Preliminary Idea

In universities around the United States, Luther’s food provider Sodexo began a program called “Meatless Mondays” where they provided and promoted a vegetarian line in their dining halls. Using this idea, but knowing that Luther already provides vegetarian options, the question became how we could increase vegetarianism among students.

Sustainability coordinator Maren Stumme-Diers led me to the idea of challenging students to eat vegetarian. This became a good jumping point for the Veg Yourself Pledge, which was a challenge that began during Lent to eat vegetarian at least one day a week for the rest of the semester.

I was personally inspired by Treehugger founder Graham Hill’s “weekday vegetarian” idea. Hill proposes to eat vegetarian during the week and eat meat on the weekend. This idea was great because it gave me goals and structure and I no longer had to fight my conscious knowing that industrial meat production is such a problem even though I do enjoy the taste of meat. This new personal practice really became my motivation and structure for the pledge.

The Project

There are many different rationales for eating vegetarian. In framing the pledge, I wanted to include a variety of reasons, but decided to mainly focus on the health component. In our culture, there is a certain stigma against “tree hugging” environmentalists and “animal loving” vegetarians and I really wanted the pledge to seem as applicable as possible to the meat eater. By making the pledge about eating more of the most neglected food groups, students could identify with their eating habits and find a need for improvement.
In total, 103 signed the pledge constituting about 2,500 meatless days. Here is the breakdown:

*By Grade*
- Freshmen: 31
- Sophomores: 34
- Juniors: 13
- Seniors: 19
- Faculty/Staff: 6

*By Days*
- One: 10
- Two: 19
- Three: 11
- Four: 12
- Five: 9
- Six: 3
- Seven: 27

Vegetarians and vegans were encouraged to sign the pledge and they were equally excited to join this collective progress toward vegetarianism. Almost everyone who signed the pledge did challenge themselves by pledging more vegetarian days than their current habits permitted.

Out of the 103 pledges, 54 signed up to participate in an online discussion group where weekly emails were sent with information regarding vegetarian options in the caf, the Dirty Dozen, statistics about the pledge, reasons for eating vegetarian, etc.

[Link to headlines archive](#)
[Link to Sustainability website](#)

**Insights**

The excessive production and use of meat in the American diet is partly due to a cultural myth that meat is a necessary food group when in actuality, meat is only one source of a multitude of proteins. Challenging students to go meatless requires them to find other protein sources, allows them to diversify their diet for the better, and questions their notions of cultural norms.

The pledge was powerful in the effect that when meat is taken out of the diet, you start to question what foods will sustain you and you begin to enter a new relationship with food. There is no other food group when taken off a plate that makes you completely rethink your meal as easily as meat. Making the pledge about nutrition seemed very effective because we do seek a balance of different foods and are really dependent on its nutrients. This thought process of entering a more intentional relationship with food, diversifying ones diet, and realizing a balance and dependency, is a process that is so crucial to develop because we desperately need to apply it to our relationship with the earth.
Student Reflections
“T’ve discovered the Vegetarian line in the Caf! Before I kind of just skipped past it, but they have some really good options there. I find myself eating more vegetables now than before I signed the pledge, and I'm more conscious about the nutrients I take in, and if I'm getting enough of each food group.”

“On most days there was some meat option that was very enticing. I would often take some, but in smaller quantities than I typically would.”

“Meat is wonderful when mixed in with other vegetables, grains, and sauces. Like in a sweet and sour mixture, or stir fry. Meat as a main dish tends to be repetitive and loses its spot as a treat.”

“Yes, I have found myself filling my plate with items from the vegetarian line, and enjoying really tasty vegetables like brussel sprouts and asparagus, quinoa, sweet potatoes, mushrooms, peppers rellenas, and okra. I've also really come to appreciate the dark leafy greens in the salad bar, and I've found that cucumbers and celery are tasty with hummus!”

“I don't think humans need meat. It's definitely not tasty enough that we should have it at every family dinner-- that's unhealthy and costly, for both us and the planet.”

“I've discovered a lot of great vegetables and meatless dishes that make my dinners more flavorful and interesting! I feel healthier and better about my eating choices without the typical meat options. I also know that when I'm buying my own food, it'll be far less expensive to leave the meat out of the shopping cart.”

“Prior to the pledge, I was attempting to eat vegetarian 2-3 days a week, and doing this pledge has made me more dedicated to maintaining a part-time vegetarian diet. I now constitute up to 4-5 days a week of eating no meats.”

*Those who responded to the reflection questions justified vegetarian eating mainly because of health benefits and the environmental impact of meat. However, animal treatment, poor industrial practices, and cost benefit were also important factors.*