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REFLECTIONS ON SERVICE WITH ACE CAMPUS FOOD PANTRY

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Marly Beck is a senior in Sustainable Food and Farming Systems and in Global Studies. She has been working at ACE Campus Food Pantry since her sophomore year and also has been a member of the Purdue Student Farm Organization since her freshman year. She plans to pursue a career working with nonprofits focused on food security. In this article, she describes her experience improving the infrastructure of support for food-insecure students at Purdue University.

In 2018, the Wisconsin Hope Lab, now the Hope Center, reported that up to 36% of college students at four-year institutions were food insecure in the last 30 days (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, et al., 2018). Then just one year later, in a broader review of campus food insecurity studies within the United States, the Government Accountability Office examined 31 studies and concluded that 9–50% of students are food insecure at universities and colleges across the nation, both well within and possibly far beyond the average rate of 11.8% for all American households in 2018 (Economic Research Service, 2017; U.S. GAO, 2018).

The growing recognition of food insecurity as a problem at universities is pushing higher education institutions and organizations to action, but clear understandings of both the extent of the problem, and how to respond effectively, are still lacking. Here, I describe and reflect upon the attempts to build capacity in both of those areas—by measuring campus food insecurity levels and addressing these needs through outreach coordination at Purdue’s West Lafayette campus through multidimensional engagements with service-learning. From 2017 to 2020, this involved organizing the first campus survey of food insecurity at Purdue West Lafayette and participating in service to extend the reach and long-term

sustainability of the campus food pantry, known as ACE. This paper reports on these efforts and contemplates the path forward.

Several characteristics of higher education today contribute to the greater visibility of hunger on campus. Rising tuition costs are placing additional stress on the more “flexible” parts of a student’s budget, like food spending from month to month. These flexible parts are subject to reduction, while tuition, housing, and other living costs are inflexible expenses (Weinfield et al., 2014). This situation has been exacerbated by tuition increasing by up to 31% at public institutions and 24% at private institutions between 2006 and 2016, brought on by decreased state and federal funding for higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Simultaneously, an increase in the number of nontraditional students nationwide, without the parallel increase of support systems integrated in university systems, leaves resource-strapped students at risk. “Nontraditional students” include those who attend college part-time, are employed full-time and financially independent, must provide for dependents or are single parents, and do not have a formal high school diploma. Nontraditional students experience the highest rates of hunger while

enrolled in school. Along with nontraditional students, international students, graduate students, and students receiving federal student loans or Pell grants are more likely to be food insecure (El Zein et al., 2018).

Addressing this situation is crucial for institutions of higher education to remain successful, as good academic performance is inversely related with food security. Of students experiencing food insecurity, 32% report that hunger or housing problems affect their education, with consequences like not purchasing textbooks, missing class, or ultimately even dropping a class (Dubick et al., 2016). Unfortunately, meal plans do not ensure food security for students, either. At four-year colleges, 43% of students who are food insecure are so despite having a meal plan (Dubick et al., 2016). Institutions have only begun to take notice in the past decade, with most assessments of food insecurity on college campuses a rather recent phenomenon (Chaparro et al., 2009; Dubick et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, et al., 2018; U.S. GAO, 2018).

Here, I outline efforts to strengthen the strategic resources at Purdue WL to combat student hunger: the campus pantry and campus FI research. Previous to this project, no knowledge existed of the extent of food insecurity on Purdue's campus, aside from informal surveys of clients at the pantry. With the knowledge of the extent of food insecurity on campus, the pantry will be able to intentionally grow in ways to meet specific needs. If food insecurity were assessed routinely, the pantry would be able to measure the effectiveness of response programs.

THE CAMPUS FOOD PANTRY

Starting a pantry, whether big or small, seems to be the most popular grassroots method of combating campus food insecurity (Feeding America, n.d.; U.S. GAO, 2018). Campus food pantries are largely individually operated and contextualized to local situations. The Hope Center surveyed food pantries on campuses in 2017 and found certain commonalities among them. Most pantries stay in a designated space, serve the on-campus community exclusively, and are operated by a combination of staff, students and faculty. These pantries often operate with some paid staff, but with limited budgets they rely on student support. Only 5% of pantries require proof of financial need or some other demonstrated factor of food insecurity by clients, indicating an intention to keep barriers to usage low (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, et al., 2018).

Guidelines for running a campus food pantry are provided by the College and University Food Bank Alliance

(CUFBA), a professional organization of campus-based programs focused on alleviating food insecurity, hunger, and poverty among college and university students in the United States. Despite the useful guidelines provided by CUFBA, much is yet to be established around what makes a successful pantry. However, four main barriers to utilization are widely recognized; these include social stigma, insufficient information on pantry-use policies, and inconvenient hours. A final issue is lack of data, which inhibits a pantry's ability to effectively support the wider campus community. Only 64% of campus pantries collect any sort of data on student food insecurity levels or experiences (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, et al., 2018).

Purdue West Lafayette's ACE Campus Food Pantry

On Purdue's WL campus, ACE Campus Food Pantry is a primary defense against food insecurity. Established in 2015, ACE is a partnership between the local Food Finders Food Bank and the office of Civic Engagement and Leadership Development in Student Life. Food Finders (FF) serves Tippecanoe County, where Purdue resides, and 15 surrounding counties. As an agency partner with FF, ACE furthered their mission to address food security in the Purdue community specifically, and upholds the food bank's commitment to community-building collaboration.

From its establishment, ACE has been student-led and reliant on volunteers. The pantry serves the whole Purdue community—faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students. In its first year, ACE served around 50 clients. In the fall semester of 2019, over 300 clients visited ACE at least once. The client population is student-heavy, graduate students especially.

The ACE Campus Food Pantry maintains one main location (Figure 1) that is open twice a week, along with five other satellite locations, which are typically open during host buildings' hours; these are referred to as "pop-ups." Financial support for the ACE Campus Food Pantry comes primarily from in-kind donations, grant funding, and FF.

In many ways, ACE appears on par with other campus pantries and struggles with many of the same limitations encountered at other institutions. Reliant on donation drives and bulk food purchasing from Food Finders, ACE has limited to no access to fresh food. The pantry is also susceptible to common difficulties within university, student-run organizations, such as challenges with consistent recruitment, officer transitions, and outreach. As a

Figure 1. Shelves at the main location of ACE Campus Food Pantry. Photo: 2019 spring ACE Campus Food Pantry, Student Life—Purdue University/Dalani Young.

relatively young organization, ACE had few established and active institutional partnerships. Furthermore, the dearth of food insecurity data limited ACE's understanding of the scale of needs and their impact on it. Constant outreach to build awareness is especially important for a food pantry, as the most common refrain from clients is, "I wish I had heard about this earlier." Throughout this whole process, the needs of clients were intentionally prioritized.

ACTIVITIES

I worked with the ACE Campus Food Pantry my sophomore and senior years, taking a hiatus my junior year to study abroad. In my senior year, I became the student director for ACE, expanding my variety of duties and forms of service. Over these years, in consultation with ACE's dedicated advisers and annually changing student leadership board, I enriched the pantry and the Purdue community's capacity to address campus food insecurity through a multidimensional approach that incorporated

service, administration, and research. This approach was intentionally multidimensional in order to overcome limitations in any one dimension. For instance, while needed, research alone only identifies the problem; it does not contribute to the pantry's capacity to respond to students in crisis. Similarly, student-led efforts will often dissipate in four years without strong institutional partnerships and so I emphasized my efforts on making sustained programs.

Service

During my sophomore year, my service was focused on the satellite pantries as the pop-up coordinator. I worked to more deeply establish the relationship with the Wellness Center at the COREC by increasing communication and consistency of food drop-offs, taking consideration to meet their preferences in food supplies. The subsequent pop-up coordinator, Talia Broekers, then succeeded in expanding the pop-up locations to Purdue's LGBTQ+ Center, Black Cultural Center, Latino Cultural Center,

and Purdue Lutheran Ministries. All of these centers saw the need for improved food accessibility in their student communities, which led them to work with ACE. As a direct result of these efforts, community partners are able to offer more extended hours than ACE's main location. Whereas prior to these efforts there were two pop-ups at the Wellness Center and at Horizons, there are now six.

Energized by these efforts, the rest of the board and I at ACE pursued and achieved a variety of additional institutional connections on- and off-campus to further support our efforts. These include partnerships with Third Street Starbucks, University Residences, and Span Plan Nontraditional Student Services. The Third Street Starbucks partnership began in the spring 2020 semester through Drew Thoennes and includes donations of preferred items like salt, pepper, and other flavorings. With a vested interest in giving back to the local community, the Starbucks also established a month-long food drive to be repeated annually. Second, through the Office of University Residences, ACE will be providing resident assistants (RAs) with information on ACE and guidance

on how to support food insecure students as part of the RAs' training experience. A fellow director, Sharae Hightower, established a semester-long series of cooking demonstrations with the Span Plan Nontraditional Student Services to connect clients with meal preparation equipment and recipes.

However, before much of this advancement, I addressed the issue of produce availability. At the start of my efforts, the only sources for fresh produce at ACE came from the Food Finders, which was able to provide potatoes and bananas reliably. Luckily, from 2016 onward, I had already been involved with the Purdue Student Farm (PSF), where we were often awash with fresh vegetables. The PSF centers itself on providing experience in sustainable production of food for students, and is managed by students through coursework and a student organization (Figure 2). Farm manager Chris Adair spoke for PSF when he told a reporter, "We try to always promote the idea that access to healthy food is essential for every community," a sentiment that aligned with ACE's mission of food accessibility (Ambrose, 2020). Working

Figure 2. The Purdue Student Farm, summer 2017.

with another student, Luna Renée, we connected the PSF manager and adviser with the ACE pantry's advisers.

We established a supply chain that brought extra produce from PSF to ACE weekly during harvesting periods (April–October). As a direct result of these efforts, ACE is now able to offer kale, cantaloupes, peppers, tomatoes, and more to its clients on a regular basis. On average, the PSF brings 25–30 lbs. of produce to ACE, and up to 60–70 lbs. during the peak harvest period. With visible excitement, our clients consistently clear out the weekly donations. This supply chain was established in the summer of 2018 and has continued uninterrupted to the present. In addition, the relationship has presented new prospects for the potential of establishing a farm intern and a community-supported agriculture (CSA) share. I graduate knowing this relationship will carry on.

Administration

In fall 2019, I worked with the ACE adviser and other directors to evaluate spaces within the ACE structure where there was room to expand awareness and methods of operations that would be more sustainable and transferable across changing leadership. For awareness, I worked with my adviser to present to Purdue Student Government and the Purdue Graduate Student Government about food insecurity. We have also put significant energy into expanding and improving the pantry's social media presence, using Facebook regularly and restarting the pantry's Twitter page. We have also taken every opportunity to interact with the campus paper, *The Exponent*, to be part of their features.

To address obstacles in recruitment and director transitions, we are currently focused on three efforts. The first is a mentorship program: each current director is developing transition documents that detail what needs to be done, how to do so, and recommended timelines. This will decrease the adjustment period that typically slows growth at the start of each year. We are also initiating more opportunities for shadowing and earlier recruitment of directors, so that oncoming students can get direct advice from current students. Second, I am currently writing a long-term vision plan for the pantry, to act as a guide for incoming students. As a final effort toward eased transitions, the current board has made special efforts to edit the shared file system for greater clarity.

Research

An assessment of food insecurity on the Purdue West Lafayette campus can identify the extent of need among

students and inform the pantry on what populations show a greater degree of food insecurity. To measure food insecurity on the Purdue WL campus, a survey was launched as part of the course HONR 299: Food Security in fall 2017. The survey utilized the USDA U.S. Adult Food Security Module 10-item form, three-stage design with screeners. The questionnaire was supplemented with a range of additional demographic questions. The full survey was developed and distributed through Qualtrics from October 5 to November 16, 2017 (IRB #1608018005, PI: Elizabeth Brite). The survey was distributed by e-mail as well as in-person using iPads and phones. The target populations originally included undergraduate students, graduate/professional students, faculty, and staff. All fully enrolled students received the survey via the university's registrar office. Faculty and staff e-mails were generated from the Purdue Directory; however, this method failed to limit system-wide locations, and therefore results covering faculty and staff were excluded from the study.

A total of 1,997 undergraduate students and 767 graduate/professional students responded to the survey. The results were coded following the USDA Module guidelines. Using RStudio, all responses were coded and assigned a respective food security scale value (1–10) and classification (classifications were Food Secure, Food Secure without Hunger, Moderate Food Insecure with Hunger, and Severe Food Insecure with Hunger). In the results of this study, “food insecurity” describes respondents who were classified as either “Food Insecure without Hunger,” “Moderate Food Insecure with Hunger,” and “Severe Food Insecure with Hunger.” Preliminary findings are presented in Table 1.

Likely present in the results of this survey is selection bias, as witnessed in other similar participation-based studies (Nikolaus et al., 2019): students who fill out the survey are often those with an existing interest in the topic and therefore the food insecurity measures could be reported as higher among respondents than in the true population. As demonstrated in the table, there is consistency in the food insecurity rates, generally around 13% and all rates between 10% and 20%. In this table, we compare white and nonwhite, graduate and undergraduate, and international versus domestic students as these demographics have been correlated with differences in food insecurity rates in other studies.

As compared in the table, food insecurity rate among respondents was higher in nonwhite students than white students. The relatively higher rates of food insecurity among URM (underrepresented minorities) graduate students, and international graduate students is consistent

Table 1. Response rates and food insecurity rates from Qualtrics survey.

Response Rates and FI Rates Compared				
Undergraduate Domestic			White	Underrepresented Minorities (URM)
		Total Enrollment	23,105	2968
		% Total Enrolled Responded	6.6%	10.6%
		% Contribution to Survey	76.6%	15.8%
		FI Rate among respondents	13.5%	14.3%
Undergraduate Domestic + International			White	Nonwhite
		Total Enrollment	n/a	n/a
		% Contribution to Survey	77.0%	20.3%
		FI Rate among respondents	13.4%	13.1%
Graduate Domestic			White	URM
		Total Enrollment	4,688	796
		% Total Enrolled Responded	9.8%	12.7%
		% Contribution to Survey	59.7%	13.2%
		FI Rate among respondents	13.1%	15.8%
Graduate Domestic + International			White	Nonwhite
		Total Enrollment	n/a	n/a
		% Contribution to Survey	62.1%	33.6%
		FI Rate among respondents	13.9%	18.2%

with anecdotal observations about the demographics of clients at ACE. The income bracket with the highest percentage of food insecurity is an income of less than \$20,000, which is consistent with expectations (Figure 3). Food insecurity rates were higher among students living off-campus than on-campus (Figure 4).

A final goal of the survey was to assess awareness and use of the ACE Campus Food Pantry. Overall, less than

half (31%) of respondents were aware of the campus pantry, and only 5% reported using the pantry. Of the students who were food insecure, less than half (32%) were actively utilizing the pantry. Ultimately, this indicates a need for greater outreach and promotion of ACE to students. Additionally, the difference in response rates between white and URM students raises questions concerning possible differing interests or needs among a diverse study body. This latter question could fuel further

Figure 3. Number of all respondents and food insecure students by income bracket (includes graduate/professional and undergraduate students).

Figure 4. Percentages of food insecurity of all respondents who live on and off campus (includes graduate/professional and undergraduate students).

studies on how institutionally driven food insecurity measures are perceived by students in the campus culture.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Today, the landscape of resources for Purdue students experiencing food insecurity has expanded in multiple ways. As depicted in Figure 5, the pillars supporting food insecure students have expanded, creating a far broader landscape of support. Before my tenure, there were two main forms of support: the ACE pantry, and direct student food insecurity support from the Office of the Dean of Students (ODOS), which offers financial assistance through emergency loans. In the latter case, students have a borrowing limit of \$2,000 per semester and are expected to pay back the loans in 30 days. ODOS also refers students to Lafayette Urban Ministry and the Salvation Army Financial Assistance, community partners that can provide utilities assistance. These limited support services are now further scaffolded by a broader support network, channeled through the ACE pantry system. As visible in Figure 5, all the pillars in red represent new support for food insecure students since the start of my project.

The expansion of opportunities for the introduction of students to ACE was prioritized during my service. Through efforts in outreach to increase awareness and

partnership building, individuals in the Purdue community can be introduced to ACE via a number of offices, such as the Office of the Dean of Students, Purdue Student Farm Organization, Purdue Student Government, Starbucks advertisements (particularly during the monthly drives), Purdue Graduate Student Government, and through all of our other program partners. The stronger relationships allow ACE to reach and appropriately serve far more students. Especially under the stress of COVID-19, the new partners have supported ACE to ensure consistent access to produce, dairy, and meat, the products our clients get most excited about. All in all, food security and nutritional needs can be better met with this full net approach.

The coordination of all these organizations over food security has lifted campus-wide knowledge of food security to a higher level. This higher understanding fosters a campus dynamic sensitive to, and therefore more likely to address, food security. When I began my work at ACE, every time I described my involvement to new friends, they would express surprise—“We have a pantry?” they would say. Now, friends will respond with familiarity, and this shift in mindshare is only one of the ways in which I have witnessed evidence that ACE has established itself. Our clientele rose from around 300 visits in the 2016–2017 school year (July 1–June 30) to 2,200 visits in the 2019–2020 school year thus far. This

Figure 5. The support infrastructure for students through ACE has been expanded from the initial blue pillars to twice the size with the addition of the red pillars. This strengthens support for food insecure students and provides richer opportunities for students in service through ACE.

surge affirms improved awareness but also emphasizes a great need in the Purdue community.

STUDENT IMPACT

Participating in ACE and, more specifically, connecting ACE and the Purdue Student Farm, was an exploration in the opportunities that exist for creating local and sustainable food systems that address inequalities like food access. ACE and the Purdue Student Farm have strong student-oriented leadership models, which I see as a key component in the success they have had together in identifying a limitation and in developing success. Under student direction, ACE and the Purdue Student Farm were able to aptly identify inclusive and sustainable solutions for inequality on the campus—suggesting that democratic leadership that includes student decision-making is a powerful combination for addressing campus issues like unequal access to housing, leadership roles, opportunities, food, and other resources. This experience emphasizes the importance of including the voices of affected communities in decision-making in addressing inequality even outside of the college campus.

Additionally, my experience at ACE has taught me practical actions toward building productive relationships. Identifying a clear goal and your community partner's capacity is instrumental to both achieving what is needed and doing so in sustainable bounds. Most important, contributing parties must consider how the project aligns with the institution's long-term needs. Needless to say, spending energy pursuing partnerships simply for the sake of building a coalition or community with limited longevity will not achieve the desired outcome, and will only be effective in using a lot of energy.

A lesson in leadership throughout this experience was to listen and grow with clients rather than listen to my voice and grow to my desires. When I first began at ACE, I was eager to usher in big transformations. Yet, as I graduate, it has been the slow and steady activities and relationships that I believe have been more enriching to ACE and the community around food insecurity.

At the time, building partnerships felt slow, awkward, and uncontrollable. This was because my focus was on the work itself, and not the people and community around it. This misled me into forgetting the true value and purpose of food: food brings people together. Meals inspire relationships, and sharing meals affirms care. This is why food security is so important to me. Beneath the scientific and political jargon are all the emotions wrapped around food. Enhancing the landscape of food

security should be less about checking off the boxes, and more about creating an enduring community. With these lessons, I am directing my postgraduate plans in food security to be centered on community outreach and partnership building, since I believe I can build inclusive solutions through those channels.

CONCLUSION

The relationships built with the ACE pantry have helped to close the gaps in the net to catch hungry students at Purdue WL and prevent them from slipping through. Naturally, more can take place to tighten this net more thoroughly. I believe next steps would be to focus on new student introductions, incorporating ACE awareness into the general Purdue resources curriculum for new students and in University Residence Life, since these two are the first two introductions for students to the general support at Purdue.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and all the economic and job instability it has brought, emphasizes the importance of ACE as a resource to the whole Purdue community. ACE and its partners were put to the test, and they delivered: throughout the crisis, the PSF has maintained a steady supply of fresh produce to the pantry, Starbucks rushed to donate its supply before its store was locked, and the Purdue Student Government made a generous donation not a week after the announcement of Purdue's switch to distance learning was made. ACE has maintained resiliency because of these relationships.

In the future, I project that there is meaningful work to be done in assessing the state of other basic student needs on campus. For instance, housing security is often closely tied to instances of food insecurity. At this time, little is known about the extent to which students are experiencing housing insecurity. A meaningful first step would be assessing housing insecurity among Purdue undergraduate and graduate students. Studying and working at a land-grant university creates a dynamic combination between engineering, agriculture, and community engagement. Greater relationships between groups interested in tackling urban agriculture and food security in the agricultural college could be fruitful in improving food availability and giving students meaningful experiences in solving real problems.

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