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# Bite Me: Food as Culture in Dallas and London

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Bite Me: Food as Culture in Dallas and London

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The Engaged Learning program connects students with project ideas to faculty and staff who serve as mentors, to campus programs and courses with student engagement opportunities, and to community partners who host student projects. It allows undergraduates to deepen their SMU education through capstone-level learning beyond the classroom in research, civic engagement, internships, creative work, on-campus and in local and global communities. Through my project, I studied food culture locally in Dallas and abroad in London, so that I could better understand and analyze the global food movement. I looked at the relationship Americans have with food and their eating habits compared to that of London.

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### **Statement**

Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and other qualitative research analysis, I studied the context of food as a metaphor for American culture in relation to that of the U.K.

### **Purpose**

Food is necessary not only for sustainable purposes, but for identity, culture, tradition, and sociological being. It is a huge part to every individual's day that its importance can often be overlooked. It provides nourishment, entertainment, and comfort. It is a reason to get together with friends, a way to bond with family through tradition and passed-down recipes, a motivator to get through the end of the day, and even a way to just fill the gaps of time. Our society has transformed the simple habit of eating into a cultural aspect of who we are as Americans. My Engaged Learning project studied America's relationship to food as a metaphor for its culture.

Food preferences and habits are established early in a child's home, but one molds and changes these habits to fit their independent lives as they transition from their childhood home to their own space. Food knowledge and selection is important to an individual's health as well as the health of society and environment.

Research shows that some of the most important factors predicting food selection are taste, cost, nutrition, convenience, pleasure, and weight control (Glanz, Basil, Maibach, Goldberg, & Snyder). A strong understanding and relationship around the food we purchase and consume relies on parents and schools. People establish taste preference and habits at a young age based on associations with contexts and consequences of eating

various foods (Birch). Healthy diets depend on eating environment, food availability, and means to obtain food.

The transition to college life is a crucial time in which most people begin to make their own food decisions. This can be a positive or negative transition, but it is one that individuals should be aware of. It is a well-known fact that college students often have poor eating habits. Students' fruit and vegetable consumption falls well below the daily-recommended level as a 2004 study showed only 7.3% of students ate five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily (American College Health Association). As a college student with a small budget, busy school schedule, and active lifestyle, I recognize how easy it is to form poor eating habits and distance ourselves from the food relationship we need, but mission is to make students aware of these facts and their significance.

This past summer I traveled abroad to London for the SMU Communications Internship program. While there I looked at London's association with food compared to that of the US. I wanted to investigate how people on a global landscape eat, cook, and relate to food in a way that is similar and different than we do. Initially, I analyzed the eating habits of students and local residents of Dallas dining out and cooking in.

Traveling to London, I observed the availability of locally grown and produced foods in London in terms of cooking at home and eating out from the tourist and residential perspective. I explored the glocal food movement through the abundant number of markets and authentic worldly cuisines offered at restaurants across the city. I observed London locals as well as students from SMU in our class. I wanted to understand the

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students' relationship to food, how they reacted to the cultural food differences in London, and if the food culture of London impacted their eating habits after the trip.

Many Americans such as myself classify themselves as a “foodie.” A foodie seeks new food experiences as a hobby rather than simply eating out for convenience or hunger. This can be extended to cooking at home, culinary tourism, restaurant management, food distribution, or even an obsession with health and nutrition. The resources to find the perfect restaurant or recipe for any individual are abundant. With a passion for writing and all things food, I recently joined the food blogger sphere. Through my blog *Bite Me: Taking Life One Bite At A Time*, I voice my take on local restaurants, food's influence on the people of Dallas, my culinary ventures at home, and life outside the realm of food. My findings in London further expand my current experiences, writing, and relationship with food to that of a city known to encompass hundreds of cultures, peoples, and languages. I am entered London on a clean slate and unfamiliar with the European nation, but I am not a tourist. I lived, ate, and worked in the city, which allowed me to discover the different eating habits, traditional foods, nutrition, food accessibility, and overall connection the people have to food in comparison to that of America.

### **Research**

#### **The Study of Food**

The geography of food is a field of human geography, which focuses on patterns of food production and consumption on the local to global scale. Through this field, researchers look to uncover and understand unequal relationships between developed and developing countries in relation to innovation, production, transportation, retail and

consumption of food. Today, people are looking more closely at the food they put into their bodies between where it comes from to what it is comprised of.

### **America's Association to Food**

The United States is known across the world for its fast food, corporate farming, and bad eating habits. The advancement of technology in the past century brought a shift in restaurant kitchens to production-line prototypes, standardization, self-service, and rapid food production. The book *Fast Food Nation*, describes the direct affect fast food has made in the workforce, landscape, culture, and how food is produced. The nation takes popular, cultural dishes and “Americanizes” them to fit a more general audience, yet leads the public to believe it’s the real thing. In addition, with the rise of social media people are broadcasting their love of food at a whole new level. From tweeting about what you are eating, checking in on foursquare where you are eating, to uploading a photo on Instagram of your food, people are obsessed with finding the best places to indulge and sharing it with the world.

There are many papers, novels and movies such as *Food Inc.*, *Super Size Me*, and *Fast Food Nation* that focus on America’s eating habits and food production, but very few compare it to that of Europe. Europe is known for its glocal food movement, a movement based on bringing authentic, cultural cuisines to the people, but through local food production. Although America is beginning to move towards this buy-local movement through the promotion of farmers market and locally bought school meals, Europe is already decades ahead in the trend, due in large part to its long-standing culinary traditions tying to culture and local foods (Just-Food, 2004). The local food market in the UK accounts for about 4% of the food market and is projected to increase

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between 5 and 10% each year. In America, local food still struggles on mainstream markets, but people are beginning to embrace the concept due to dissatisfaction with quality, taste, and safety of their food.

### **London's Association to Food**

London is a leading global city, with the fifth-largest metropolitan area GDP in the world and is one of the most-visited cities in the world. It has a diverse range of peoples and cultures with more than 300 languages spoken. The social and cultural diversity can easily be reflected in over 60 different cuisines provided in over 12,000 restaurants, which is more than half the nation's total. Food tourism is a vital part of London's attraction for visitors between the well-known markets like Borough and Walthamstow, independent corner shops, renowned restaurants, and the unparalleled choice of cuisine. London is constantly working to reconnect the consumers of food with the producers of food through programs such as the European Common Agricultural Policy and National Strategy for Sustainable Food and Farming. The United Kingdom does not cater to fast food like Americans are used to. Eating out for Londoners takes on the role of eating healthy where that does not apply to many here. Portions are smaller and more ornate. Plates from across the world such as Lebanese, Vietnamese, and Turkish are offered with genuine spices specific to that country. Fast ethnic dishes such as dim sum and lamb pita are more easily available and remain true to their origin.

### **European Food Movements**

Europe has shown through its Slow Food Movement that transnational and global movements can occur using local resources, giving rise to the idea "think global, act local" (Springer, 2011). The movement originated in Italy in 1986 when Italian

journalist, Carlo Petrini protested the building of a McDonald's near the Piazza di Spagna in Roma. It emphasizes that the fast life fostered by globalization has disrupted every aspect of traditional ways of life, specifically in regards to the food system and consumption behavior (Springer, 2011). This globalization of food could eliminate the very biodiversity that makes certain cuisines specific to different countries. It threatens the destruction of the environment, degradation of the small producer, and loss of cultural identity. By turning "fast food" and all social behaviors connected to it, into "slow food" people will be able to "rediscover the flavors and savours of regional cooking." A once local crusade, the Slow Food Movement has expanded to a transnational level in the past two decades, but Slow Food USA was not founded until 2000.

### **Globalization Versus Localization**

Globalization is defined by the intensification of social and geographical interconnectedness and an accelerated circulation of people, capital, information and cultural symbols on a worldwide scale (Just-Food, 2004). Food is a major globalized commodity that has greatly been affected by modernization through mass production and will to decrease cost of production. This in turn increased globalized food consumption patterns, decreasing local, differentiated food consumption patterns (Just-Food, 2004). Globalizing food through trade allows for easier market access through imports, but less domestic support for agriculture and export subsidies. Recently, countries are putting greater concentration on local, organic practices. In contrast to globalization, localization is a process, which ensures that all goods and services that can be produced locally are done so. It puts emphasis on cooperation for the best, rather than competition for the cheapest through large corporations.



### **Audience**

My research extends well beyond myself and the students of SMU. Initially I hoped to gain further experience writing and understanding another culture's lifestyle, but I wanted to relate everything I learn back to American society. The very act of my research will increase the awareness of people around me including those in my program, the people I interviewed, and the people behind the food I buy. It looked to make them question their habits and take the opportunity to look at a vital part of their lives. The blog on a global level as well as local Dallas level will give more scope to my experience as a writer and insight for those reading. It will influence the SMU community and our society as a whole by showing them another culture's customs. Valuable things can always be taken away from studying the way another country functions in relation to our own.

One cannot fully take away the experience of studying abroad unless they move outside their established comfort zone and take on this new, exciting life in a completely different environment. My findings will prove beneficial to the Study Abroad office and future study abroad students. This research allowed me to further gain career experience and enjoy London in a deeper and richer way than regular students.

### **Methodology**

I used qualitative research analysis to obtain opinions, preferences, habits, and the overall nature of the communities in London versus those of Dallas. Participant observation is the best method because I gained an intimate familiarity and relationship with the groups and individuals I come into contact with. My involvement proved beneficial as I can expand on my personal experiences and give my personal insight. I

created an intense involvement with the people and food itself in the different environments over an extended period of time.

Returning from London, I took my observations and looked at the current food issues across America. Taking my knowledge of the London food system and other academic research, I started a series on my blog entitled “Food Is,” which describes the current state of food in America, where America should look to go with its relationship to food, and how Americans can work together to get to this relationship. My blog features articles on a healthy lifestyle, nutritious recipes, eating out around the city, a forum for individuals across the globe to discuss their relationship to food, and statistical results from the survey I gave to 80 students at SMU. My blog serves as a home for people across the world to learn what a healthy relationship with food means and how they can achieve that. People can share their thoughts and better understand how a strong food system occurs when everyone is connected together.

I used my blog to write on my experiences in London as well as tackle current issues such as the Slow Food Movement, the push for buying local, and the concern for health and nutrition every country struggles with. I talked to residents and people I work with to gain insight into their relationship with food and opportunities to eat globally as well as buy locally. I will observe people in restaurants, markets, and groceries. I observed and wrote on the availability and authenticity of the different global foods London offers as well as their dedication to keep local farming.

Prior to my trip I published research on my blog on local Dallas restaurants. I conducted interviews with a number of students and faculty on campus to understand their relationship to food, so that I could use it in my analysis of London’s food culture. I

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gathered research on Dallas's food production, consumption, and local movement efforts as well as the US as a whole.

This survey served to analyze the eating habits of Southern Methodist University students in Dallas, Texas. Questions range from childhood eating experiences to current eating routines in order to look at the student's relationship to food and how this relationship was molded through adolescence. A written questionnaire of 12 open-ended questions was distributed to 80 seniors and juniors, chosen through cluster sampling of various classes at the school. The study included 32 females and 48 males, with 3 Muslim, 12 Hispanic, 20 African American, and 45 Caucasian participants. All participants had access to their own kitchen and were not on a school-eating plan.

### **Results**

#### **What are sustainable practices versus that of local practices?**

**60%** of students held no knowledge of the definitions of sustainable or local practices, let alone the difference between the two. The remaining **40%** of students held some concept of what the two meant, but often believed sustainable and local were synonymous terms.

#### **What is a balanced meal?**

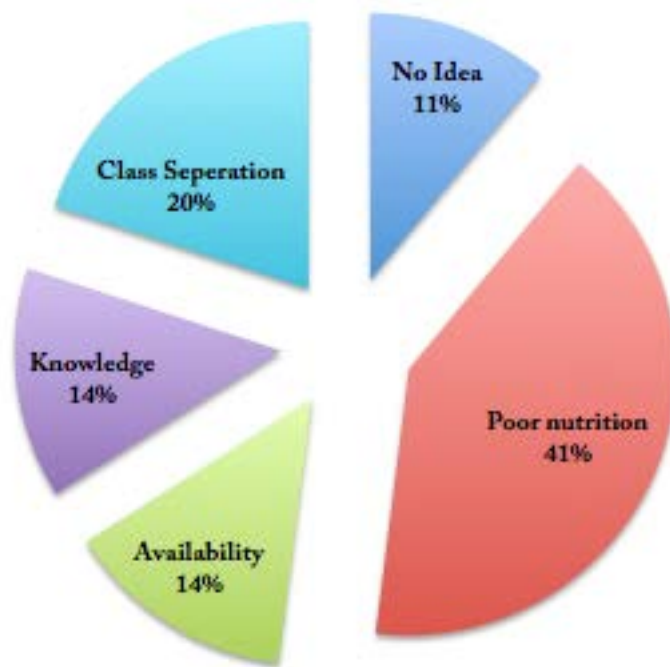
Individuals understood that a balanced meal is centered around the food pyramid with proper proportions of protein, vegetables, grain, fruit, and fat. However, a large number of students misunderstood what the correct proportion sizes are for each food group.

A balanced meal means obtaining the right types and amounts of food and drink to supply nutrition and energy for supporting proper growth and development. To achieve

a balanced diet, one must eat a variety of foods from each of the food groups. This is based on knowing the amount of calories one should consume everyday, what size proportions one should consume, and what are the healthy choices from each food group.

### **How can nations be both obese and food insecure?**

Responses to this question fell under a wide range of reasoning, each of which plays a role in this key issue around the world.



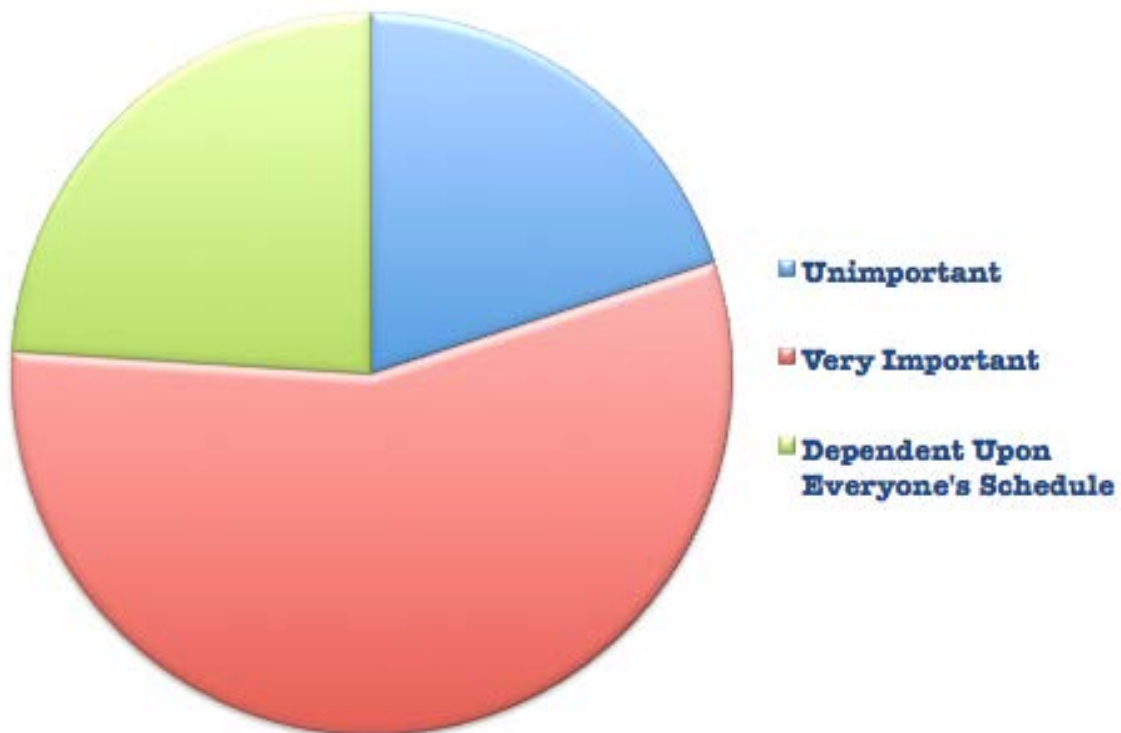
The USDA defines food insecurity as part of a continuum that includes hunger, malnutrition, and famine. On a long-term scale, lack of food security becomes hunger, which is “an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.” Famine refers to food security on a population-level, specifically when “at

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least 20 percent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope.” Lastly, malnutrition is caused by food insecurity, but results from poor health as well. This is a result of poor care for children or an unhealthy environment. “Food desert” is a term used to describe a location that has limited access to healthful, nutritious food, commonly found in low-income areas.

### **How important were family meals in your household?**

Over half of the students sampled ranked family meals as very important with about half of these participants claiming family occurred every night in their household. About a quarter of all the participants claimed family meals were important, but often depended upon each individual’s schedule.



Looking at these responses, I then cross-analyzed those that answered “very important” with the questions that related to current eating habits. I found that those individuals, who experienced and understood the importance of communal meals, are able to cook at home; however, almost half still eat out a majority of the time. These students still acknowledge the importance of community as they usually eat out with friends, but have lost the culture of preparing a meal themselves. Lastly, in regards to sticking to a particular diet or routine, students that reported family meals as “very important” were still passive about their decisions. Almost half stuck to no specific routine and a small majority only tried to eat healthy when possible.

### **Favorite food memory**

I found that when it came to food memories as a child, answers were centered around either a holiday meal or cooking with family and/or friends. This shows the importance of food in community and the importance of community in food.

Robert Putnam from Bowling Alone says, “America is becoming a nation of increasingly disconnected, unhappy people.” America’s lack of connection is the driving force behind all our current issues in the food system. Food cultures that once treated cooking and eating as central elements in maintaining social structure and tradition are being overcome by cultures dominated by cost and convenience of food. Social meals are a thing of the past and cooking is merely an act seen on television and defined by the books garnishing our coffee tables.

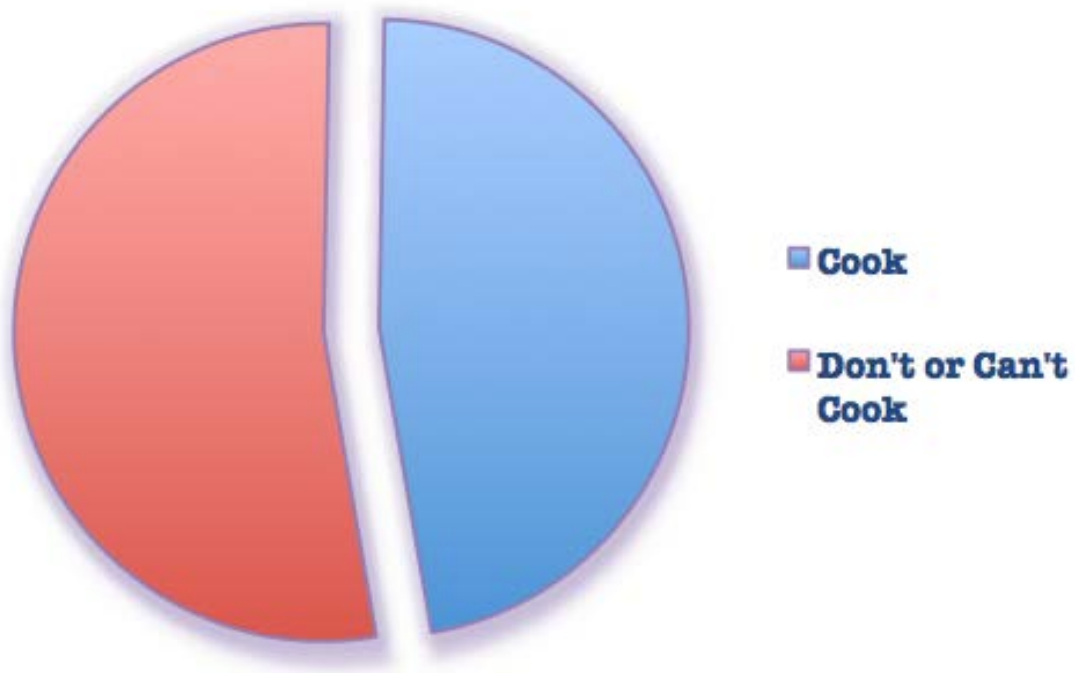
### **Favorite restaurant:**

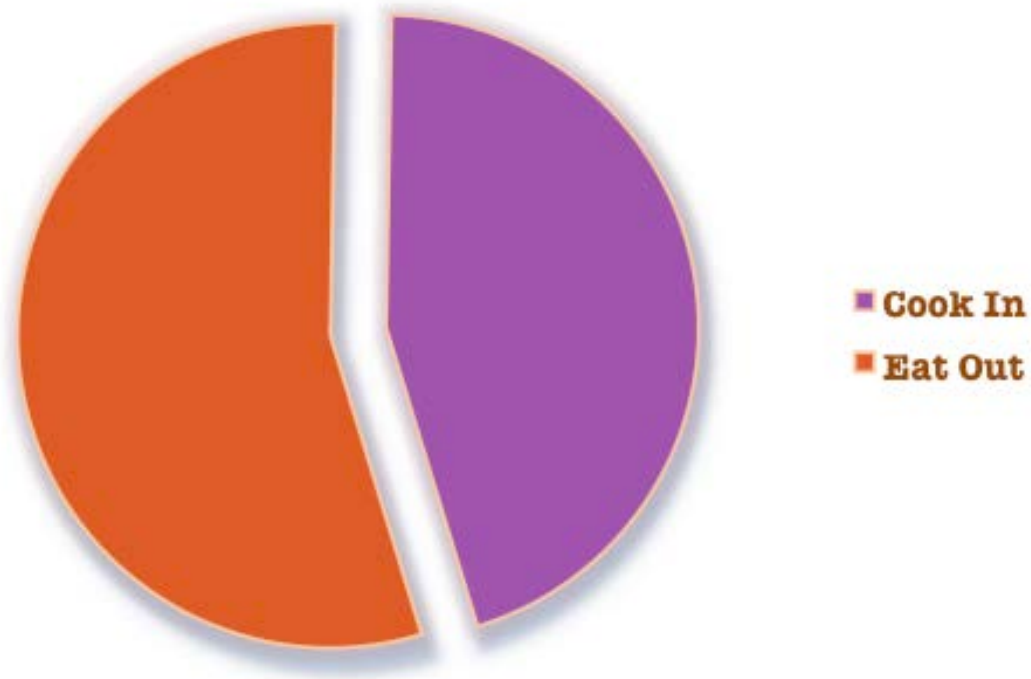
About 75% of students claimed their favorite restaurant is a some type of chain such as Chipotle or McDonalds instead of a family owned or city-specific establishment.

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This shows a couple different ideas, such as the idea that eating has become more of a thing of convenience rather than experience. Additionally, the younger generation is losing a sense of culture and diversity. The United States is known across the world for its fast food, corporate farming, and bad eating habits. The advancement of technology in the past century brought a shift in restaurant kitchens to production-line prototypes, standardization, self-service, and rapid food production. The book *Fast Food Nation*, describes the direct affect fast food has made in the workforce, landscape, culture, and how food is produced. The nation takes popular, cultural dishes and “Americanizes” them to fit a more general audience, yet leads the public to believe it’s the real thing.

### Cook at home?



**Cook or eat out more?****How much do you spend on food monthly?**

Most of those sampled acknowledged that they do not keep a monthly budget of food expenses, with a small number giving no response to the question. Generally, the students were scattered across an expenditure ranging from \$100-\$500+. This question reflects on the transition students make from relying on parents to purchase their food to buying food on their own, preparing meals on their own, and account for food costs on their own. Income levels for the students was not accessed, so some students may have more financial means than others and some may be held more responsible for finances than others.

**Do you stick to a certain diet or eating routine? What is it?**

Once again, findings show that students are passive about their eating choices. Almost half of participants do not stick to a particular eating routine or diet, which shows



that students do not have a connection or relationship to the food they consume.

Generally, students do not take into consideration organic, local, sustainable practices, but half of the individuals responded they do look to eat for a healthy lifestyle. However, this does not suggest what “healthy” means to these individuals, so students could have a misunderstanding of what a clean diet is. This appeared to be the case when students answered on food proportions for a balanced meal.

**If the global market was closed what food could you obtain locally or produce on your own?**

I found the results from this question to be the most interesting because if participants were forced to rely solely on their local system for food then their diets would drastically change. America is one of the largest meat consumers between beef and chicken, but only 17 percent of students would know how to obtain this resource locally or on their own. Half of the participants believed they could obtain fruits and vegetables, which proved to be the most reliable and readily available source of nutrition in their eyes. Almost a quarter of students had no idea what food they could obtain locally or own their own, which reiterates students’ little knowledge of local, organic, and sustainable practices. It is daunting to see that only 30 percent of participants could produce some means of food on their own and those that could, would only be able to produce one or two items.

Paul Roberts, author of The End of Food, asks readers to do a mental inventory of the items from the grocery that, if the modern food system were temporarily turned off, they would be able to replace locally, or even produce in the backyard. He does not suggest we all turn to the preindustrial food economy or live on nuts and berries, but that

we must make it a priority to think more about what we eat and how it is made because we have both encouraged the decline of food and lost something profound from our own lives by disconnecting ourselves from the food process. There is a breathtaking volume of food still being shipped to the U.S. from China and that shows just how unconnected we have become from what is arguably the most essential human function. Our choices as consumers affect everyone around us; we are all connected. What we choose to buy and eat affects how food is produced processed, distributed, who benefits, and who pays.

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