

Narrowing the equity gap in student food security: A student-led approach at the University of Wyoming



Christine M. Porter,^{a*} Kami Grimm,^b and Rachael Budowle^c
University of Wyoming

Submitted February 26, 2023 / Published online March 16, 2023

Citation: Porter, C. M., Grimm, K., & Budowle, R. (2023). Narrowing the equity gap in student food security: A student-led approach at the University of Wyoming. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(2), 37–45. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.122.016>

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Introduction

About 40% of U.S. college students experienced food insecurity even before the pandemic, when the numbers rose further (Rafferty et al., this issue). The burdens of the problem rest disproportionately on the shoulders of students whom our society already disadvantages, such as students of

color and those from families who struggle with low income. Although most institutions of higher education have begun efforts to address food insecurity among students in general, fewer have built strategies that explicitly aim to tackle these stark disparities in which student groups face the highest rates of food insecurity. In this practice brief, we share experiences and practice recommendations from our shared work to narrow these gaps at the University of Wyoming (UW).

^{a*} *Corresponding author.* Christine M. Porter, Wyoming Excellence Chair and Professor of Community and Public Health, Division of Kinesiology and Health, University of Wyoming; Christine.Porter@uwyo.edu

^b Kami Grimm, bachelor of science student in Environmental Systems Science and Environment and Natural Resources, and UW Food Security Taskforce Sustainability Coalition student co-leader; University of Wyoming; kgrimm@uwyo.edu

^c Rachael Budowle, Assistant Professor, Community Resilience and Sustainability, Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Wyoming.

Dr. Budowle is now Collegiate Assistant Professor, Honors College, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia USA; rbudowle@vt.edu

Acknowledgments

University of Wyoming (UW) students Gwen Cameron and Taylor Myers collaborated with Grimm on the course-based project described here. Nicole Morshead, former UW Food Security Taskforce Sustainability Coalition student co-leader, co-mentored the course project. We are grateful to the many UW Food Security Taskforce members who support this equity work, most notably the staff and students who launched and continuously stock the food share cabinets as described below.

Measuring College and University Student Food Insecurity

Attendance in U.S. colleges and universities began rising sharply after World War II (Snyder, 1993). However, the U.S. only began monitoring food security generally in the mid-1990s, and the first published study of student food insecurity, to our knowledge, was the work of Chaparro et al. (2009). Wider efforts to track the issue began in 2014 as part of an assessment led by The Ohio State University of student financial wellbeing, including food security. The assessment collected three rounds of data in 2014, 2017, and 2020 from over 75,000 students at hundreds of institutions, including community colleges (The Ohio State University Center for the Study of Student Life, n.d.). From 2015 to 2021, the #RealCollege Survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (currently housed at Temple University) was an even larger student basic needs tracking effort, with half a million student responses from over 500 colleges and universities; The Hope Center is planning for a new assessment in 2023 (The Hope Center, n.d.).

These surveys, and others, not only consistently find high rates of student food insecurity but also statistically significant disparities in who experiences it. For example, students of color bear a disproportionate share of the food insecurity burden (Reeder et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2022), as do LGBTQIA+ students (Willis, 2019). The most recent Hope Center survey reported that 75% of Indigenous and 70% of Black students were food insecure and/or housing insecure compared to 54% of White students (McCoy et al., 2022). As described below, we found these and other stark inequities in who experiences food insecurity among the UW student body.

Addressing Student Food Security in Higher Education

As student accounts of personal experiences of food insecurity were amplified by these new data sets revealing the magnitude of the problem, more campuses began organizing toward solutions. For example, in 2010, a group of students at a California university founded Swipe Out Hunger to promote students sharing dining hall meal swipes with

their peers (Swipe Out Hunger, 2022). By 2021, the effort had over 140 campus members. Mirroring national U.S. nongovernment hunger response, a major higher education response has been to open campus-based food banks and pantries. In 2012, the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) formed to connect these efforts, with 800 campuses joining by 2021. That year, Swipe Out Hunger merged with CUFBA to combine efforts; today they work with about 550 institutions on food banks and other strategies, including advocating for policy changes (Swipe Out Hunger, 2022). Many other institutions, including UW, are also working to address food insecurity independent of these organizations.

Though efforts to improve student food security in general may often reach those who most need the support, ending disparities requires a more proactive approach (Haggerty et al., 2018; Savoie-Roskos et al., 2023). And while efforts to measure who disproportionately experiences student food insecurity have grown, we were unable to find examples of colleges and universities implementing strategies to explicitly address that inequity, though we expect many may be working toward it. This gap in published strategies for food security equity encouraged us to share our experience at UW here.

A Student-Engaged and -Led History of Addressing Food Insecurity at University of Wyoming

In 2017, two events spurred a few members of the UW community into the first UW actions to address student food insecurity. First, Porter and Budowle connected Alanna Elder, a student who co-led the UW Sustainability Coalition student organization and was exploring student food insecurity for her undergraduate honors thesis, mentored by Budowle, with previously unshared Ohio State Financial Wellness Study results for UW. Those results indicated that over 37% of UW students experienced food insecurity, with half of those students experiencing very low food security. Elder examined the UW survey data in her thesis (Elder, 2018a) and reported on the problem along with personal student stories of food insecurity on Wyoming Public Radio (Elder, 2018b).

Second, a staff member mobilized her academic unit after one of their students shared with her that they were able to eat mainly when they could identify and attend campus events that offered food. They spent more time at these events than on their studies, but were still hungry on most days, especially on weekends. That staff member, with support from Elder, Budowle, and others, launched a food share cabinet in their home building, open for anyone to access or contribute food regardless of need. With shared food from faculty, staff, and students and generous donor support, the unit has kept the cabinet stocked since 2017 (UW Food Security Taskforce, n.d.). To our knowledge, this was the first consistent strategy to address student food insecurity at UW. As news of this approach spread, additional departments and units across campus launched their own food share cabinets. The Sustainability Coalition, advised by Budowle, made student food security central to its action agenda. The Coalition collaborated with the UW student government (Associated Students of UW [ASUW]) through a strategic partnership. The partnership included a resolution recognizing UW student food insecurity as a pervasive problem and calling for action, expanding an executive ASUW student position focused on it along with other wellness and sustainability issues, and securing funding to address it.

Budowle and Porter then made student food (in)security a centerpiece of their campus sustainability and food, health, and justice experiential project-based courses, respectively. Student projects included creating a guide to help others establish and manage food share cabinets (Yoder et al., n.d.), writing and receiving a food share cabinet expansion support funding proposal, and compiling a menu of student food security strategies for the UW administration based on best practices at other campuses.

A new Sustainability Coalition co-leader, Caitlin McLennan (co-editor of this special section), worked closely through Porter's food, health, and justice course with the then-ASUW wellness and sustainability director, Anna Savage, to convene

campus stakeholders, including from the administration, to help foster student food security action. In 2019, this group of students, staff, faculty, and administrators became the UW Food Security Taskforce ("the Taskforce"). Taskforce membership is open to all, and it continues to be co-led by the Sustainability Coalition and ASUW, as established by McLennan and Savage. At one of the first meetings, Porter presented the menu of strategies drafted by her students, from campus grocery stores to gardens (Budowle et al., 2019). The most senior administrator at the meeting responded, "Let's do them all." The Taskforce soon formed a mission around ending food insecurity at UW, mainly for students but extending to other members of the campus community, to "ensure that every Poke is nourished."¹ Values include focusing on securing high-quality and culturally appropriate food; using multiple high-impact, sustainable strategies; identifying and addressing underlying factors; prioritizing dignity and respect with a sharing ethos; and amplifying students' voices for a justice approach to student food security.

To facilitate focused action, the Taskforce soon formed working groups to tackle its priorities, such as a central campus food pantry, support for expanding student-led food share cabinets across campus, meal swipe sharing, and piloting good food recovery. Another was to more frequently and accurately measure food insecurity at UW—including which students are most affected and underlying contributing factors—and seek direct student input on strategies. With overall guidance from the Taskforce and mentorship from several faculty members via a working group, a nutrition graduate student and Taskforce member took on a campus-wide survey to measure food insecurity as his master's thesis. His specific thesis findings on military-connected student food security status and priorities have been published (Schinkel et al., 2023). Initial overall survey findings compiled for the Taskforce show that nearly half of UW students (46.8%) reported being food insecure and that rates were much higher among students of color, especially Native American students, nonbi-

¹ A "Poke" is the gender-neutral version of UW's mascot (i.e., "Cowpokes"); students, staff, faculty, and alumni frequently use the phrase "Go Pokes!"

nary students, and international students (Schinkel et al., 2020). (An associated manuscript is in preparation for peer review.)

In the face of those survey results, Porter proposed a Taskforce equity working group to focus on narrowing these gaps. The Taskforce unanimously agreed in fall 2021, and several student and faculty members volunteered to launch and join it.

Focusing on Equity in UW Student Food Security

Porter and Budowle again turned to student leaders in the Sustainability Coalition and Taskforce, including a student co-leader of both at the time, Nicole Morshead. Budowle also incorporated the equity working group as one of the project options in her spring 2022 campus sustainability course, the fifth year of the course to feature a student food insecurity project option. In this way, the course aims to “develop student and mentor-partner capacity for sustained engagement in particular areas of need for long-term and ongoing local sustainability challenges and opportunities” (Budowle et al., 2021, p. 6), such as student food insecurity. Porter and Morshead co-mentored a group of students who selected the project, including co-author Grimm and two others. We approached this work in three phases, beginning with and extending beyond the campus sustainability course: listening, following up, and learning.

Listening

The mentors and students gathered to strategize. Porter suggested that rather than inviting people to come to the Taskforce, the team should identify groups on campus associated with those student populations experiencing the highest food insecurity rates and come to them to share what the Taskforce was doing and hear about their priorities, assets, and ideas to improve student food security. This approach aimed to reduce the burden on already overtaxed minority groups at our predominantly white institution and create deeper and wider openings for listening by going to their tables, if invited, rather than only asking people to join ours.

Student team members reached out with “cold call” emails to international, LGBTQIA+, and

Black student groups. In addition, Porter contacted her collaborators in the Native American Education, Research, and Cultural Center at UW. The emails asked each group if equity team members could join an existing meeting or event and solicit needs, priorities, assets, and ideas about fostering food security. We also prepared and shared a summary of existing UW student food security resources to introduce this context as a basis for conversations and promote the opportunities already available. We heard back from the international student services and global engagement offices, a coalition of students associated with UW’s LGBTQIA+ community, and the Native American center, but we did not hear back from the Black student group.

The international student services office had already launched a food share cabinet through staff-led efforts, and we heard back quickly with an invitation to a standing breakfast event for international students. Most of our group attended, equipped with hard copies of the resource summary and questions for the students. We each sat with different groups and moved among them as students came and went. Students clearly asked for an interactive map of food resources, linked from a QR code posted near their food share cabinet. Other needs included family supplies such as diapers, longer hours for accessing food resources, and more food as well as more diverse and culturally appropriate food in the cabinet (and, for the few familiar with it, in the central UW Food Share Pantry) (Every Poke Nourished, n.d.). Some suggested upgrading the filing cabinet currently holding the food to something that would better display its contents and be easier to open and adding a refrigerator and/or freezer. A few students also suggested hosting potlucks to share food and company.

Student team members also accepted an invitation to visit the Rainbow Resource Center, part of Multicultural Affairs at UW. The hosts pointed out that students who identify as LGBTQIA+ are more likely to be estranged from their parents while still officially being their financial dependents. This can mean that students are actually financially insecure but prevented from accessing any means-tested resources. (These points are mir-

rored in Henry et al. in this issue.) They suggested to explicitly communicate that all UW food security resources are available to everyone, regardless of any demonstration of need. They also noted that the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC) had the space and funding to establish a food share cabinet and requested a copy of the guide for establishing cabinets.

Student leaders at the Native American center told Porter they would like to establish a food share cabinet in their building. They sought support to obtain funds to acquire an attractive wooden cabinet and stock it.

Following Up

In response to the ideas and priorities shared by international students, the student team developed an online interactive map (Figure 1), guiding students to locations, services, and hours for each existing

UW food resource, including food share cabinets scattered across campus (Every Poke Nourished, n.d.). Students distributed a poster advertising that food resources are available with a QR code taking users to the map to each group contacted and all student food share cabinet contacts on campus.

While the equity group initially aimed to provide a second-hand cabinet funded by Porter, an international student services staff member worked with her family and colleagues to secure their own. One international student made securing a refrigerator with a freezer to supplement the cabinet as part of her project work for another of Porter's courses. She was chair of the student nutrition club, which purchased a refrigerator at the end of 2022 where leftover food from events can now be shared. Staff are also helping another food share cabinet group on campus to acquire their own refrigerator with a freezer.

Figure 1. An Online Interactive Map of University of Wyoming Food Security Resources, Shown Here Featuring the Be'3Einooonesi Cebisee (Walking Cedar Tree) Food Share Cabinet



Image courtesy of Every Poke Nourished, n.d.

Currently, the international staff member who started the cabinet has noted that they lack standing funds to keep the cabinet and refrigerator/freezer fully stocked. The UW Food Share Pantry provides some supplies, and the Sustainability Coalition has provided funding that the organization competitively received from ASUW for a natural foods online grocer to support cabinets campus-wide. These sources, however, are not enough, not long-term, and/or not always desirable or culturally appropriate to the students. The staff member has been stringing together small donations and funding opportunities to keep some items on the shelves. The world language departments raised US\$120 for the cabinet, but the rice, beans, and lentils bought with those funds were gone within a few days. A senior administrator secured some local meat donations to fill the freezer, although they expected those to be gone not long after announcing their availability to students. Identifying reliable sources for getting foods that students want and need is now the international student food share cabinet team's top priority. Another international student taking courses with Porter is pursuing a multise­mester project investigating how students can help raise funds to keep the cabinet and refrigerator with freezer stocked into the future.

The Be'3Einooonesi Cebisee (Walking Cedar Tree) Food Share Cabinet opened in the Native American Center in spring 2022. The center director helped students clear a space for it and for overflow food storage. The equity working group and student team helped purchase a second-hand wooden cabinet with drawers, cupboards, and glass doors. The Sustainability Coalition provided US\$1,500 in gift cards for the aforementioned natural foods online grocer. Given the food security inequities experienced by Native American students as identified in the Taskforce survey, the Sustainability Coalition provided more than double the funding for this cabinet than others. However, the Be'3Einooonesi Cebisee cabinet shelves go bare possibly even more quickly than those at the international student cabinet. Both groups lack the resources to reliably replenish them. Some personal donations have enabled a student and faculty team to restock the cabinet for now, but much more support will soon be necessary.

Finally, the team shared the guide to creating a food share cabinet with the Rainbow Resource Center and worked with the Taskforce to ensure that food security resources are clearly communicated as being available to all, without demonstrating need. The MRC has not yet launched a cabinet; the equity working group plans to follow up again soon to offer support for a cabinet and/or other preferred strategies.

Learning from Our Initial Equity Efforts

We provisionally offer the following lessons from our recent equity-specific efforts at UW as recommendations for future student food security equity work at other colleges and universities.

Build connections before and beyond the scope of a particular issue. For example, the student team and mentors did not have any previous connection with the Black student group, and we did not receive a reply to emails. Porter's previous relationship with staff and students at the Native American Center provided a clearer path for collaboration.

Consult at other tables in addition to inviting people to yours. Whereas inviting diverse representation to the general Taskforce meetings had limited or inconsistent success, the equity working group found that going to the groups to share information and listen was much more productive.

Measure the inequity in student food security. The data about overall UW food security from the 2017 survey and the equity-specific data in 2020 have been essential tools for student leaders and others to mobilize action on these issues.

Articulate the core, moral values of student food security work. While this lesson emerges more from the overall Taskforce effort, starting with explicit shared values made it much easier to introduce the equity effort, because doing so aligned with those values of dignity and respect around a sharing ethos, a systemic approach considering underlying causes, and amplifying students' voices as those affected by food insecurity for a food justice approach.

Work to put equity at the center of every food security strategy conversation. In the first years of the work, the Taskforce latched onto any approach to tackle food security that felt like it was gaining any traction to help create and institutionalize a student food security commitment at UW. For example, there was an early opportunity to open a campus pantry. While this had not been the Taskforce's top priority, nor the student body's (Schinkel et al., 2020), it was a chance to literally gain a footprint on campus and to distribute more food, and the Taskforce took it. In conversations now about strategies, the equity working group aims to make reducing the disparities in who experiences food insecurity a central focus. For example, the Taskforce is having growing success in fundraising, and the equity focus enables us to consider allocation of the funds in new ways.

Engage students in action through experiential learning. UW students' work in project-based courses, graduate and undergraduate research, and extra/co-curricular experiences has deepened their education while fostering, informing, and even enabling the Taskforce's formation and capacity for action.

Promote the resources your college or university does have, especially among students most likely to face food insecurity. Many students with whom we consulted were unaware of the meal swipe sharing, central pantry, and other campus food security programs available to them.

Name how far you still need to go while recognizing that you are on the way there as long as you keep going. Naming our efforts and celebrating each successful step we take has helped Taskforce and equity working group members cohere and stay committed even when the distance between present conditions and the vision of closing inequity gaps and ensuring full student food security seems daunting. Those goals, however far away, guide the daily decisions we make and motivate us to keep coming to the table to get a little closer to the vision than we were yesterday.

Assessing Progress and Planning Next Steps

The measurement of student food insecurity at UW is not yet precise nor frequent enough to evaluate whether and to what extent Taskforce strategies are mitigating the problem, generally, and narrowing equity gaps, specifically. From anecdotal evidence and based on the volumes of pantry, cabinet, and swipe share food that are going to students, this work is plausibly making a real impact, and certainly in some individuals' lives. However, the equity efforts are too nascent and starkly insufficient to close the gaps in who is inequitably experiencing food insecurity. And none of the strategies in play are enough to end student food insecurity at UW.

For example, the student food share cabinets mainly serve as a source of snacks and an occasional dinner. Their purpose, however, is to share food with all who would like it in a grassroots and noncentralized way, involve students in this work, and raise the profile of food insecurity as an issue on campus. They have succeeded in all three. Logically, they would be much more useful in addressing food insecurity if they were in every building frequented by students and always well stocked with nourishing food that students want. Taking the last of the lessons listed above to heart, the equity working group's next two priorities are to (1) seek sustainable resources to keep the international and Native American student food share cabinets fully stocked, and (2) return to the Rainbow Resource Center to help start and stock a cabinet to better support LGBTQIA+ students.

Facing the Scale of the Problem

Ensuring that nearly every college and university student is nourished, including at UW, is achievable. It is the right thing to do. It is also the fiscally and practically smart thing to do. Compared with public and university endowment subsidies for tuition, food is cheap and student status is temporary. Letting students go hungry or struggle to succeed in academics after long hours at low-wage jobs, or both, is a moral failure. It is also a fiscal failure, in that food insecurity threatens the returns on investments on education. If they are well nourished, students can learn well, earn higher grades, and graduate more quickly.

The gross inequities in which student groups are facing food insecurity multiply both failures, including by compounding additional systemic disadvantages faced by many of these students beyond securing enough to eat (Osiecki, 2022). The inequities in which students disproportionately experience food insecurity will continue to

amplify inequities in scholastic achievement and later career opportunities. Any institution serious about improving retention and graduation rates and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion should start with ensuring that every student is nourished.

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