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## Professor Teaches Course on Social History of Candy

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University Professor William Munro has been teaching a course on the history of chocolate for nearly half a decade. As Halloween and the season of chocolate overload approaches, Munro has some news for his students.

“Nestlé has decided to take all chocolate with traces to child labor out of its supply chain for KitKats,” said Munro, the Betty Ritchie-Birrer ’47 and Ivan Birrer, Ph.D. Endowed Professor. “So we can eat KitKats now.”

The KitKat news is yet another chapter in what Munro calls the “rich, dark history” of chocolate. It is a foodstuff considered so important, for example, that the Aztecs are said to have used it as currency. A member of the political science faculty, Munro’s course “The Social History of a Candy Bar” is a Gateway Colloquia course, designed to develop students’ proficiency in writing by tracing the complexities of chocolate’s journey to become a worldwide commodity.

It’s a history that has nearly always crossed continents. In its earliest recorded history, cocoa was brought from the New World for usage in the Old World, with nearly half consumed in Spain alone. Today, over 60 percent of the world’s cocoa is grown in West Africa and consumed as chocolate largely in western Europe and the United States. In the U.S. alone, chocolate sales will amount to about **\$21 billion** this year, with the **average American eating about 9.5 pounds of chocolate each year**.

Most of us, including Munro’s students, don’t think about much about how chocolate is made or even where it comes from, except for distinct preferences for one retail brand over another.

“Those who produce chocolate don’t eat it, and those who eat it don’t produce it,” said Munro. “There’s an incredible gap of knowledge. Those who eat it don’t know where it’s coming from. Those who grow it don’t really know where it’s going. As far as some poor cacao farmers are concerned, we could be making t-shirts out of those beans.”



William Munro



Prof. Munro doesn't want his students to feel guilty about eating chocolate, but to think critically about the social, cultural and historical relationships that shape what we eat.

It takes enormous resources – human and otherwise – to make chocolate, Munro said. In the west African nation of Côte d’Ivoire, where more than 35 percent of the world’s cocoa is harvested, child labor makes up a significant amount of the workforce, he said.

Several events in the early 2000s– from a BBC documentary on child slavery on cocoa farms, to a civil war in Côte d’Ivoire and the Harkin-Engel Protocol – brought public attention to the issue of children working in the fields, many against their will. In addition, many children work on family farms, and Munro spends considerable time leading students in discussion of whether family labor is coerced labor.

Munro doesn’t want his students to feel guilty about eating chocolate for social justice reasons, but he wants them to fully understand the food chain so they can make informed decisions.

With chocolate, such knowledge isn’t easy to ascertain, according to Munro. “With coffee, for example, a consumer might say she’ll only drink Colombian coffee, or another person may only drink Sumatran, and yet another might choose Ethiopian coffee, in order to make an informed decision,” Munro explained. “When it comes to cacao beans making their way to market, they are often bulked into huge container

ships so you can’t tell exactly where one bean comes from over another.” Human rights organizations such as the Food

Empowerment Project say that consumers currently have no sure way of knowing if the chocolate they are buying involved the use of slavery or child labor.

To address the problem, the major chocolate manufacturers have taken some steps, such as the Nestlé's KitKat initiative, but many critics say major producers fall far short of articles outlined in the Harkin-Engel Protocol, a U.S. agreement aimed at ending the worst forms of child labor.

“What we eat is shaped by a vast network of social, cultural and historical relationships,” he said. Thinking critically about such networks and relationships is a hallmark of a **liberal arts education**, where questions are asked and the answers are sought across multiple disciplines. A liberal arts education develops a student's rational thought and intellectual capabilities, so Munro leaves the decision on what to eat up to his students.

In the meantime, he's got a small bowl of KitKats on his desk.