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Farm-Based Programming for College Students Experiencing Food Insecurity

Abstract

Student food insecurity is a concern at colleges and universities across the country, and Extension professionals can bring unique solutions to this growing problem. At Rutgers–New Brunswick, visitors to the Student Food Pantry receive vouchers for fresh produce to be redeemed at the New Brunswick Community Farmers Market. The Rutgers Gardens Student Farm makes weekly deliveries of fresh produce to the pantry, which is available at no cost to students. With creativity, Extension efforts such as master gardener programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education, and family and community health sciences programs can play an important role in alleviating college student food insecurity.

Keywords: [food insecurity](#), [hunger](#), [college students](#), [farmers market](#), [farm](#)

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Introduction

Student food insecurity is a problem at colleges and universities across the country (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). This includes Rutgers–New Brunswick (RU-NB), where recent research by two members of our author team indicated that over one third of students experience food insecurity (Cuite et al., 2018).

RU-NB has a range of programming to address this critical student issue, as do many other colleges and universities (Brotton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). These include having an on-campus food pantry, distributing grocery store gift cards, providing information about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and surveying students to understand the prevalence and sequelae of food insecurity.

Two innovative programs currently operating at RU-NB highlight how farmers and on-campus farm-based programs can address student food insecurity. Extension professionals can capitalize on local resources to create similar programs at their own institutions.

Farm-Based Partnerships With the RU-NB Student Food Pantry

The RU-NB Student Food Pantry has served over 800 students since 2016. Initially, the pantry offered only shelf-stable foods. However, several partnerships have been developed for the purpose of providing fresh produce to student pantry clients.

New Brunswick Community Farmers Market

In 2017, the pantry began a collaboration with the New Brunswick Community Farmers Market, a project of RU-NB Cooperative Extension and local partners. Lauren Errickson serves as the market coordinator.

From June through October, pantry visitors are offered vouchers redeemable at the market for fresh produce items of their choice. Individual students receive \$10 per weekly visit, with additional funds available to students with dependent family members.

The market operates in three locations 4 days per week. In 2019, the partnership expanded to include an additional on-campus farmers market as a redemption site for students. Use of the program has grown by nearly 270% since its inception, with over \$5,000 in vouchers redeemed in 2019 (Errickson et al., 2020). The market plans to expand voucher distribution to additional students and increase disbursements to further increase access.

Rutgers Gardens Student Farm

Home to the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station and Rutgers Cooperative Extension, RU-NB has multiple farm operations, including the Rutgers Gardens Student Farm. Alex Sawatzky serves as manager of the farm.

In 2019, the farm began donating one third of its harvest to the pantry. This represents over \$12,000 worth of fresh produce via weekly deliveries (June through November). The farm is expected to expand over the next 3 years and transition to a 50% donation model, providing produce for 200–300 students every week.

One goal is to bring pantry users to the farm via student volunteer days to connect them with where their food is coming from, close the loop between production and consumption, and build community.

Program Successes and Challenges

The main successes and challenges of the market voucher and farm donation programs are similar, though some are unique.

Both models promote increased access to produce. Vouchers are redeemable multiple days a week at the market, and students have been more likely to go to the pantry on days that farm produce is available. Further, each program allows students the opportunity to select produce that appeals to them. This choice, and the complementary nature of the programs, can improve students' diets and reduce food waste (Remley et al., 2006).

The increased number of vouchers redeemed each year reflects successful use of the market program by students. Anecdotally, students have expressed to pantry staff that the programs have helped them acquire a more nutrient-dense diet. One student explained that she felt a "sense of consistency with food."

Although weekly produce deliveries to the pantry minimize transportation concerns for students, transporting produce to the pantry and students to the market has been challenging. Personal vehicles were used to deliver farm produce in 2019; however, the pantry has since purchased a vehicle to address transportation needs. In addition, the market is exploring pop-up locations, whereby the market would set up at the pantry.

A common drawback is that peak growing season occurs when students are not on campus. Growing crops for spring or fall harvest could help as could using hoop houses and other season-extension techniques. Preserving summer produce through value-added processing is another potential solution.

Funding these programs requires flexibility. Whereas RU-NB covered the farm expenses for the 2019 growing season, the farm secured private and university funds to subsidize future years. The market voucher program has been funded through donations from varying sources. Future models may include the donation of fresh produce by local farmers and/or market shoppers.

Future Role of Cooperative Extension

We have described two successful RU-NB farm-based programs, but there are additional ways in which Extension can help address student food insecurity.

Community gardens provide students experiencing food insecurity with opportunities to grow their own produce, expanding food access and self-sufficiency. For example, RU-NB features two large community garden programs that welcome student participation. Connecting students to on- or off-campus gardening opportunities may be helpful; however, students experiencing food insecurity are more likely to work longer hours, so finding time for gardening could be a challenge for them (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Master gardener programs have potential to grow produce for donation to students experiencing food insecurity. Rutgers master gardeners contribute food to off-campus pantries and food banks; surplus could easily be directed to on-campus endeavors at other universities. Farmers also are motivated to address food insecurity (Schattman et al., 2015); thus, Extension may have a role in connecting local farmers with on-campus food security initiatives.

Providing health, nutrition, and cooking programs focused on fresh produce is a way to engage Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) or family and community health sciences departments in addressing student food insecurity. This option may be especially important for student pantry clients, given their unique needs (e.g., limited kitchen space, time, knowledge). SNAP-Ed educators also can provide SNAP enrollment guidance.

Although every school has different needs and distinct programming, most can address student food insecurity. A prerequisite is identifying food insecurity as a problem, whether through research or anecdotally. Next comes thinking creatively about available resources, whether on or off campus, including connections to local agriculture. Engaging farmers and students experiencing food insecurity while exploring solutions will contribute to success.

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