CAMPUS COMMUNITY BOOK PROJECT
ROUNDTABLE
May 15, 2006

Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*

**Facilitators:** Gary Sue Goodman (University Writing Program), Karen Roth (Office of Campus Community Relations)

**Participants:** Linda Adams (Dining Services), Cynthia Brantley (History), Diana Cassady (Public Health), Alex Chassy (Food Science), Michelle Danyluk (Food Science), Pam Demory (UWP), Richard Dorf (School of Management), Joe Dumit (Science and Technology Studies, Anthropology), Susan Ebekler (Viticulture & Enology), David Fahy (EALC/ Japanese), Paul Gents (Plant Sciences), Charlene Ho (Nutrition), Alyson Mitchell (Food Sciences), Laura Murphy (Land and Water Resources), Susanne Rockwell (News Service), Paul Takushi (ASUCD Bookstore), Steve Vosti (Ag. Resource Economics), Paul Weinbaum (Plant Science)

*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* seems well suited to the purpose of the book project: to provoke dialogue and wrestle with significant, controversial issues. Although the author Michael Pollan expresses a distinctive point of view, the project as a whole will explore various perspectives.

The book could be integrated fruitfully into courses in a wide range of disciplines. The book project will list such courses on the web site. Faculty are encouraged to create freshman seminars using the book. The book project also invites faculty to propose courses to connect to the project and open to the community and staff. Appropriate courses would be open-ended, interactive, discussion-oriented, and accessible to non-majors. The course also must already be scheduled for a room large enough to permit adding 20-25 more people. Interested faculty may propose courses to Karen Roth (through May 31) or Gary Goodman (starting June 1).

Several participants who are specialists in areas that the book discusses – plant science, animal science, agricultural economics — were critical of Pollan’s argument, calling into questions both facts and analyses. An expert in the beef industry pointed out Pollan’s bias against the beef industry and contested several assertions. An expert in agricultural economics noted that Pollan picked up on sensationalistic topics and did chummy interviews, but omitted some facts and distorted others, made leaps in connecting policy to outcomes, and misattributed responsibility.

At first glance, some felt they would not assign the book to undergraduates, due to factual or analytic errors, but then realized that it could be a very useful teaching tool for teaching critical thinking. It would be especially useful if students read it more than once, perhaps took courses in related fields (maybe as General Education clusters), and started questioning —noticing the “selective pruning” of information and ideas, such as literature on agricultural policy that he didn’t use. It could be an excellent measure of
“value added,” if students read the book in their first year and again before graduating, thinking about how they think critically and digest material, recognizing what is sensationalist and what it not.

For example, his economic analysis linking corn subsidies to outcomes such as prices and obesity came under fire for being wrong: corn might be more expensive, but industry would adapt, might grow more wheat and less corn, make substitutions in food production; corn might be more expensive but relative prices of foods wouldn’t change.

Participants also praised its ability to put disparate kinds of information together: although technically problematic, it was described as “well mixed and well served,” integrating ideas and information from a wide range of disciplines.

It was also seen as an excellent way to raise questions about what is True and how you determine what to believe. Because the prose is so readable, students won’t see it as constructed. Pollan presents himself not as an expert or a preacher, but as a questioner and a quester: he constructs a persona, as a writer, that would be interesting to explore, examining closely what questions he poses, how he attempts to find answers, and how he constructs his arguments.

The book would also be useful, in combination with Marion Nestle’s *Food Politics*, in a freshman seminar, to inquire about the roles of the individual and industry in creating food and in causing obesity. It raises significant issues about food, diabetes, and obesity. Instead of blaming individuals, he takes a broader approach to how we identify and define medical problems, encompassing a network of forces and influences on diet decisions. It raises questions about how the food industry has evolved, whether it could be regulated differently or could prioritize different values: for example, genetic modification of crops has selected for high yield, low labor costs, resistance to pests, and easy transport, rather than for nutrition.

It provokes thought about the dilemma about how to make good choices about food—a particularly important topic for first year students. It emphasizes the problems of facing excessive choices, the need for information and values to make decisions. In another freshman seminar, where the forces regulating the American diet and issue of food choices were explored, students “didn’t have a clue what they were eating.” They said that they felt out of control—forced to eat whatever the dining commons served. When asked to put their choices under control—asked “which macaroni and cheese would you choose?”—most picked organic, which was not the healthiest choice from a nutritional point of view. The experience that had the strongest impact was harvesting carrots at the student farm: “the best carrot I ever tasted.”

Participants expressed concerns about teaching the book in freshman seminars—a sense of need to lead them somewhere and be careful about what they were exposed to. The concern that first year students would not feel capable of addressing such complicated issues lead some to ask whether freshman seminars had to be confined to
freshmen, since the interaction with older students in small discussion classes would be educational for them.

Participants noted how American his perspective is, the heavy cultural component in habits and preconceptions. Food consciousness and food choices in California are distinctive: Davis made political choices to support the farmers’ market, for example (where the opening event of the book project may occur). But the trends that Pollan discusses are also moving worldwide: the “supermarketification” that took a generation and a half in America, occurred in 20 years in Central America: for example, 80% of food is purchased at supermarkets now in Brazil.

Participants also discussed the impact of socio-economic class on food decisions. According to the Economic Research Service of the USDA, education and ignorance were less significant than the dual constraints of money and time—the lack of healthy choices.

NOTE: Karen Roth is retiring from UC Davis effective May 31, and Gary Goodman will assume the position of Interim Coordinator, Campus Community Book Project, coordinating the fall 2006 book project events and chairing the selection team for the fall 2007 book project.

Resources:

Michael Pollan’s website:  http://michaelepollan.com

Digital versions of many articles, speaker’s schedule, reviews and interviews.

Articles:

Modified version of the last chapter on hunting: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/26/magazine/carnivore.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

Pollan’s NY Times blog:

In May, Pollan will be a guest columnist, blogging on food issues, for the Times Select website. He welcomes your reactions, questions, and suggestions. The web address is: http://pollan.blogs.nytimes.com

Reviews:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/06/AR2006040601701.html

http://www.salon.com/books/int/2006/04/08/pollan/

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/060515crat_atlarge

**Interviews:**

NPR interview on Fresh Air, 4/11/06

NPR interview on Science Friday, 4/14/2006

*Sun Magazine Interview*
http://www.thesunmagazine.org/365 POLLAN.pdf

**Images of Zea Mays**

http://www2.mpiz-koeln.mpg.de/pr/garten/schau/ZeamaysL./Mais2.jpg

Paul Gept’s web page for his course PLB143, Evolution of Crop Plants: The origins of agriculture and the domestication of plants:

http://www.agronomy.ucdavis.edu/gepts/pb143/pb143.htm


**Potential speaker for a class on Oct. 25 between 8 and 11 am:**

Gary Ruskin
Executive Director of Commercial Alert, which does research on marketing topics, including food marketing, marketing to
children, pharmaceutical marketing, role of the government in marketing.

http://www.commercialalert.org/

Gary Ruskin, executive director and co-founder of Commercial Alert, is an expert on commercialism in schools, government and culture, and the effects of advertising on children and public health. He has written widely on these issues, and is quoted regularly in major newspapers across the country, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal. He has appeared dozens of times on TV news programs on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and CNN. He is also director of the Congressional Accountability Project, which opposes corruption in the U. S. Congress. He received his undergraduate degree in religion from Carleton College, and a graduate degree in public policy from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government.

If interested, please contact: Sarah Rees <srees@ucdavis.edu>

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