

Grains for Health Foundation—Creating Positive Change for Public Health

Recently, Managing Editor Amanda Aranowski asked Len Marquart, an associate professor in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota, about his current work as president of the Grains for Health Foundation (GHF). Marquart, who holds a Ph.D. degree in human nutrition and exercise physiology from the University of North Carolina and is also a registered dietitian, has worked as a nutrition technical specialist and as a senior scientist at General Mills, Inc. He has authored dozens of articles on issues related to whole grains, edited two books, *Whole Grains and Health* and *Whole-Grain Foods in Health and Disease*, and taught courses on the nutritional quality of foods and foodservice operations management.

For Marquart, the GHF is essential to educating the public and industry about the importance of incorporating whole grains into a healthy diet. For him, the key question is “How can we focus, prioritize, and leverage research dollars to benefit the grains industry and, more importantly, have a positive impact on public health?” There may not be an answer to that question yet, but it is evident that the GHF is answering the call through creating a community of members—from industry, government, and academia—interested in and focused on improving public health.

Q. For those readers unfamiliar with your foundation, when was the GHF established and what is its mission?

A. The mission of the GHF, established in February 2009, is to assist in redesigning the food supply by facilitating the development, delivery, and consumption of grain-based foods that promote a balanced body weight, reduce chronic disease, and curb healthcare costs. Our initial objective is to promote the gradual introduction of grain-based foods into schools that have a higher whole grain and dietary fiber content and are lower in total calories and fat.

Our strategic platforms include:

Applied Science—Focus, prioritize, and leverage research dollars to address weak links in the grain supply chain that will as-



sure the development and distribution of healthier grain-based foods and their consumption by consumers.

Child Nutrition—Gradually incorporate grain-based foods into school meals that are higher in whole grain (fiber) and lower in excess calories, fat, and sodium.

Sustainable Training—Train young scientists and business and health professionals to collaborate on sustainable grain-based, multidisciplinary research projects that promote public health.

Q. Why was the GHF established?

A. A group of us, including Gary Fulcher, University of Manitoba, Jon Faubion, Kansas State University, and Rui Hai Liu, Cornell University, decided some structure or framework must be placed around grains and health research. There is much research being conducted, but how can we focus, prioritize, and leverage research dollars to benefit the grains industry and, more importantly, have a positive impact on public health. Thus, we decided a nonprofit group may serve as a conduit to help provide direction and coordinate grains and health research among the various sectors and disciplines. The driving force behind this initiative is to develop a research community that works together to improve public health.

Q. How is the GHF funded?

A. The GHF is funded through industry contributions, including Buhler, Cargill, Certified Foods, ConAgra, Frito Lay, Kellogg, and Malt-o-Meal. Other contributions include the Manitoba Agri-Health Research Network. This funding has allowed us to accelerate the develop-

ment of our organizational structure and key initiatives.

Q. How do you see government, industry, and academia coming together to achieve increased availability and consumption of whole grain foods? Does one have a greater role than the others?

A. We are helping to “nurture” the various sectors, disciplines, and cultures to focus on public health issues by investigating and leveraging food systems. This integration of a variety of disciplines allows for a comprehensive view of critical research issues facing the grains industry. We are also encouraging cross-disciplined thinking and going to build a global community that has the wisdom to create positive change for public health. In theory it is simply “Getting the right people, in the right place, at the right time, around the right issue.”

Q. What do food scientists/manufacturers need to know about the process of creating more healthful whole grain products?

A. The key to developing more healthful grain products will require a whole new way of thinking and doing, particularly related to the delicate balance between taste, cost, and health. Part of this will be attributed to novel processing techniques to enhance functional and health-related properties of grains. Another component requires that we all work together to leverage limited resources, particularly in the basic sciences. This philosophy floats all boats and augments the credibility of the grain industry as we work to improve public health.

Q. Where does your foundation fit in the whole grain food chain? (Development, consumption, manufacturing, production, processing, breeding, education, etc.)

A. The GHF will specialize in linking the various disciplines within the supply chain to assist in resolving complex public health issues. We will work within all segments of the supply chain to leverage grain and health-related issues.

Q. Do you see the cereal foods industry as “on target” with the use and addition of whole grains to their products?

A. We must understand that the transition from refined to whole grain will not happen over night. Today, only about 4% of all flour production is whole grain and only about 12% of all grain products available on the market are whole grain. I would hope we will continue to see a gradual introduction of whole grain foods into the marketplace. A gradual shift will provide a comfortable transition for consumers to adapt to the taste and texture of whole grain foods. We hope the GHF will have a positive impact, particularly as we work toward implementing our gradual approach in the schools.

Q. How might AACC Intl. and the GHF collaborate in the future?

A. We are currently collaborating with AACC Intl. to pilot-test “Wi Sci”—an expert database and issues identification process. We are working on face-to-face and virtual issue processing tools in order to enhance our ability to determine how to address critical grains and health issues. The GHF Critical Gaps Group, led by Lee Anne Murphy, Manitoba Agri-Health Research Network, is currently identifying the top five issues that face the grain industry as it relates to health. These issues will serve as the basis for the GHF’s long-term strategic plan.

Q. How does the work you do for the foundation fit in with your current research at the University of Minnesota?

A. I am currently on a sabbatical from the University of Minnesota. However, I am working very closely with the University of Minnesota’s College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences to develop and teach an undergraduate interdisciplinary course involving experiential learning through sponsored internships in each of the major sectors. It will be es-

sential for tomorrow’s scientists to have an appreciation for a wide variety of disciplines in solving complex issues, such as developing a healthier food supply.

Q. For readers interested in learning more about the GHF, how can they reach you?

A. Currently, the foundation is in the process of creating a website, which will be available soon at www.grainsforhealth.org.



Amanda Aranowski, managing editor of *CEREAL FOODS WORLD* and membership communications manager for AACC International, welcomes input and guest contributors for an upcoming issue. If you are an “expert” in your field, send an e-mail to aaaranowski@scisoc.org.



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