



Food Preferences of Kenyon Students: the *Ideal* Meal and the *Real* Meal

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Abstract:

College student diets reveal much concerning food choices, issues of control, and individuality. We explore Kenyon College students' food ideals and the factors influencing food choice. Most student dietary ideals emphasize balance and healthfulness, indicative of Western values which stress the nutritional properties of foods and their impact on physique. Students' perceived abilities to reach dietary ideals while self-reliant during the summer vs. relying on meal plans in the school year were compared. Self-reliant students ate more processed/convenience foods, citing reasons such as lack of money, time, and skill. Despite complaints about institutional food, students on meal plans ate more unprocessed/whole foods, better reflecting their dietary ideals.

Introduction

Food choices are influenced by a myriad of variables such as culture, health, age, income, education, location, gender, and family traditions, to name a few. Transitioning between adolescence and adulthood, the food choices of college students are of particular importance to many because of the long-term consequences for health and well-being (Smart & Brown, 2001; Conklin *et al.*, 2005; Schroeter *et al.*, 2007). This study explores the notion of a perceived "ideal" diet, and how that compares to the "real" diet of Kenyon college students. The extent to which someone meets their food ideals whilst providing for themselves and whilst being provided for by a college dining hall, is something of great interest, as it has been widely acknowledged that being on a meal plan forces one to eat institutional food and at institutional meal times, a common complaint of college students the world over (Counihan, 2008; Levi *et al.*, 2006; Soliah *et al.*, 2006). The issue is whether college meal plans inhibit one's ability to meet their food ideals, or whether, given the opportunity to fend for oneself, ideals are better met.

Data was collected from 25 student volunteers who lived on the Kenyon College campus over the summer of 2008. Each volunteer was interviewed twice during the course of this project. The first interview took place during the summer when students were organizing their own meals, and the second interview took place during the following fall semester, while they were eating in the college dining hall. Kenyon College requires all students to sign up for the meal plan which is part of their tuition and fees. The plan allows unlimited access to the dining hall during its hours of operation. Written consent was obtained from each student prior to the first interview, and these interviews took place at a location determined by the participating student. Each student was asked a standard set of questions at both interviews, and confidentiality via a numerical coding system was kept by the researcher during data analysis. All aspects of the project were reviewed and approved by the Kenyon Institutional Review Board prior to the project's undertaking.

Methods

Table 1: Students notions of the perfect/ideal diet

| Category | Sub-category | N | Quotes |
|---------------------------|--|----|--|
| Nutrition & Health (N=46) | Balance/variety | 15 | •No junk food...even though that's my favorite stuff. |
| | Freshness | 4 | •Canned is cheaper, but ideally it would all be fresh. |
| | Some factor avoided/limited (i.e. trans fat/corn syrup/red meat) | 8 | •Protein, Americans push protein. America should be less meat focused. •I limit sugar, for obvious reasons. •I try to limit processed foods. |
| | General health consciousness | 9 | •Health is the big picture, I don't want the junk, just straight food. |
| | Organic | 3 | |
| | Regularity and/or portion control | 5 | |
| | Natural | 2 | |
| Aesthetics (N=5) | Color/appeal | 1 | •Ideally, in a no consequence world, I would eat McDonald's every day...it's so good! |
| | Taste (including 'no consequence' eating) | 4 | •If I were one of those people who would be thin no matter what, and could get nutrients elsewhere, I think I would just eat French fries! |
| Specific Food Type (N=47) | Sweets/snacks | 5 | •Thanksgiving, that is ideal! |
| | Carbohydrate source | 5 | •I eat a lot of fruit, granola, yogurt. |
| | Meat/dairy/protein source | 12 | •Lots of vegetables and greens, and fruit, I love fruit. |
| | Vegetables/fruit | 17 | |
| Context (N=4) | Particular meal/cuisine described | 8 | |
| | Social event/setting | 2 | •My ideal food is that which I get at home. |
| | Company | 1 | •To me food is about who you eat with, and your relationships with those people. |
| Result (N=2) | Time of day | 1 | •I think of food as a cultural act. |
| | Positive feeling/energy | 2 | •Eating right gives me such a positive energy burst, the whole day is better. •An ideal diet would be something that feels good. |

N = Number of students with this response. Students often gave several answers, and each was counted, so although there were 25 students, there are more than 25 noted responses in several categories

The Ideal Meal

Western cultural values of food as primarily a factor that affects the physique and appearance [reductionalist science, Pollan 2008], are very common in this sample. Overall, non-nutrition based ideals about food were minimal. Only 11 out of the 104 responses to what was an ideal diet were about context of eating or the aesthetics of food, while the other 93 answers were about specific food types, and nutritional/health factors relating to diet. Concern for caloric or fat content were common, results which are found in similar studies of college students (Marietta *et al.* in 1999).

Student's believed the most influential factor shaping their ideals was their cultural upbringing, with special emphasis on the influence of parents and/or other adults, and the media. Shankar *et al.* (2004) looked at the relationship between differences in cultural upbringing and food behavior, and concluded that upbringing is a very influential factor. Dietary habits form at a young age and are thus impacted heavily by the upbringing of an individual (Georgiou *et al.*, 1997).

Table 2: Factors that impact food ideals

| Category | Sub-category | N | Quotes |
|---|--------------------------------|----|---|
| Nutrition & Health (N=15) | Balance/variety/food groups | 9 | •I am a health freak. |
| | General health consciousness | 6 | •I always knew that eating balanced meals was important. I use the Plate Model (Camelon <i>et al.</i> 1998) quite a lot. |
| Aesthetics (N=4) | Taste | 4 | •Things that taste fresh. |
| Context (N= 22) | Politics/ethics | 9 | •I will never shop at Wal-mart. |
| | Locality | 4 | •I refuse to eat anything with corn syrup in it. |
| | Economic/cost of food | 6 | •How much money I have. If I'm pulling pennies from under the couch, I won't be buying luxurious food. |
| Upbringing & cultural influences (N=57) | Social situation | 3 | •We are on the higher end of the economic scale. We can afford healthy food. •I prefer free-range – those chickens are treated humanely. |
| | Parents/influential elder | 23 | •In health class you learn all about the food pyramid, the plate model, that stuff. |
| | Academic course | 7 | •My coach for high school lacrosse taught me about nutrition, how to eat to perform well. |
| | Media (books, television etc.) | 11 | •I really think my friends at Kenyon have had a huge impact on me – the way they eat and the way they view food. But girls here are really skinny...I have never felt worse about my body than I did first semester of freshman year! |
| | Sport/activity | 9 | |
| Result (N=8) | Body image | 4 | •Growing up in a small farming community has simplified my food tastes. I am suspicious of food with a lot of frills, it means the food itself can't hold an eaters attention. |
| | Peer influence | 3 | |
| Result (N=8) | Feeling after eating | 8 | •Definitely the way that I feel when I don't eat, or eat things I shouldn't eat. |

The Real Meal

Table 3: Diet during the summer

| Food type | Examples of foods | N |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----|
| Whole/ self-prepared foods (N=47) | Meats | 9 |
| | Vegetables | 12 |
| | Fruits | 10 |
| | Pasta/rice | 9 |
| | (Home) baked goods | 2 |
| | Eggs | 5 |
| Convenience/ Processed Foods (N=37) | Boxed foods (cereal, easymac etc.) | 17 |
| | Microwaveable meals | 5 |
| | Ramen noodles | 4 |
| | Canned foods | 5 |
| | Sandwiches | 6 |
| | Fast food | 5 |
| Dining out (N=13) | Dining Hall | 3 |
| | Restaurant | 5 |

Table 4: Diet during the academic year

| Food type | Examples of foods | N |
|--|------------------------------------|----|
| Whole foods (prepared by dining hall staff) (N=79) | Meats | 18 |
| | Vegetables/salad | 25 |
| | Fruits | 8 |
| | Pasta/rice | 17 |
| | Baked goods | 4 |
| | Pizza | 7 |
| | Boxed foods (cereal, easymac etc.) | 3 |
| Convenience/ Processed foods (N=12) | Microwaveable meals | 0 |
| | Ramen noodles | 0 |
| | Canned foods | 0 |
| | Sandwiches | 9 |
| Dining out (N=0) | Fast food | 0 |
| | Restaurant | 0 |

In the summer every student shopped for food in Mount Vernon, the nearest city to Gambier. Of the 25, only 7 students mentioned buying food in Gambier. Kroger was the most commonly visited supermarket (N=18) followed by Wal-Mart (N=7) with 18 students shopping there regularly. Though four students refused to shop at Wal-Mart for political or ethical reasons. Only eight students mentioned visiting the local farmer's Market in Mount Vernon, open Saturdays from 9am-12pm.

We compared students actual diets to their *ideal* foods, such as vegetables/fruit (N=17) and meat/dairy/protein source (N=12) shown in Table 1, however Tables 3 and 4 illustrate that during the summer students ate considerably fewer whole foods (N=47) than they did in the dining hall during the academic year (N=79).

Students admitted to eating considerably more convenience/processed foods during the summer (N=37) than during the academic year (N=12, mostly sandwiches). However, it should be noted that the students were discussing what they ate in the dining hall, and may have neglected to mention snack foods they eat beyond that.



During the summer, four out of 25 students felt they were meeting their ideals. In contrast, during the academic year 12 students felt they were meeting their ideals. Based on my own comparisons of their ideal diets vs. what they reported to actually consume, 11 more closely approximated their ideals during the summer, and 14 did better during the academic year eating in the dining hall.

Students generally ate more processed food in the summer, whereas during the academic year they ate more whole foods like fruits, vegetables, and meat. Although generally perceived as being less tasty than they would ideally want, the dining hall diets more closely match the ideals that were stated. Although students tend to complain about institutional food, this research and the work of others shows that self-reliance does not necessarily lead to an improvement in diet (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

During the summer, the cost and convenience of dealing with raw ingredients was the most frequently mentioned reason for not meeting ideals (Table 5). These results conform to the ideas expressed by Levi *et al.* (2006), in which cost and convenience were among the most commonly considered factors surrounding food choice, and they also mirror Marquis' (2005) study where convenience was shown to be the primary factor of food choice, followed by cost, pleasure, health, and weight concern (Marquis, 2005). Skill was another factor that limited ideals being met during the summer, as students were less likely to cook or prepare food from scratch if they felt unsure of their culinary skills (Soliah *et al.* 2006).

During the academic year (Table 6), taste, variety of food, and convenience were the most commonly perceived limiting factors. Students claimed that the long queues and crowding made time an issue, and the more ideal food was less convenient to access.

Several students thought eating during the academic year was made more ideal because of the dining hall, which is newly renovated, aesthetically pleasing, and enables intimate eating experiences.

Ironically, though students have the potential to exercise greater food choice during the summer when they are not participating in a campus meal plan, more of them meet ideals during the school year. Student diet ideals reflect what is described as, a food culture suffering from *Orthorexia Nervosa*, or an "unhealthy obsession with healthy eating" (Pollan, 2008).



Farmer's Market, Mount Vernon

Real vs. Ideal

Table 5: Factors limiting *Ideals* during the summer

| Reason why: | Not able | Able |
|------------------------|----------|------|
| Cost | 17 | 0 |
| Convenience/time | 10 | 2 |
| Skill | 6 | 1 |
| Influence of situation | 7 | 0 |



Peirce main dining hall, Kenyon College

Table 6: Factors limiting *Ideals* during the academic year

| Reason why: | Not able | Able |
|---------------------|----------|------|
| Convenience/time | 9 | 1 |
| Variety/balance | 8 | 8 |
| Taste/food quality | 10 | 3 |
| Dining hall setting | 0 | 3 |

