

Leaders in food and health economics

The **Food and Health Economics** programme in Virginia Tech's Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics is truly one of a kind, providing an outstanding, interdisciplinary education and research environment

CURRENTLY RANKED IN the top 20 Applied Economics graduate programmes in the US, the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics (AAEC) at Virginia Tech has gained national and international recognition in its excellency at research, teaching and extension. The faculty has taken leadership roles in specialised areas of Food and Health Economics, Environmental and Resource Economics, International Development and Trade, Applied Econometrics, and Rural and Regional Development.

The latest area of development in AAEC has been the Food and Health Economics programme, which was established in 2007 and forms an integral part of a university-wide obesity cluster hire at Virginia Tech. This special branch of study is led by Drs Wen You and George Davis. While Dr You's work has been largely economic-based, a great deal of her work has been interdisciplinary and includes teaching graduate level courses in food and health economics and applied microeconometrics. Meanwhile, Dr Davis is a Professor in the AAEC, and the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise. His research interests range from food demand and health outcomes, to econometrics and methodology. Whether working together or separately, both have received several awards for their research and have enjoyed great success in running the programme over the past six years.

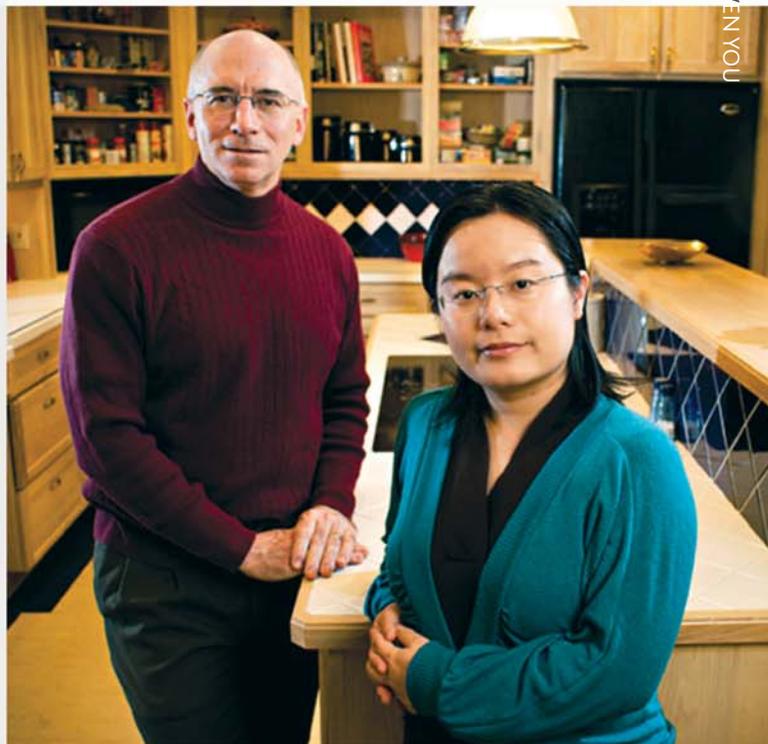
THE FOOD AND HEALTH ECONOMICS PROGRAMME

There are several unique aspects of Virginia Tech's Food and Health Economics programme. While there has been increasing recognition of the relationship between economic determinants, food consumption and health, in the US the Food and Health Economics PhD programme at Virginia Tech is the only one to specifically focus upon the relationship between these factors. More unique still is the fact that the majority of the research in this area is interdisciplinary. At Virginia Tech, studies employ experts in marketing, nutrition, genetics, physical activity and behaviour intervention to understand functional economic questions about food and health.

Students are also a major focus of the programme, which is designed to educate the next generation of applied economists with the necessary skills and knowledge to tackle complex societal problems, such as obesity. Students are supported by research assistantship that provide a financial stipend and full tuition coverage. The department has enjoyed incredible success since 2007, and several students under the guidance of Drs You and Davis have won awards for their research. Furthermore, students in this area have presented their work in regional, national and international conferences and workshops. Graduates of the Food and Health Economics programme have excellent job placement in industry, government, consulting companies and academia.

CURRENT WORK

The current primary focus of research being undertaken in the department is on the US obesity epidemic. This specific research programme revolves



around three topics that are crucial for health quality improvement; these are choices within social and physical environment, incentives for behaviour changes, and the evaluation of health policies and programmes. Such research is vital, considering the ever-growing medical and financial burden that obesity places on society, as well as its damaging effect on a huge number of people's quality of life.

The three topics, which are central to this research, are strongly interlinked, as individual social and physical lifestyle choices within the environment are the channels through which health policies and programmes take effects. Understanding individuals' decisions to lose weight lies at the heart of this research, with role of choice in the context of social and physical environment being a major subject of interest.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

One particular aspect that the Food and Health Economics programme is most proud of is the rigorous and wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach to its research. For example, institutional infrastructure for interdisciplinary collaboration is firmly established with the 'Fralin Translational Research Obesity Center' at Virginia Tech, as well as with the 'Carilion Clinic' and a graduate programme on Translational Obesity Research. This interdisciplinary approach has also assisted funding for the programme. For example, grant funding has come from Virginia Tech's Fralin Life Science Institute, the National Institute of Health, the USDA National Research Initiative and the USDA Economic Research Services.

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