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Navigating Food Justice: Addressing Student Food Insecurity Challenges and Successes

Jayden F. Beed

Davidson Honors College, University of Montana, jb171393@umconnect.umt.edu

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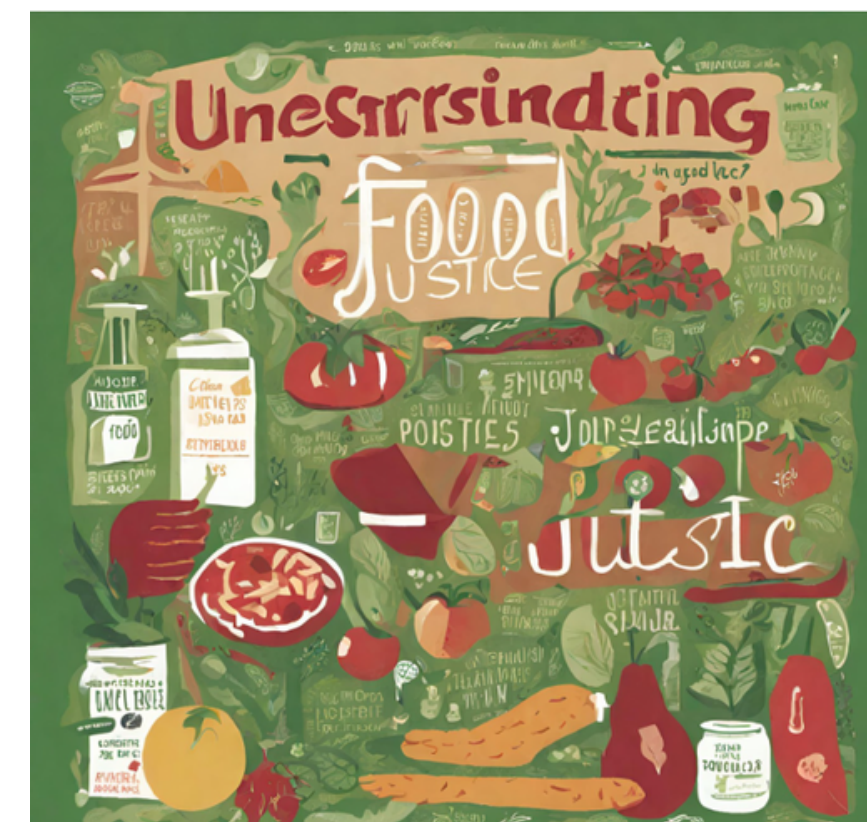
NAVIGATING FOOD JUSTICE: ADDRESSING STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

Food Justice: The What, Why, How

WHAT: Food justice seeks to facilitate equitable access to food for all, regardless of their socio-economic status or cultural background.

WHY: Access to nutritious food shapes every aspect of life: academic success, physical health, mental well-being, and dignity. Lack of access disproportionately affects college students.

HOW: Food justice can best be achieved through community-led, equity-driven systems that center lived experience, dismantle structural barriers, and ensure all people have access to culturally appropriate, nourishing food.



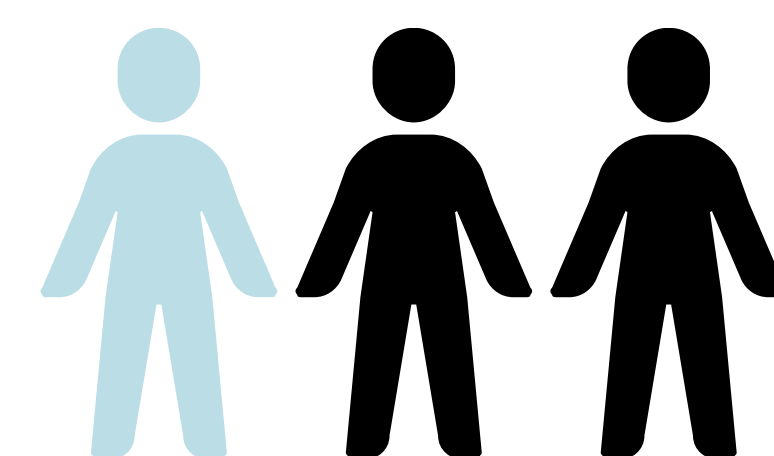
Food Insecurity on College Campuses Today

Over the last decade, multiple studies of food insecurity among college students have found rates from 20% to more than 50%, considerably higher than the 12% rate for the entire US population (Freudenberg et al. 2019).

63%

At the University of Montana, an estimated 63% of students need help with basic needs. This is significantly higher than the national average of 58%. However, 44% of UM students are unaware that there are resources to help them (Szpaller, 2022).

Temple University found that 34% of their students experienced food insecurity in 2020. Additionally, they noted "more than 4 million students in higher education are experiencing food insecurity, and 2.3 million more students have marginal food security" (Ableson et al., 2023).



These staggering statistics are consistent across the United States. See Table 1 below (Schultz, 2022).

University Location	Food Insecurity Prevalence
United States	10.5% (Coleman et al., 2020)
North Carolina	46.2% (McArthur et al., 2017, 566)
California	40.0% (Martinez et al., 2018, 6)
Illinois	35.0% (Morris et al., 2016, 379)
Georgia	29.0% (Raskind et al., 2019, 479)
New Hampshire	25.2% (Davidson & Morrell, 2020, 122)

UM's Honors Food Pantry

Creation of the Honors Food Pantry at the University of Montana

The idea for the Honors Food Pantry came to fruition after I completed a USDA-sponsored Food Justice course through the Davidson Honors College (DHC). That experience not only deepened my understanding of systemic food insecurity but also taught me how to research and approach problems from a justice-centered framework. As part of this course, we did a 24-hour Hackathon where teams tackled real food insecurity problems in a given community. We identified the causes, researched solutions, and presented them. It was where I first learned how to apply what we'd studied in class and gained the skills to turn that knowledge into real change.

Motivated by what I learned, I began looking into food insecurity on our own campus and was shocked by the prevalence of need. I noticed the Honors College didn't have a dedicated resource for students struggling with basic needs. I brought the idea of creating a food pantry to the Dean's Advisory Council, and with the support of both my peers and Dean Tim Nichols, planning began.

We chose the DHC kitchen as the pantry's location as a space that is discreet, accessible, and already tied to nourishment. I organized an initial food drive to get the pantry stocked and officially opened it in late 2024. At first, I would check in and see that most of the shelves remained full. But slowly, more food began to disappear. This quiet but powerful sign of impact reminded me why this project mattered. As word spread, donations became more consistent, and we eventually expanded the pantry to include essential toiletries and hygiene products.

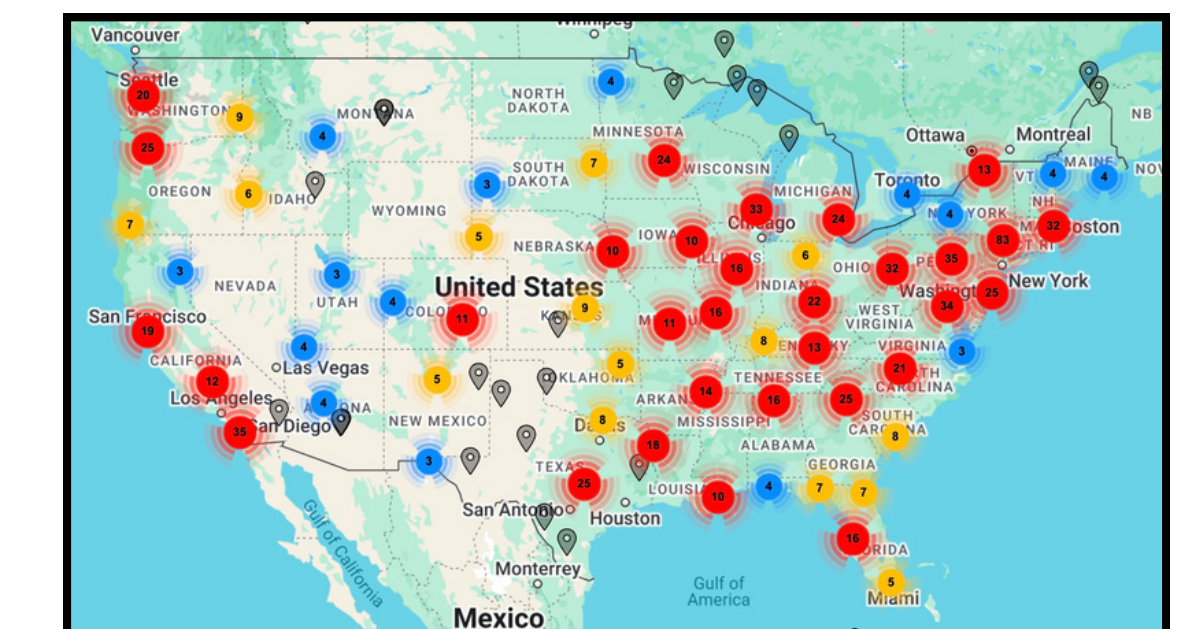
One of the pantry's biggest challenges has been sustainability. Unfortunately, efforts to partner with organizations like the Montana Food Bank Network and the UM Food Pantry have been complicated by a number of factors. For now, the pantry runs on small donations from students, faculty, and staff.



Model Programs

Many campuses are starting their own food pantries, like the University of Montana. Organizations like the College and University Food Bank Alliance have helped over 640 campuses start their own pantries (Williams, 2019).

Additionally, national movements like Swipe Out Hunger are becoming increasingly popular on U.S. college campuses. In fact, they now have over 850 partners. See the map to the right. (SwipeOutHunger, n.d.)



Strategies for Success

- 1. Start with Justice:** Understand food insecurity as an equity and justice issue that disproportionately affects marginalized students.
- 2. Do Your Research:** Use credible data, lived experience, and campus-specific insights to clearly define the problem and intentions.
- 3. Build Support:** Connect with peers, staff, and leadership to gain momentum and backing.
- 4. Pick Resource:** Choose the resource you feel will best fit the community you aim to serve and build an implementation plan.
- 5. Launch Accessibly:** Choose a low-barrier, welcoming space and start small with a food drive or starter stock.
- 6. Track Use:** Monitor use over time and adjust to meet real student needs.
- 7. Plan for Sustainability:** Explore long-term funding and partnerships while navigating institutional barriers.
- 8. Educate and Advocate:** Raise awareness through discourse, collaboration, and community engagement about food insecurity and promote a culture of dignity and care.

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Jayden Beed, Davidson Honors College, University of Montana