



Beyond the Food Pantry:

A Report on the Innovative Solutions for
Hunger Relief and Student Success Project



League for Innovation in the Community College
with support from Walmart Foundation



This report outlines the details of the colleges' work over the past two years, which ultimately resulted in over 6,500 points of contact with students, family members, and community members who were served as well as informed and inspired by the possibilities of healthy eating.

Three years ago, almost half of U.S. community college students responding to the #RealCollege survey conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (Hope Center) indicated that they had experienced food insecurity within 30 days of completing the survey (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). To help community colleges reduce food insecurity for students and their families in sustainable ways that foster student retention, persistence, and success, the League for Innovation in the Community College (League), with support from the Walmart Foundation, launched a two-year project, "Innovative Solutions for Hunger Relief and Student Success." The inclusion of families was intentional and important because many community college students are responsible for or contribute to the support of their household (Cruse et al., 2019).

Shortly after the project started, the COVID-19 pandemic upended the world. Despite this, employees at both colleges understood the opportunity in the midst of the crisis to push innovative responses to food insecurity, and they worked tirelessly on two different approaches. One college transformed a small food pantry into a CARE Center which holistically provides for students' basic needs; the other college began developing a playbook for sharing learnings with other rural community colleges on what worked and what didn't work in addressing students' basic needs within their population. This report outlines the details of the colleges' work over the past two years, which ultimately resulted in over

6,500 points of contact with students, family members, and community members who were served as well as informed and inspired by the possibilities of healthy eating. Quotes from individuals who were directly served are included on these pages, as are quotes from those whose awareness of the extent of food insecurity on campus was raised through project activities.

To be considered for participation in the project, colleges needed to serve distressed, rural communities as identified in Walmart's *America at Work* report (2019). In response to a multi-state request for proposals, Northeast Texas Community College (NTCC) and West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) were selected as the project colleges. Executive leadership at both colleges as well as city policymakers and social agencies committed their support.

Northeast Texas Community College, in Mount Pleasant, Texas, had a fall 2019 enrollment of almost 3,000 students (1,436 FTE). The college serves students in Camp, Morris, and Titus counties, with average annual median household incomes between \$40,227 and \$50,196 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). West Kentucky Community and Technical College, in Paducah, Kentucky, had a fall 2019 enrollment of almost 6,400 students (2,074 FTE). The college serves students in ten surrounding counties, with average annual median household incomes between \$28,274 and \$50,268 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). During the pandemic, unemployment in Titus County, one of the counties NTCC serves, reached 9.1% in June 2020, double that of the previous June; in McCracken County, where WKCTC is located, unemployment was 17.8% in April 2020, over four times what it was (4.3%) in April 2019 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a, 2021b). The two colleges in the project have very different ways of addressing the challenge, and each has created a variety of responses based on the needs of the college and community. This report describes the colleges' responses and lessons learned as well as what did and did not work in engaging students in food and nutrition education, helping students access college and local food resources, and strengthening sustainable resources for students and their families.

Project Colleges

Northeast Texas
Community College

West Kentucky
Community and
Technical College



The aim in working with Innovation Engineering was to connect budget-strapped community colleges to accessible systems they can use to think differently—to be innovative—in seeking solutions to challenges...

As part of the project, staff, students, and community members at these two colleges were trained in Innovation Engineering, a proven systems approach to innovation created by Eureka! Ranch. Innovation Engineering focuses on research-to-practice initiatives and in this project was centered around changing institutional cultures to enable new thinking about long-term socioeconomic challenges (Hall, 2018). The aim in working with Innovation Engineering was to connect budget-strapped community colleges to accessible systems they can use to think differently—to be innovative—in seeking solutions to challenges that inhibit student access to higher education, persistence to completion of educational goals, and entry into family-wage careers that reduce the need for food assistance and provide opportunities for advancement.

Eureka! Ranch conducted the training and was engaged to coach the colleges' project teams as they identified and developed effective solutions through Innovation Engineering's use of Fast Fail and Plan-Do-Study-Act. This process examined the food insecurity problem not in isolation, but in the context of the larger ecosystem and how it could better support the basic needs of its population.

The League also engaged the Hope Center to conduct pre- and post-assessments of the scope of need among students and their families at the participating colleges.

During the first two months of 2020, the first (and only) in-person meetings were held at the colleges. At these meetings, college and community teams began their training in Innovation Engineering with Eureka! Ranch, engaged in the earliest stages of

ideation and innovation, and began planning their respective approaches to reducing food insecurity among students and their families. The Hope Center planned to launch the pre-assessment survey at the two colleges. Representatives from the colleges attended the League's Innovations Conference in Seattle, Washington, March 1-4, 2020, where they introduced the project and shared their emerging plans.

And then, as we all know, the world changed.

As with almost everything in our professional and personal lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major influence on the work of this project. The pandemic disproportionately impacted marginalized populations (Gracia, 2020), which include many community college students. In the fall of 2020, a Census Bureau survey indicated that more than 40% of households reported having a family member who was "cancelling all plans for community college" (Belfield & Brock, 2020, para. 3). The pandemic has also exacerbated students' basic needs issues, which impact student outcomes (Goldrick Rab et al., 2019). We are learning more about the large number of college students whose basic needs are compromised (Breuning et al., 2017; Broton & Cady, 2020; McArthur et al., 2018; Nazmi et al., 2018) and the importance of addressing their basic needs in improving educational outcomes. A national student survey of basic needs, distributed during the pandemic by the Hope Center, found that "nearly 3 in 5 students experienced basic needs insecurity" and 39% of community college students surveyed indicated some form of food insecurity (2021, p. 3). Research also indicates that rural communities have layering of distress and unique challenges in addressing food insecurity (Blagg et al., 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). We know that the major issues impacting rural community college students include Internet access, funding, and basic needs (Rush-Marlow, 2021), all of which were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With college teams kicking off their work just as the pandemic began, all aspects of the project were affected. Colleges were immersed in taking care of students academically, emotionally, and physically. Curriculum was moved online, support services had to find new ways to serve students, and the challenges

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related to rural environments were heightened. But there was no question of abandoning the work, and stakeholders at each college took on the additional responsibilities.

The project was stalled for several months as colleges focused on moving operations online and helping students through the transition during spring and summer terms. At the same time, the League and Eureka! Ranch worked to redesign the planned on-site team meetings, training sessions, and multi-day innovation accelerator sessions as Zoom meetings for what would be the remainder of the project. Community engagement of food banks and other social agencies that had figured into new, significant roles in systemic change was lost as these organizations were overwhelmed in meeting the avalanche of needs. Despite all the changes that were happening at the colleges in spring 2020, teams were committed to the project and to looking for new ways to address hunger and access to healthy eating. As teams began developing ideas, their students took part in the Hope Center's (2020) national survey of students' basic needs to gauge the level of need. Results indicated a high level of food insecurity among students at the colleges. Community mapping was also done to create food resource maps with live Google Maps links for each county served by the projects.

BROAD PERSPECTIVES

Before delving deeper into the college activities, we provide the following broader perspectives on learnings from the project, which no doubt have been impacted by the pandemic (League for Innovation in the Community College, n.d.). The first is an acknowledgement that the focus should be, as the Hope Center describes on its Resources page, “beyond the food pantry.” Food pantries are an excellent first step for colleges that do not have them, and they can also serve as a focal point for communications and engagement, but they are a short-term response and changing food insecurity requires changing systems. Crossing the boundaries of each college’s approach is awareness of the importance of creating a single system to get students and their families the needed information about resources and the assistance to guide them through red tape. For example, increasing students’ access to SNAP benefits can be hindered by confusing qualifications that are subject to change, so simplifying SNAP information for students and staff is key (Freudenberg et al., 2019; Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). In this project we have worked with national agencies in support of simplifying SNAP information in ways that can be shared with other colleges. Also noteworthy is the recognition at both colleges of the need to normalize asking for help. Vulnerable populations are strongly represented among community college students, and decreasing barriers of any kind is important in helping them succeed. The theme of reducing stigma associated with seeking hunger relief was repeated often in this project and is reflected in the inclusiveness of activities the colleges designed.

Next, not surprising but worth repeating, is that people matter and engagement is key. The pandemic could have closed down the project as colleges were overwhelmed with the massive effort of quickly moving from in-person to online environments, but it didn’t. We were reminded of the importance of investment in individuals beyond the classroom, finding ways to demonstrate genuine connections with students to build trust. In doing this work, it is helpful to have support services that include peer-to-peer mentoring. Addressing socio-academic issues as nuanced and pervasive as food insecurity is part of the often hidden work of community college faculty and staff. Without a full portfolio of best practices to lean into, this filling-the-gaps work falls on the shoulders of committed individuals, committees, or functional units which

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may or may not be well-integrated into the full college community. They build bridges with external agencies, find funding, and go the extra mile to ensure that each student can be successful, despite often tremendous odds. Research identifies them as “street-level bureaucrats” (Howard, 2017, Lipsky, 2010). The work takes time, emotional effort, and physical labor that are often unrecognized and exhausting; however, the work is also very rewarding. As community college financial expert James Palmer says, “we educate all by educating each,” and this is the work of the community college (personal communication, March 23, 2018). Leveraging partnerships in a teach-them-to-fish model and clearing our bureaucratic weeds so students can become self-supportive in basic needs resources enables faculty and staff to provide other needed support. The culture of care within a community is imperative for change to happen, and it is these connections with the community which are needed to facilitate that change.

Finally, innovation can be messy, and Innovation Engineering incorporates Plan-Do-Study-Act and Fast-Fail processes to help innovators quickly recognize what to retain, what to revise, and what to abandon. In keeping with these aspects of Innovation Engineering, the college teams reported on initiatives regardless of their level of success. All of these programs started as experiments, and many are still in a pilot or trial phase. While successful or promising programs are being refined for possible further implementation, less successful programs are being revised and reimaged for possible relaunch or have been tabled or canceled. The programs included in this report fall across the successful/unsuccessful continuum. Unsuccessful initiatives are included in part because we learned from them, but also because they may work well elsewhere or in other circumstances, and they may spark ideas for other programs.



NTCC

NORTHEAST TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The project at Northeast Texas Community College benefits from an engaged external community with organizations focused on meeting individuals' socioeconomic needs and an internal work team led by Carmen Shurtleff, a social work faculty member. With a deep, unyielding commitment to helping students, Shurtleff facilitated the student-driven effort to establish the food pantry at NTCC. She then helped ensure its sustainability by including it among the service-learning opportunities for students in the college's social work program and bringing in interns from a nearby transfer university's social work baccalaureate program. During this project, she led the transformation of this nascent food pantry into a broader CARE Center that offers a holistic approach to basic-needs assistance.

“The wellness group and the EatBetter4Less program taught me that eating healthier is very important to your emotional and academic well-being.”

Student



“Being an on-campus dorm student, it is hard to find money to go to the grocery store. The CARE Center helped me out and the volunteers are there for you with whatever you need! They go above and beyond to make sure the students’ needs are met...”

Student

CARE Center

Consistent with many colleges nationally, NTCC is moving beyond the food pantry in meeting students’ basic needs. With a mission to help alleviate basic-needs insecurities within the college community by providing students with resources through access to education, healthy food, advocacy, and empowerment, the newly formed CARE Center is a place for students to connect with each other as well as with campus and community resources. It incorporates the college’s food pantry—the Eagle Pantry—which also houses a Hygiene Closet stocked with supplies such as shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, and feminine products. A new Cook Nook at the Pantry is a mini kitchen stocked with an air fryer, microwave, and blender, where students living in on-campus housing can check out approved kitchen equipment to use in their dorms.

Early in the COVID-19 shutdown, students struggled to access food as well as gasoline and the technology resources needed to complete newly online courses. Although the pandemic closed the campus, the pantry continued operations and went from serving an average of 40 students a month to over 300 a month with curbside-only pickup. Because of the increase in the number of students who accessed the pantry, NTCC implemented curbside services as a permanent option for students. In addition, home delivery was added for students who have health concerns or limited transportation. Finding food for the pantry became a challenge as grocery store supplies diminished, but through the college’s

partnership with the volunteer-led community agency, God's Closet, the pantry has been supported with food throughout the pandemic.

The CARE Center also launched a peer-led Wellness Group, offering students a space for making connections and learning about healthy living with the EatBetter4Less program (see page 11). The college created a CARE Peer Mentor program to address basic-needs issues as the team found that students were more likely to be open about struggles among peers than with faculty or staff. The success of the program resulted in the development of a new CARE Mentor position filled by social work interns in a partnership with the Texas A&M University-Commerce Social Work department. CARE Center plans include continued expansion and development to meet students' basic needs.

Early in the project, NTCC's student services created a campuswide promotional plan to bring awareness of available campus resources, including the Eagle Pantry. As services expanded beyond the food pantry and were rebranded as the CARE Center, the promotional materials followed suit and the Center has seen an increase in the number of students accessing services. Although the CARE Center is new and statements of overall impact would be premature, early observations suggest an infusion of renewed energy around a more overt culture of caring across the college. It seems likely that the CARE Center's active efforts to normalize asking for help are contributing to, if not driving, this transformation.

"If it weren't for being able to get food from the CARE Center, I would not have been able to eat for the week."

Student



"I had no idea how big the need is. The CARE Center helps bring awareness to the needs of college campus students."

Faculty Member



“As a mother of five little ones and a full-time student who’s interning, our lives are hectic. I absolutely love the EatBetter4Less program. It taught me several different tips and hacks [and] the effects certain foods have on my family and my own mental health. I learned ways to schedule meals... along with ways to save money...and still offer my family healthy fulfilling meals.”

Student

EatBetter4Less.com

Beyond meeting students’ immediate food needs, the broader work of the project team at NTCC was the creation of EatBetter4Less.com (EB4L), a food education and activation support system. The program has two parts: (a) education in how to buy and prepare inexpensive, healthy meals through short videos, recipe cards in Eagle Pantry food kits, and a digital food badge students and others can earn; and (b) activation through communications, partnerships, and outreach to support students and their families in eating healthy foods on a tight budget. EB4L topics help students and others learn how to cook healthy meals with food pantry or other items, read nutritional labels, and grow a personal garden.

Other Programs and Activities

Healthy Eating Meal Kits. Early in the project, the team used meal kits to raise awareness of the Eagle Pantry and EB4L through a monthly food kit program. Each kit came in a reusable EB4L-branded bag with a cooking tool, step-by-step recipe card, and local food map. Over 400 meal kits and 1,000 healthy snack kits were distributed as part of the project. In addition, monthly on-site and online cooking demonstrations were held to show students how to prepare the meal-kit food. During this program, Eagle Pantry volunteers found that many students are frequently approached in the student center by individuals or groups selling products or promoting opportunities, making them hesitant to inquire about or accept a kit. Students were more comfortable accessing food kits distributed by college employees who explained that the kits were free, with no strings attached.

Grow Your Own. The team launched a Grow Your Own program that provided students with materials needed to create herb pallet gardens. Over 50 herb pallet gardens were built, and student volunteers distributed over 600 dill seed packets that included a welcome card marketing the EB4L website. The herb garden built at the CARE Center site provides herbs for cooking demonstrations as well as distribution with Eagle Pantry food items. The team also provided home starter garden kits for students and their families to create vegetable gardens and helped build and strengthen relationships with local nonprofit hunger relief organizations by holding a Community Dig Party to create community gardens. The team has partnered with the college's agriculture program to provide fresh produce and ensure compliance with food handling regulations.

Family and Community Events. To promote hunger relief and healthy eating resources on campus and in the community, and to help reduce the stigma that can be related to asking for help, the NTCC team held numerous events for campus and community members as part of the project. For example, in promoting EatBetter4Less.com, the team held a campus event that encouraged students to complete an EB4L certificate, which would then grant access to a campus Backyard Crawfish Boil. A community Family Fun event was held to bring awareness to EatBetter4Less.com as a resource for learning about healthy eating. It included games as well as a gardening workshop. A Community Block Party featured food and entertainment as well as academic advising and an on-site SNAP navigator, and a "One Night in a Cardboard Box" event helped raise awareness around issues of food and housing insecurity. Cooking demonstrations were held at many events, including special demos for dorm students to learn how to prepare healthy snacks and meals using Cook Nook equipment and campus and community demos for preparing foods provided in meal kits or food pantries.

"The EatBetter4Less website...has some great resources for teaching individuals how to eat on a budget. I love the food for your mood video. It had some great information on the food you should eat to help keep a positive mindset."

Student



Photo provided by NTCC

Eagle Assist. In a partnership between student services and the food pantry, Eagle Assist was developed as a college web page to streamline student access to on- and off-campus services. A resources video tour is in production at NTCC as one of several activities designed to help drive students to the online resource. Through this project, NTCC connected with a Feeding America initiative to support VISTA/AmeriCorps volunteers working on college campuses to help college students connect with SNAP and WIC benefits.

“[The CARE Center] is a safe space for students to come be heard and get what they need within in the safe environment.”

Staff Member



WKCTC

WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE

West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) approached the project as a Hunger Relief Learning Laboratory, incubating and testing various solutions for hunger relief and detailing processes and lessons learned to share with other community colleges. A cross-functional team of student services staff, institutional research, and external stakeholders, led by Student Services Vice President Emily Peck, began the project with a premise that sufficient resources are available to alleviate food insecurity, but students weren't accessing them due to stigma or lack of awareness. The team first identified friction points students encounter when trying to access programs and services and then began testing ideas for dissolving the roadblocks, simplifying the processes, and redesigning systems. The project team developed programs focused on identifying need, raising awareness, and providing resources, all with an aim to reduce food insecurity by easing access to resources and reducing stigma associated with seeking assistance.



Campus Cupboard

At the start of the project, WKCTC had operated its Campus Cupboard food pantry for less than a year. The Cupboard sought to assist students in need with supplemental food, household supplies, and personal hygiene items, but the project team was concerned that students were hesitant to seek the new food pantry's services. The team worked with the Student Government Association (SGA) and the WKCTC TV department to create a three-minute video addressing the Cupboard's purpose, providing a visual guide to accessing it, and answering frequently asked questions. This video, which was posted on the Campus Cupboard website and on social media, was crucial during the pandemic as it guided students through easy steps during COVID-19 protocols. It continues to be included in student emails, announcements, and the KCTCS app. The team has plans for its use in new student orientation and first-year experience classes and anticipates future videos and publications that will include more student voices. The team also sought to add a "Refer" button to the college website so faculty, staff, and students could refer students in need to the Cupboard; faculty referrals are among the top five ways students learn about the food pantry. Although this effort stalled, the team determined that increased promotion would further raise awareness of the Cupboard and its services, as would professional development for faculty and staff around student need, available campus resources, and existing referral processes.

Sharing Stations. Seeking ways to make food items more readily available since access to healthy food was hindered by a sprawling campus, the project team created Sharing Stations, placed strategically around the campus and stocked with grab-and-go food items for students experiencing immediate hunger issues. An ongoing awareness campaign informs students about the impact of diet on learning, mood, and other activities and emotions, as well as promotes use of the Stations and donation campaigns. A QR code at each Station connects students to the Campus Cupboard, and the SGA has taken on the task of stocking and maintaining the Stations. The Sharing Stations were launched in fall 2021 and early use patterns seem to indicate that placing Stations in lower-traffic areas counters concerns about stigma associated with food insecurity.



Photo provided by WKCTC

My perception of food insecurity has definitely shifted this semester [as] I truly realized I have been struggling with food insecurity. My mom has changed jobs this semester [and] buying food that'd last was difficult. I spent many days walking to the store 20 minutes away for my siblings. I'd order what I could [and] used every skill I learned in this class for them. So I was thrilled to find out I was baking for [other students]. No matter what's going on, everyone deserves great food and I was beyond glad to have taken part in that. It has inspired me to help others with food insecurity as much as possible.

Culinary Arts Student



Treat Yourself Culinary Carts. In partnership with the Culinary Arts department's Basic Baking class, the team's Treat Yourself initiative provided free scones, muffins, bagels, rolls, and other baked goods for students. The carts were placed in high-traffic areas with a sign asking, "Did you miss breakfast?" and were promoted via campus media as an activity sponsored by Culinary Arts and the Campus Cupboard. The partnership provided an opportunity for Culinary Arts students to address a local need as they learned more about food insecurity on campus. Although the project team noticed an increase in Campus Cupboard visits after each Treat Yourself event, they readily saw the need for a more formalized process for tracking the carts' impact on raising awareness of the Cupboard.

Beyond the Campus Cupboard

When students need resources that are not available in the Campus Cupboard, WKCTC's Community of Concern refers them to partnering community organizations, including Family Service Society, Paducah Cooperative Ministry, and United Way of Paducah-McCracken County. As part of the project, however, the team explored opportunities to extend campus options beyond the Campus Cupboard, including a simple, confidential referral option that can provide immediate assistance for students in need.

Advisor in the Middle. Recognizing that student-advisor connections can improve retention rates (Rosenbaum et al., 2006) and provide opportunities to identify academic as well as nonacademic needs, the WKCTC team sought ways to increase student engagement in advising sessions. The lack of student participation in these sessions was made worse when the pandemic forced the college to move to online environments, so the team created an incentive program to drive one-on-one discussions with advisors. Students who had not met with an advisor by midterm were invited to complete a personal inventory identifying academic as well as basic needs and to make an advising appointment; those who did would receive a \$25 gift card. Among students who completed the inventory, half reported having experienced food insecurity, opening opportunities for advisors to connect them with food and other needed resources. This initiative supported the advising department's recent shift to a holistic model, and plans are under way to test other incentives and launch future incentive programs earlier in the semester.

“Having food available supports student engagement, retention, and success.... Speaking personally as a former food-insecure college student, I feel that if food is consistently available for our students, it will make their world a better place.”

Faculty Member



Photo provided by WKCTC

Among students who completed the inventory, half reported having experienced food insecurity, opening opportunities for advisors to connect them with food and other needed resources.

Lunch It Forward. Because many students lack funds to purchase lunch or bring their own food from home, the team planned a Lunch It Forward program at the Center Café in the Student Center. When students stopped by the Café for lunch, they could also purchase a pre-paid meal gift card for \$4.50, \$6.00, or \$6.50. The gift card would go into a bank to be redeemed at the Café by any currently enrolled WKCTC student in need. The pandemic closed the Café before this program could launch, so Lunch It Forward remains on hold; however, planning it increased student leaders' understanding of food insecurity among college students and sparked their interest in supporting other efforts, including Sharing Stations and Campus Cupboard.

Planting Workshop: Grow Your Own Lunch.

To promote the nutritional value of fresh produce, the team worked with SGA to hold a Grow Your Own Lunch (GYOL) workshop as part of the college's Earth Day events. Students registered online to pick up a lettuce-growing kit with 14-18 inches of seed tape, starter and potting soils, containers, planting instructions, and a hashtag for sharing photos. GYOL was marketed in daily announcements, the KCTCS app, electronic bulletin boards, and printed marketing materials. The planting workshop was held during the pandemic when many students were not on campus, but 17 students participated. Plans for future workshops include scheduling them when more students are on campus and providing a centralized space for students to work together on their gardens and participate in additional gardening workshops.

Students Speak. To raise awareness of community resources available to students and their families, the team engaged in a live-streamed, virtual town hall with WKCTC and local agency leaders. Local organizations shared information about resources for food and other basic-needs assistance, and college personnel updated students on pandemic-related changes and advising opportunities and answered questions submitted by students. The event was intended to empower students to seek assistance and share information with other students. Forty-



Photo provided by WKCTC



Would you like to grow something, but never thought you could or did not know where to start? This is your chance! Grow Your Own Lunch kits will include everything needed to start growing lettuce, including the instructions!

You will use #wkctcgrowyourownlunch to post pictures of your adventure to social media! This will be fun and we are excited to share this opportunity with you! When your kit is ready for pickup, we will notify you with the information you submitted on the form! Super simple! We hope you enjoy this experience and feel confident to grow more food items!

Questions? Contact amy.elmore@kctcs.edu

Grow Your Own Lunch kits will be available for pickup April 19-April 22 by registering for them.

Scan this QR Code with the camera app on your mobile device. Fill out the form to reserve your "Grow your own lunch" kit!



This event is in partnership with WKCTC's Earth day events.
Earth day is April 22

West Kentucky Community & Technical College
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WKCTC, a proud member of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), is an equal educational and employment opportunity institution.

Photo provided by WKCTC



“We heard some amazing stories about how these groceries were helping tide a family over until payday... . The drive-through process...helped take some of the hesitancy away that people might have about accepting free food.”

Student Volunteer

eight students participated in the event, which was recorded and posted online. In planning similar events in the future, the team will consider shorter videos featuring students that can be used with various media platforms and, when safety protocols permit, holding live events on campus.

Students Taking Action on Resources (STAR) Badge.

The STAR Badge initiative was designed to raise students’ awareness of the many campus resources available to them, including those related to food insecurity. The college’s media tool, Merit, publicizes students’ profiles and achievements, such as skills in student leadership and making connections, that can be added to resumes and LinkedIn profiles. The first STAR badge pilot began when the college was closed to most students, and the team quickly determined that with all the pandemic-required changes and adjustments, this initiative would be tabled until faculty and staff were better able to coordinate fully on the effort.

Yes, We Can! Collaborating with a local nonprofit, Paducah Cooperative Ministry (PCM), WKCTC planned to raise awareness of support systems, reduce food insecurity stigma, and reach up to 380 households through its Yes, We Can! drive-through food distribution program for students. Volunteers filled 380 tote bags with food, related recipes provided by Culinary Arts students, local assistance agency brochures, and Campus Cupboard and other college resource information. The event was widely promoted in the campus community and all tote bags were distributed either at the drive-through site, by delivery upon request, or at other campus locations. Moving forward, the college intends to partner with other external food pantries to continue this successful program.

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been traumatic in its effect on community college students and their families, and rural communities have been particularly impacted (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The two rural colleges participating in the League's "Innovative Solutions for Hunger Relief and Student Success" project did what community colleges do: They said "yes," they stepped up, and they took care of their students. In the middle of the most significant upheaval to higher education most of us have experienced, faculty and staff made time to work on solutions to students' hunger and healthy eating needs.

And the work they did made a difference. Collectively, the colleges made more than 6,500 points of contact with students, family members, and community members regarding hunger relief and healthy eating. They distributed more than 2,000 meals and provided nutrition education and cooking skills to at least 350 students and others.

Dealing with food insecurity in a crisis is just one example of the countless untold stories of the work of community colleges. The adage of trying to be all things to all people has been a common concern among community college employees for decades. It is reflected at times in a perception that these institutions attempt to meet expanding student and community needs because if they do not, no other sector will. Rather than lamenting this as a problem, the colleges in this project are adopting a more productive framework of better leveraging community-based partnerships to address the emerging and continuing nonacademic needs of students, which ultimately will positively impact educational outcomes.

"There are no words that can express how thankful I am for the groceries that [were] given to me. All I can say is thank you so much for your kindness and generosity."

Student



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