

Looking for an oasis in America's food deserts

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Where does your food come from? For many in the United States, that important question is answered by a simple solution—the grocery store. However, in some parts of the country, acquiring nutritious, fresh food is not as easy as making a quick trip to the supermarket.

Sherrie Godette, a public administration doctoral student at NC State and a former employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, investigated government intervention into [food](#) deserts—low-income population areas where residents have limited access to grocery stores.

Godette researched how government loans and grants for developing local food markets, such as farmers' markets, are fighting the food desert problem in the United States and presented her findings at the NC State Graduate Student Research Symposium. We asked her about her research and what it tells us about the state of food access.

The Abstract: What inspired you to investigate government policies regarding local food markets and food deserts?

Sherrie Godette: My background in agricultural economics, my work with the federal government and my recent field work on the benefits and challenges to local food system development inspired this research. It provided the foundation for my interest in food systems and how they work. My work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture sparked my

interest in evaluating the efficacy and impact of government programs in mitigating social issues. So naturally when I was afforded the opportunity to work as a research assistant to evaluate the efficacy of local food systems development and the assistance programs created to support these systems, as the famous phrase goes, it was an offer I could not refuse.

Through this research I found several gaps, including a lack of evidence that local food systems are being developed in ways that will ameliorate the food desert problem. I also found evidence lacking that government programs to support the development of these systems are actually targeting disadvantaged areas. Given these gaps, I decided to conduct research as a means to stimulate this type of discourse in fields focused on mitigating the food desert problem.

The Abstract: How did you collect your data? What were you analyzing from it?

Godette: I extracted and integrated secondary data from several sources, the main sources being the USDA Food Environmental Atlas and the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Program databases. The Food Environmental Atlas provides county-level food market availability and accessibility data along with relevant demographic and socioeconomic factors. The Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Program database provides funding information for local food grant and loan projects supported by agencies under the USDA and other federal departments.

I used the data to examine whether there were significant variations in the availability of local food markets, particularly farmers' markets, in food desert counties compared to non-food desert counties. In addition, I examined whether government assistance programs provided more financial assistance to food desert counties. I wanted to evaluate the local

food strategy and government intervention in ameliorating the food desert problem.

The Abstract: What are some of your most interesting findings?

Godette: One interesting finding is that suburban and rural food desert counties statistically had fewer farmers' markets compared to their non-food desert counterparts, with urban food desert and non-food desert counties having no statistical difference. This suggests that farmers' market development is targeted in more densely populated and higher income areas, rather than areas more disadvantaged in these ways (i.e. food deserts). It matters because while most of the food in the U.S. is grown in rural areas, this study supports existing research that suggests that these areas suffer from food insecurity even more so than urban areas. These findings are in opposition to the social justice philosophy on which the local food movement is based.

I also found that large amounts of government assistance were awarded to both progressive counties and non-progressive counties in terms of farmers' market development. This finding suggests that government agencies were investing in strategies to develop local food markets as a means to replicate and disseminate proven strategies across environments. It also suggests that government programs targeted food deserts as means to increase farmers' market availability, which is what we want to see.

The Abstract: Have you found local applications in your research, whether here in Raleigh, the Triangle or North Carolina in general?

Godette: Absolutely. Many parts of southeast Raleigh are considered to

be food deserts. In addition, the Triad (Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem area) is ranked first in the country for people who had difficulties securing healthy foods. My research can be used to understand the environmental factors that contribute to food security issues in these areas, as well as the policy and community-level implications associated with these issues.

The Abstract: What impact have your faculty advisers had on your research?

Godette: My graduate committee had a tremendous impact on my research. One of my dissertation committee members, Dr. Kathi Beratan, gave me the opportunity to work on several local food system development projects which led to this research. She also provided valuable content-related guidance in my research. My main adviser, Dr. Branda Nowell, introduced me to Dr. Beratan, and Dr. Nowell along with my co-adviser, Dr. Jeffrey Diebold, provided valuable theoretical and methodological guidance. My fourth committee member, Dr. Rajade Berry-James, also provided significant theoretical guidance. In all, my committee provided a great deal of guidance that helped to shape and further my research agenda.

The Abstract: How has your research enriched your graduate studies?

Godette: I have a strong affinity for applied research because I believe it contributes to a better understanding of theory and its ability to explain reality. Having the opportunity to conduct applied research in the field of agriculture has helped me understand the feasibility of strategies such as [local food](#) system development and [government intervention](#) in mitigating problems that derive from the structure and design of food systems.

The Abstract: What do you intend to do after you complete your graduate studies?

Godette: I am in the process of finding a position that will allow me to be a part of evaluating and developing solutions to mitigate food security and public health issues.

The Abstract: What advice would you give to students starting research for the first time?

Godette: Make sure you have a strong interest in and understanding of the value of the research you set out to do. Research can be very daunting and draining at times. Having a genuine interest in and knowing the value of your research will help pull you through these moments.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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