

UVM Student Conference
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Exploring the Relationship Between Engagement with the
Food System and Healthy Eating

The prevalence of obesity in the U.S. has been rising at an alarming rate over the past few decades; as of 2010, all states have over a 20% obesity rate. Factors such as increased consumption of processed foods, and inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables have been linked to this rise in obesity. Simultaneously, small, and particularly mid-sized farms are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with industrialized farms, yet have been cited as providing socio-economic benefits to communities. This research explores the relationship between consumer engagement with the food system and healthy eating. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty Vermont residents in January and February of 2012. The interviews highlight three themes by which consumers make decisions about purchasing food, including relationships or embeddedness of food; health crises, such as obesity or allergies; and price or marketness. Preliminary findings show that motives for purchasing food by a combination of these three mechanisms may be closely related to varying levels of engagement with the food system, which may in turn be linked to choosing a healthy diet. This research could highlight avenues by which consumers may be encouraged to purchase healthier, less processed foods to improve their diet, while supporting local farms.