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An Innovative Approach to Eliminating Food Insecurity

Did you know that three in four college students will go hungry at some point of their college career? Even though there are campus food banks popping up around the country, the problem still exists. Campus gardens might be a way to enhance what food banks are already doing. Wasatch Gardens provides an innovative solution for fighting hunger on college campuses through creating community gardens that can assist the efforts of food banks.

Wasatch Gardens was founded in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1989. Their mission is “To empower people of all ages and incomes to grow and eat healthy, organic, local food” (Wasatch). In order to accomplish their mission, Wasatch Gardens helps people start and maintain community gardens. Whether these gardens are for a neighborhood, a local homeless shelter, or even a school, they are teaching others that “the quality of a community is directly related to the quality of its food” (Wasatch). With their five programs, Community Garden, Youth Garden, School Garden, Community Education, and Green Team Farm, they “offer garden space, educational programs, and community events to empower people to grow, harvest, preserve, and prepare fresh, healthy food” (Wasatch). This organization does its best to help people create a sustainable way to grow food that empowers members of the community.

Food insecurity is a growing problem in the US, and the issue is even more challenging for students who have additional costs related to funding their education. In the state of Arizona, food insecurity affects as much as 20% of the population: “One in five Arizonans lacked the money to buy food at least once in 2012, according to Feeding America, a non-profit organization consisting of more than 200 food banks and food-rescue organizations across the U.S.” (Szabo). These numbers are even higher for students, who are often working part-time to enable them to handle the rigors of academic life. In Yavapai County alone, the number of people struggling with food insecurity, which means they are not able to purchase adequate food for themselves or their families, is estimated to be around 17%. Add to that the increased cost of education, tuition, books, and fees, and the need to spend more time working on classwork, and students are even more likely to fall into this category. Food insecurity among students leads to a decreased ability to learn effectively, but, even more significant, it decreases a student’s ability to successfully complete his/her education.

Especially in the community college setting, many students have families to care for and are trying to balance school, work, and family on a very limited budget. When the choice is between food and books, students often must choose food, which leaves them without the necessary tools they need to succeed in their courses. Surviving on affordable options like Ramen

and Kraft Macaroni & Cheese can leave students without energy to give all their attention to their studies.

Wasatch Gardens provides an innovative solution to the problem of food insecurity by helping communities start community gardens. In one instance, they started a community garden down the street from a homeless shelter. Women from the shelter can work at the garden for a salary, and food from the garden is sold at a discount to a local Head Start program: “Each woman also gets a 6-foot stretch to plant whatever she likes. Lynette, whose Pomeranian-Chihuahua service dog, Ed, watches her patiently, chose melons, green beans, beets and snap peas so sweet they’d pass for candy in a blindfold test” (Piper). Not only does planting a garden empower these women to make positive choices, but it provides a living. “Team members earn \$9 an hour for a minimum of 20 hours per week and attend Friday classes on job skills. The land is leased by Salt Lake City’s Redevelopment Agency at a cost of \$1 per year, and the produce is sold at a cut rate to the Head Start program for disadvantaged children.” (Piper). What is really innovative about this program is that it is helping the women at the homeless shelter, as well as giving back to the community in other ways.

Community gardens are working to combat hunger in other areas of the country, as well. Right here in Arizona, community gardens are providing another way to combat food insecurity. “Non-profit organizations nationwide have started teaching lower-income communities to create their own vegetable gardens. The non-profit group, which is funded by donations and grants, formed partnerships with nearby churches for the gardens” (Szabo). As in Salt Lake City, these community gardens are giving people a sense of pride, as well as providing for their basic needs. “Experts say urban gardening is a cheaper and more nutritious option than purchasing food.” (Szabo). In addition to providing more nutritious food at a lower price, working in the gardens also serves as therapy: “There’s mountains of research that talks about the benefits of getting your hands dirty, as far as therapy goes,” he said” (Piper). And it’s making a difference! “The garden produces enough food that Alvarez doesn't need the food banks. In fact, he gives extra produce to church members or friends.” (Szabo). Participation in the garden projects provide a hand up, instead of a handout for people who need it most.

A similar solution is working on college campuses. College campus community gardens offer a way to expand on the offerings of campus food banks. One thriving example is the Montclair State University Community Garden. After doing a survey that found that “over 4 out of every 10 students who responded to the survey may be Food Insecure during the academic semester, and may not have access to enough food, or have only low quality foods, on a regular basis” (Montclair). In response, the campus decided to start a community garden.

Founded in 2018, the garden has “reclaimed and revitalized underutilized space on the campus, and has established 20 raised garden beds, totaling 1,000 square feet of growing space” (Montclair). Students must apply for space in the garden, which provides food for the school’s food pantry, as well as for community food banks. Not only do they provide fresh, healthier food, but since the food is grown right on campus, it is easily accessible and costs less money than stocking the shelves in a food pantry. In addition, working in the campus garden can provide

money making opportunities for students, as well as additional operating funds for the food bank when extra produce is sold to the campus dining facility. The vision of the garden is to “strengthen the connections between members of the Montclair State University community and bring our community closer together, while sustainably providing fresh foods and educational resources to our community members in need” (Montclair). Like the Wasatch Gardens, the community garden at Montclair does more than just feed students. It also supports the community as a whole, improving relations with the community while it assists students in need. Following the model created by Wasatch Gardens can expand upon the offerings of a campus food bank and really help students.

While starting a community garden on campus might have some initial costs, it doesn't have to break the bank. Colleges already pay for landscaping—why not plant edible landscaping and enlist students in the project? Not only would this help to round out a campus food bank, but it could even reduce costs for the college as students take on some of the work of landscapers. In addition, many colleges already have agricultural programs. Campus community gardens could be an innovative way to allow those students to get real experience running a community garden as they plan planting space, production, and coordinate getting produce to the campus food bank and to other community organizations, as well. Colleges can and should set an example for their communities by implementing this innovative and sustainable solution to food insecurity.

Those who are interested in this idea can show their support by educating themselves about the benefits of community gardens, as well as food insecurity. Donating to organizations like Wasatch Gardens allows them to continue to grow and provide a model for the rest of the country for a way to give people dignity and self-respect as they learn how to feed themselves, even as their efforts help others.

Wasatch Gardens provides college campuses with a model for an innovative solution that can help to alleviate food insecurity on their campuses. Even for colleges that already have a campus food bank, adding a campus garden might be a way to enhance what food banks are already doing. Not only would campus gardens provide nutritious food for students, but it could provide job experience for agriculture students and provide a living wage, as well. College campuses would do well to consider the benefits of incorporating a community garden on their campuses.

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