


Summer 8-26-2015

# The Food Education Project: Teaching Nutrition through Environmental Awareness

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## Recommended Citation

Pinto, Caren R., "The Food Education Project: Teaching Nutrition through Environmental Awareness" (2015). *Master's Projects*. Paper 185.

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The Food Education Project: Teaching Nutrition through Environmental Awareness

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Master's of Public Health  
August 26, 2015

**Abstract**

This paper examines a 300-hour fieldwork internship that took place during a summer semester at a local non-profit called the Food Education Project (FEP). FEP provided a practical and hands-on opportunity, which allowed for the knowledge gained over the past two years at the University of San Francisco's Public Health Program to be put to public health practice. The experience was invaluable for the author's professional and personal growth.

The paper will explore the prevalence of obesity and type II diabetes in the nation's youth today. Second, a literature review will be conducted to examine the relevance of in school interventions to combat obesity and type II diabetes. Next, a description of the Food Education Project's staff will be provided as well as various programmatic ways in which FEP is trying to address the obesity epidemic. The importance of a grass roots level organization and what makes FEP unique is explored. A project will be described where the author further researched the validity of the program, and sought to examine if FEP was having a positive and helpful impact for their students. From here, competencies that were put forth from the Master's of Public Health Program at the University of San Francisco will be addressed and acknowledged in how they related to the author's experience. Relevant and useful coursework will be recognized and final thoughts on the author's experience during these 300 hours.

## **Introduction**

Childhood (2-11 years of age) and adolescent (12-19 years of age) obesity is a scourge that permeates throughout the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and has been four times more likely for adolescents in the past 30 years (CDC, 2015). Since 2012, more than one third of children, as well as adolescents, have been deemed overweight or obese (CDC, 2015). Childhood obesity is significantly correlated to an onset of adult obesity, which is another reason that it is imperative to target youth to lead a healthier lifestyle (Skinner & Skelton, 2014). Roughly 17% of children aged 2-10 years of age are obese, which can lead to a multitude of other problems including high blood pressure and high cholesterol—problems that can subsequently lead to other health risks including type II diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (CDC, 2015). The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey examined youth aged 2-19 years old from 1999-2014. The evidence showed that there was an upward trend in obesity amongst this age group. Although the obesity trends became stagnant from 2012-2014, the trend shows that the upward obesity trends in youth is a large public health concern that needs to be addressed (Skinner & Skelton, 2014).

Youths have become a critical link in the obesity endemic and continuum because they are easily influenced and bad habits are learned at a very early age. Healthy nutrition for children is crucial to their well-being. In this paper, the reader will learn about the Food Education Project and be led to understand why proper nourishment is the cornerstone for our youths to live meaningful, longer, and healthier lives. This paper will provide examples of the innovative ideas The Food Education Project has come up with to begin a movement to ensure a healthier lifestyle for kids.

Over 2.3 million adults in California have been diagnosed with diabetes. Diabetes is

currently the seventh leading cause of death in the California, and the underlying cause of 8,000 deaths annually (Conroy, Lee, Pendleton, & Bates, 2014). Nationally, minority residents are disproportionately affected by overweight and obesity. Hispanics and African Americans are twice as likely to obese or diagnosed with type II diabetes, and are twice as likely to die from this preventable disease, than Non-Hispanics and Caucasians (Conroy et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that there is a cultural connection with obesity incidence. For example, the rate of obesity in Hispanic adolescents is double the rate of non-Hispanic adolescents (Campbell, 2009, p. 171). Culturally, Hispanics are more accepting of a fuller figure and parents do not tend to think that being overweight as a child could pose as a threat to health as they get older (Campbell, 2009, p. 172). Also, many ethnic foods that are served at home in different cultures, contribute to weight gain. Overall, body image, portion control, family beliefs, cultural foods, and unhealthy eating habits at home, and independently, all contribute to the higher rate in obesity amongst different cultures.

In an article entitled, “Strategies for the prevention and control of obesity in the school setting: systematic review and meta- analysis,” the authors research the effectiveness of obesity prevention programs in school settings. For the analysis, Peer Review Journals were analyzed from 1966-2004, which included over 64 journals that were eligible. The authors found that a healthy intervention that combined nutrition and physical activity were deemed effective at achieving healthier body mass indices (BMI’s) within a school setting (Katz, O’Connell, Nijike, Yeh, & Nawaz, 2008). Furthermore, students who had some sort of parental or familial guidance when it came to nutrition had a more successful outcome in regard to their health (Katz, et al., 2008). Another study entitled, “A school-based intervention for diabetes risk reduction” the authors used a cohort of students who’s race or socioeconomic factors placed them at risk for

type II diabetes. Four thousand six hundred and three students participated in the study, and each student was measured for their BMI, glucose/insulin levels, and weight circumference (Foster et al., 2010). While the prevalence of obesity remained the same in the control group versus the intervention group, the BMI rates went down in the schools that initiated a programmatic installment compared to the control group (Foster, et al., 2010).

The studies described above demonstrate that even though school programs may not be sufficient in decreasing the rates of obesity and type II diabetes on their own, intervention does help decrease BMI's and has an overall positive effect on the students' health. Even though these changes may be incremental, they are a step to promoting health awareness, which will lead to a decrease in health risks for at-risk youth. The school setting is a powerful resource to tap into since it offers a platform to disseminate knowledge about the risk factors for obesity and type II diabetes among children and adolescents. There is a need to create comprehensive and effective school-based obesity and type II diabetes interventions that shows long term-results. Starting at a grassroots level, and addressing the underlying causes of obesity and type II diabetes can potentially have long-term beneficial effects. That is were FEP comes in.

**Agency Description:**

The Food Education Project (FEP) is a local non-profit start up organization based out of San Francisco, California. FEP was started in 2011 with a mission “to improve community health by teaching practices through environmental awareness” (The Food Education Project, 2015). FEP addresses the underlying causes of obesity and type II diabetes by educating and endorsing four basic components: health, nutrition, food, and environment. FEP was started as a response to a needs assessment, which determined negative health outcomes in impoverished locations through out the city of San Francisco. Due to the high rate of childhood obesity and type II diabetes in these underprivileged areas, FEP made a goal to create health awareness

among students and to provide them with the proper tools and resources to prevent negative health outcomes. From there, they were able to educate students about health issues as well as mobilize the surrounding communities to fight against childhood obesity and type II diabetes.

FEP is currently teaching at three schools in San Francisco, California: two public elementary schools (Daniel Webster Elementary and McKinley Elementary) and one private, all-girls high school (Immaculate Conception Academy (ICA)). Although ICA is a private school, the majority of students are accepted on scholarship. Among the ICA students, 65% are Latina, 18% are Filipina/Asian, 7% are African American, 7% multi-racial, and 3% white (ICA, 2015). This coming fall, FEP will work to be in two more schools in the Bay Area: St. James, which is a private school, Kindergarten through 8th, and Mission Preparatory School, which is a public charter school, Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

FEP is going on its fourth year since Executive Director, Amanda Lesky, founded it in 2011. In March 2014, FEP applied for a 501c3 tax-exemption from the Federal government in order to obtain a non-profit status. FEP was approved as a 501c3 in six months. The team continues to be small, but diverse in background and comprised of members who are all eager to help out in any way he or she can. Amanda Lesky is the confident and intelligent brain behind the organization and she is a marriage and family therapist with an extensive background in environmental health. Tina Wiley, also employed full time as a health educator, has a background in Education from University of California, Santa Cruz. Nikki Naverette attended the University of San Francisco for her Masters in Public Health and is a full time health educator. Recently, Amy Verhey was brought onto the team as a publicist. Amy works at Edelman PR and will be helping out with all social media outreach as well coordinating FEP's efforts to receive attention in local publications. Positive media awareness will be very beneficial

for the start up moving forward. The Board of Directors is comprised of 10 people who help make important decisions for the nonprofit. The team also has interns, who historically have hailed from the University of San Francisco, and volunteers who help with the organization's operation and management. It is always important to have motivated people who want to help out, which is why Amanda is always open to new volunteers for the program. To continue to grow, FEP looks for corporate sponsorships as well as donations. In the past, FEP has partnered with Paragon, Kelly Moore Paints, Whole Foods, Flora Grubb, the Market, and of course, the University of San Francisco. FEP continues to look for meaningful partnerships that can be mutually beneficial to both parties.

FEP believes in four major components in order to teach students the necessary tools to succeed and lead healthier lives. These four components are the following: health, nutrition, food, and environment. FEP strives to enhance community health by: strengthening relationships between education and community development by offering activities in nutrition, health, and agriculture; increasing awareness and the level of ability to prepare, cook, and grow food products; focusing on teaching techniques and practices that encourage greater health and environmental awareness; and, exploring awareness around health and how certain foods affect health (The Food Education Project, 2015). FEP strives to teach the students about their bodies and the environment. The aim is to have students go home and disseminate this information to their families leading to a healthy and informed community. The teaching model for FEP is tangible since students are able to cultivate food in the garden with the teachers and then make a recipe with the food that is grown. The curriculum comes full circle, as the importance of environmental impact as well as healthy recipes is practical and realistic. The students are able to see first hand how to grow food and make healthy recipes with that food, subsequently leading to



more aware and excited students. In order to make every class different, FEP hosts guest speakers to teach different lesson plans to the students. FEP has had chefs come in, as well as nurses and environmental advocates who can teach about the importance of composting and recycling.

This summer, FEP taught kindergarten through third grade as part of their summer curriculum. During the school year, FEP teaches first grade through fifth grade as well as ninth grade at ICA. FEP has been able to prove itself both for in school curriculum as well as an after school program. The FEP program can be incorporated into the school's schedule depending on what they need throughout the school year. When FEP is teaching after school they are involved with the After School Enrichment Program also known as ASEP.

Throughout the 36-week curriculum that FEP offers, research illustrates that the most effective way to present the material to the students is one component at a time. Through this building process, students have been more likely to understand, and more importantly, to retain the material presented to them. First, FEP teaches the health component of the curriculum, which provides students the opportunity to explore their own bodies and the negative side effects and possibilities that could result from poor attention to their health and the foods that they eat. Second, FEP focuses on nutrition, exploring micro and macronutrients' effect on their overall health needs and outcomes. Third, FEP teaches about the environmental component of food so students can begin to understand the source, sustainability, and importance of locally grown food. The environmental component is taught through gardening, lecturing, and cooking. Fourth, FEP teaches the cooking component in which students apply their knowledge of health, nutrition, and environmental concerns to the kitchen.

The curriculum serves as an aid to assist the students on learning more about nutrition,

their bodies and the environment. Due to the high satisfaction rates amongst students and school administrators FEP anticipates that the program will be able to be incorporated in new schools in the upcoming years.

### **Project Learning Objectives**

Due to the author's interest in health promotion, disease prevention, and nutrition, it drove her to work for Amanda Lesky at the Food Education Project. Learning objectives were created between the author and Amanda Lesky, which can be found in the appendices (Appendix A).

The 300-hour internship was comprised of tasks of all types of duration and difficulty. The main goals included in-classroom assistance, searching for grants as well as grant writing, and searching for donations and community partnerships. During the summer semester lesson plans included: the body systems; the digestive system; My Plate; communicable diseases; the importance of sleep; diabetes; and more. The author also spent time gardening with the students, educating them about the importance of urban gardens and local and seasonal foods.

Furthermore, this summer, the author became certified for Food Handling Safety. The certification was necessary as activities in the fieldwork often included prepping healthy snacks for the students, which, in turn, introduced them to in-season fruits and vegetables, as well as foods that are not a part of their regular diet. These subjects and activities fell under the targeted learning content of the four main components of FEP: health, nutrition, food, and the environment.

Researching and finding appropriate grant opportunities was a large part of the author's job. The grant could be local, state or national but it was important to be careful to sort them based on if they were supporting non government funded programs as well as grants that were not associated with the San Francisco unified school district. Grant writing is extremely important in the non-profit world, which is why this is an important tool to practice and become

better at for all employees of FEP. The need for donors, partnerships, and in-kind donations is never ending so it was important for the author to stay on top of finding new possibilities in order to programmatically help FEP.

Another smaller task that the author took part in was to be proactive on social media outlets. These outlets include Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. With the new wave of marketing, being active and relatable on these outlets is very important for a non-profit which is trying to grow (social media: @thefoodedproject).

### **Methods**

Although, program evaluation was not the author's main task, the author can see the importance of program planning in order for FEP to have long-term success. Pre and Post surveys over the summer semester allowed the team to evaluate if the program is beneficial to the students and to see if the information they have learned has stayed pertinent and relevant. On the first day of the summer semester, the author passed out a survey called "My Ideal Salad" (Appendix B). The students were able to pick from a plethora of ingredients and explain why they chose the foods they did. At the end of the summer semester, students were given the same survey and again, asked why they chose the foods that they chose. The exercise was aimed to determine, if after a semester with FEP, the level of awareness and healthy choices of their responses had increased or decreased. For example in the beginning of the semester, one student noted, "I like tomatoes because they are red" and at the end of the program, the student recognized, "I like tomatoes because they are high in Vitamin C and K".

### **Findings/ Results**

The author recognizes that this survey was more subjective, qualitative data than quantitative data. The results could not be measured statistically using a T test. Qualitatively speaking, answers were evaluated at a 0 or a 1. Zero was given to students who showed no

improvement with their answers. One was given to students who benefitted from their semester with FEP as demonstrated in a more intelligent answer on the survey. **PRE:** First class of Kindergarten and first graders: 14 students. **POST:** 8 showed improvement with their answers after the summer semester. **PRE:** Second and third graders: 18 students. **POST:** 10 showed improvement on their answers. Unfortunately, we did not have the type of survey and evaluation system to conduct a T test to evaluate statistical significance. Going forward, program planners can design a type of survey that will allow for better evaluation. The surveys should have a correct and incorrect answer so that they can be evaluated with a variation; this is necessary for the test to be statistically meaningful. From here, the hypothesis could be stated in null and alternative form. First, the hypothesis in null and alternative form will be stated.  $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$  vs.  $H_a: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$   $H_0: 0 = 0$  vs.  $H_a: 0 \neq 1$ . The null hypothesis could demonstrate that there was no change in the responses from the student surveys from the beginning of the program to the end of the program. A zero score would be given to each student at the beginning of the program. To determine, if the FEP curriculum was meaningful, the average of the hypothesis would be different than a score of zero. These students' responses would indicate an understanding of health, nutrition, food, or the environment. A program planner has been hired for the coming school year, and surveys that are distributed will be more quantitative.

### **Discussion**

FEP attempts to promote health education and promotion through a health curriculum. All of the facets that are involved in the program aim to alleviate obesity and type II diabetes problems in low-income areas in San Francisco. There are many factors that play into the health of an individual, and although this survey may be a small start, it is in fact a start. The fact that FEP is able to have an open and beneficial relationship with the teachers, principals, and other after school staff enables FEP to try new ways to help the students. Even if results are not

immediate, FEP is able to bring health options and agricultural awareness to the forefront of the students' mind, which they can then share with their respective families. Effectively reaching the children from a grassroots level is valuable.

### **Limitations**

There were many limitations when conducting this study. First, acknowledging different vegetables and fruits and their health implications does not directly correlate with a decreased risk of type II diabetes. The point is for children to have a basic understanding of why certain fruits and vegetables are healthy and to digest this knowledge while moving forward with meal options and choices. Another limitation would be how subjective the answers were graded. The author herself ascertained whether the student's answers changed or stayed the same. One major limitation was taking into account the developmental age of the children enrolled in FEP.

Sometimes, words were difficult for them to comprehend and had to be explained to the students. Another challenging component of this survey is the amount of time that is spent with each class. FEP has a new cohort of students each year, which makes evaluating individual progress challenging and limits long-term assessments. Moreover, one must be culturally aware when dealing with food while they are teaching information about it as well as administering surveys. While this survey helped for qualitative data, surveys will need to be conducted for more quantitative research. Going forward, it is imperative for program evaluators to use surveys with correct and incorrect answers. This method is able to provide a more statistically meaningful approach in long-term evaluation and does not allow room for answers to be arbitrary.

### **Public Health Significance**

There is a lot of public health significance in the survey that was administered, as well as for FEP as a whole. Health education and awareness is a preventive tactic in public health and is extremely relevant and important for different communities to understand. Even if results were

not dramatic, to make students aware of health concerns and how their food choices impact their health is a large step in the right direction. Any change, no matter how small, is pertinent. As aforementioned, being culturally aware of different families and student food choices is an important consideration as a public health practitioner. FEP is advocating for the fight against obesity and type II diabetes. There is a plethora of ways to advocate for these particular public health issues, but FEP allows for a foundation in order to begin to disseminate useful information to students. FEP is addressing primary levels of prevention as they try to eliminate risk factors by circumventing numerous conditions that develop from lack of proper nutrition. By promoting healthy behavior, FEP seeks to eliminate many associated diseases that stem from childhood obesity.

More research and program planning are essential to usefully evaluate the program's influence on students; however, FEP is doing impactful, grassroots level work for its students in their community.

### **Competencies**

In the beginning of the summer, the author and the preceptor went over important competencies that should be addressed over the summer semester (Appendix A). A list of learning objectives was made in order to incorporate the competencies that are put forward by the University of San Francisco. All of the competencies were taken into consideration while deciding learning objectives. Among the most notable learning objectives include, “developing health education skills” and “learning how a nonprofit organization works”. Being comfortable in the classroom was a trait that was very important to the author. The author made it a goal to monitor the tangible and intangible health of students and their behavioral changes.

Additionally, the non-profit world was new to the author. The author learned how to identify local partners for in-kind and major gift donation opportunities. There were a few

competencies that resonate with the author more than others. For example, “Develop public health programs and strategies responsive to the diverse cultural values and traditions of the communities being served”. Since FEP works with the underserved population and children, it was important to remain culturally sensitive to different children’s needs. Many of the children were at different reading levels and able to comprehend lesson plans at different rates. These disparities were challenging, but also provided the author to lead the lesson plans while remaining aware that different students were dealing with different developmental stages. Another competency that resonated with the author is, “Effectively communicate public health messages to a variety of audiences from professionals to the general public.” Being able to communicate effectively was a large part of the author’s experience at the Food Education Project. Clear and open communication with not just the students, but also the other teachers, school administrators, and potential financial partnerships played a crucial role in a successful summer internship experience.

The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) acknowledges 5 areas in which students receiving MPH degrees must hone certain skills, synthesize them and finally implement them into their work. These areas include, biostatistics, epidemiology, environmental health, public health services administration and leadership, and social and behavioral sciences. Dutifully, the author became a *master* in all of these subjects. Most notably would be environmental health since part of FEP’s goals is incorporating a large part of the curriculum to environmental health. Also, social and behavioral sciences played a large role in the fieldwork since often behavioral, social, and cultural factors were taken into consideration while coming up with any programmatic changes and lesson plans.

One of the most relevant courses offered by the University of San Francisco, Master’s

of Public Health program to this fieldwork experience was Communicating for Healthy Behavior and Social Change with Dr. Raffel. This class taught the author how to evaluate the role of social and behavioral interventions and useful ways to address it. The theory of planned behavior relies on perceived behavioral control, which pertains to a person's perception of being able to control their behavior (Murnaghan et al., 2010). Behavioral outcomes are naturally different for various populations and subgroups. This social norm construct is crucial when dealing with the sensitive adolescent population. Additionally, the Environmental Health class with Dr. Sattler allowed the author to understand the issues associated with agriculture and environment and how negatively affecting our earth has dramatic irreversible changes. Last but not least, the Public Health Systems Leadership and Administration class with Dr. Dru was very valuable because the class taught the author different approaches to synthesize new material and how to work with others even if one does not agree on the topic at hand. This style of learning was crucial in dealing with new situations during the author's fieldwork, daily.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the 300-hours of fieldwork during the summer semester was a positive experience both professionally and personally. Due to the nature of the small organization, the fieldwork allowed for lots of hands on experience and allowed the author to express her mind freely when asked to come up with new ideas. The author has always wanted to work for a non-profit and it opened up the author's eyes to see how such an organization can be both humbling and rewarding. The author is interested in health promotion, disease prevention, and nutrition which all got to be explored and further studied while at the same time learning new ways to combat childhood obesity and type II diabetes. Research and writing skills were honed, whether it was writing grants, or writing messages to potential donors. The author learned about her



leadership skills while teaching a classroom full of students and was able to think quickly when asked a difficult or unexpected question.

FEP has created a positive revolution, which contributes to an overall healthier community at large. Moreover, FEP is constantly researching new innovative ideas to increase the quality of our youth's health. FEP does an excellent job of educating their students as well as offering nutritious recipe options during their educational program. These in school and after school programs help the children understand the purpose of the food they are eating and demonstrate to them how to make smarter eating decisions. FEP has proven to be effective in fostering healthier eating behaviors and changing the way children eat. Hopefully, nutrition education continues to spread throughout America and children are taught as early as possible about the negative repercussions associated with childhood obesity. FEP is a wonderful non-profit to work for because the change is tangible, innovative, and impacts all of our lives.

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**Appendix A: Student / Preceptor Learning Objectives**

<b>Goal 1: To develop health education skills and to be certified in food handling and food safety</b>				
<b>Objectives (S)</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Start/End Date</b>	<b>Who is Responsible</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>
To develop health education skills	Study and learn teaching skills and styles  Monitor the health of students and their behavioral changes.	02/05-08/15	Amanda Lesky (Executive Director)	General comfort and ease in a classroom setting from beginning of the semester until the end
To be trained in food handling skills	Take a food handling class for certification	02/05-08/15	Caren Pinto	Certification
To become an knowledgeable on nutrition and environmental sustainability	Independently study nutrition and environmental sustainability topics through articles I find both online, and through Amanda  Assess students/ families needs and become educated on how best to serve them	02/05-08/15	Caren Pinto	Notes
<b>Goal 2: To Assist with Fundraising</b>				
Learn how to write grants	Attend a Grant Writing Course Research grant opportunities for local, state, and national sector	06/08-8/15	Caren Pinto	Certification
Learn how a non-profit organization works	Identify local partners for in-kind and major gift donation opportunities	06/08-08/15	Amanda Lesky	List of possible Donors/Partners
<b>Goal Three: To be involved with Program Evaluation</b>				
To understand benefits of behavioral interventions	Research local in-school time health programs and curricula		Caren Pinto	List of schools in the city/their health curriculum status
Measure/monitor program in public and private schools	Prepare survey questions, when requested		Amanda Lesky	Survey questionnaires

Appendix B: My Ideal Salad Survey

**YOUR IDEAL SALAD!**

**STEP 1: What would you put in your ideal salad? Check all that apply!**

**SALAD GREENS**

- Iceberg Lettuce
- Spinach
- Mixed Greens

**PROTEIN**

- Grilled Chicken
- Fried Chicken
- Beef
- Ham
- Beans
- Tofu
- Chickpeas
- Hard-boiled Eggs
- Chicken Salad
- Tuna Salad
- Cheese

**STARCH**

- Pasta
- Potatoes
- Macaroni

**VEGETABLES**

- Bell Peppers
- Onions
- Carrots
- Peas
- Olives
- Tomatoes
- Corn
- Broccoli
- Sprouts
- Celery
- Cauliflower

**Raisins**

- Raisins
- Pears
- Grapes
- Mandarin Oranges
- Strawberries
- Blueberries

**CRUNCHY TOPPINGS**

- Water Chestnuts
- Almonds
- Candied Walnuts
- Crackers
- Croutons
- Fried Wonton Pieces
- Tortilla Strips

**DRESSING**

- Ranch
- Blue Cheese
- Thousand Island
- Balsamic Vinaigrette
- Raspberry Vinaigrette
- Italian

**STEP 2: Pick 5 of your favorite toppings and tell us why you chose these!**

1. I chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. I chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. I chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. I chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. I chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_