Food and Family Program and reach the desired level of expansion outlined above, additional annual support is required.

Funding will support a diverse and growing faculty seed grant program, including graduate student support, and provide funds for dissemination and communication about the program to a broad audience. As well, every three years a conference will be held to highlight the work of grantees and national experts; it will serve as a platform for a network of experienced scholars and rising star students to address emerging, complex issues in family life as it relates to food. Together, we will raise national and international visibility of the program, the department, and the University of Illinois.

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