

Summary of Comments on Academy Corporate Sponsorship Program Member Perceptions and Future Opportunities

*Prepared for Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Leadership by the HEN DPG Leadership Team
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Impact of the recent report and associated media attention discussing the Academy's corporate sponsorship program have been fragmenting for our organization and our profession, exacerbating members' concerns and frustrations with feeling ill-equipped to respond to questions about their professional organization. This situation has inflamed some existing concerns from members around the topic of the Academy's corporate sponsorship and partnership programs, highlighting core issues for members who are uncomfortable with these relationships, including : the need for increased transparency, communication, and member engagement in the Academy corporate sponsorship/partnership program. We feel that if a robust member-driven corporate sponsorship **program** and **process** were to be implemented, it would support the empowerment of members from all viewpoints to more fully embrace a sponsorship program. We propose a series of organizational process strategies that will support needed changes to the current sponsorship program.

The HEN Leadership Team would like to commend the Academy for the following efforts to increase membership engagement:

- Applying swift and appropriate action to a written request made by HOD representatives to remove corporate sponsors from required sessions HOD meetings (June, 2012). This action included shifting all sponsor led sessions to be optional and the revision of any sponsor engagement in HOD discussions with new contract renegotiations moving forward.
- Allowing industry sponsored events held at PPW to be optional
- Willingness to communicate with HEN leaders for guidance and clarification on an ongoing basis.
- Increased outreach and engagement to HEN recognizing our area of expertise, for instance:
 - Interview for Food & Nutrition Magazine article on farm tours
 - Request for participants to the EAL Advanced Food Production Expert Work group (Fall, 2012)
 - Formation of the first ever PPW Film Festival (April, 2013)
 - Recognition of HEN members by President Ethan Bergman in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (September, 2012;)
 - Engagement in the Future of Food Program and Food Solutions Working Group (Fall, 2012)
 - Participation in Academy position paper review: Local Support for Nutrition Integrity in Schools, Comprehensive School Nutrition Services, Food Security in the United States

In efforts to gather perspective on current Academy member concerns surrounding the Corporate Sponsorship Program HEN leadership reached out to current Academy members, participants of the HEN Corporate Sponsorship Task Force, and past Academy members in the hopes that it will provide a

basis for retrospective thought and discussion. The following is a consensus of the concerns about the Corporate Sponsorship Program from these groups.

Industry Sponsor Selection

The industry partners that are chosen to form a relationship with the Academy through sponsorship are generally inconsistent with Academy's vision to optimize the nation's health through food and nutrition. The primary products these industry partners represent and market support the degradation of individual, public, and community health. We recognize that the product profile of any industry partner may be diverse to include some healthier products. However, as members of the organization of the nation's leading nutrition professionals, it is our role to shape the course of our food system, including the food industry, towards one that not only produces healthier food products, but also one that supports public health through all of their practices. To embrace a partner whose advertising/marketing, employment practices, and products work against our mission as registered dietitians, we are defeating the great work of our larger organization to move forward policies and programs that support public health through clear and effective education about the value of healthy nutritious foods.

Public Perception

Regardless of contractual arrangements, the public views the sponsorship arrangement as an endorsement of these organizations and their entire product profile, which causes confusion in our efforts to guide the public towards healthy food choices. In light of the current inconsistencies in values between the industry partners and the role of the RD to promote health, fellow RDs and Academy members express having to defend the practices around Academy Corporate Sponsorship to their clients, professional colleagues, and the general public.

Influence on Educational Programming

Continuing Professional Education provided by sponsors places industry advertising on valuable public health education and messaging. We recognize that the Academy maintains thorough oversight of all educational material but feel the educational message is often lost with the industry sponsor connected. **FNCE** Expo Center showcases the sponsors' products and provides a forum for them to advertise to dietitians. We feel as though this should be a secondary focus of the expo where non-biased education can be sought out and foods that are consistent with our mission to promote health are represented. Increasingly, there is concern that our current sponsorship relationships have fostered inaction towards **external science-based activities**. (Please see Appendix : Letter from Concerned Member)

We recognize the valuable process in place to formulate a member-based committee to vet an organizational position from which we engage in public activities but we would like you to consider the level of flexibility the Academy maintains with regards to the review of opportunities to support public health initiatives set forth by organizations with similar missions. We feel that if formal partnerships that include education sharing with these large industry partners are a current practice that a more fruitful relationship would be to engage with those in the non-profit sector without any deeper motive than to improve public health.

We suggest the following resource for further perspective: Union of Concerned Scientists. Heads They Win, Tails We Lose. February 2012. Available online at:
http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity/abuses_of_science/how-corporations-corrupt-science.html

Transparency & Communication

There have been marked efforts made by Academy leadership to engage HEN leaders and improve communication about the Academy's policies and procedures. However, there seems to be a disconnect that occurs when conveying the parameters, individuals involved, and transparency of activities with regard to current Academy policies and programs to the majority of Academy members. Although the sponsorship guidelines have been noted to be posted on the Academy website, neither the search function nor intuitive navigation of the site leads members to these documents. A lack of member engagement in decision making and/or validation for expressed concerns by members about the program has led to members' disassociation from the organization. This issue was exacerbated recently when Academy President Ethan Bergman publically offered full acceptance of the sponsorship program on behalf of all members without recognition of a strong number of members vocal about their discontent: "And for the record, I support the Academy's sponsorship program, as does the Board of Directors and our members." ⁱ We believe that the opportunity for the Academy to actively engage members in this conversation in a multi-faceted way will improve member satisfaction. Approaches to engage members may include: webinars on the current and changing corporate sponsorship policy, improved access sponsorship information on the website, regular opportunities to comment on the Program, engagement of diverse array of members in sponsor policy development and sponsor review.

Academy member survey on corporate sponsorship perceptions

The survey has served as a main resource for the Academy to communicate with members on their views of the current organizational Corporate Sponsorship Program. Members have expressed many concerns with the current member survey; For example, here is no indication that various member factions are not over-represented, the wording of many of the questions are biased, written without balance or with equal opportunities to disagree with the author's point of view. For these reasons, the results reported from these surveys do not represent a true scientific measurement of the Academy's membership base and opinion in total. Academy members include many research and survey experts from independent backgrounds who have conveyed the following specific concerns with the survey:

- The survey is performed by Performance Research, a third-party firm dedicated exclusively to sponsorship marketing industry. This partnership suggests an inherent bias to support the industry they are representing.
- The questions do not allow an option to opt-out [i.e., none of the above]. As such, when members respond to questions about the benefits about sponsors, they are required to choose an affirmative response, supporting sponsorship in some form, whether or not they agree with it.
- The survey is designed so that respondents cannot move back and forth to change their answers, which causes respondent frustration and lower response rates, biasing the sample.
- While the survey mentions that it is a random survey, the sampling design is not clear. How are respondents sampled (by geographic region, by DPG); are some groups sampled at greater weights than others? Members have noted that many Academy surveys are not anonymous and voiced concern that this survey may also not be.

Academy Corporate Sponsorship Process - Recommendations for Consideration

The following consists of constructive, proactive suggestions for improving the current Academy Corporate Sponsorship Program. By instituting foundational changes to the process and the core program currently in place the Academy can lead the way for health professional organizations to model healthy, ethical industry relationships, lead the food industry and system towards public health and foster a positive public image for registered dietitians.

Engaging Members in Program Development and Decision Making

Academy Corporate Relations Committee

Create a committee to help review and make decisions about corporate sponsorship program under the BOD or HOD consisting of Academy members from a diverse array/representative sample of DPGs and backgrounds who would work with staff on identifying and retaining corporate sponsors that meet Academy's mission, vision, and values. This committee would cultivate relationships with corporations and organizations that more closely align with Academy principles, strategic plan and HOD goals. Tasks of this committee would include the following:

- Create and adopt more defined criteria for corporate sponsors that includes upholding the health, safety, and welfare of the public at all times
- Review current and future corporate partner contracts and provide recommendations to the HOD and BOD.
- Provide oversight on the development of the Academy member perceptions survey on corporate sponsorship.
- Review current and future corporate partner contracts.
- Work with Academy staff on re-evaluating expenditures of the Academy to see where costs may be minimized in order to possibly reduce industry relationships.

Academy Member Survey on Corporate Sponsorship Perceptions

We suggest involving the Academy's own members in designing the annual sponsorship survey. Academy members have the expertise to write an unbiased survey, which will more fairly assess members' attitudes towards the benefits of Academy Sponsorship. RDs with an industry relationship as well as Academy sponsors should not be allowed to participate in the design of this survey. As an alternative, we suggest contracting with an academic institution, without industry ties, to design and administer the annual survey in conjunction with Academy Leaders and DPGs. We suggest engaging a broad range of members for survey question development, review, and analysis. We encourage increased transparency and communication about the provision of the survey including sampling design and display of results. The Academy may consider the opportunity to engage the perception of former Academy members as well to provide additional insight. In an effort to evaluate where costs may be cut, including questions that allow members to rank which aspects of the Academy are most important to them (DPGs, number of face-to-face meetings, continuing education opportunities, networking, working with and influencing legislative bodies and government agencies, specific components of FNCE, etc) and allocate funds to these entities

proportionately. Items ranked lowest can be re-considered as expenditures are re-evaluated as a way to decrease funding from corporate sponsor entities. We strongly encourage adding a question inquiring if individuals would be willing to pay higher dues in exchange for discontinuing certain sponsorship agreements.

Transparency of Corporate Sponsorship to Members

The creation of a formal written policy that outlines sponsorship criteria and includes selection process would be valuable to post publically to members. We strongly recommend that this policy include a stipulation that corporate sponsors should be excluded from events/activities where decision about the profession or association are made. In order to improve confidence and communication among members posting publically the following information would be valuable for members:

- Benefits that each sponsor receives.
 - Include information on the relationship between the sponsor and continuing education
- Amount the Academy and Academy Foundation receives from sponsors and where this money is allocated (sponsorships, education fees, specific program development, foundation donations)

Effective Communication

The DPGs, Affiliates, EatRight Weekly and eatright.org have served as the main method of communication to members from the Academy. These avenues can be utilized to increase direct communication from the Academy on matters of Corporate Sponsorship. In addition to this, regular updates to members on the sponsorship program to provide education sponsor selection, committee representatives, and opportunities to provide input would effectively engage members. All updates would be independent of sponsor influence and would simply serve as an information session for the current status of the Academy corporate sponsorship program and include ways to engage or submit comments to the Committee such as:

- Webinars
- As part of a orientation for Academy leadership positions
- Facilitated through HOD, Affiliates, DPGs

Additionally we recommend a more effective platform for members to contact the Academy to express concerns, provide input or suggestions. Issues Management has not served to meet the needs of members in this capacity because it is a general issues comment resource. We recommend the provision of primary Academy corporate sponsor relations staff and Corporate Relations Committee contacts to be easily available to members.

Systemic Changes

We recognize many RDs work in the food and beverage industries. These RDs are often encouraged by their place of work to serve in Academy Leadership. We recognize that disclosure statements are utilized but that working with the industry does not prevent you from sitting on educational committees or serving in leadership positions. Clinical, Community or Public Health Dietitians do not receive the same support or time flexibility from their places of work to serve in leadership roles within the Academy therefore there is often an imbalance in representation in leadership. Implementing

volunteer position term limits, retirement, and rotating in RDs of different backgrounds would support a new mix of opinions represented.

There is also an opportunity to evaluate our investment in organizations inconsistent with our mission in all facets of the Academy. There is a movement from American University students requesting that their schools divest their endowments from certain companies that are not consistent with the focus of the school. We have an opportunity to lead the way for health organizations to leverage their role on the industry and ultimately public health.

Academy Corporate Sponsorship Program - Recommendations for Consideration

Develop Baseline Sponsorship Criteria

Baseline sponsorship criteria, based from member input, defines criteria for corporate sponsor selection including holding corporate sponsors to the same code of ethics as dietetic practitioners, specifically upholding the health, safety, and welfare of the public at all times and that they do not engage in false or misleading practices or communications. In addition these criteria are consistent with the Academy's mission, vision, and values and are not in conflict with the mission and vision of DPGs MIGs or other committees. We strongly encourage a criterion to be included in which corporate sponsors who engage in public policy and advocacy efforts align with and support the public policy efforts of the Academy. Look to other health professional organizations as opportunities for best practices. Each organization has room to grow but also has best practices to share.

FNCE

- Sponsors' track verses integrated sessions – Development of a separate track where sessions offered by sponsors are included instead of integrating them into the conference. Increase the opportunity for member-based/DPG sessions. If one of the tracks is not well attended then it can be cut
- Publically provide the protocol for how FNCE sessions are chosen and reviewed as well as how expo space is allocated and approved

Corporate-Sponsored Education

- Eliminate CDR support for industry-sponsored education continuing education and education sessions. There is an inherit bias in these sessions.

We hope that this summary of member concerns and opportunities for the Academy Corporate Sponsorship Program serve as a launching point in your efforts to review and revise the current program in place. HEN Leadership welcomes the opportunity to provide further insight and support to the Academy through an in-person dialogue. Thank you for your valuable work on this effort.

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ⁱ Facts, Opinion and Speculation: Know the Difference as We Inform the Public. January 23, 2013. Available at: <http://www.eatright.org/Media/content.aspx?id=6442474564>

Appendix: Letter from Concerned Member

This letter was provided to HEN leadership from an Academy member with a request to share with Academy leadership. These views represent one members' position but serve to acknowledge the need for future dialogue with members on the relationship of the Academy with its corporate sponsors.

When years ago I first noticed that the Academy had acquired as corporate sponsors companies that manufactured foods which I considered harmful, I was merely uncomfortable, and puzzled. It was only in 2011 when I checked the list of sponsors of CSPI's Life's Sweeter Challenge to reduce sugary drink consumption and found the Academy not listed beside partners such as the American Diabetes Association, the American Heart Association, the American Institute for Cancer Research, the American Nurses Association and the American Public Health Association, that I became seriously concerned about the Academy's relationship to its corporate sponsors. I sent an email to the Academy Issues site in November 2011; neither that nor a resending of the message in January 2012 was answered. It was only after my state delegate addressed the matter with the Academy in March that I received a response, from Jeanne Blankenship, Vice President, Policy Initiatives and Advocacy in the Washington office. Her response was as follows:

"The campaign that you mention was originally brought to our attention by CSPI last spring. At that time the Legislative and Public Policy Committee (LPPC) was in the process of establishing a workgroup to review the evidence surrounding food and beverage tax. Our chair at the time, Sister Ladonna Woerdeman, made the recommendation that the LPPC hold off on signing onto the campaign until the committee had begun its work and to ask them to consider this as part of their review."
(Ms. Blankenship's reply included an apology for my 4-month-old email not being answered)

It is not clear to me why taxing beverages needed to be a consideration in whether to join the Challenge that simply encourages a reduction in consumption of the scientifically recognized unhealthy beverages. However, In March the LPPC unanimously voted to ask the BOD to join the Challenge. The Board refused, Instead deciding “to create an Academy media outreach program that incorporates the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and is in keeping with the Academy’s vision and mission...”

The Academy was not joining its public health partners in an assault on a major health problem, but instead was taking its own singular path. The motives of the leadership for this go-it-alone stance were unclear.

In May 2012 the Institute of Medicine issued a report entitled “Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention.”

<http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2012/Accelerating-Progress-in-Obesity-Prevention.aspx> Two RD’s were on the committee that wrote the report. Goal 2 (creating healthy food and beverage environments) specifically targeted sugar-sweetened beverages and recommended that the business community, the private sector, NGOs and government adopt specific strategies to reduce overconsumption. Wider concerns about the food supply were then addressed. Current agricultural policies were also targeted. Goal 3 (“Transform messages about physical activity and nutrition”) addressed changing food marketing to children and making changes mandatory by law if they were not voluntarily instituted within two years.

To this nutrition professional these were ideas whose time had come. I was dismayed to see the Academy’s position released in the following media response:

<http://www.eatright.org/Media/content.aspx?id=6442469826>.

After stating Goal 2 the Academy promptly segued into a discussion of world hunger, which was not a subject of the report. The Academy’s “All foods can fit” position was used as a defense. This position statement that accurately represents a counseling method was misused as a way to include unhealthy foods in recommendations. This statement has portrayed the Academy as an organization of inaction.

In 2012 the Mayor of New York City decided to limit the maximum size of sugar-sweetened beverages, and the AMA voted to approve the strategy of taxing them. The Academy did not address the methodologies advocated (which might legitimately have been questioned), but again fell back on the “All Foods Fit” platitude. Meanwhile, the national buzz about obesity’s relation to sugary beverage intake continues, with ample press coverage and scientific support.

Last month the New York Times business section carried an article telling of the release of a report titled “And Now a Word from Our Sponsors.” There are certainly factual inaccuracies and biases in the report, but its thrust is to highlight a disappointing (if not tragic) failure of the Academy to join “the nation (as it) 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.”