



Interview with IAFNS Summer Research Opportunity Fellow Jen Oslund

This transcript has been edited for brevity and length.

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Why don't you start by telling us your name and where you go to school and how you heard about IAFNS.

Jen Oslund

Great, so my name is Jennifer Oslund, and I'm going to school at Tufts University in Boston. And it's interesting how I learned about IAFNS. And I was talking with my thesis adviser, Susan Roberts, about my research goals and career aspirations and she mentioned IAFNS. So, I looked on the website and started looking at what they were doing. And was just really impressed with their collaborative environment of having academia, government and industry work all together, and just the caliber of research that was coming out of those collaborations. It felt like, I had found a way to really figure out a puzzle that a lot of public health groups are trying to figure out, and it really made me interested. I wanted to look under the hood and see how they were doing that. And also, to see how I could improve my research by using some of the tools that I learned about. It's been a great experience.

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Tell us about your research this summer.

Jen Oslund

So I'm doing this interesting research project where I'm looking at how socio-cultural factors impact dietary patterns and weight status. In particular, right now I'm really looking at how cultural influences impact the decision to eat a plant- or animal-based diet. My end goal is to have those findings influence programs and policies that are culturally sensitive and relevant, and I'm doing that by developing a questionnaire. It's called the Food Customs, Traditions and Beliefs Questionnaire, which is in the process of becoming a validated instrument, where we It will allow us to quantify what those cultural influences are.

During the summer, I have the opportunity to do an in-depth literature review on the cultural influences of associated with eating a plant or animal-based diets. And it's really been helpful to have a collaborative environment, seeing different viewpoints from government, from different members of industry and from academia. It's really helped me to, again, see where my blind spots were with my research project and how I could reach my end goals. But it also has helped me be more deliberate on how

I communicate it, so it can make more of a meaningful impact outside of just the academic sphere.

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Can you tell us more about the index survey questionnaire that you're developing?

Jen Oslund

There are cultural influences that may seem obvious, like different locations, maybe different heritages or backgrounds and different religious influences. There are other influences that are less obvious or less visible. All these influences merge together to create a person's 'food culture.' What can be hard to do is, to really understand which influences are impacting what decisions -- which is what we are trying to figure out with the decision to eat plant or animal-based diet.

Currently, much of the literature looks at each of these cultural influences in isolation. If we want to see a clearer picture of how different cultural influences are impacting diet patterns it's important to measure a wide range of these different influences (or socio-cultural factors) in one instrument. This is how we can determine what cultural influences are significantly associated with a plant or animal-based diet pattern. That is the goal of the questionnaire I am developing.

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So, help us understand how you're developing the questionnaire. Once you develop it and it gets validated, what's your vision for how it would be used, and how it would help the field?

Jen Oslund

Once validated, I see this questionnaire playing a valuable role in research that looks at weight status and diet patterns. For example, culture is a key missing measure in the NIH's ADOPT (Accumulating Data to Optimally Predict Obesity Treatment) Core Measures. This instrument, once validated, would be a useful tool to include as a core measure in that project.

The goal of the ADOPT measures is to combine a standard set of core measures and factors (such as behavioral, biological, environmental, and psychosocial) from validated instruments that can be used across studies. This can allow researchers to combine datasets to conduct pooled and meta- analyses to better understand the variation in response to obesity treatments.

When trying to understand diet patterns or weight status you need to measure the role of culture if you want to get a more complete picture of what is going on.

When we have a more complete picture of an individual, or a community, we can make effective interventions, programs and policies since we can better understand why dietary patterns are chosen. Or how those different cultural influences lead to differences in weight status.

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So, can you tell us a little about how this relates to IAFNS work?

Jen Oslund

I've been working with the IAFNS Protein Committee. And one of the goals of the committee is to build a framework of dietary protein recommendations that take into account the amount and quality of protein in the North American food supply that's been undergoing a shift -- that balance of animal- and plant-based proteins. And where my work fits into that overarching goal of building those future recommendations is that I could provide an understanding of how those socio-cultural influences may influence those decisions on what to eat. Which would really help support the development of protein dietary recommendations that can be culturally sensitive and culturally relevant.

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What advice would you have for future Fellows at IAFNS?

Jen Oslund

First of all, I'm consider myself a non-traditional student. I'm an older student and I'm also a mother, and one thing that I've experienced, also with talking to other non-traditional students, it can sometimes feel like jumping into fellowships and other experiences isn't welcome. Like maybe that's too far a jump for different students to get into those opportunities. And I would say anyone who considers themselves, maybe less traditional, to not feed into that mentality, but to take a chance and apply for an IAFNS Summer Fellowship. And what I found with the application is that not only are those different life experiences welcome at IAFNS, but those different viewpoints are valued and encouraged. I think it really feeds into the collaborative environment of wanting as many voices at the table. So, I'd say to anyone, apply and know that your experience matters. And I found that IAFNS is such a welcoming community, that I've been able to learn so much from people who've had a lot of career experience. And a lot of just understanding of what that world looks like. As a student, be willing to ask people what their experiences are, and you'll find a lot offering answers, and providing other beneficial information as you build your own career. I've asked questions about how I can do my research, and I've got a lot of great, deep connections to resources and tools that I otherwise wouldn't have known about or considered. If you come in, come in curious, and be willing to reach out. And IAFNS again, is such a welcoming community, that you'll get a lot from the experience when you come in with that mentality.

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Thanks for making the time today.

Jen Oslund

It was great talking with you.