

FUEL NKU: SERVICE LEARNING IN A DYNAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY

Jessica Averitt Taylor, Megan Lindsey, Laura Sullivan, and Skyla Robbins

Northern Kentucky University

ABSTRACT

Transdisciplinary initiatives offer valuable opportunity for students and faculty members to address community challenges, especially those challenges related to social justice. FUEL NKU is a campus food pantry for students at a metropolitan university, and is uniquely situated to serve the student population while incorporating multifaceted aspects of a macro level project. This paper describes a collaboration among two doctoral students, one faculty member, and one Master of Social Work (MSW) practicum student to address long-term sustainability of a beloved campus program.

Keywords: food insecurity, pedagogy, social justice, hunger, educational leadership, social work

INTRODUCTION

This transdisciplinary project was developed to support the sustainability and eventual institutionalization of a student-managed campus food pantry, FUEL NKU (Feeding the University and Enriching Lives). Northern Kentucky University (NKU) is a metropolitan campus, located just outside of Cincinnati, with a student population over 15,000. The pantry was established in 2013, in direct response to experiences of hunger on campus. Over the course of the past four years, the pantry has grown from serving just one student in its initial weeks to 618 client visits over the spring semester of 2017. This growth has been both exciting and challenging, and has involved the support of our entire campus community.

During the spring and summer of 2017, we collaborated as a team on the specific service-learning project described herein. Our overall objective was to address food insecurity on our campus through an assessment of the

pantry. We sought a more comprehensive understanding of both the strengths and limitations of our current efforts, and identified concrete steps for future development. Through participation in this project, our transdisciplinary team contributed to and learned from the unique expertise and contributions of several fields of practice, including social work, educational leadership, and library sciences.

LITERATURE

Food Insecurity

Recent years have witnessed a spate of community efforts to address food insecurity, including increased public attention and the development of and reliance upon community food pantries as regular sources of food for families (Feeding America, 2011; Schroeder & Saldone, 2015). This critically important topic is at the very heart of community engagement, as students and educators seek to address food

¹Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology is a new institution in the Bay of Plenty, created in May 2016 from the merger of Bay of Plenty Polytechnic in Tauranga and Waiariki Institute of Technology in Rotorua.

²Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand.

security challenges on their campuses. Food security indicates that a person or household has “consistent, dependable access to enough food for healthy, active living” (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2016, p. v). Based on this definition, food insecurity is the lack of such consistent, dependable access.

A discussion of food insecurity necessarily addresses poverty, as the two challenges are inextricably linked. The United States employs both a poverty threshold that is applicable by family size on a national basis, and a set of poverty guidelines. The poverty guidelines are a more responsive measure, as they are adjusted by both family size and location for the non-mainland states (Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d.). The poverty guidelines are used for such administrative purposes as program eligibility screening, and capture a snapshot of poverty from a broad perspective. In 2017, the poverty guidelines for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia indicate that an individual is considered to be living in poverty at an annual income of \$12,060. For households consisting of more than one member, \$4,180 is added to that threshold per additional member (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). This indicates that a family of four would have a poverty guideline of \$24,600.

Based on the provided poverty guidelines, 43.1 million people lived in poverty in 2015 (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). While this percentage does indicate a slight decrease as compared to the previous year, it still represents a national poverty rate of 13.5% (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). This provides an interesting comparison point to receipt of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, as 13.2% of households reported receipt of SNAP benefits over the past 12 months in 2015 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). In addition, 12.7% of households were food insecure in 2015 (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2016; USDA ERS, 2016).

There is a clear relationship between poverty and food insecurity, and SNAP is truly intended to be supplemental rather than comprise the bulk of food purchasing ability for families. Furthermore, the charitable network of food banks and food pantries are also intended to be supplemental to an existing effective food provision and access program (Feeding Ameri-

ca, 2015). The various definitions and numbers provided above illustrate the interactions of poverty, food insecurity, and receipt of benefit assistance. In order to effectively address the challenge of food insecurity in America, a successful initiative must involve multifaceted components. The overall impact potential of alternate approaches to addressing food insecurity is shown below, in figure 1.

A food insecurity intervention that involves several initiatives must consider colleges and universities as a possible point to reach many young adults. Indeed, the higher education system has accomplished a great deal in terms of organization and large-scale efforts to address food insecurity. Therefore, the next section specifically focuses on food insecurity among college students.

Food insecurity on the college level

Access to higher education is a core social justice issue, serving as a cornerstone of social mobility within the United States. However, this opportunity is less readily available to those from diverse backgrounds. Students from low-income families, students from first generation families, and students of color all experience decreased opportunity to access higher education due to a confluence of social mobility factors including college affordability (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). Campus food pantries are an essential component of an inclusive and proactive campus environment to support and retain a diverse student community.

Support for diverse campus populations is owned, at least in large part, by the systems of higher education; each separate institution must address their campus, region, and larger policy and advocacy network in pursuit of this goal. For urban universities, involvement in the larger food system may even be indicated (Whittaker, Clark, SanGiovanni, & Raja, 2017). This effort to develop a sustainable system is supported by CUFBA, the College and University Food Bank Alliance. As of July 2017, CUFBA included 515 member institutions across the United States (CUFBA, 2017). In addition, a newly formed regional network of CUFBA specifically focuses on university food pantries in Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana (KOIN).

While large-scale studies regarding food insecurity are a newly emerging research

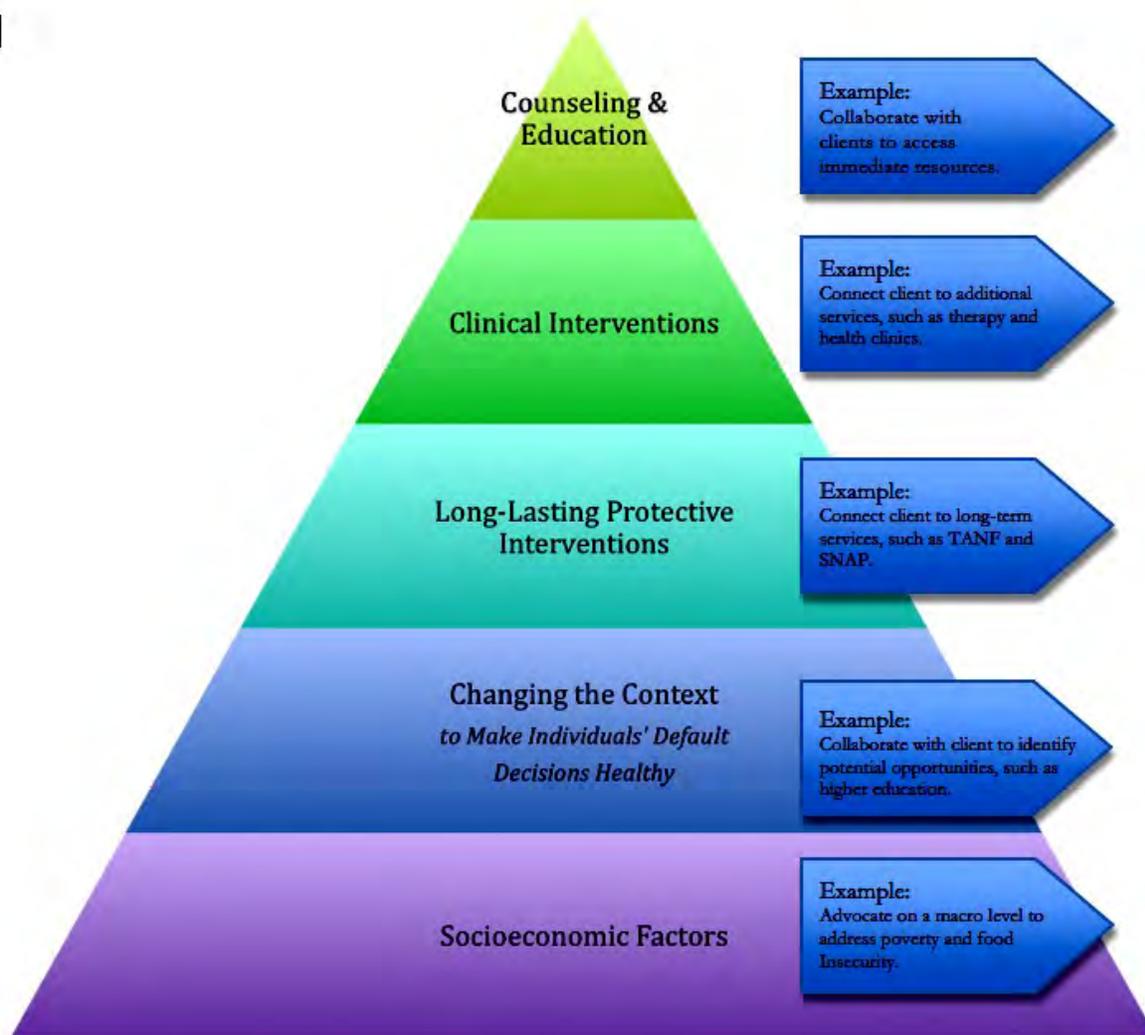


Figure 1. The health impact pyramid and food insecurity (adapted from Freiden, 2010).

topic, recent work in the area revealed that 45-67% of college students experience food insecurity (Dubick, Mathews, & Cady, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Food insecurities among college students are a factor that can contribute to unhealthy behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors include unhealthy eating, binge drinking, increased stress levels, depression, and anxiety, each of which may lead to lower academic performance that increases the dropout rate of college students (Bruening, 2016). There is a meaningful association between food security and GPA; compared to higher-GPA students, lower-GPA students experience “less high food security” (Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016, p. 380).

The existence of food insecurity among college students indicates that institutions of higher education are achieving some level of success with recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds. As more complex social issues manifest in higher education, leaders in those schools must recognize the potential of education as a site for the resolution of the social issue (Dentith & Peterline, 2011). However, those same institutions must develop support networks to empower students to graduation. Leaders in education such as doctoral students and social work students are uniquely poised to combat such an important social issue.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A food insecurity intervention that involves several initiatives must consider colleges and universities as a possible point to reach many young adults. Indeed, the higher education system has accomplished a great deal in terms of organization and large-scale efforts to address food insecurity. Therefore, the next section specifically focuses on food insecurity among college students.

Food insecurity among college students presents an excellent opportunity for efforts and support from within the university. One of the many goals educators have is to strengthen moral characteristics, increase work ethics, spread values of citizenship, address social injustices, and create an educated public among their students (Townsend, 2009). This focus is even more important in higher education institutions. Educational leadership theories such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and social justice leadership have played a significant role in bridging the gap between leadership, education, and solving real-world problems. For example, faculty, students, and community partners often participate in a service-learning experience to employ leadership toward the problem of food insecurity (Priest, Bauer, & Fine, 2015).

In educational leadership doctoral programs, there are several guidelines for achievement of educational goals that impact the community. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) standardizes Doctor of Education (EdD) programs with six guiding principles (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, n.d.). These principles include:

1. The program is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.
2. The program prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.
3. The program provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.
4. The program provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and

use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.

5. The program is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, that links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.
6. The program emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice.

The foundation of the doctor of Educational Leadership (EdD) program at NKU is built upon these guiding principles. Thus, future educational leaders are required to develop meaningful relationships that impact communities and tackle complex social problems. In the role of educational leadership, there are few topics more important than addressing hunger among our own student populations.

Few introductory leadership courses exist in higher education that join leadership, social challenges, and civic engagement (Johnson & Woodard, 2014). However, the NKU EdD program is designed to incorporate leadership and civic responsibility. The Independent Study described below addressed food insecurity from the perspective of students engaged in both educational leadership and social work.

CASE STUDY

Background

Social work student impact on FUEL NKU.

Practicum students largely manage the daily operations of FUEL NKU, while a social work faculty member coordinates the pantry. FUEL NKU supplies students in need with food, toiletries, and school supplies. Students are welcome to visit the pantry once every two weeks as needed, although many of the regular clients come by more often to check in with updates, ask questions about campus services, and visit with the managing practicum students.

The daily operations managed by social work practicum students include regular client interactions, establishing and maintaining campus relationships with divisions and student groups, and management of campus donation drives. Typically, two to three social work practicum students complete their field placement at FUEL NKU each semester, with the

supervision of the faculty coordinator. Practicum students usually include both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) level and Master of Social Work (MSW) level students, and this field placement uniquely empowers students to make a difference in a community of their direct peers.

A practicum placement at FUEL NKU also provides students with the opportunity to complete an individually designed service-learning project to improve the pantry. The FUEL NKU field placement also presents students with an opportunity to grow and gain skills as related to leadership, time management, community organization, and professional communication. In addition, practicum placements at FUEL provide students the opportunity to collaborate with other students from across the campus community. This encompasses a variety of projects such as organizing a food drive, creating a video to educate others about campus food insecurity, and hosting events that benefit both the pantry and other student organizations.

FUEL NKU is a place where all students are welcome, an important note given the particular vulnerabilities of persons experiencing hunger. Students use the pantry not only as a source for needed items, but also as a place to connect and learn from each other. A social work practicum student who collaborated on this manuscript reported the following:

As a social work practicum student, it was beneficial to learn from the students who utilized FUEL NKU. Through my work in the pantry, I learned about different barriers faced by low-income students they worked toward a degree, as well as the varied and creative strategies employed by students to overcome those barriers.

The students who use FUEL NKU encourage a feeling of community and inclusion. Most of the students who use the pantry ser-

vices bring other students with them who might also benefit from the pantry; it is quite common for clients to visit in groups, and the majority of students who visit FUEL NKU learned about the pantry from peers. The following tables show both total pantry visits, and pantry visits by individual unique clients since the fall of 2015.

Our team member who completed her practicum placement with FUEL NKU further reflected:

I feel very blessed to be a part of an organization that is able to have such a great impact on other students' lives. I know the pantry is needed because many students have expressed gratitude for our services and shared that they would be struggling even more without the services of FUEL NKU. FUEL NKU is helping students reach their goal of graduation and I am proud to be witness to the successes of my peers. My field placement at FUEL NKU has fueled my growth as a leader and as an individual. Through my work with the pantry, I have grown more confident in my abilities to assist others and gained new perspective.

Doctoral Student impact on FUEL NKU.

Given this foundation of a campus food pantry supported by both faculty and students, collaborative efforts led to the development of an independent study to further support FUEL NKU and integrate the pantry into additional academic programs. The course development process included the social work pantry coordinator and two students (referred to as Learning Associates, or LAs) in the EdD program at NKU. In addition, this collaboration included one MSW student who completed a field practicum placement with the pantry. Over the course of this project, the MSW student graduated and

Semester	Total Pantry Visits
Fall 2015	285
Spring 2016	503
Fall 2016	843
Spring 2017	618

Figure 2. Total pantry visits.

Semester	Total Unique Clients
Fall 2015	111
Spring 2016	126
Fall 2016	260
Spring 2017	181

Figure 3. Unique client visits.

has since moved to professional social work practice.

The purposes of this study were to enhance the services of FUEL NKU. The independent study course focused on two specific areas: establishing donation sources through community engagement, and developing a sustainability plan for FUEL NKU through program development. Areas of work included the navigation of NKU administrative systems to engage in community development, grant research to provide financial support for further development and sustainability, and a full program evaluation with the goal of institutionalizing FUEL NKU. Finally, the LAs, the MSW graduate, and the instructor of this course reflected on this collaborative journey by drafting this manuscript to share our work. Each participant's role included multiple contributions and supported existing strengths, while also encouraging new professional development.

The primary goal of the course was to enhance FUEL NKU's current systems through an unbiased look at the food pantry, specifically in the areas of donation streams and sustainability.

The major course objectives supported the overall goals for further development of FUEL NKU. An overall action plan (Appendix 1) was developed as a guide for completion of these activities. The selected activities for this project included the following steps as outlined below.

Activities/Assessments.

1. *Program Evaluation and Implementation of Recommendations:* The LAs critically evaluated FUEL NKU using multiple evidence-based tools, including the University of Kansas' Community Tool Box (Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas., n.d.). The LAs then made recommendations for implementation to the FUEL NKU faculty coordinator based on the results of the program assessment.

2. *Grant Writing:* The LAs researched grant funding relevant to FUEL NKU for grant opportunities. They also wrote an outline plan to complete a grant application. The goal of the application was to support FUEL NKU through both funding and institutionalization.

3. *Manuscript:* The LAs contributed to this manuscript based on the collaborative learning experience. The faculty member coor-

minated the manuscript process, which served as a venue for reflection on the learning experience. In addition, the manuscript allowed team members access to a specifically outlined method that they may adopt in future.

4. *Community Collaboration:* The LAs participated in establishing relationships to strengthen the university food pantry network. The team met with regional food pantries to review best practices and participated in an initial meeting of a regional university food pantry network, KOIN (Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana Network).

In addition to the specific goals of the independent study, the course aligned with both NKU's 2013-2018 strategic plan, Fuel the Flame, and the CPED standards/principles. NKU's most recent strategic plan promises a "supportive, student-centered educational environment that promotes academic success" (Northern Kentucky University, n.d.). Each of these supports the mission of FUEL NKU, which strives to engage our campus and community in the fight against hunger.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Program Evaluation and Implementation of Recommendations

The program assessment of FUEL NKU proved invaluable as a guide for continued growth. There is a direct correlation between social support, such as the services offered by campus food pantries, and student success. Given this relationship, the continued growth and prioritization of campus food pantries is integral to the recruitment and retention of diverse student bodies. The program assessment centered on the need for a stable, long-term funding source. Specifically, the program assessment identified several main objectives for the pantry over the next academic year:

1. Campus integration of the pantry through an assortment of components including readily available information for incoming students regarding pantry availability;
2. Integration of donation drives into classes and campus events;
3. Establishment of the pantry as a university service with appropriate supports; and
4. Continued collaboration with existing community and campus resources.

The outcomes for this project varied by participant, with each unique contribution also resulting in a slightly different perspective. As the project concluded, the participants scheduled time for intentional reflection. The MSW student participant noted the foundational importance of collaboration and relationships in her reflection:

Throughout this process, I have learned that in order to run a beneficial campus food pantry it is important to have relationships with many different departments on campus as well as with other campus food pantries. Through the collaboration of teams we can continue to improve our campus food pantry with best practices. A smooth stream of information and resources between on campus tools, partnering agencies in the community, and local food pantries is essential.

It is important to sustain our campus food pantry because among our students there is a need for supplemental resources and a place for students to feel comfortable talking about their stresses and struggles. Students can utilize FUEL NKU to collaborate with other students and faculty and learn how to lead projects to help others succeed. It is also important to spread awareness of food insecurity issues that many college students face because food insecurity may interrupt educational success.

The perspective for the faculty coordinator reflected her position as both instructor and colleague, with the delicate balance between collaboration and instruction:

This project has enabled me to see FUEL NKU and teaching in a slightly different light. I work with all of the other team members already, in various capacities, and it was a shift to serve as the instructor for this project. In particular, this involved constant evaluation of my own boundaries and expectations; I worried almost equally about providing a meaningful learning experience and maintaining our existing professional and personal connections.

Ultimately, this project resulted in a valuable and comprehensive examination of FUEL NKU, and that will

guide us for our future growth plans and goals. It served as a learning experience for me, in providing that elusive combination of structure and guidance, and because of this I now have more confidence regarding my next such experience. Student voices are absolutely critical for the pantry, as a community-owned project and inclusive program. This is one aspect of working toward that goal, and I hope to continue with similar projects in the future.

In their reflections, the doctoral students contemplated leadership and regional stewardship. One LA noted the following:

This project has been near and dear to my heart since focusing on food insecurities in our regional stewardships course. The importance of student retention on campuses has never been more vital. Discovering that so many students do not know where their next meal is coming from breaks my heart. Keeping with the philosophy of stewardship and servant leadership, I had to get involved. This project not only allowed me to integrate course work with real time learning, it allowed me to assume a leadership role.

From the beginning of the collaboration with Dr. Taylor, and FUEL NKU, my learning associate and I took charge of what we wanted to learn. We designed the course outcomes and determined areas of learning we wanted to improve upon. I recognized how each of us have our own strengths—Ms. Sullivan brought her expertise with grant writing to the table, while Dr. Taylor and myself brought our expertise in community collaboration. Part of leadership is not having to know it all, allowing the natural strength of others to surface and that will shape the success of a project. I truly feel the success of this project was more than each of us expected.

The second LA's perspective tended to focus a bit more on the process and relationships:

The FUEL NKU independent study was regional stewardship in action. It's one thing to attend classes to learn about regional stewardship, which in-

cluded what specific steps are required to engage with a community over a problem all are committed to solving; it's quite another to actually put those steps into practice. I found that preparation, intentionality, and conscientiousness are essential when assessing a community and analyzing the problem.

Also, the importance of taking the perspective of team members was a critical realization for me as the project began. I am a tenured faculty member as well as a doctoral student. I have much experience in leading teams; however, for this process I had to remember my role as a student. I was mindful of Dr. Taylor's groundwork with FUEL NKU and was concerned that some of my or my learning associate's ideas would be perceived as "pushy".... Due to our mutual professionalism, those concerns did not come to fruition.

Regional stewardship is not only gaining knowledge on process; it is also about relationship building. Key to that is self-awareness, listening (not just for content but also for feeling), respect, empathy, and the willingness to be open to others' opinions and ideas.

CONCLUSION

FUEL NKU presents an opportunity for us to serve students in a meaningful and immediate way. The provision of food and toiletries is a social cause that includes most of the community, as we all consume and therefore appreciate being involved. In order to move beyond this basic model of donations and case management, the growing university food pantry movement must continue to innovate and engage the community in transdisciplinary and inclusive initiatives. In a culture where resources continue to decrease, this project was an example of how collaboration between existing resources (students), can significantly impact change. This project engaged the community in direct learning outcomes for students, thereby effectively demonstrating the tangible relationship between traditional student support services and academic departments.

The structure of college and university food pantries demands support from the entire

university community, in order to maintain a dynamic environment that supports our students. However, it can present a challenge to continuously engage the student population beyond donation drives and charity events. This project provides a starting point for social justice projects that connect existing university support systems to learning outcomes and academic goals.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Jessica Averitt Taylor, Department of Counseling, Social Work, and Leadership; Megan Lindsey, College of Education and Human Services; Laura Sullivan, Library Services; Skyla Robbins, MSW practicum student; Northern Kentucky University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jessica Averitt Taylor, Department of Assistant Professor, Department of Counseling, Social Work, and Leadership, College of Education and Human Services, Northern Kentucky University, One Nunn Drive, MEP Suite 222, Highland Heights, KY 41099. E-mail: taylorj28@nku.edu