

# Woodlands Wisdom: Traditional Knowledge Guiding Contemporary Health

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The long-term goal of the Woodlands Wisdom Nutrition Project is to create a regional community consciousness within and between Native American communities around how food and nutrition impact community health and well-being. The figure shown below was created by the Woodlands Wisdom Academic Committee to illustrate our approach to educating students of food and nutrition science. We believe this approach has implications for how these subject areas are taught, how research is conducted, and how communities of Native people across the country are empowered to make positive changes in their lives.



Craig Hassel (center).

Broadly speaking, nutrition can be seen as the interaction between food and living organisms. Since everyone has a lifetime of experience eating food, the perspective of **personal experience** is an important asset to any student of nutrition. Common sense tells us that our relationship with food, based upon our own unique identity, background, and experience is vital in shaping our preferences and how we use food. By looking through the lens of self-reflection at our own behavior, we can become more aware of how we make our food choices as an individual. We may also look to the collective experience of communities to see how communities decide what foods are available, those that have cultural significance, and those used frequently.

The **ancient science** perspective of Woodlands People offers the fragments remaining of an elegant and sophisticated ancestral system of understanding the relationships of land, plant and animal food sources, and health of people (Ojibwe Curriculum Committee 1973; Ojibwe Histories 1998; Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Cajete 2000). This perspective emphasizes the interrelatedness of all things, the seasonal and spiritual nature of foods, and food as nurturance for people, communities and the environment.

The **biomedical** perspective offers a modern scientific and medical understanding where the nutrition interaction is seen in chemical and physiologic terms.

The Woodlands Wisdom food and nutrition curriculum is designed to involve faculty and students in a mutual exploration of each of these perspectives: ancient science, biomedical experiment, and personal experience.

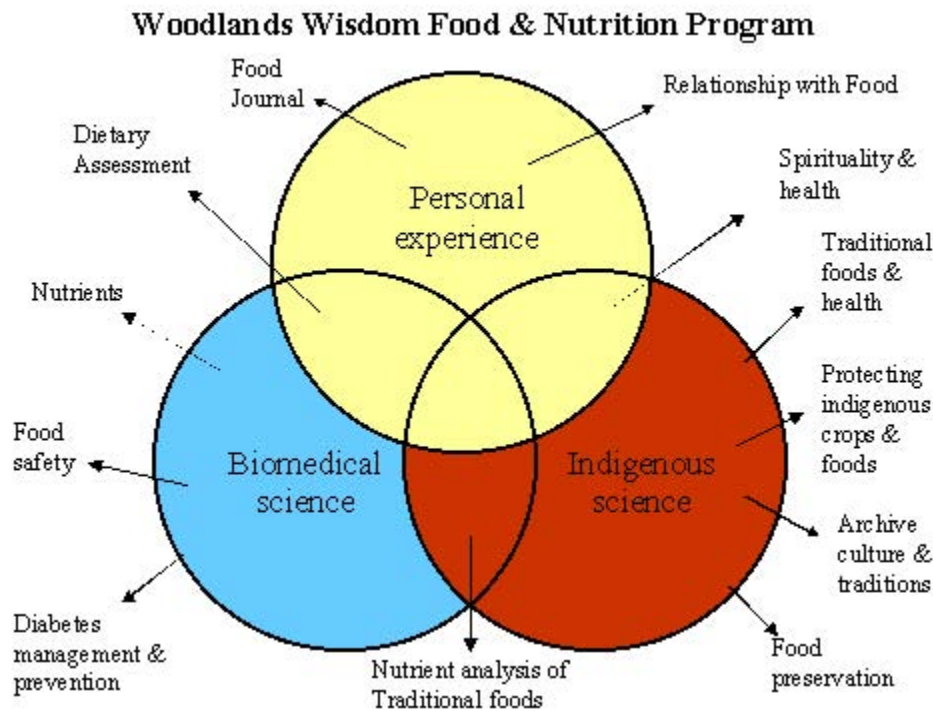


Figure 1. Education and the Woodlands Wisdom Nutrition Project.

### **Why Study Food and Nutrition through Different Perspectives?**

One's perspective can be thought of as a mental lens through which one sees the world. Just as a good photographer has a variety of lenses to capture the desired pictures of her object of study, a good student is able to enter into distinctly different perspectives to gain a fuller understanding of the subject at hand. This is especially true for food and nutrition, since it is a subject familiar to us all. Each of these perspectives—biomedical experiment, ancient science, and personal experience—has its own set of strengths and limitations, and its own criteria for determining validity. The Woodlands Wisdom curriculum acknowledges value and respect for each of these perspectives with the understanding that a program of study as broad as food and nutrition benefits greatly from a multicultural sharing of perspectives.

### **What Are the Limitations to this Approach?**

Any multi-cultural approach must acknowledge a potentially significant disadvantage; that of inappropriately confusing one perspective for another. The Woodlands Wisdom Academic Committee has identified a number of examples within other, well-intentioned “culturally-relevant” nutrition education programs where there is confusion around the integration of perspectives being offered. A common manifestation of this is a United States Department of Agriculture food-guide pyramid that has been adapted for use with Indian communities. This kind of approach invariably includes traditional Indian foods such as wild rice, venison, and bear in the pyramid construct. Unfortunately, it is not made explicit that the pyramid construct itself is grounded within a biomedical perspective. By not being explicit, learners are left with the mistaken suggestion that traditional Indian foods should be most

appropriately used within a biomedical construct. This implicit suggestion devalues further the already fragmented indigenous system of understanding food and health. Woodlands Wisdom endorses explicit and clear labeling in all cases of the perspective being offered. The goal is to think *within* each perspective by using the worldview assumptions of the perspective being learned. This is quite a different matter from the more common approach of thinking *about* other knowledge systems from a familiar or detached perspective. This distinction will hopefully limit unintended confusion and damage.

### **Why Should Woodlands Tribal Colleges Offer the Ancient Science Perspective?**

Often forgotten in the formal study of nutrition is that the indigenous peoples of the Americas knew how to cure scurvy centuries before the Europeans (Keoke and Porterfield 2003; Price 1939; Vogel 1970), or that they developed sophisticated systems of agriculture that have given us beans, corn, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, tomatoes, and more than twenty other foods (Keoke and Porterfield 2003), or that they enjoyed excellent health and freedom from chronic disease (Price 1939; Vogel 1970), or that more than 200 indigenous drugs they used have been in the Pharmacopeia of the United States of America (Vogel 1970) since 1820. These contributions seem to have had little impact in the communities of credentialed nutritionists.

As our source of food has evolved from the diversity of a subsistence diet to a modern system of reduced crop diversity and food processed for convenience, diet-related chronic diseases emerge as increasing concern for indigenous communities across North America (Kuhnlein and Recevour 1996; Kuhnlein et al. 2001; Indian Health Service 2002). In the Upper Midwest, American Indian communities face a crisis of cultural survival as traditions—horticultural, religious, culinary and medicinal—are threatened by the rapid demise of their elderly population, the keepers of indigenous knowledge. Elders are oftentimes the last speakers of traditional languages and serve as the remaining repositories of traditional foods and knowledge of their uses. Their knowledge represents what is left of an elegant and sophisticated system of understanding relationships between the land, plant varieties, and human and animal health. This system of understanding includes perspectives on plant genetics, organic chemistry, pharmacology, food safety, and farming systems, and has historically contributed to scientific advancement, durability of the food system, and viability of communities across the world.

Tribal Colleges arose from this context to offer help in dealing with the crisis. Cultural preservation remains a unique feature of the Tribal College mission. Accordingly, one of the long-term goals of Woodlands Wisdom is that Tribal Colleges, where appropriate, take a leadership role in strengthening the local, indigenous knowledge and wisdom around food and nutrition. This includes a responsibility to work with elders to teach students and to restore the fragments of understanding into a more comprehensive and integrated form of education. Students and faculty, working together with elders, restore and preserve the traditional knowledge and perspectives through course work, field trips, guest speakers, and community-based research projects. An excellent current example of integrating this kind of work with modern technology can be viewed at: <http://www.Brain-Box.com/> (Ojibwe Histories, 1998). Archival research and cultural restoration represents a significant scholarly commitment and opportunity for Tribal Colleges.

## **What Is Meant by a Biomedical Perspective on Food and Nutrition?**

The modern biomedical perspective is grounded in a way of knowing that values most highly acquiring an objective knowledge of truth (Maxwell 1984; Wallace 2000). According to this idea, knowledge is to be acquired not by accepting the speculations of philosophers or wisdom of elders, but rather, by arriving at results based upon direct experiment and observation. Thus, all scientific claims to knowledge must be assessed with respect to experimental and observational success or failure. This idea owes its prestige and influence to the success modern European natural science beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this sense, the biomedical perspective can be seen as the “new kid on the block.” By the eighteenth century these ideas had become commonplace in European higher education, and they persist today in the large, mainstream research universities of North America. A few of the implicit assumptions of the biomedical perspective are as follows:

- Living systems and food are understood through a mechanistic worldview; one understands the whole by understanding the components or parts. Similarly, much current nutrition research strives to understand the “mechanism of action” of food components within the body or its parts.
- Reality is divided into the objective world of fact, matter, experiments, and physical reality on one hand, and the subjective world of mind, consciousness, personal experience, and value on the other. Thus, the biomedical perspective is seen to deal predominately, if not exclusively, with “objective” phenomena that can be observed and replicated by third parties.
- Health is associated largely with the absence of objectively diagnosed disease, or “risk factors” for pathology.

These assumptions offer insight to some of the limitations of the biomedical perspective. For example, the study of how food enhances spiritual and emotional health has received little attention from biomedical nutrition researchers. This is because dimensions of spiritual and emotional health are considered too subjective and variable to be effectively studied in controlled research methods. It is interesting that these may be just the areas where indigenous perspectives of food and health are most revealing.

Currently, students must master the biomedical perspective on food and nutrition in order to gain academic credit, degree status, and licensure as registered dietitians or nutritionists. Unfortunately, indigenous perspectives based on ancient science are not recognized as valid because they do not meet the criteria for “scientific” from a biomedical perspective. One of the goals of Woodlands Wisdom is to broaden the perspective of nutrition knowledge that is considered legitimate to include indigenous perspectives from around the world.

## **How Is Personal Experience Involved?**

All learning begins with experience. Making food choices is a daily process for each of us. Food choices are the result of identity, priorities in life, relationships with oneself, one’s family and friends, and one’s experience. Each of us has a lifetime of personal experience to offer and draw upon, even though this knowledge is not seen by some as “scientific.” In the Woodlands Wisdom food and nutrition curriculum, students have a unique opportunity to

explore their own food behavior through dietary assessment and journaling their use of food. By reflecting on personal and subjective observations, students can gain insights into their relationship with food. This insight may result in taking an interest in questioning personal, family, or community food choices that may not align with values or lead to improved health or well-being. Experience can serve as vital role in gaining spiritual relationships between food and health.

We see this multicultural approach as an example of how to broaden the scope and aims of academic inquiry within both Tribal Colleges and large research Universities as well. We look ahead to see land grant institutions of higher education as places where different forms of knowledge and methods of inquiry can be openly and freely shared and exchanged.

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