Kaitlyn Clark

Outside Assignment 3

Feb. 20, 2026

When the federal government released its 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, it came with a provocative message: America has been misled.

For Sarah Brunnig, a human nutrition professor at the University of Florida with decades of research experience, the claim stung.

The message sits center stage in bold white lettering on the U.S. government's new dietary website, eatrealfood.gov: "For decades we've been misled by guidance that prioritized highly processed food."

"I am infuriated," Brunnig said. "They're saying that all of the dietitians, nutritionists and researchers have been misleading the American people on purpose."

The new guidelines are a joint product of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services. Their release was led by the secretary of HHS Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose "Make America Healthy Again" movement has sharply criticized America's nutrition experts.

Updated every five years, the guidelines shape the food provided in government funded services such as in public school cafeterias, military dining halls, prisons and federal nutrition assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The website is direct: Half of Americans have prediabetes or diabetes, three in four adults live with at least one chronic condition and 90% of U.S. health care spending goes toward treating those diseases.

Brunnig doesn't dispute any of it. "We have a lot of chronic disease, and no matter what anyone says, we can't seem to stop it," she said.

For students like Victoria Foster, a 19-year-old sophomore nutritional science major at UF, the guidelines present a different kind of problem – not the politics behind them, but whether it's reaching everyday American.

Her concern is practicality. For college students juggling cost, convenience and limited dining hall options, the guidelines can feel distant, she said.

"It's not super realistic for college students," Foster said. "The dining hall doesn't really have the best healthy options that taste good."

Foster also said the guidelines' popular terms like "Eat real food" may be too vague for the general population.

"People may not even understand what that even means," she said. "They think all food is real."

What frustrates Brunnig most is the administration's claim that nutrition professionals are stuck in the past, still preaching the 1992 food pyramid. The pyramid, she noted, hasn't been used in more than 20 years.

"We have learned a lot in 25 years, but they're acting like we haven't – like we have just been saying the same things," she said.

Research on the negative impacts of ultra-processed food has been building for a decade, she added, yet the new guidelines frame it as a fresh revelation.

"They're deliberately being rude and insulting to all the researchers, scientists, nutritionists and dietitians who have been saying the same message for a really long time."

The insinuation that dietitians have been steering Americans toward junk food is what Brunnig found most absurd.

“Dietitians have not been saying, go eat a Mountain Dew and french fries,” she said.

Whether the message actually reaches people is a concern Brunnig shares. But despite Brunnig’s frustration, she still finds reason for optimism.

“If these guidelines can reach that swath of Americans who really need to change their diet,” she said, “that’s good.”