Master of Public Health

Integrative Learning Experience Report

Bridging research, leadership, and advocacy: A systems approach to tackling food insecurity

by

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MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Summary/Abstract

This report summarizes my Applied Practice Experience (APE), which encompassed four distinct but interconnected initiatives: *The Cats' Cupboard* (Kansas State University's on-campus food pantry), the *Alternative Breaks Program* in Garden City, the *Rural Grocery Initiative* and *Kansas Healthy Food Initiative*, and the development of a *SNAP Outreach Program* for K-State students. Over the course of 240 applied practice hours, I gained invaluable experience in public health practice, particularly in five core competencies: *leadership, governance, and management*; *systems thinking*; *structural analysis of health disparities*; and *data-driven program development and biostatistical analysis*. These competencies provided a framework for my engagement in direct service, community-based research, policy advocacy, and leadership in public health initiatives. While these four competencies were central to my experience, in the following sections, I will also highlight how other of the 22 foundational public health competencies were addressed throughout my work.

Throughout this experience, I worked under the mentorship of four key preceptors, each playing an essential role in my learning and making contributions across these projects. *Shelly Williams*, Director of 'Cats Cupboard, guided me in food pantry operations, resource management, and program expansion to address food insecurity on campus. *Tamara Bauer*, Director of the Alternative Breaks Program, supported my facilitation of immersive student learning experience in Garden City, where I led discussions on food systems, labor, and public health. *Dr. Leah Tsoodle*, an agricultural economist, provided mentorship in research design and data analysis for the Rural Grocery Initiative, where I examined food access and grocery sustainability in rural communities. *Dr. Kara Ross*, also an agricultural economist, played a pivotal role in supporting my efforts to develop a SNAP Outreach Program for K-State students—a project that marks the first university-led SNAP outreach initiative in the state of Kansas.

The primary objectives of my APE were to design and implement public health interventions that address food insecurity, apply systems thinking tools to analyze food access challenges, develop leadership and advocacy skills, and engage in data-driven decision-making to inform policy and program development. Through these four experiences, I was able to work at the intersection of research, community engagement, and policy to advance food security in meaningful ways.

As part of my contributions to these initiatives, I facilitated strategic planning efforts for *'Cats Cupboard*, expanding its services and reducing stigma associated with food assistance; conducted research and data analysis for the *Rural Grocery Initiative* and *Kansas Healthy Food Initiative*, contributing to policy recommendations aimed at strengthening rural food systems; and initiated the process of establishing a *SNAP Outreach Program* at K-State, collaborating with a multidisciplinary team to secure funding and develop a strategic plan for implementation. This program represents a groundbreaking effort, as no other university in Kansas currently has an official SNAP outreach initiative.

This culminating Applied Practice Experience allowed me to engage in impactful public health work across four different but interconnected settings, each contributing to my professional development. In the forthcoming sections of this report, I provide an in-depth examination of each organization and project, detailing my responsibilities, the public health competencies I applied and strengthened, and the broader implications of my work. As will be evident, my experience across these four sites enabled me to develop expertise in leadership, systems thinking, structural analysis of health disparities, and data-driven program development—while also practicing additional competencies in advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and program evaluation. These experiences have prepared me to continue addressing food insecurity and public health challenges through research, policy, and community-driven action.

Subject Keywords: Food insecurity, public health, SNAP outreach, systems thinking, leadership, community engagement.

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Dr. Carol Shanklin, your encouragement has been a constant source of strength for me, extending far beyond the length of this report. You consistently remind me of the broader impact of this work and its potential to affect communities. Your mentorship has been key in helping me bridge theory with practice, and you lead by example in the many ways you uplift and address the needs of our campus and community. I deeply appreciate the care you've shown in my personal and professional development. Thank you for seeing me as more than just a student but as a person. I aspire to be the mentor you are someday.

I am also profoundly grateful to my site preceptors, Shelly Williams, Tamara Bauer, Leah Tsoodle, and Kara Ross. Each of you has taught me the importance of listening, understanding the complexities of food systems, and approaching our work with empathy and integrity. Your willingness to share your expertise, your patience in answering my questions, and your belief in my potential have left a lasting impact on me. You've shown me the value of collaboration, the importance of asking difficult questions, and the need to stay grounded in the communities we serve.

This work, this journey, would not have been possible without each of you, and for that, I am grateful. The knowledge I have gained from you will continue to shape my work in public health, but more importantly, your example of service, compassion, and commitment to positive change will continue to inspire me. As I move forward, I carry with me the profound understanding that this is just the beginning. The work we do in public health is far from over—it is a continuous commitment to those we serve, and I hope to continue working alongside each of you, learning from you, and contributing to the collective effort to make the world a better place for all.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to the amazing women who have shaped my academic journey and life, each of you contributing to my growth in ways I will carry with me always. To Dr. Marianne Paiva, whose belief in me has never wavered and whose encouragement and mentorship helped ignite the spark that led me to public health. You were the first to show me that this path was not only possible but that I had the strength to walk it. Your guidance, wisdom, and willingness to challenge me have meant more than words can express. You've taught me the power of standing firm in the face of adversity and that sometimes, we must get into "good trouble" and bulldoze the barriers that stand in our way. Thank you for seeing my potential long before I could see it myself.

To my Kansas mothers, mentors, and friends—Nancy Bolsen, Mary Ice, and Mary Kay Siefers —thank you for your unwavering presence, your gentle reminders that I am not alone, and for reminding me that while grad school is tough, I am tougher. Your kindness, support, and wisdom have been an unshakeable foundation throughout my academic journey.

To my grandmother, Yvonne, who would have thought—our trips to the "big bell" and other food pantries throughout much of my upbringing—have woven the threads of my commitment to a world free from hunger. Thank you for being the first person to show me that there should be no shame in accessing food.

And to the countless women I stand with—those who carry the weight of food insecurity, feeding their families with little more than what they can afford. Women who eat less so their children don't go without, who stretch every dollar with grace and strength. I see you. Your stories are not isolated acts of struggle; they are the consequences of a system built to perpetuate inequality. I stand with you in your resilience, in your hope, and in your fight for a better tomorrow.

The fight for justice continues. *La lucha por justicia continua.*

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

My first Applied Practice Experience (APE) took place at Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry, an on-campus initiative at Kansas State University (K-State) designed to address food insecurity among students and employees. In 2023, the pantry moved from its previous location in the basement of Fairchild Hall, which was roughly 800 square feet, to a much larger facility of about 8,000 square feet, offering more room for food storage, student services, and community engagement. The pantry operates as part of the university's broader public health initiatives aimed at improving student success, focusing on providing access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food. The Cats' Cupboard initiative is in line with both national and institutional public health objectives, promoting food security, reducing stigma around food insecurity, and fostering educational opportunities for students facing food instability.

I have been actively involved with Cats' Cupboard since March 2023, initially completing 34 hours to fulfill my official APE requirements, and my engagement continues beyond those hours as I am still serving on the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board. In this capacity, I collaborate with faculty, staff, and community members to ensure the pantry's sustainability and effectiveness, helping to steer policies that ensure the pantry remains student-centered and accessible. Additionally, I continue to volunteer within the pantry itself, assisting with operations, stocking inventory, and interacting with students who access its resources. This ongoing involvement allows me to continue learning about the multifaceted nature of food insecurity and the critical role that campus food pantries play in supporting students facing food instability.

My preceptor for this experience is Shelly Williams, the Morrison Family Director of Cats' Cupboard, whose extensive experience in student affairs and public health programming has been invaluable to my professional development. Shelly's expertise in community development and public health program administration has been instrumental in expanding the pantry's outreach and securing funding through grants and partnerships with local food banks. Working under her mentorship has provided me with firsthand insights into the complexities of running a campus food security initiative, including managing partnerships with food suppliers, navigating university administration, and advocating for policies that promote student access to nutritious food and resources.

Cats' Cupboard exemplifies how university-based public health initiatives operate within the larger landscape of higher education, student services, and public health programming. The pantry employs a multi-sectoral approach, integrating public health, student support services, and community partnerships to advance food security. It is supported through a combination of university funding, state and federal grants, private donations, and partnerships with local food banks. The pantry is staffed by a team that includes full-time professionals, student workers, and volunteers, ensuring that students receive not only emergency food assistance but also education on topics such as nutrition, budgeting, and connecting with additional resources in the

community. This holistic approach reflects the university's commitment to addressing the root causes of food insecurity while providing immediate relief for students in need.

Food Insecurity: A Growing Concern Among College Students

Food insecurity is a significant global issue that has far-reaching consequences, particularly for marginalized populations. According to the United Nations (2020), food insecurity is defined as a lack of access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets the dietary needs for an active and healthy life. While food insecurity is typically seen as a concern in low-income and developing regions, it is also a critical issue in wealthier nations, where rising costs and systemic inequities prevent vulnerable populations from accessing adequate food (FAO, 2019). For college students, food insecurity is an increasingly recognized concern. Research indicates that the prevalence of food insecurity among college students in the United States is alarmingly high. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018) found that approximately 36% of students at four-year colleges experience food insecurity, with these figures being much higher for students of color, first-generation students, and those from low-income backgrounds. These findings are corroborated by more recent studies, such as the report by the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA, 2020), which highlights that food insecurity is a widespread issue on college campuses across the nation, and the demand for food pantry services has increased substantially in recent years.

The factors contributing to food insecurity among college students are multifaceted. A major contributing factor is the financial burden of higher education, as students are often forced to make difficult choices between tuition, housing, textbooks, and food (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). The rising costs of tuition and textbooks, combined with stagnant wages in many low-income jobs, leave students with little disposable income to purchase food (Maroto et al., 2015). In addition to financial barriers, many students face the challenge of housing insecurity or live in off-campus apartments where food access may be limited due to distance from grocery stores or financial constraints (Parker et al., 2019). Food insecurity on campuses is often a hidden issue, as students may feel ashamed to seek help due to stigma surrounding food insecurity (Lott et al., 2017). Therefore, university food pantries, like Cats' Cupboard, play a crucial role in addressing this issue by providing not just food but also reducing stigma and creating a more supportive campus environment.

Consequences of Food Insecurity for Students

The impacts of food insecurity on college students are profound and multifaceted. Academically, food insecurity is strongly correlated with lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, and greater levels of absenteeism. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2018) found that food-insecure students are more likely to report difficulties in focusing, maintaining good grades, and attending classes regularly, all of which undermine their chances for academic success. The cognitive impairments associated with food insecurity are tied to poor nutrition, which affects concentration and learning abilities (Seligman et al., 2019). A well-balanced diet is crucial for

students to maintain cognitive function, but when students face food insecurity, they often rely on cheap, non-nutritional foods that lack essential vitamins and minerals (Leung et al., 2019). This poor diet quality can contribute to fatigue, reduced cognitive performance, and a higher likelihood of illness, further hindering students' academic achievements.

In addition to academic setbacks, food insecurity also has serious mental health implications. Research consistently shows that food-insecure students experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to their peers (Bruening et al., 2017). The psychological toll of not knowing where your next meal will come from is compounded by the social stigma that many food-insecure students face. This stigma can lead to feelings of shame, isolation, and further withdrawal from academic and social activities (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). Furthermore, food insecurity is linked to long-term physical health problems, including obesity, diabetes, and hypertension, as food-insecure individuals often rely on cheap, calorie-dense foods that provide immediate satisfaction but lack the nutritional value needed for optimal health (Leung et al., 2019).

The Role of Campus Food Pantries in Addressing Student Food Insecurity

Campus food pantries have become an increasingly important resource in addressing food insecurity in higher education. These pantries provide students with emergency food assistance, helping to mitigate the effects of food insecurity by offering both non-perishable and fresh food items. In addition to immediate relief, campus food pantries also play an important role in education and advocacy. According to the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA, 2020), more than 50% of campus food pantries now offer nutrition education and assistance in connecting students with other community resources. These services are vital for helping students manage food insecurity and build resilience against it. Cats' Cupboard at K-State, for example, offers not only food assistance but also financial literacy workshops and nutrition education programs aimed at empowering students to make healthy food choices within their budgetary constraints (Parker et al., 2019).

Recent studies highlight the growing demand for campus food pantries and their role in reducing food insecurity. The demand for food pantry services has increased dramatically in recent years, with some universities reporting a surge in usage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic challenges it created (Seligman et al., 2019). At K-State, the expansion of Cats' Cupboard to a larger facility was a direct response to this increased demand, reflecting the university's commitment to addressing the growing food insecurity crisis on campus. As part of the pantry's operations, students can access not only food but also educational resources that provide them with the tools they need to manage their food insecurity and overall well-being (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

Ensuring Food Pantries Remain Student-Centered

The success of campus food pantries depends heavily on their ability to remain student-centered. A student-centered food pantry is designed with the unique needs of the student body

in mind, ensuring that it is accessible, culturally appropriate, and responsive to the challenges students face. This includes providing flexible hours, offering a range of food options that reflect the cultural and dietary preferences of the student population, and ensuring that students feel comfortable accessing pantry services without fear of stigma (Bruening et al., 2017). As a member of the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board, I have worked to ensure that these principles are upheld. We have implemented strategies to reduce the stigma associated with food insecurity by fostering a supportive, non-judgmental environment and by ensuring the pantry is accessible during late hours to accommodate students' varying schedules (Lott et al., 2017).

Moreover, it is essential for students to play an active role in the operation and advocacy of food pantries. Student involvement ensures that these resources remain aligned with the needs of the student population. By working alongside faculty, staff, and community partners, students can help shape policies and programs that meet the specific challenges they face. Engaging students in the advocacy for campus food pantries can also serve as a way to raise awareness about food insecurity on campus and build a more inclusive and equitable campus culture (Seligman et al., 2019).

Food insecurity continues to be a significant issue on college campuses, with far-reaching consequences for students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Programs like Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry at Kansas State University play a critical role in mitigating the effects of food insecurity by offering essential support to students facing food instability. However, addressing food insecurity requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond providing emergency food assistance. My involvement with Cats' Cupboard has shown me the importance of not only providing access to food but also ensuring that students are aware of and have access to other resources that can further support their academic and personal success. This insight has informed my second Applied Practice Experience (APE), where I have transitioned into working on the development of a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Outreach initiative at K-State. This work, which I refer to as "Experience SNAP," has already begun to shape my understanding of food security through a different lens—focusing on long-term, systemic solutions to food insecurity.

Experience SNAP started roughly a year ago with three key individuals: Kara, Leah Tsoodle, and me. Leah and I had previously worked together on research related to food insecurity, so we were already familiar with each other's work ethic and passions for addressing this issue. Kara, a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics, had not previously worked with us but was keen on expanding her research focus to include domestic food security. Her primary focus had been international work, particularly in Ghana, where she has been involved with the METSS program and led technical analyses on the Population Baseline Survey for Northern Ghana. When we came together, Kara expressed interest in applying her expertise in a domestic context, particularly concerning food security in the U.S. This was a pivotal moment as the three of us began brainstorming ways to address food insecurity on K-State's campus, particularly through the creation of a SNAP Outreach program.

We started this initiative in March 2024, leveraging our collective knowledge and experience. My background in working with the SNAP Outreach program at Chico State, coupled with Leah's and Kara's expertise, helped us develop a strong foundation for the program. By the end of the year, we had secured a grant of approximately $21,000to begin this work, which marks a significant milestone in this ongoing initiative. Although I only officially logged 10 hours for this part of my APE, it's important to note that this is just the beginning of what promises to be a long-term and impactful project. The following sections will delve deeper into how the process unfolded—from formulating the program to securing funding—and provide a more detailed overview of the literature on SNAP and its significance for college students.

SNAP, its Role for Students, and the Need for SNAP Outreach Programs

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as food stamps, is a federal program that aims to alleviate food insecurity by providing low-income individuals and families with financial assistance to purchase food. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), SNAP is one of the largest and most widely used social safety net programs in the United States, reaching approximately 38 million people in 2020 (USDA, 2020). The program serves a diverse population, including children, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and working adults. However, despite its reach, many eligible individuals are not enrolled in SNAP, often due to barriers such as lack of awareness, complex application procedures, and stigma associated with receiving assistance (Seligman et al., 2019). These barriers are particularly pronounced among college students, who face unique challenges in accessing food assistance programs.

Students, particularly those in higher education, experience food insecurity at alarming rates. According to a report by Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018), approximately 36% of college students in the U.S. experience food insecurity, with higher rates among students of color, first-generation students, and those from low-income backgrounds. This situation is compounded by the financial pressures of tuition, housing, and textbooks, leaving many students with insufficient resources to afford adequate food (Maroto et al., 2015). For these students, SNAP can be a crucial resource in alleviating food insecurity. However, a significant number of eligible students are not enrolled in the program. Studies show that only about 25% of eligible college students utilize SNAP benefits, which can be attributed to several barriers specific to the student population (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024).

One of the main challenges that students face when applying for SNAP is the unique eligibility requirements that often exclude them from receiving benefits. While SNAP is intended to assist individuals and families with low incomes, students must meet specific criteria to qualify. Most notably, students must work at least 20 hours per week or be responsible for a dependent child to be eligible for SNAP benefits (USDA, 2020). This is a significant barrier for many college students who may not meet these criteria due to part-time academic schedules or lack of dependents. In addition to work-hour requirements, students must also navigate a complex application process that often involves providing documentation of income, assets, and

expenses—further complicating their ability to access benefits (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). These eligibility markers make it difficult for many students to qualify for SNAP, even though they may be living on extremely limited resources.

Moreover, students often lack awareness of the SNAP program and how to apply for it. Despite the widespread availability of SNAP, many students do not know that they are eligible for the program or are unsure of how to navigate the application process. This issue is particularly prevalent among first-generation students, who may lack the social capital or prior knowledge to access public assistance programs (Lott et al., 2017). Additionally, the stigma associated with receiving government assistance can discourage students from seeking help. As Patton-Lopez et al. (2014) note, students may be hesitant to apply for SNAP because they perceive it as a welfare program, which can carry negative connotations, especially in a university setting where the focus is often on academic achievement and independence.

While food pantries on college campuses, like Cats' Cupboard at K-State, serve as vital resources for students experiencing food insecurity, they are not a substitute for long-term solutions like SNAP. Food pantries provide short-term relief and can be a lifeline for students in need. However, they cannot provide the same level of financial support that SNAP can offer. SNAP benefits are designed to assist individuals with purchasing food over an extended period, helping them maintain a stable and consistent food supply. In contrast, food pantries typically offer emergency assistance, which may not be enough to sustain students throughout an entire semester (Seligman et al., 2019). Additionally, while food pantries are valuable, they may not always have the variety or nutritional quality of food that students need. SNAP, on the other hand, allows students to choose their own food, including fresh produce and other healthy options that food pantries may not be able to provide on a consistent basis.

Furthermore, students may not be able to access local agencies that provide SNAP assistance, especially if they are new to the area or if their university is located in a rural or remote region. In such cases, university-based SNAP outreach programs, like the one we are developing at K-State, can be crucial in reaching students who might otherwise remain unaware of their eligibility or unable to navigate the application process. SNAP outreach programs on campus can help bridge the gap by offering information, resources, and direct assistance with the application process. These programs can also help reduce stigma by normalizing the conversation around food insecurity and encouraging students to access the support they need without fear of judgment (Lott et al., 2017).

Thus, while food pantries play an essential role in addressing immediate food insecurity on college campuses, SNAP outreach programs are necessary to provide long-term solutions and ensure that students have access to consistent and sustainable food assistance. Given the unique eligibility barriers that students face, SNAP outreach programs can help guide students through the application process, increase awareness of the program, and ultimately improve students' access to food security. The work we are doing with the SNAP Outreach program at K-State aims to address these challenges by providing students with the tools and support they need to access this critical resource, ultimately promoting greater food security on campus.

My third APE, which I will refer to as "Experience RGI," was conducted with Dr. Leah J. Tsoodle, an extension associate in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University, and the director of the Land Use Survey Office. This experience, which began approximately one year prior to our work on the SNAP Outreach program, focused on contributing to the second iteration of the statewide survey on rural grocery stores in Kansas. The initial survey was conducted in 2008, and this update sought to provide valuable insights into the contemporary state of rural grocery stores across the state, particularly in light of challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaboration took place alongside two significant partners: the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) and the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI).

The Rural Grocery Initiative, housed within K-State Research and Extension, was established to support the sustainability of locally owned rural grocery stores. These stores play a crucial role in the vitality of rural communities by providing essential services, economic benefits, and access to healthy foods. RGI works to identify, develop, and share resources to help grocers maintain their operations while strengthening access to healthy foods in rural communities. The initiative has responded to the growing threat of grocery store closures in Kansas, where between 2008 and 2018, 105 rural grocery stores closed, and in half of these communities, no new store has re-opened (Hunt, 2020). The goal of this work was to assess the viability of rural grocery stores in the state and understand how they could adapt to emerging challenges such as changing consumer behavior, economic pressures, and health crises.

Dr. Tsoodle's mentorship was invaluable throughout this experience and the timing of this research was particularly significant, as it came shortly after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that fundamentally altered the landscape of rural food security forever. The pandemic forced many rural grocery stores to innovate and reimagine how they operated, particularly as communities navigated restrictions, health concerns, and an increasing reliance on SNAP benefits and pandemic-related food programs (P-EBT).

Rural Food Insecurity and the Role of Rural Grocery Stores

Food insecurity is a pressing issue that affects both urban and rural populations. However, the experience of food insecurity in rural communities is often distinct from that of urban areas due to a variety of factors, including geographic isolation, lower population density, and limited access to food retailers (Lobao et al., 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), rural households are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, with approximately 15.6% of rural households experiencing food insecurity, compared to 11.8% of urban households (USDA, 2020). This disparity reflects the unique challenges faced by rural communities in accessing affordable, nutritious food.

One of the primary challenges contributing to rural food insecurity is the limited availability of grocery stores in many rural areas. Rural grocery stores are vital to the food security of their communities, as they provide essential access to fresh produce, dairy, and other nutritious foods. However, between 2008 and 2018, the number of rural grocery stores in Kansas declined significantly, with 105 stores closing during this period, further exacerbating food

insecurity (Hunt, 2020). The loss of rural grocery stores is a significant issue, as these stores are not only a primary source of food but also a key economic and social anchor in these communities (Huffman et al., 2019).

The Economic Role of Rural Grocery Stores

Rural grocery stores are vital economic anchors for rural communities. These stores create local jobs, generate tax revenue, and contribute to the stability of the local economy by supporting supply chains, especially for local farmers and food producers. The loss of grocery stores in rural areas can have cascading effects, diminishing both job opportunities and the local economic base (Huffman et al., 2019). Research shows that grocery stores are often the largest employers in small rural towns, and their closure can lead to significant job losses, especially in areas where other employment opportunities are limited (Lichter et al., 2020).

Economically, rural grocery stores also provide essential goods at lower prices than convenience stores, which are often the only alternative when a local grocery store closes. Convenience stores primarily stock non-perishable, processed foods, which are typically less nutritious and more expensive, exacerbating food insecurity in the process (Bauer et al., 2020). Rural grocery stores, by contrast, can offer fresh produce and healthier options at more affordable prices, contributing directly to the community's economic well-being and overall health outcomes. The closure of rural grocery stores often forces residents to travel long distances to access healthy foods, increasing transportation costs further exacerbating economic hardships for low-income families (Lobao et al., 2020).

Moreover, rural grocery stores act as distribution points for government assistance programs like SNAP, which is particularly important in areas where transportation options are limited. By providing access to these programs, rural grocery stores play a crucial role in reducing food insecurity and supporting the economic independence of rural residents (Seligman et al., 2019). Without these stores, residents may struggle to access not only the food they need but also the services that support their economic stability (Seligman et al., 2019).

The Social Role of Rural Grocery Stores

In addition to their economic function, rural grocery stores serve a significant social role in small communities. Rural grocery stores are often the central place where people gather, socialize, and exchange information. In rural areas, where social networks may be more spread out and less centralized, grocery stores serve as informal community hubs. This social interaction fosters a sense of belonging and community cohesion, helping to maintain the fabric of rural life (Huffman et al., 2019). The closure of these stores can lead to social fragmentation, as residents lose a critical space for interaction and community building.

Grocery stores also have an important role in fostering social support networks. For example, they can act as the meeting place for residents to share resources, such as information about food programs or local services. In many rural communities, particularly for older adults and those with limited mobility, these stores offer essential social connections that help prevent

isolation (Caldwell et al., 2020). The loss of a local grocery store not only makes it more difficult for people to access food but also contributes to feelings of loneliness and detachment, undermining the community's overall social health.

The Health and Well-Being of Rural Communities

Rural grocery stores have a profound impact on the health and well-being of the communities they serve. Access to nutritious, affordable food is a critical determinant of public health. Grocery stores that provide healthy food options, such as fresh produce, dairy, and protein, contribute directly to improved dietary habits and better overall health outcomes. Conversely, the closure of these stores forces rural residents to rely on less nutritious food options, leading to poor diet quality and a higher prevalence of diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension (Bauer et al., 2020).

Research by Lichter et al. (2020) has shown that communities with limited access to grocery stores experience higher rates of food-related health issues, particularly among low-income and rural populations. In fact, studies suggest that food insecurity is strongly linked to chronic health conditions, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and other diet-related illnesses, in rural communities (Seligman et al., 2019). The lack of access to fresh, healthy food options in rural areas has a direct impact on public health, as individuals are forced to rely on convenience stores that stock more processed and unhealthy food. As these communities face limited access to healthcare services, the resulting health disparities are compounded, leading to poorer health outcomes overall.

Furthermore, the economic burden of health conditions exacerbated by food insecurity places a strain on rural healthcare systems. Chronic illnesses associated with poor diets increase healthcare costs for individuals and the community, creating a vicious cycle of poverty, illness, and healthcare access challenges (Bauer et al., 2020). By maintaining grocery stores that provide affordable, nutritious food, rural communities can significantly improve their public health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and foster healthier, more resilient populations.

The Role of Rural Grocery Initiatives in Addressing Food Insecurity

Given the critical role that rural grocery stores play in community health, economic vitality, and social cohesion, initiatives like RGI are essential for ensuring the sustainability of these stores and the food security of rural populations. The RGI works to address the challenges faced by rural grocery stores by providing technical assistance, facilitating access to funding and resources, and promoting evidence-based models of rural grocery operations (Huffman et al., 2019). These initiatives are crucial for fostering food security and ensuring that rural residents have access to healthy, affordable food options.

Moreover, the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI), a partner in the RGI, further strengthens access to healthy foods in rural communities by supporting local food systems and expanding the reach of grocery stores that provide healthier food options (Hunt, 2020). By investing in these community-based initiatives, rural communities can not only secure better

access to healthy food but also contribute to the local economy, improve public health, and create a more socially cohesive environment.

Rural food insecurity is driven by unique economic, social, and health-related factors that distinguish it from urban food insecurity. Rural grocery stores serve as critical lifelines for these communities by providing access to healthy food, supporting local economies, and fostering social cohesion. The closure of these stores exacerbates food insecurity and contributes to poor health outcomes, economic decline, and social fragmentation. Initiatives like the Rural Grocery Initiative play a crucial role in sustaining rural grocery stores and improving food access in rural communities. Through the efforts of the RGI and KHFI, rural communities can improve their food security, strengthen their local economies, and foster better health outcomes. Understanding the intricate relationship between rural grocery stores and food security is essential for developing policies and programs that address the unique challenges faced by rural populations.

My fourth APE, referred to as "Experience Garden City," involved serving as the lead for an Alternative Breaks program focused on food systems. The program took place in Garden City, Kansas, and was designed to provide K-State students with in-depth service experience, immersing them in the local food system while exploring how it interacts with broader issues of food security and immigration. This experience was the largest portion of my APE hours, as it required significant preparation, a week-long stay in Garden City, and ample time for reflection afterward.

Alternative Breaks is a program that offers K-State students the opportunity to participate in intensive service experiences during winter, spring, and weekend breaks. These breaks provide students with the chance to travel to various sites, primarily in the Midwest, where they work directly with local residents to learn how communities address pressing social issues. The Alternative Breaks program is open to undergraduate, graduate, and international students, and participants and site leaders receive training before each trip.

While I had participated in an Alternative Break previously, this experience changed my understanding of the food system. The trip to Garden City, which took place over roughly one week, was preceded by preparatory training starting in November 2024. During this time, Tamara Bauer and her team of student coordinators supported me as I led a group of three students to Garden City. While in Garden City, we visited various non-profit organizations, schools, Brookover Farms Headquarters, a feedlot, and the Tyson food plant. This provided us with a holistic view of the town’s food system and helped us understand its crucial role in feeding the world.

One of the most eye-opening and intellectually rich components of the Experience Garden City trip was the opportunity to situate Garden City within both the national and international food supply chain. Despite its relatively modest population of around 27,371 residents, this southwestern Kansas town plays an outsized role in the production and processing of food—particularly beef—for global consumption (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Garden City is a community shaped by movement: of livestock, of commodities, and, perhaps most notably, of people. It stands out not only for its economic relevance, but also for its deeply multicultural and

multilingual character. As a designated secondary resettlement site for refugees, the city has become home to a remarkably diverse population, including newcomers from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa who have helped sustain its labor force over several decades.

Statistically, the city's demographic composition sets it apart from most other Kansas communities. More than 54% of Garden City residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, and nearly one-third of the population is composed of individuals born outside the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). To illustrate the exceptional nature of this diversity, one can look to Wichita—Kansas's largest city, more than 14 times the size of Garden City—where just 18% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino. The stark contrast highlights the degree to which immigration, particularly driven by employment opportunities in agriculture and meatpacking, has shaped Garden City's development over time.

This relationship between labor and migration is not new. It dates back to the late 20th century, when major meatpacking corporations began moving their operations to rural areas in "right-to-work" states, drawn by looser labor protections, lower union density, and proximity to feedlots (Benson, 1996). In the early 1980s, the region saw two transformative investments: IBP (now part of Tyson Foods) opened what was then the largest beef packing facility in the world just outside Garden City, and Monfort (now JBS) modernized its plant within the city itself. These developments sparked a population boom between 1980 and 1985, during which Garden City grew by 33%, making it the fastest-growing municipality in Kansas at the time (Stull et al., 1990).

Today, the meatpacking industry continues to anchor the local economy, with Tyson Foods as Finney County's largest employer (City of Garden City, n.d.). Its facility processes approximately 6,000 head of cattle per day and employs over 3,000 workers, most of whom are immigrants and refugees (Condos, 2021). During our visit to the plant, we were given a sobering window into the daily realities of meatpacking labor. Conversations with workers throughout our time in Garden City and descriptions of current job postings on the Tyson website reveal the extent of physical strain involved: tasks often require standing for long shifts on moving chains or elevated platforms, handling sharp tools like knives and hooks, and working in extreme temperatures—sometimes below 40°F in processing areas or in hot and humid conditions during harvest. These roles also involve repetitive motion, heavy lifting (up to 80 pounds), and navigating slippery surfaces (Tyson Foods, n.d.), making injury a constant risk.

Although the work is demanding, it is not necessarily well-compensated when weighed against the physical and emotional toll it takes. According to Tyson's job postings, details on pay are limited. However, third-party data from ZipRecruiter provides a clearer picture: as of April 2025, the average hourly wage for a Tyson employee in Garden City is $24.41. While the platform reports salaries ranging from as low as $12.90 to as high as $38.90 per hour, the majority of wages fall between $18.08 (25th percentile) and $29.13 (75th percentile), with top earners in the 90th percentile making considerably more on an annualized basis (ZipRecruiter, 2025).

Despite these wages, many workers continue to face economic hardship. The cost of living in Garden City is approximately 18.6% lower than the national average, with a cost-of-living index of 81.4 (BestPlaces, 2025). The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is about $589 per month, and the median home value is around $186,200 (Apartments.com, 2025; ERI Economic Research Institute, 2025). However, the living wage for a single adult in Finney County is estimated at $20.93 per hour, and for a single adult with one child, it's $33.23 per hour (MIT Living Wage Calculator, 2025). This suggests that those earning at the lower end of the wage spectrum, such as $12.90 and even a few dollars above that, per hour, do not make a livable wage considering the cost of living in the area.

Furthermore, this broad pay range illustrates disparities in compensation depending on position, experience, and shift—but even the higher end of the spectrum may not be enough to ensure long-term financial security, especially when paired with the physical demands and risks of the job.

Moreover, the economic picture is further complicated by employment policies that add layers of instability. For instance, Tyson enforces a 180-day rehire waiting period and limits individuals to three rehire opportunities (Tyson Foods, n.d.); policies that make it difficult for workers to navigate layoffs, injuries, or personal challenges. Many of the individuals we spoke with shared stories of moving from one meat packing town to another to seek work just to survive. This form of mobility—often involuntary—reflects a pattern observed in academic literature, in which meatpacking workers circulate through the Midwest as they are laid off, rehired, or forced to leave due to unsafe conditions followed by subsequent injuries (Benson, 1996).

Food Security, Protein, Meatpacking, and Immigration through the Lens of Garden City, Kansas

A major theme that emerged during our time in Garden City was food security—and more pointedly, the painful irony that many of the very people responsible for feeding the country, and indeed much of the world, struggle to consistently access the food they need themselves. This paradox of food insecurity among food system workers was not only visible but palpable throughout our experience. It pushed our group to explore the role of protein not only as a vital nutrient required for physical and mental well-being, but also as a commodity whose production structures labor practices and socioeconomic realities in towns like Garden City.

Protein is one of the three primary macronutrients required for human survival, alongside carbohydrates and fats. However, its functions in the body extend far beyond simply contributing to caloric intake. On a biochemical level, proteins are composed of long chains of amino acids, which serve as the building blocks for every cell in the body. Unlike carbohydrates, which the body primarily uses as its main energy source—proteins play a broader and more complex role. They are essential for cellular growth, tissue repair, muscle maintenance, immune system function, hormone production, enzyme synthesis, and the transportation of nutrients throughout the body (Dawson, Harris, & Blake, 2020; National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2022). Protein also provides 4 kilocalories of energy per gram, although the body tends to prioritize

carbohydrates and fats for energy before breaking down proteins. Still, during illness, injury recovery, periods of growth, and aging, protein becomes even more critical. Children, pregnant individuals, older adults, and those recovering from physical stress or trauma are especially vulnerable to the effects of protein insufficiency (Leung, Tester, & Laraia, 2019; NIH, 2022).

Yet despite its importance, access to adequate protein is not equitably distributed—particularly among low-income and food-insecure populations. Food insecurity is not merely a matter of lacking enough calories to stave off hunger; it's about lacking access to the right kinds of calories that provide the nutrients necessary for long-term health (USDA, 2022). In this way, nutrition security is a more accurate term in contexts like Garden City, where affordability and access to nutritious food remain persistent challenges. Protein deficiencies can lead to a host of health problems, including stunted growth in children, muscle wasting, poor wound healing, and compromised immunity (Leung, Tester, & Laraia, 2019; FAO, 2013). According to current dietary guidelines, the recommended dietary allowance (RDA) for protein is 0.8 grams per kilogram of body weight per day (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2022). For an adult weighing around 150 pounds (approximately 68 kilograms), this equates to about 55 grams of protein daily. However, this baseline doesn't account for individual variations due to age, activity level, or medical condition—many individuals, especially those experiencing physiological stress, require significantly more (Dawson, Harris, & Blake, 2020).

In food-insecure households, consistently meeting these nutritional needs becomes a formidable challenge. Protein-rich foods like lean meat, eggs, poultry, dairy, and seafood are often among the most expensive items at the grocery store (Drewnowski & Eichelsdoerfer, 2010). As a result, many families are forced to make difficult trade-offs between food quality and quantity. Cheaper, energy-dense foods—often high in added sugars and refined grains—are more financially accessible but tend to lack essential nutrients, including protein (Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010). Over time, these dietary patterns contribute to the rise of chronic, diet-related illnesses, such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension. These conditions are disproportionately prevalent among populations living in poverty, rural areas, and food desert environments that frequently overlap in places like Garden City (Leung et al., 2019; USDA ERS, 2021).

This contradiction becomes even more stark when considering the very nature of Garden City's local economy. The city is anchored by industries that specialize in the production of protein-rich foods, namely beef. Tyson Foods, the largest employer in Finney County, processes thousands of cattle each day, producing high volumes of beef that are distributed across the nation and internationally (Condos, 2021). The workers in these facilities—many of whom are immigrants and refugees—spend their days processing, packaging, and preparing meat that they often cannot afford to put on their own tables (Benson, 1996; Stull, Broadway, & Griffith, 1990). This disconnect lays bare the moral and structural failings of a food system that benefits from the labor of marginalized populations while leaving them vulnerable to the very insecurities they are laboring to prevent for others.

From a nutritional standpoint, animal-based proteins like beef, chicken, pork, and eggs are especially valuable because they are classified as “complete proteins.” This means they contain all nine essential amino acids that the human body cannot synthesize on its own. These amino acids must be obtained through diet, and animal products are among the most efficient and bioavailable sources (Leung et al., 2019). By contrast, plant-based protein sources—while still important—are typically considered “incomplete,” as they often lack one or more of the essential amino acids (Leung et al., 2019; Bauer et al., 2020). In order to meet protein requirements through plant-based diets, individuals must combine multiple protein sources (e.g., beans and rice) in deliberate ways to ensure nutritional adequacy. This approach requires not only access to diverse food items but also a degree of nutritional literacy, time, and food preparation resources that may not be available to low-income households (Bauer et al., 2020).

Moreover, plant-based proteins tend to have lower bioavailability, meaning that even when consumed, the body may not absorb and utilize the amino acids as effectively as it does from animal sources (Dawson et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2020). For working-class families in Garden City—many of whom are juggling long work hours, physically demanding jobs, language barriers, and limited transportation—these barriers are compounded.

Thus, the story of protein in Garden City is not just a story about nutrients; it is a story about structural inequity. It is about how food security is shaped by power, labor, geography, and policy. It reveals the ways in which protein production is reliant on a workforce that often does not benefit from the very goods they help create. And it challenges us to consider what it means to have a food system that prioritizes volume and efficiency over justice and equity.

Tamara Bauer, who has overseen many of these experiences, played a critical role in shaping the focus of this trip. This was the first time sending students on an Alternative Break experience that included such a deep, first-hand experience of the food system. This immersion provided a wealth of nuance and, to some extent, raised more questions than answers for myself and my peers. The experience offered a profound opportunity to reflect on the complexities of the food system and its connections to issues of immigration, labor, and food security.

The experiences I have engaged in as part of my Applied Practice Experience—ranging from the Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry initiative at Kansas State University, to the development of the SNAP Outreach program, to the Rural Grocery Initiative research, and finally the Alternative Breaks program in Garden City, Kansas—represent a diverse but interconnected set of efforts aimed at addressing food insecurity and promoting food systems change. While each experience is distinct in its focus, setting, and approach, they collectively weave a comprehensive understanding of food security, its complexities, and its far-reaching implications for communities.

At the core of each experience is a common thread: the fundamental need for accessible, nutritious, and affordable food. Through my involvement in Cats' Cupboard, I directly engaged with the immediate, hands-on aspect of food security. This experience highlighted the essential role of campus food pantries in addressing food insecurity for students, offering not just food but a space of dignity and support for students experiencing the stress of financial instability. By

witnessing the growing demand for such services at Kansas State, I gained valuable insight into the challenges faced by individuals in higher education, where students often balance academic pressures, social expectations, and economic difficulties. This hands-on work reinforced the urgent need for accessible food systems within college communities, particularly for marginalized populations, and directly linked to my later work on SNAP Outreach.

The SNAP Outreach initiative, which I began in collaboration with Kara and Leah, extended this focus on food security into a more systemic solution. While food pantries provide crucial emergency support, SNAP offers a longer-term, sustainable solution for low-income individuals and families. The challenges students face in accessing SNAP benefits, particularly the unique eligibility markers and the bureaucratic complexities of the program, became clear as I began developing the outreach program. This work in the context of SNAP allowed me to consider the structural barriers to food security, especially as they intersect with college students' financial burdens, limited knowledge of available resources, and the stigmatization of public assistance programs. This experience illuminated the importance of expanding awareness and access to SNAP, helping ensure that students can navigate the complexities of eligibility while offering a more long-term strategy for securing adequate nutrition.

Meanwhile, my involvement in Experience RGI with Leah, in partnership with the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI), provided an entirely different but equally important perspective. Unlike campus-based food insecurity, rural food security is heavily shaped by geographic isolation, the local economy, and the loss of critical food infrastructure, such as rural grocery stores. My work on the statewide survey, which updated research first conducted in 2008, illuminated the stark realities faced by rural communities in Kansas. I saw how grocery store closures, many exacerbated by economic pressures and rural flights, significantly impact food access and exacerbate food insecurity. However, I also learned about the resilience of these communities through initiatives like RGI, which works to sustain locally owned rural grocery stores and increase access to healthy foods. In contrast to the individual-focused work at Cats' Cupboard and SNAP Outreach, RGI addressed the macro-level issues of food systems and the long-term sustainability of food access infrastructure.

Finally, Experience Garden City, through the Alternative Breaks program, served as the culminating experience that tied many of these lessons together by providing an in-depth exploration of how the U.S. food system operates in a global context. During our week-long stay in Garden City, we explored the role of the meatpacking industry and how Garden City serves as a microcosm of the intersection of food security, immigration, and labor. The story of Garden City—a town that has become a refuge for immigrant and refugee populations seeking employment in the meatpacking industry—highlighted the complex relationships between immigration policies, the labor market, and food access. I learned how Garden City's immigrant workforce, which is crucial to the operations of the Tyson Foods meatpacking plant, faces unique barriers to food security despite being directly involved in food production. The refugee resettlement policies and the role of organizations like Catholic Charities further emphasized the

systemic challenges that immigrant and refugee populations face in accessing nutrition, while also illustrating the economic and social dynamics that shape food systems on a global scale.

Through these four experiences, I have come to understand that food insecurity is not a singular issue but one that is shaped by a multitude of factors at various levels of society—from individual and community efforts to policy and global forces. Each experience presented a unique piece of the puzzle, but together they painted a more complete picture of the challenges we face in achieving food security. At the individual level, the work with Cats' Cupboard and SNAP Outreach underscored the need for emergency food access and long-term systemic solutions, especially in student populations. At the community level, the Rural Grocery Initiative highlighted the importance of maintaining food access infrastructure in rural communities, while the Alternative Breaks experience in Garden City demonstrated the broader, global factors such as immigration and labor dynamics that affect food security.

What makes these experiences interconnected is that each one, in its own way, advocates for food justice and equitable access to food. Whether through providing immediate relief to students, advocating for public assistance programs, supporting rural food systems, or confronting the challenges of the meatpacking industry, each experience reflects a deep commitment to addressing the systemic inequities that prevent individuals and communities from accessing the nutritious food they need. Moreover, they highlight the need for multi-faceted approaches that combine emergency interventions with longer-term strategies aimed at addressing the root causes of food insecurity.

As I reflect on these experiences, I see how they are not just separate efforts but rather pieces of a larger puzzle of food security and systems change. They have all contributed to shaping my understanding of the complexities of food systems—from local issues such as student food insecurity to global challenges involving labor, immigration, and food production. They have also reinforced the importance of both direct service and advocacy, urging me to continue exploring how these issues intersect and how we can collectively work toward a more equitable, sustainable, and just food system for all.

The interconnections between these four experiences demonstrate the diverse ways in which food insecurity manifests itself across different settings and populations. They underscore the need for a holistic, systemic approach to addressing food security, one that involves both immediate relief efforts and long-term solutions to the structural issues that drive food insecurity. Whether through local food pantries, outreach programs, rural grocery initiatives, or exploring the global forces shaping labor and immigration, each experience has reinforced my commitment to addressing food insecurity at every level and ensuring that all individuals have access to the nutritious food they need to thrive.

Chapter 2 - Learning Objectives and Description of Deliverables

Throughout my experiences, I have had the opportunity to engage in diverse and comprehensive projects aimed at addressing food insecurity in both urban and rural settings. These experiences have provided me with hands-on opportunities to apply public health principles and deepen my understanding of the complexities surrounding food systems. Each project was interconnected, yet distinct in its approach, contributing to a holistic view of the challenges and strategies necessary to combat food insecurity in a range of contexts.

From direct engagement with students at Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry to exploring rural food access through the Rural Grocery Initiative, from developing a SNAP Outreach program to leading an Alternative Breaks program focused on food systems, I have worked on projects that span the spectrum from immediate relief to systemic change. Each experience was guided by clear learning objectives, involved substantial community and stakeholder engagement, and culminated in meaningful deliverables that both advanced food security and provided valuable insights into how to address this complex issue.

Throughout this chapter, I detail the learning objectives and activities for each of these experiences, describing my roles and responsibilities, and outlining the deliverables that resulted from these projects. These experiences collectively enhanced my ability to assess, advocate for, and implement effective public health strategies, while providing a deeper understanding of how food insecurity impacts diverse populations and communities.

2.1 Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry: Co-chair of the Advisory Board

Learning Objectives:

- Leadership and Team Management: Apply leadership principles to organize and guide collaborative efforts, ensuring effective team management and goal alignment in addressing food insecurity within a university setting.
- Data Analysis: Assess pantry data and gather input from diverse stakeholders, including students, staff, and faculty, and use this data to advocate for expanded services that meet the needs of the broader campus community.
- Strategic Planning and Resource Management: Design and implement strategies to address systemic barriers to food access, applying awareness of social inequities to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of pantry operations.
- Budget and Resource Management: Demonstrate skills in resource allocation and budget management by supporting sub-committees in determining funding decisions and guiding monetary awards to food security initiatives

Activities and Responsibilities:

As co-chair of the advisory board for Cats' Cupboard, I played a pivotal role in organizing and leading meetings, setting agendas, and ensuring effective communication among board members. I coordinated with faculty, staff, and student representatives to create a shared

vision for expanding the pantry's impact on campus. This involved advocating for expanded access hours for faculty and staff, ensuring they could continue utilizing the pantry services during more convenient times throughout the week. I also facilitated sub-committees focused on reviewing grant applications and awarding funds to food security initiatives across campus. In addition to my advisory duties, I spent considerable time volunteering in the pantry itself. I worked in the "front of house," assisting students as they checked out groceries, stocking shelves, and administering food vouchers to students in critical need. Through these efforts, I directly contributed to enhancing food access for students and learned about the logistical challenges involved in running a campus food pantry.

Deliverables:

- Subcommittee and Board Reports: I compiled reports summarizing key decisions made by the advisory board, including recommendations for funding allocations and strategic initiatives. These reports helped guide the pantry's decisions regarding the revision of its mission and vision statements and informed broader campus engagement efforts to increase awareness of food insecurity.

2.2 SNAP Outreach Program Development: Public Health Intern

Learning Objectives:

- Public Health Planning and Program Design: Apply public health planning principles to assess the food insecurity needs of university students, designing a targeted SNAP outreach program that addresses these needs effectively.
- Stakeholder Collaboration and Advocacy: Utilize negotiation and mediation skills to collaborate with stakeholders such as the Kansas Health Foundation, agricultural economists, and the Department of Children and Family Services, ensuring the successful development and implementation of the program.
- Impact Evaluation: Evaluate the program's potential impact by applying methods to assess community health and the effectiveness of public health interventions in addressing food insecurity.

Activities and Responsibilities:

As part of the team developing an on-campus SNAP outreach program, I collaborated with agricultural economists, extension agents, and public health professionals to design a targeted intervention for university students experiencing food insecurity. I conducted research on the specific needs of students and performed a gap analysis to understand the challenges in accessing SNAP benefits. I contributed to the drafting and refining of a grant proposal for funding through the Kansas Health Foundation, ensuring it addressed the key needs identified in the research. I was also involved in the creation of an implementation timeline and helped coordinate meetings with university administrators, faculty, and other stakeholders to garner

support for the program. In addition to these tasks, I worked on developing social media content and communications strategies to increase awareness of the program among students.

Deliverables:

- Final Draft of Grant Proposal: I played a key role in developing a grant proposal that successfully secured funding for the SNAP Outreach Program at Kansas State University, collaborating with a team of experts to refine the document and ensure all necessary components were included.
- Social Media Content for SNAP Outreach Program: I created social media posts to promote the program, aiming to increase student awareness of available resources and the process for accessing SNAP benefits.

2.3 Rural Grocery Initiative: Research Assistant

Learning Objectives:

- Data Collection and Analysis: Analyze quantitative and qualitative data on rural food access using appropriate epidemiological methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of food security challenges in rural Kansas.
- Community Assessment and Strategy Design: Design and implement strategies to support rural communities by assessing their needs and identifying effective solutions to enhance food access, using data from interviews and surveys with local grocers and farmers.
- Research Communication: Synthesize research findings and create public-facing materials that communicate insights into rural food access to stakeholders.

Activities and Responsibilities:

In my role as a research assistant with the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) and Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI), I assisted with the collection and analysis of data for a statewide survey on rural grocery stores. I conducted interviews with rural grocers and farmers to better understand the challenges they face in providing food to underserved communities. I helped organize and analyze qualitative data from these interviews, synthesizing key themes that informed our understanding of food access in rural Kansas. Additionally, I contributed to the creation of a statewide map that identified active rural grocery stores and helped maintain data for quarterly reports on services provided to rural grocers. I also co-authored a non-academic article that compared findings from the 2021 survey with the original 2008 survey, offering insights into the evolution of rural food access issues. My responsibilities included attending meetings with stakeholders and organizing data for public presentations and reports.

Deliverables:

- Co-Authored Non-Academic Article: I contributed to a publication highlighting key insights into rural food access, analyzing the challenges faced by local grocers and

comparing survey data from 2008 to 2021. This article played a role in informing policy discussions and rural food system planning.

2.4 Alternative Breaks Program: Site Leader for Garden City, Kansas

Learning Objectives:

- Community Engagement: Apply principles of community engagement to facilitate reflective learning sessions that connect students' experiences to larger food systems, fostering a deeper understanding of the impacts of immigration on food production.
- Advocacy and Cultural Awareness: Apply advocacy and cultural awareness by exploring the intersections of immigration, labor, and food production through conversations with local agricultural producers and understanding their role in the region's food systems.
- Reflective Learning and Service Leadership: Lead students in reflective discussions and service work, helping them connect their service activities with broader issues of food insecurity and food systems, especially regarding the role of immigrant labor in food production.

Activities and Responsibilities:

As the site leader for the Alternative Breaks program in Garden City, Kansas, I was responsible for organizing and facilitating student interactions with local organizations such as Catholic Charities, Tyson Food Complex, and Kansas Food Bank. These site visits provided students with an opportunity to learn about food insecurity and refugee resettlement efforts, as well as the role of food assistance programs. I coordinated service activities with the Kansas Food Bank, where we packed backpacks for migrant families in need of food. I also planned and facilitated reflection sessions, both pre- and post-departure, to help students connect their experiences to the broader dynamics of food systems. Additionally, I led a site visit to Brookover Farms to explore the role of immigrant labor in the beef production industry and facilitated conversations about the challenges faced by these workers. This experience also involved preparing students for the trip through pre-departure training, ensuring they understood the socio-political context they would be engaging. Throughout the program, I emphasized the importance of community engagement and cultural awareness, guiding students in recognizing the connections between immigration, labor, and food systems.

Deliverables:

- Blog Post on Systems Thinking: After the program, I wrote a reflective blog post using systems thinking to analyze food insecurity in Garden City. This post connected students' experiences to the larger issues of migration, labor dynamics, and the food system, highlighting how systems thinking can provide a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues.

Throughout these four experiences, I have had the opportunity to engage in a diverse range of public health projects aimed at addressing food insecurity, each contributing unique insights and skills. Whether through direct service, research, or program development, each project provided me with the tools and knowledge necessary to advocate for and implement food security interventions. The projects varied in scope and focus, but all were tied together by a shared commitment to improving access to food, addressing systemic inequities, and creating long-term solutions for food-insecure communities. These experiences not only advanced my understanding of food systems but also reinforced my commitment to public health and social justice, particularly in ensuring equitable food access for all.

Chapter 3 - Methods

The methods I employed in my public health practice have been shaped by a combination of practical experience, research methodologies, and a deep understanding of community dynamics and food systems. Each of the experiences I worked on—whether it was at Cats' Cupboard, developing the SNAP Outreach Program, assisting with the Rural Grocery Initiative, or leading an Alternative Breaks program—required distinct methods for engaging with stakeholders, collecting data, and analyzing the impacts of food insecurity. These methods were integral to ensuring that the projects were not only effective but also culturally sensitive, data-driven, and responsive to the diverse needs of the populations they aimed to serve.

Cats' Cupboard Food Pantry: Co-chair of the Advisory Board

At Cats' Cupboard, a food pantry within Kansas State University, my role required strategic planning, collaborative leadership, and the effective use of data to improve food access for students. One of the key methods I used was networking to connect with the right people who could inform my understanding of food insecurity on campus. I sought out campus stakeholders—faculty, staff, and other members of the community—who had experience with food insecurity or who were in positions to advocate for changes in university policies. This included meeting with faculty and staff who could offer insight into students' needs and how best to represent them on the advisory board.

A major component of my work was the intentional formation of sub-committees, which I chaired, ensuring that the right stakeholders were involved in decision-making processes. This required careful consideration of who would best represent the diverse needs of students, faculty, and the broader campus community. For example, I worked to include voices from both student government and administrative staff to ensure that decisions were made with a well-rounded understanding of both the logistical and social challenges faced by students experiencing food insecurity. We also created an inclusive environment by involving community members in these discussions, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of food access challenges beyond the campus bubble.

The pantry's operations were underpinned by a systematic process that required careful attention to inventory management. I contributed to tracking the pantry's stock levels, keeping an eye on which items were most frequently checked out, such as eggs and meat, which tend to be higher in protein and generally more expensive. This data was important for understanding student needs, especially considering that students were consistently seeking these protein-rich foods. Inventory tracking was not just about managing stock but about using this data to inform strategic decisions, such as which items to prioritize in future purchases or how to adjust for trends in food demand. I also assisted with healthy food vouchers, which required meticulous documentation for tracking purposes. For each voucher issued, I documented student ID numbers, voucher numbers, and expiration dates in an online system. This system helped maintain accurate records while ensuring transparency in the distribution of resources.

In board meetings, preparing clear and accessible reports was a critical aspect of my role. Since the board included diverse members, from students to faculty and staff, it was important to present data in a way that was both digestible and actionable. I worked to ensure that the data we discussed, such as inventory levels or voucher usage, was presented in a manner that would engage all stakeholders, regardless of their background in food security or data analysis. This required translating technical data into practical insights, ensuring that all participants could understand the implications of the findings and contribute meaningfully to decision-making.

SNAP Outreach Program Development

The development of the SNAP Outreach Program at Kansas State University required a multi-pronged approach, combining data gathering, stakeholder collaboration, and strategic planning. As part of the team, I conducted extensive research on food insecurity among students, including reviewing existing data and conducting surveys to understand students' awareness of SNAP and the barriers they faced in accessing these benefits. Gathering this data was essential in providing a clear picture of the problem and allowed us to identify gaps in the services offered to students.

In addition to collecting primary data through surveys, I was involved in collaborating with various stakeholders, including agricultural economists, extension agents, and public health professionals. This collaborative approach helped to ensure that the outreach program would be well-rounded, addressing not just the awareness of SNAP but also the logistical barriers to accessing it. For example, I facilitated discussions with the Department of Children and Family Services to understand how state-level policies could affect students' ability to apply for SNAP, ensuring that the program would be aligned with the broader institutional and state frameworks.

One of the methods I applied was conducting a gap analysis to identify where the university's current resources fell short in supporting food-insecure students. The gap analysis helped to focus our efforts on specific areas, such as increasing outreach and education around eligibility and streamlining the application process for students who faced language or technological barriers. In parallel, I worked with the team to develop and refine a grant proposal to secure funding for the program. This process required synthesizing research findings into clear, concise language that could be understood by non-academics, while also ensuring that the proposal met the criteria set forth by the funding body. Our work was guided by both qualitative insights from students and the quantitative data that highlighted the scale of the food insecurity problem on campus.

Rural Grocery Initiative: Research Assistant

In my role as a research assistant for RGI and KHFI, I utilized a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess food access in rural Kansas. The first step in the methodology was the creation of a codebook that standardized the qualitative data collected from interviews with rural grocers and farmers. This codebook was essential in ensuring that all interviews were consistent and that we captured key themes that emerged in conversations about food access and

the challenges faced by rural grocery stores. This qualitative data was analyzed using Dedoose version 9.0, a software tool that allowed us to identify patterns and trends in the responses, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the barriers rural grocers face when it comes to stocking healthy food options.

For the quantitative component, I worked with the team to collect and analyze data using SPSS version 28 and R version 4.5.0. This data collection included surveys and statistical analysis of factors such as grocery store sales, inventory levels, and community demographics. One of the key projects was the creation of a statewide map that identified active rural grocery stores. This map was created using R, allowing us to visualize food access across the state and identify geographic areas where access to healthy food was limited. This visualization was crucial in making our findings accessible to both policymakers and rural grocers, providing actionable insights that could guide future policy and community planning.

Our final report was designed with a specific audience in mind—professionals and policymakers working in rural food systems. As such, the report was written with a focus on providing practical recommendations and strategies for addressing food access challenges in rural areas. We made sure to tailor the data visualizations to meet the needs of our audience, presenting complex findings in a way that was accessible and actionable. The methodology behind this report was grounded in both qualitative and quantitative research methods, providing a comprehensive overview of the state of rural grocery stores in Kansas and the challenges they face.

Alternative Breaks Program: Site Leader for Garden City, Kansas

The Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City focused on building cultural competency and critical reflection, with an emphasis on understanding the complexities of food systems through the lens of immigration and labor. As the site leader, I began by conducting Active Citizens training for student participants, which addressed personal biases, positionality, and cultural awareness. This training was crucial in preparing students to engage respectfully and thoughtfully with the community in Garden City, particularly in understanding the lived experiences of immigrant workers in the meatpacking industry.

In Garden City, the method of intentional reflection was a core component of the program. I facilitated daily debriefing sessions that encouraged students to reflect on their experiences, discuss the connections between their service work and the broader food system, and acknowledge their own biases and roles within the system. This process of reflection helped students move beyond surface-level understanding and critically engage with the structural issues of food insecurity, labor, and immigration. I also ensured that we were asking the right questions during our interactions with local organizations like Tyson Foods, Catholic Charities, and Brookover Farms. These questions were designed to promote dialogue and understanding, helping us gain a deeper insight into the challenges faced by immigrant laborers and how food systems are shaped by immigration policies.

For the blog post that followed the trip, I applied systems thinking to synthesize my experiences and communicate the complexities of food insecurity, labor, and immigration in a balanced way. Understanding my audience was key in crafting this narrative—I wanted to engage readers in a meaningful conversation, acknowledging the complexities of the beef industry without casting blame. I focused on encouraging readers to think critically about their role in perpetuating these systems, while also calling for a collective effort to address these issues in a way that fosters positive change.

The methodologies used across these experiences provided a diverse yet interconnected approach to addressing food insecurity. Each project required specific, tailored methods, from data collection and analysis to cultural competency and stakeholder engagement. These methods helped ensure that the projects were not only successful in addressing the immediate needs of food-insecure populations but also contributed to the larger conversation about systemic change in food systems. From networking and data analysis to critical reflection and stakeholder collaboration, these methodologies emphasized the importance of holistic, culturally aware, and evidence-based approaches to tackling food insecurity in both urban and rural settings. Through these experiences, I gained valuable skills in research, program design, leadership, and community engagement that will continue to inform my public health practice moving forward.

Chapter 4 - Results

The experiences I engaged in throughout my time working on food security projects have not only provided invaluable personal and professional growth but also generated deliverables that directly impacted the communities I served. These deliverables range from board reports to grant proposals and policy briefs, all of which contributed to strengthening food security initiatives and expanding awareness of food access issues at multiple levels. In this chapter, I will provide detailed insights into the results of my work for each of the four projects: Cats' Cupboard, the SNAP Outreach Program, the Rural Grocery Initiative, and the Alternative Breaks Program. These deliverables reflect the progress made, the challenges encountered, and the success of collaborations and partnerships in advancing food security efforts.

One of the most significant outcomes of my time at Cats' Cupboard was the expansion of access hours for faculty and staff. This initiative was the result of ongoing discussions within the advisory board, where the need to better support the broader campus community was repeatedly highlighted. Through these conversations, we identified that faculty and staff—who are key supporters of student success—needed expanded hours due to varying work schedules across campus. By advocating for expanded access hours for faculty and staff, we aimed to address the systemic barriers to food access that affect the entire campus community.

Research has shown that food insecurity is not limited to students and disproportionately affects faculty and staff in higher education settings. According to a study by Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2018), faculty and staff in universities often face similar food insecurity challenges as students, yet their struggles are less acknowledged. Expanding access hours of the pantry helps ensure that all members of the university community are supported, thus fostering a healthier, more sustainable academic environment. This expansion also helps to reduce the stigma associated with food assistance, as it normalizes the conversation around food insecurity across all demographics on campus.

The development of a new board meeting report was another important deliverable. This report was designed to communicate pantry activities, funding decisions, and strategic goals to a diverse board, which includes students, faculty, staff, and community members. The challenge here was presenting technical data in a way that would be engaging and accessible to people without a background in food security. By using straightforward language and visualizations to present key data points—such as inventory levels, voucher distributions, and the pantry's impact on student retention—I was able to foster greater understanding and buy-in from board members. This method of clear communication ensured that all stakeholders, regardless of their familiarity with the subject, could participate effectively in the decision-making process.

The successful development of the SNAP Outreach Program at Kansas State University was marked by a significant milestone: the submission and full funding of a grant proposal through the Hunger-Free Kansas initiative, led by the Kansas Health Foundation (KHF). This grant, totaling approximately $21,000, was crucial in bridging the gap between Kansas State

University's Extension arm and KHF, connecting community work with university resources. It will be used to purchase technology that will facilitate student applications for SNAP, along with outreach and educational materials designed to increase student awareness of available food assistance programs.

The process of preparing the grant proposal was both a collaborative and data-driven effort. As part of a team that included Lisa Ross, Nutrition Specialist for Research and Extension in Riley County, I helped provide research that demonstrated the need for such a program on the K-State campus. Lisa's involvement was pivotal, as her expertise in public health nutrition and community engagement helped refine the proposal and ensure it addressed the needs of students facing food insecurity. By aligning our efforts with the priorities of the Kansas Health Foundation and connecting our work to broader state and national food security initiatives, we were able to secure the necessary funding.

Additionally, drawing from my previous experience at Chico State, I reached out to the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC), who have been running SNAP outreach programs across California State University campuses. Their guidance and support in program implementation were invaluable. The CHC agreed to lend their expertise to our outreach efforts, providing support on best practices and assisting in building relationships with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF), which will be essential in helping students access SNAP benefits. Leveraging these partnerships is crucial for the success of the program, as it ensures that we are not reinventing the wheel but rather using the lessons learned from other successful programs to implement a sustainable and effective outreach strategy at K-State.

The success of this initiative and the accompanying grant proposal was a significant step toward addressing food insecurity on the K-State campus, ensuring that students have access to both short-term food assistance and long-term solutions for meeting their nutritional needs.

My role in the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) involved contributing to the collection and analysis of data through a statewide survey aimed at assessing the challenges faced by rural grocery stores in Kansas. The survey focused on store characteristics, owner challenges, and the broader food access issues faced by rural communities. The findings were compiled into a policy brief, which not only provided a snapshot of the state of rural grocery stores but also included actionable recommendations for Extension and other local stakeholders.

One of the key findings from the survey was that many rural grocers are aging and lack transition plans, a factor that contributes to the closure of grocery stores and exacerbates food insecurity in rural areas. This challenge is particularly pronounced in communities with limited resources, where the closure of a single store can significantly disrupt food access. The policy brief recommended that Extension personnel play a crucial role in supporting grocers through transition planning, even if they are not experts in the area. By connecting grocers with resources such as small business development centers, tax advisors, and funding sources, Extension can help ensure the sustainability of these critical community institutions.

Additionally, the survey highlighted the challenges grocers face in terms of competition and distribution, with many struggling to differentiate themselves from larger retailers. The brief

suggested strategies such as expanding delivery services, offering specialty products, and sourcing more inventory from local vendors to improve the viability of these stores. Extension, along with other local food systems stakeholders, was identified as a key player in helping grocers implement these strategies, ensuring that rural food access remains viable in the face of these challenges. The findings and recommendations in the brief provide a strong foundation for future initiatives aimed at sustaining rural grocery stores in Kansas.

For a more in-depth exploration of the findings and implications of the survey, the full report is included in the appendix. This comprehensive document includes detailed data analysis, policy recommendations, and a framework for addressing the challenges facing rural grocers.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work as a site leader for the Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City was the opportunity to reflect on the experience and communicate those reflections in a way that would engage others. Following the trip, I authored a blog post that explored the connections between food insecurity, labor, and immigration through the lens of the beef industry. The blog post, which will be published on the Mary Lynn and Warren Staley School of Leadership website, aims to engage students and encourage them to critically consider how their actions and consumption are connected to broader systems.

Writing this post was an exercise in balancing reflection with awareness of my own biases. The challenge was to communicate the complexities of the food system without casting judgment or alienating readers, particularly those who may not be familiar with the intricacies of the beef industry or food insecurity. I consciously avoided "calling people out" and instead focused on inviting readers to engage in a conversation about how we, as a society, are all interconnected in these systems, both locally and globally.

This approach was informed by cultural competency principles, acknowledging that students and readers would come from diverse backgrounds with varying perspectives on food systems and labor. By focusing on systems thinking, I aimed to offer a nuanced perspective that would encourage reflection without shutting down the conversation. The hope is that by sharing the story of Garden City, readers will gain a deeper understanding of how food insecurity and labor are connected and consider how they can engage with these issues in their own communities.

The blog post serves as a tool for engagement and awareness, fostering critical thinking and encouraging students to explore communities and make connections between their own lives and the larger food systems at play. By promoting intentional reflection and encouraging further discussion, the post aims to inspire future students to think more deeply about their role in the global food system and how they can contribute to positive change.

The results of these projects reflect both the tangible impact of the work completed and the broader systemic changes these initiatives aim to foster. From expanding food security services at Kansas State to securing funding for a SNAP Outreach Program, supporting rural grocery stores, and creating reflective learning experiences for students, each project contributed to the larger effort of addressing food insecurity in diverse contexts. These results demonstrate

the power of collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and cultural competency in promoting food justice and building sustainable food systems.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This report presents a comprehensive overview of my Applied Practice Experience (APE), which spanned four distinct yet interconnected initiatives: Cats' Cupboard (Kansas State University's on-campus food pantry), the Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City, the Rural Grocery Initiative and Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, and the development of a SNAP Outreach Program for K-State students. Throughout the course of this experience, which accounted for 240 applied practice hours, I engaged deeply with the issues of food insecurity and food systems, applying core public health competencies to develop solutions that could address both immediate and long-term needs of underserved populations.

The four experiences provided a diverse yet unified platform for learning and practice. Working with Cats' Cupboard, I was able to address food insecurity at the campus level, advocating for expanded access hours for faculty and staff, and facilitating strategic planning to make the pantry more accessible and effective. This work underscored the importance of food security as a broader issue, not confined to students alone, but extending to all members of the academic community, including those who support the university's core functions. Research indicates that food insecurity among faculty and staff is a significant issue, but often overlooked, despite their crucial role in supporting student success (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

The work I did on the SNAP Outreach Program was another pivotal aspect of my APE. By securing funding for the initiative through the Hunger-Free Kansas Initiative, a program by the Kansas Health Foundation (KHF), we were able to develop a SNAP outreach strategy that bridged the gap between Kansas State University's Extension arm and KHF. This effort marked the first of its kind for the state of Kansas and represents a systemic intervention to help students access a sustainable solution to food insecurity through federal assistance. The collaboration with Lisa Ross, Nutrition Specialist for Research and Extension in Riley County, was crucial in preparing the grant proposal and ensuring the program was designed with the unique needs of college students in mind. This project also leveraged the expertise of the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC), which has extensive experience in SNAP outreach, particularly in the California State University system. By collaborating with CHC, we ensured that our approach was informed by best practices in SNAP outreach, thereby maximizing the chances of the program's success.

The Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) provided a unique opportunity to expand my understanding of food insecurity in rural areas, where access to nutritious food is often more limited than in urban centers. The statewide survey that I assisted in updating offered insights into the challenges faced by rural grocery stores, many of which are under severe economic strain. A key finding was that many rural grocers lacked transition plans, which has led to a significant number of store closures over the past decade, further exacerbating food insecurity in rural communities (Hunt, 2020). By analyzing data and contributing to policy recommendations aimed at sustaining these vital community resources, I learned about the critical role that rural

grocery stores play in both food access and the local economy. The RGI's focus on supporting these stores through training and resource provision is vital for sustaining food access in rural areas, where grocery stores often serve as both food hubs and social centers (Huffman et al., 2019).

Finally, my work with the Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City, Kansas allowed me to explore food insecurity from a broader, systemic perspective. In Garden City, food insecurity is closely tied to the dynamics of the meatpacking industry and the role of immigrant labor in the food system. Through direct engagement with local organizations such as Catholic Charities and Tyson Foods, I gained a deeper understanding of how immigration policies, labor conditions, and food systems intersect in rural communities. This was particularly illuminating as it demonstrated how those working in the food system—often immigrants and refugees—can still struggle to access adequate nutrition due to low wages, poor working conditions, and limited food access. These insights were framed through a broader discussion on systems thinking, where I was able to guide students in reflecting on the complex relationships between labor, immigration, and food security. The culmination of this work was a blog post for the Mary Lynn and Warren Staley School of Leadership, which I developed as part of my effort to raise awareness and encourage deeper engagement with the systemic factors contributing to food insecurity.

Each of these experiences provided critical learning opportunities and contributed to my understanding of food insecurity across different contexts, whether at the campus, rural, or global level. Through Cats' Cupboard, I learned the importance of immediate relief efforts in food security, focusing on the accessibility and cultural relevance of pantry offerings. The SNAP Outreach Program extended this focus to long-term, systemic solutions, highlighting the need for greater awareness and accessibility in government assistance programs. My work with the Rural Grocery Initiative provided a macro-level view of food access challenges in rural communities, while the Alternative Breaks Program allowed me to explore the connections between immigration, labor, and food security in an industry that plays a central role in feeding millions globally. These varied but interconnected projects allowed me to apply a systems thinking approach, seeing food insecurity not as a discrete issue but as a complex challenge shaped by structural factors at every level of society.

Furthermore, my APE experiences emphasized the importance of advocacy and stakeholder engagement in addressing food insecurity. By working with a diverse range of stakeholders, including faculty, students, community organizations, and governmental bodies, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of how to navigate the complexities of food security policy and practice. These experiences reinforced the need for interprofessional collaboration in public health work, as tackling systemic issues like food insecurity requires the combined efforts of individuals from diverse fields, working together to create sustainable solutions.

Through these experiences, I not only gained technical skills in research and program implementation but also honed my leadership and advocacy abilities. My work has prepared me to continue contributing to the field of food security, where I plan to focus on research, policy

development, and community-based interventions. These experiences have provided me with the tools to understand the broader implications of food insecurity and the systemic barriers that prevent equitable access to healthy food. By engaging in both direct service and policy advocacy, I have learned the importance of a multifaceted approach to food security—one that includes both immediate relief and long-term systemic change. As I reflect on these experiences, I am more committed than ever to pursuing sustainable, equitable solutions to food insecurity that address the root causes and ensure that all individuals have access to the nutritious food they need to thrive.

Chapter 6 - Competencies

In this chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of the five core public health competencies that were integral to my Applied Practice Experience (APE). These competencies were essential for guiding the work I undertook across four distinct but interconnected public health initiatives: Cats' Cupboard, the development of a SNAP Outreach Program, the Rural Grocery Initiative, and the Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City. Each section will delve into how the competency was applied in these experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of how I utilized these competencies to inform public health interventions and drive systemic change.

Competency 16: Apply Principles of Leadership, Governance, and Management

In my role as Co-chair of the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board, I was deeply involved in applying the principles of leadership, governance, and management. This role required me to facilitate strategic discussions, guide subcommittees, and ensure that decisions aligned with the pantry's mission to address food insecurity on the Kansas State University campus. A core aspect of this experience was fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and community members. By bringing together these various groups, I ensured that all perspectives were considered in the decision-making process, which was essential for creating a sustainable and student-centered food security program.

As Co-chair, I advocated for expanded access hours for faculty and staff, recognizing that food insecurity extends beyond the student population and often affects university employees, many of whom work irregular hours in low-wage, part-time, or seasonal roles that make it difficult to access pantry services when hours are too limited or rigid. This expansion was a direct result of my leadership in gathering input from various stakeholders, advocating for policy changes, and guiding the board in making decisions that would broaden the pantry's scope and accessibility. In addition to advocating for these changes, I also played an instrumental role in developing educational materials that would reduce the stigma surrounding food insecurity. This included outreach campaigns aimed at normalizing the use of food assistance and creating a supportive environment for those in need.

The leadership skills I developed in Cats' Cupboard extended into my work with the SNAP Outreach Program. As a student on a multidisciplinary team working to develop this program, I applied the same leadership principles to coordinate efforts across diverse groups, including agricultural economists, public health specialists, and nutrition experts. The goal of this program was to increase student access to federal nutrition assistance programs, and my role was pivotal in helping design the program and secure funding through the Kansas Health Foundation's Hunger-Free Kansas Initiative. Leadership in this context meant not only guiding the team toward a common vision but also negotiating resources and strategies to ensure the program's success. Through this initiative, I saw how leadership, governance, and management are essential for the coordination of complex public health projects.

Similarly, my leadership was tested during the Alternative Breaks Program in Garden City. Here, I led a group of three students and coordinated site visits to local food systems organizations, including Catholic Charities, Tyson Foods, and the Kansas Food Bank. As the lead for this program, I ensured that students engaged meaningfully with community members, facilitating discussions about food insecurity and its relationship with labor and immigration. The experience allowed me to apply leadership principles by guiding students through the complexities of the food system while ensuring the logistical aspects of the trip were handled effectively. I also supported students in post-trip reflections, helping them connect their experiences to broader social and political issues surrounding food production and access. My leadership throughout this experience demonstrated how effective governance can facilitate learning and foster collaboration on both a local and global scale.

Competency 9: Design a Population-Based Policy, Program, Project, or Intervention

Competency 9 was central to the work I did on the SNAP Outreach Program. One of the key aspects of this initiative was designing a population-based intervention aimed at increasing student access to federal nutrition assistance. This involved identifying barriers to SNAP participation, such as eligibility requirements, lack of awareness, and stigma associated with government assistance. I collaborated with a multidisciplinary team to create a program that would bridge the gap between K-State students and the resources they needed. The project culminated in a grant proposal to the Kansas Health Foundation, which successfully secured $21,000 in funding to support the program's implementation. The funding will be used to purchase technology that will assist students in applying for SNAP benefits, as well as educational materials for outreach and awareness campaigns.

In designing this program, I applied key principles of public health policy development, including assessing the needs of the student population, gathering input from stakeholders, and developing a strategy that would address both short-term needs and long-term goals. This project required me to design a comprehensive intervention that was not only based on the needs of students but also took into account institutional barriers that might prevent them from accessing SNAP. Through research, collaboration, and policy design, I helped create a program that provides students with the tools and guidance they need to access federal nutrition assistance, making food security a more attainable goal for students at K-State.

In my work with the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI), I also applied Competency 9 to design strategies for improving food access in rural Kansas communities. The RGI aims to sustain locally-owned grocery stores, which play a critical role in rural food systems. I worked with Dr. Leah Tsoodle and other members of the RGI team to collect data on rural grocery store closures and to develop policy recommendations aimed at supporting these businesses. The challenges rural grocers face, including competition from larger retailers and distribution issues, require innovative policy solutions. My involvement in analyzing statewide survey data and helping craft recommendations for policy changes provided me with a deeper understanding of

how to design interventions that address systemic barriers to food access, particularly in rural areas.

Competency 3: Analyze Quantitative and Qualitative Data Using Biostatistics, Informatics, Computer-Based Programming, and Software

Competency 3, which involves analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, was particularly important in my work with the Rural Grocery Initiative. As part of this project, I was involved in collecting, coding, and analyzing survey data from rural grocery stores across Kansas. This required the use of statistical software like SPSS and R to clean and organize both quantitative and qualitative data. The data from these surveys helped identify the challenges that rural grocery stores face, such as lack of funding, distribution problems, and economic competition.

In this context, I used Dedoose for analyzing qualitative interview data, synthesizing the challenges that rural grocers encounter, including difficulties related to supply chains and store closures. One of the key deliverables from this experience was the co-authored non-academic article, where I contributed insights from the data and performed a comparative analysis with previous surveys to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and community leaders.

While my work with the Rural Grocery Initiative involved heavy data analysis, this competency was also applied in my role with Cats' Cupboard. I helped track pantry usage, maintaining records of the types of foods requested by students and their frequency of use. This data collection and analysis was crucial in guiding pantry management decisions, such as which food items to prioritize in future food drives. Additionally, the quantitative data helped us understand trends in food access, such as which products were most in demand and which could be donated or procured more easily.

Similarly, with SNAP Outreach, data analysis played a key role in gap analysis and understanding the barriers that students face when accessing food assistance. The data we collected from national reports and campus surveys was used to strengthen our grant proposal, making a compelling case for the need for a dedicated outreach program at K-State. Across all my projects, Competency 3 facilitated my ability to interpret complex data and use it to guide decision-making, evaluate interventions, and inform policy recommendations.

Competency 22: Apply Systems Thinking Tools to a Public Health Issue

Competency 22, focused on applying systems thinking tools to a public health issue, was central to my work in Garden City, particularly during the Alternative Breaks Program. In this experience, I used systems thinking to analyze the complex, interconnected issues of food insecurity, immigration, labor, and food production. This was particularly relevant when discussing how the meatpacking industry relies on immigrant labor and how this paradox—where workers who produce food for others are themselves food insecure—highlights systemic flaws in labor and food policy.

Through systems thinking tools such as causal loop diagrams and process mapping, I helped students make connections between their experiences and broader issues. For instance, we explored how labor policies, economic conditions, and agricultural practices interact to create vulnerabilities within the food system. By mapping these interactions, we gained a deeper understanding of the feedback loops that perpetuate food insecurity, such as low wages in the meatpacking industry and limited access to nutritious food in low-income immigrant communities.

This systems thinking approach was also utilized in Cats' Cupboard, where I helped facilitate discussions about how food insecurity on campus is shaped by interconnected factors like financial stress, stigma, and academic pressures. We used these insights to better design pantry services and outreach programs that addressed these systemic barriers. Similarly, in SNAP Outreach, I applied process mapping to ensure that the outreach program would be effective in addressing gaps in the application process and identifying the right stakeholders to assist students.

In the Rural Grocery Initiative, systems thinking was used to assess how rural grocery stores interact with the broader food system, from supply chains to local food access. Understanding the causal relationships between store closures, transportation costs, and food access allowed us to make informed policy recommendations that could help sustain grocery stores in rural communities and ensure better food security for their residents.

Competency 6: Discuss the means by which structural bias, social inequities, and racism undermine health and create challenges to achieving health equity

Competency 6 was a critical lens through which I viewed all of my experiences, particularly in addressing food insecurity and the underlying structural inequities that exacerbate this issue. In my work with Cats' Cupboard, I advocated for expanded access hours for faculty and staff. This effort was grounded in the understanding that food insecurity is not limited to a single demographic but affects a broad spectrum of the university community. By normalizing the use of food assistance for all members of the campus, I worked to dismantle the structural stigma that often prevents individuals from seeking help.

In Garden City, I applied this competency by exploring the impact of immigration policies on the local food system. I led discussions with students about how labor exploitation in the meatpacking industry disproportionately affects immigrant workers, who face economic and racial inequities that prevent them from accessing food security. Despite their essential role in the food production system, many immigrant workers struggle with low wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to nutritious food. By addressing these inequities in our reflections and discussions, I helped students understand the broader social determinants of health that shape food insecurity in marginalized communities.

Finally, in the Rural Grocery Initiative and SNAP Outreach Program, I analyzed the economic and social structures that contribute to food insecurity, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized students. In both projects, I used data to highlight how access to food is not

just about availability but is deeply influenced by socioeconomic status, race, and immigration status. By understanding and addressing these factors, I was able to contribute to interventions that are more inclusive and that challenge the systemic barriers to food security faced by underrepresented populations.

Through these five competencies, I was able to approach food insecurity from multiple perspectives—designing interventions, applying data-driven insights, leading initiatives, and using systems thinking tools to understand complex problems. These competencies provided the foundation for my work in each experience and allowed me to contribute to the development of solutions that address food insecurity both in the short term and as part of broader, systemic change.

Table 5.1 Summary of MPH Foundational Competencies

Number and Competency		Description
1	Competency 16: Apply principles of leadership, governance, and management	Applied in the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board Reports, where I facilitated meetings and led subcommittees to advocate for expanded access hours of the pantry, promoting inclusive food access.
2	Competency 9: Design a population-based policy, program, project, or intervention	Applied in the SNAP Outreach Grant Proposal, where I collaborated with stakeholders to design and secure funding for a program aimed at increasing student access to SNAP benefits.
3	Competency 3: Analyze quantitative and qualitative data using biostatistics, informatics, computer-based programming, and software	Applied in the Rural Grocery Initiative Survey Analysis, where I used SPSS and R to clean and analyze data on rural grocery store closures and food access in Kansas.
4	Competency 22: Apply systems thinking tools to a public health issue	Applied in the Blog Post on Systems Thinking, where I used causal loop diagrams to illustrate how immigration, labor, and food insecurity intersect in Garden City's food system.
5	Competency 6: Discuss the means by which structural bias, social inequities, and racism undermine health and create challenges to achieving health equity	Applied in the SNAP Outreach Program Development, where I identified and addressed the systemic barriers preventing historically marginalized students from accessing food assistance.

Student Attainment of MPH Emphasis Area Competencies

PH Nutrition Competency 1: Information Literacy of Public Health Nutrition

One of the most essential competencies I applied throughout my APE was information literacy of public health nutrition, which involves the ability to locate, evaluate, and use credible evidence to inform public health practice, especially in the context of food security and nutrition. In my work with Cats' Cupboard, the university's on-campus food pantry, I frequently relied on evidence-based research to help shape our policies, improve the pantry's operations, and ensure that the food provided was nutritious and met the students' needs.

For example, one of the deliverables I contributed to was the subcommittee and board reports that outlined the pantry's funding decisions, inventory, and operational improvements. These reports were grounded in research about food insecurity and nutrition in student populations, including data on which foods were most in demand and why. Through information literacy, I reviewed existing studies on food insecurity among college students and used that data to inform our decisions. For example, the data indicated that protein-rich foods, like eggs and meat, were consistently in high demand, which led us to prioritize these items in our food donations and procurement strategies.

Additionally, in my role on the Advisory Board, I helped advocate for the expansion of pantry services, which required me to research broader institutional needs for food access. I consulted literature on how universities can best address food insecurity across all campus populations, ensuring that our expansion strategy was informed by best practices in food assistance and community outreach. My work with Cats' Cupboard allowed me to directly apply information literacy to ensure that the pantry was both resource-efficient and responsive to the nutritional needs of the campus community.

PH Nutrition Competency 2: Compare and Relate Research into Practice

In my APE, the competency of comparing and relating research into practice was pivotal, especially when translating findings from academic research into actionable public health solutions. This was particularly evident in my work with the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI), where I took part in a statewide survey to assess the state of rural food access and the challenges faced by rural grocery stores.

The co-authored non-academic article I worked on was a critical deliverable in this regard. It involved analyzing findings from our survey and comparing them with data from a similar report conducted in 2008. We highlighted key differences and identified emerging trends in food access in rural areas, particularly the challenges faced by grocery stores in maintaining a diverse inventory and serving low-income communities. We also compared the data to the state and national food security trends to understand how larger socio-economic and policy changes were impacting rural communities.

One of the significant insights from this comparison was how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges of grocery store closures, food supply chain disruptions, and an increased reliance on SNAP benefits. By relating this research to practice, I was able to contribute to actionable recommendations for how Extension services could better support rural grocers through transition planning, local sourcing, and delivery services. The work not only reflected the application of research but also highlighted the importance of adapting evidence-based findings to meet the unique needs of rural communities.

PH Nutrition Competency 3: Population-Based Health Administration

A core competency in my APE was population-based health administration, where I critically examined nutrition programs and public health initiatives to assess their impact on communities. This was especially relevant in the development of the SNAP Outreach Program, which was designed to support K-State students in accessing federal nutrition assistance.

In this context, I applied my understanding of public health nutrition programs to assess the needs of the student population and design a program that could increase SNAP enrollment on campus. This program involved engaging key stakeholders, including agricultural economists, public health specialists, and nutrition experts, to create a comprehensive outreach strategy. The final draft of the grant proposal I helped develop for the Kansas Health Foundation's Hunger-Free Kansas Initiative was an essential deliverable in this area. It outlined how a university-led SNAP outreach program could reduce food insecurity among students, providing a long-term solution to what had previously been an emergency-based response.

By developing this program, I was able to critically examine population-based nutrition programs, recognizing that food insecurity is not simply an individual problem but a systemic issue that requires programmatic and policy-level interventions. The SNAP Outreach initiative is not only about connecting students to resources but also about addressing structural barriers such as eligibility requirements and program stigma. In this way, I worked to design a population-based intervention that takes into account community-level needs and builds on existing public health infrastructure.

PH Nutrition Competency 4: Analysis of Human Nutrition Principles

The competency of analyzing human nutrition principles was a crucial element of my work with both Cats' Cupboard and the SNAP Outreach Program, where I integrated key principles of nutrition science and epidemiology to enhance food security initiatives. This competency was reflected in my work to ensure that students who relied on food assistance not only had access to food but were also provided with nutritious options that could support their overall health.

In Cats' Cupboard, I utilized knowledge of human nutrition principles to help prioritize nutritious food items like fresh produce, dairy, and protein-rich options, which were consistently in high demand. By reviewing existing nutrition guidelines and research on the dietary needs of food-insecure populations, I advocated for a shift toward nutrient-dense foods in the pantry's

offerings. My work included analyzing student preferences and dietary needs, ensuring that the pantry provided a balance of foods that could contribute to students' long-term health.

Additionally, in SNAP Outreach, I used nutrition epidemiology to examine how food insecurity is associated with chronic diseases, particularly in college students who may experience higher levels of stress, irregular eating habits, and poor dietary choices due to financial constraints. In the grant proposal, I emphasized how SNAP benefits can help students make healthier choices by providing access to balanced, nutritious food, which can improve their overall well-being and academic performance. By incorporating human nutrition principles, I was able to build a stronger case for the program, showing how addressing food insecurity is a critical component of improving population health and reducing disease risk among students.

PH Nutrition Competency 5: Analysis of Nutrition Epidemiology

The competency of analysis of nutrition epidemiology was applied in my research with the Rural Grocery Initiative, where I worked to examine how food access in rural communities influences public health outcomes. This competency was particularly relevant as I helped design a statewide survey to assess the impact of rural grocery store closures on food access and health outcomes in Kansas.

In my work with this survey, I applied nutrition epidemiology by reviewing validity criteria for nutritional data collection and ensuring that the survey questions were designed to yield reliable, actionable information. Using tools like SPSS and R, I was able to clean and analyze the quantitative data, ensuring that the findings were robust enough to inform policy recommendations. This analysis was key in understanding how nutrition-related chronic diseases were linked to limited access to healthy food in rural communities. Through this research, I helped identify areas where rural grocery stores were closing at an alarming rate, leaving communities with limited access to fresh produce and other essential foods.

The insights from this survey contributed to the Rural Grocery Initiative's efforts to support local food systems and improve access to healthy foods in underserved areas. The findings were also critical in shaping statewide policy recommendations aimed at sustaining and revitalizing local grocery stores. This work helped me understand how nutrition epidemiology plays a vital role in assessing the broader public health implications of food access issues and how data-driven interventions can address the root causes of food insecurity.

The application of these five emphasis area competencies throughout my APE allowed me to bridge the gap between theory and practice in public health nutrition. By focusing on information literacy, evidence-based policy, population-based program design, human nutrition principles, and nutrition epidemiology, I was able to contribute meaningfully to initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity. Each experience provided an opportunity to refine my skills in applying public health nutrition principles, and the deliverables I created reflect my ability to use research and data to inform practice, design interventions, and advocate for systemic change. These competencies not only shaped the scope of my work but also prepared me for a career focused on improving public health nutrition and addressing food insecurity on a broader scale.

Table 5.2 Summary of MPH Emphasis Area Competencies

MPH Emphasis Area:		
Number and Competency		**Description**
1	Information literacy of public health nutrition	In the courses Environmental Health Sciences: MPH 802 - Environmental Health and Public Health Nutrition: FNDH 600, I developed the ability to **inform public health practice through the analysis of evidence-based policy, systems, and environmental change.** MPH 802 provided a framework for understanding how environmental factors influence public health, particularly through policies and systems that address environmental hazards and promote healthy environments. This course deepened my understanding of the role of environmental factors in shaping nutrition outcomes, such as food deserts, access to healthy food, and the impact of urban design on food choices. FNDH 600 focused on public health nutrition, highlighting the role of systems and policy in shaping dietary behaviors and nutrition security. By integrating these two perspectives, I learned how environmental health policies and nutrition systems interact to influence public health outcomes.
2	Compare and relate research into practice	In the courses Biostatistics: MPH 701 - Fundamental Methods of Biostatistics and Nutritional Epidemiology: FNDH 844, I gained a comprehensive understanding of how **to examine chronic disease surveillance, policy, program planning, and evaluation in the context of public health nutrition.** Through MPH 701, I learned to apply biostatistical methods to analyze health data, which is crucial for understanding the prevalence and trends of chronic diseases related to nutrition, such as obesity and diabetes. This foundation in data analysis was complemented by FNDH 844, where I explored how epidemiological research

		informs nutrition interventions and policy development, particularly in the prevention and management of chronic conditions. Together, these courses provided essential skills for evaluating the impact of public health nutrition programs on chronic disease outcomes, guiding the development of more effective and targeted interventions.
3	Population-based health administration	In the course Health Services Administration: MPH 720 - Administration of Health Care Organizations, the competency of **critically examining population-based nutrition programs** was explored through a semester-long project where we evaluated the effectiveness of existing health service organizations. This project helped me consider the various facets of a program, including leadership, stakeholder relations, resource allocation, and community impact.
4	Analysis of human nutrition principles	In the courses Environmental Health Sciences: MPH 802 - Environmental Health and Social and Behavioral Sciences: MPH 818 - Social and Behavioral Bases of Public Health, I **examined key epidemiological concepts of human nutrition and their role in improving population health and reducing disease risk.** MPH 802 provided insights into how environmental factors, such as pollution, climate change, and access to healthy food, influence nutritional habits and overall health outcomes. This course helped me understand the broader environmental context in which nutritional behaviors occur, emphasizing the importance of policies and systems that create healthier living environments. Meanwhile, MPH 818 focused on the social and behavioral determinants of health, particularly how social factors, such as income, education, and cultural norms, shape dietary behaviors and health outcomes. It highlighted the need for behavioral interventions that can

		change individual and community-level dietary habits, reducing the risk of chronic diseases like obesity and diabetes. Together, these courses reinforced the importance of applying epidemiological concepts to understand and address the complex factors influencing nutrition, and they guided my work in designing interventions that promote healthier communities and reduce disease risk through improved dietary practices.
5	Analysis of nutrition epidemiology	In the courses FNDH 844 - Nutritional Epidemiology and FNDH 820 - Functional Foods for Chronic Disease Prevention, I **explored the criteria for validity in nutritional epidemiological methodology**, which is essential for ensuring the accuracy and reliability of data used to assess nutrition-related health outcomes. FNDH 844 taught me how to evaluate the validity of studies by examining key factors such as study design, sample size, data collection methods, and statistical analyses. I learned how to assess the strength of evidence in nutritional research and how to ensure that the findings accurately represent the population being studied, which is crucial for making informed public health decisions. In FNDH 820, the focus on functional foods for chronic disease prevention provided a practical application of these epidemiological methods, allowing me to critically evaluate studies on the effectiveness of specific foods in preventing diseases like heart disease and diabetes. Together, these courses helped me understand how to apply valid methodologies in nutritional epidemiology, ensuring that the research used to guide public health policies and interventions is robust and trustworthy.

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Appendix A

As part of my Applied Practice Experience (APE), I worked closely with Cats' Cupboard, the on-campus food pantry, to address food insecurity among students, faculty, and staff. One of my primary responsibilities was to contribute to the development of subcommittee and board reports, which outlined funding decisions, strategic initiatives, and operational changes related to the pantry. These reports were presented to the Advisory Board, which consisted of a diverse group of faculty, staff, students, and community partners. The goal of these reports was to provide transparency in decision-making and ensure that the pantry's services were meeting the nutritional needs of our target population, while also addressing the underlying barriers to food access. In collaboration with the Advisory Board, I also worked on revising the mission and vision statements for Cats' Cupboard to reflect the expanded scope of services and to ensure that the pantry's goals aligned with broader university objectives, including promoting student success and well-being. We recognized that food insecurity was not only a basic needs issue but also a barrier to academic achievement and overall student health.

The revised mission statement emphasized the pantry's role in providing not only food but also nutritional education and community building. This effort was informed by research on the relationship between food insecurity and academic performance (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). We also worked to ensure that the mission and vision statements addressed the social determinants of health and reflected a commitment to inclusivity and equity for all campus community members.

These reports, which reflect my work with Cats' Cupboard, are an example of how leadership, data analysis, and strategic planning come together to create sustainable, student-centered strategies to address food insecurity. In Appendix A, I have included 3 examples of one of these reports to provide a detailed look at how I applied public health principles to real-world issues and contributed to an ongoing initiative aimed at improving food security on campus.

Cats' Cupboard – The K-State Food Pantry

Cats' Cupboard aims to cultivate a transformational experience, where every Wildcat — no matter their background or circumstance — is confident in their ability to feed themselves and their households while obtaining a degree at Kansas State University. – Shelly Williams, 2023

Mission

Current	Proposed Revision
Providing access to nutritious food and support through initiatives that promote health, success, and well-being.	Providing K-Staters with access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food and support through initiatives that promote health, success, well-being and a food secure future.

Vision

Current	Proposed Revision
Our vision is to prevent food insecurity from being a barrier to student success. In order to do this, we build awareness and the capacity of our campus community to address this challenge from a holistic perspective. A pantry with healthy and accessible food is essential, but we do not limit our vision to operating the pantry. We strive to create ties with our academic programs as we provide an active learning place for many disciplines that work directly with the issue of food security. This collaborative effort of student life and academia will lead the way for practicing real change and enhancing K-State's land-grant mission.	Food is a basic need for health, success, and well-being. Dedicated to increasing food security and improving the sustainability of our local food system, we aim to learn alongside, collaborate with, and inspire the K-State community to pursue individual and collective health and well-being.

Cats' Cupboard – The K-State Food Pantry

Core Values

Current	Proposed Revision	
NA	Health and Well-being*	We value individual and collective health and well-being as a dynamic and holistic process aimed at increasing ones capacity to make positive choices towards living a quality life.
	Integrity	We believe integrity is at the foundation of successful relationships. Through personal practice, we aim to inspire responsibility, trust, generosity, and resilience.
	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion	We are committed to creating an inclusive and supportive environment that promotes dignity, respect, and equitable opportunity, regardless of background or circumstance.
	Learning	We acknowledge the importance of data driven decisions and recognize the value of individual experience. We believe empathy and respect precede positive change and are committed to growth through innovation and learning.
	Collaboration	We strive to cultivate an environment of reciprocity where people feel empowered to make positive change. We believe in the power of collaboration and actively seek partnerships to maximize individual and collective contributions.
	Sustainability	We recognize the importance of partaking in practices that promote sustainability of people, place, and planet. We strive to elevate the viability of our local food system by sourcing local products and reducing waste whenever possible to support a healthier planet.

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**Health and Well-being* value was strongly influenced by the definition for Well-being developed in November 2020 by *NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation*, https://nirsa.net/nirsa/portfolio-items/health-wellbeing-in-higher-education/

Cats'Cupboard – The K-State Food Pantry

Guiding Principles

Current	Proposed Revision
WE believe access to nutritious food is a basic human right. WE respect the dignity of every human being. WE collaborate to effect change and support student success. WE practice good stewardship of knowledge and resources.	We are committed to K-States Principles of Community and support the Division of Student Life's Core Values: Care, Community, and Collaboration and apply each to people, place and planet.

DRAFT

Figure 1. Draft of 'Cats Cupboard Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

By Laws – Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board

The Cats' Cupboard, Kansas State University's food pantry, was established in September 2017. The mission of the Cats' Cupboard is to provide K-Staters with access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food and support through initiatives that promote health, success, well-being and a food secure future.

Article I.
Purpose

The purpose of this Advisory Board shall be to advise, assist, support and advocate for programs and initiatives to promote food security on the K-State campus. The Advisory Board meets regularly in a collaborative manner and offers its insight and expertise to the Cats' Cupboard staff on matters such as community engagement, advertising and marketing, service learning activities, client services, strategic planning, volunteerism, and fundraising.

Article II
Board Members

The Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board is comprised of members of the K-State community including K-State faculty, staff, students, along with community members at large, who are committed to the ongoing functions and sustainability of the operation. Cats' Cupboard benefits from the diverse expertise and "points-of-view" offered by its Advisory Board members. The direct beneficiaries of their contributions and efforts are members of the K-State community who experience challenges with food security.

Composition: The Advisory Board shall consist of fifteen (15) and no more than twenty-five (25) members. Positions and vacancies are filled as required specifically if there are areas of expertise required to meet the needs of the service population. The composition breakdown follows:

- Student Governing Association (SGA) Representative (1), *voting*
- Students at large (Undergraduate and/or Graduate) (at least 2-4), *voting*
- Faculty/Staff at large (at least 2-4), *voting*
- Community Representatives at large (up to 10), *voting*
- Emeritus board members as appointed by the membership committee
- Cats' Cupboard Staff
- Morrison Family Associate Vice President for Student Well-being

Term: Member terms are three (3) years with a maximum of two (2) consecutive full terms. No member shall serve more than two consecutive terms, but a former member may be re-appointed after a one-year absence from the board.

Appointment: The K-State staff member serving as the Cats' Cupboard Operations Lead will send out a notice regarding seeking Advisory Board applications to the greater K-State community by November 1 of the year for possible appointment for the following calendar year. The application to serve requires the applicant to response to questions developed by a

Membership Committee. In addition, applicants are surveyed regarding availability for meetings and potential time requirements.

Vacancies on the Board. Vacancies that occur during the term of a board member will be filled by appointment of the Advisory Board. Whenever a member is appointed to fill a position that has become vacant because of a resignation, termination, or other occasion, such appointment shall only be for the remainder of the unexpired term

Emeritus Board Members. A Cats' Cupboard emeritus position is filled by a former advisory board member who is invited to stay on board as a nonvoting member. This is an honorific title in recognition of the member's role in developing the organization, preserving institutional history, and/or strengthening its financial health. Emeritus members are invited to attend the first meeting of the academic year.

Article III.
Organizational Structure

The Cats' Cupboard is a unit within Student Life at K-State and as such, the Advisory Board has a key role to advise and provide input on policies and programs pertaining to Cats' Cupboard. Final authority regarding fiscal affairs, policies, and programing remain the responsibility of the University.

Officers: The Advisory Board will have a Faculty/Staff or Community Representative Co-Chair, a Student Co-Chair, and a recording secretary who are elected for one-year terms by the membership of the Advisory Board. Duties of officers shall be those commonly ascribed to these offices as described.

- Co-Chair(s): The co-chairs shall preside at the board meeting and assist the Cats' Cupboard Operations Lead to develop the meeting agenda.

- Recording Secretary: The secretary shall keep the minutes of all Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board meetings and shall be assigned general secretarial duties. Electronic copies of the recorded minutes will be provided to the Board membership including all Cats' Cupboard Staff within two weeks after a meeting.

Officers shall be elected by simple majority of appointed members. These officers shall be the Executive Committee, in addition to the Cats' Cupboard Operations Lead who will be an ex officio member of all Boards – standing and ad hoc.

Elections: Elections will be held at the first meeting of the new membership year. Vacancies of any officer shall be filled by election of the Cats' Cupboard Board for the unexpired term.

Term: The term for all officers shall be for one (1) year. Members shall serve voluntarily on an annual term.

Dismissal: An executive officer may be removed from their position by a two thirds (2/3) vote by the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board.

Article IV.
Procedural Rules

By-Laws: The by-laws govern Advisory Board operation. By-laws may be amended by an affirmative vote of two-thirds (2/3) of the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board. Notice of the time, place, and proposed changes (with rationale) shall be provided to the Advisory Board at least one (1) week in advance of the board meeting.

Meetings: A quorum shall consist of a simple majority of appointed members. Members attending via web conferencing or phone will count toward quorum. Their votes will count the same as if they were attending in-person. Every member appointed to the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board is a voting member. The Cats' Cupboard staff are not voting members. In the event of a tie, the Cats' Cupboard Operations Lead will submit the tie-breaking vote.

The Advisory Board will meet quarterly during the Calendar Year (January 1 – December 31) with a break over the summer months. The Advisory Board has the authority to convene additional meetings as necessary and will meet according to its established plan or by call of an officer.

Minutes: Minutes of each meeting will be kept. Electronic copies of the recorded minutes will be provided to the Board membership including all Cats' Cupboard Staff within two weeks after a meeting.

Attendance Requirements: Advisory Board members who have not attended any meeting during the calendar year will no longer be listed as a member of the Advisory Board, and the Recording Secretary will notify that member and request a resignation. Vacancies that occur during the term of a board member will be filled as specified in Article II of the By-Laws.

An elected officer who has two (2) consecutive absences from board meetings or an at-large member who has three (3) consecutive absences may be removed from the board by a two-thirds (2/3) vote of Advisory Board members.

Article V.
Committees

Committees shall be created as needed (e.g., the Membership Committee forms to review advisory board applications and consider emeritus status). Members will serve on a volunteer basis.

Membership Committee

The Membership Committee will be appointed by the Co-Chairs in consultation with the Cats' Cupboard Director. The Committee will be composed of the elected officers

(Co-Chairs and Secretary) and one representative from each of the following Advisory Board Categories: Faculty/Staff, Student, and Community. The Committee will be responsible for encouraging nominations, reviewing the nomination packets and voting on Advisory Board membership. When appropriate, the Committee will review the questions in the application and submit recommended changes to the Cats' Cupboard Director.

Awards Committee

The Awards Committee will be appointed by the Co-Chairs in consultation with the Cats' Cupboard Director. Membership will include, one Cats' Cupboard staff familiar with the contributions by volunteers and supporting organizations, three Advisory Board members, and one member of the executive committee. A chair will be appointed to coordinate committee activities and will request nominations from the Advisory Board members no later than February 1st.. Awardees will be submitted to the Vice President of Student Life by the Cats' Cupboard Director following the nomination and voting process. Nominations will be collected for the following awards:

- Campus Ice-Barrett Champion Award
- Community Ice-Barrett Champion Award
- Individual Friends of Cats' Cupboard Award
- Group/Organization Friends of Cats' Cupboard Award

The Campus Ice-Barrett Champion Award will be given to a current K-State student, faculty, or staff member; the Community Ice-Barrett Champion award to an individual with no current work or academic affiliation with K-State and may include but is not limited to volunteers, community members, alumni, and family of students. The Individual and Group/Organization Friends of Cats' Cupboard Awards are presented to one individual and one group/organization.

Awards are intended to honor K-State affiliated and local community members who have **"championed the mission"** of Cats' Cupboard with their time, leadership or resources. The mission of Cats' Cupboard is: *Providing K-Staters with access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food and support through initiatives that promote health, success, well-being and a food secure future.*

Award recipients exemplify one or a combination of the following attributes:

- **Time**: Exemplary length of service and dedication to ongoing efforts of the day-to-day operations of Cats Cupboard
- **Leadership**: Consistent efforts to spearhead the mission of Cats Cupboard, either on campus or in the great Manhattan, KS community through efforts of grant writing, fundraising, planning events, hosting campaigns, and/or sharing expertise through advocacy and education
- **Resources**: Provides major financial contributions and/or in-kind donations, consistent financial support of any kind, and identifies potential corporate gifts and/or partnerships

By Laws – Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board

Recipients will be recognized annually at the Student Life Division Award Ceremony. The Chair of the Awards Committee will send communication to the Advisory Board to inform them of the winners and provide them the date and time of the Division of Student Life's Award Ceremony. Advisory Board members will be encouraged to attend the ceremony and provided a link to RSVP.

Article VI.
Parliamentary Authority

Except as otherwise provided in its By-Laws, the Advisory Board shall be governed in its proceedings by the current edition of Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised. Decisions will commonly be made by consensus. A formal vote shall be taken when a decision is required and it is to be documented for future reference as policy or in response to an action item, or if the decision requires referral to a higher authority.

ACCEPTED
These By-laws were reviewed and accepted by simple majority vote at the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board meeting on September 1, 2023.

Carol Shanklin
Carol Shanklin, Faculty/Staff or Community Rep Co-Chair

Jessica Ramirez, Student Co-Chair

APPROVED
These Bylaws were approved as submitted.

Shelly Williams — 10.10.2023
Cats Cupboard, Morrison Family Director

Shecky Davis — 10/10/2023
Shecky Davis
Lafene Health Center, Associate Director

Windy Nicholson — 10/9/2023
Windy Nicholson,
Lafene Health Center, Executive Director,
Student Health and Well-being Services

Kathleen Hatch,
Division of Student Life,
Morrison Family Associate Vice President for Student Well-being

5

Figure 2. Revised draft of 'Cats Cupboard Advisory Board Bylaws

Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
September 1, 2023

Members Present: Dianna Schalles, Kimberly Williams, Tamara Bauer, Mary Kay Siefers, Sarah Howe, Mary Ice, Carol Shanklin, Larry Moeder, Jessica Ramiez, Adelaide Easter, Emily Gipson, Lindsey Ascher, Leah Roane, Mary Kat Melcher, Shelly Williams, Kalie Kehler, Elizabeth Irvine, Sarah Barrett (Emeritus Member), and Kathleen Hatch.

KSU Foundation Guest Present: Eric Holderness

Present through Zoom: Debbie Morrison and Erica Bauer

Call to Order and Welcome:
Chair Carol Shanklin called the Cats' Cupboard Advisory Board meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.
She welcomed all new and continuing members and thanked them for their service.

Agenda was approved as distributed.
Minutes for the March 24, 2023 meeting were approved as distributed.

Personnel Updates
Shelly introduced the Cats Cupboard team in attendance. She welcomed Elizabeth Irvine who serves as the Back-of-the House Manager to the team. Kaylee Kehler has assumed the role as Operational Manager and Volunteer Coordinator. She indicated that there are currently 9 paid student staff and several student volunteers. She thanked each staff member for their contributions.

By-Law Changes
The following by-laws changes were approved by majority vote of the Advisory Committee:
1- Introduction statement the replacement of the new Cats' Cupboard mission statement;
2- Article II, Board Member Composition: replaced Vice-President of Student Life and Dean of Students with Morrison family Associate Vice-President for Student Well-Being;
3- Article V, Committee; added Awards Committee and Membership Committee with description of composition and responsibilities.

The updated By-laws will be signed by designated parties.

Updates on Cats Cupboard
Shelly provided an update on the move-in to the new location at 1021 Denison Avenue, usage statistics from August 21-30th, and current donations. The move to the new location occurred the week of August 15th. Over 100 pallets of products were delivered to the new locations from various storage locations. These products were procured from funds from the Gear grant. She expressed appreciation to Larry Moeder and the new members of the Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity who spent several hours unloading pallets, shelving stock, and moving boxes and pallets to the basement. Shelly also thanked the numerous other volunteers including the Health Division of the Kansas Department of Agriculture, the K-State Foundation staff, Lafene Health Services team members, and others from the community and

Advisory Board who assisted. The Advisory Board also expressed our sincere appreciation to the Cats Cupboard team for their hard work preparing for and during the relocation and set up of the new location. Cats Cupboarded opened as scheduled on August 21st.

Shelly acknowledged the donation of beef from the defensive line beef hat from the Kansas Beef Council. To date 500 pounds of beef have been donated. Rally House will be providing $1.00 from the hat sales to Cats Cupboard. Farmers Direct provides ongoing donation of flour. Other donors are currently being explored.

The following tentative data on Cupboard usage between August 21-30, 2023 were shared:
- Total visits day 1 (August 21st): 193
- Total number of products distributed: 4,320
- Average number of products selected, per guest: 22.38
- Visit frequency: out of 709 visits 74.8% (530 individuals) have come once or twice since new location opened
- Total number of individuals served (Harvesters numbers): 2,058
- Graduate students including those on assistantships compose almost 50% of the guests to date
- Current operating hours are Monday-Thursday 10:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. and Friday 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
- K-State employees and non-enrolled visiting scholars are currently eligible to shop on Thursdays between 4:00-6:00 p.m.
- Enrolled students are currently eligible to shop once per day during all hours of operation.

Other Discussion Topics
Mission and Vision: The term K-Staters might be too broad. Kathleen Hatch clarified that the term refers to students, scholars, and staff with the specification that unenrolled K-Staters can access Cats Cupboard on Thursdays from 4:00-6:00 p.m. Staff, administrators and the Advisory Board will continue to monitor the appropriateness of the term, K-Staters, as we evaluate usage and available resources needed to sustain Cats Cupboard and address food insecurity for all K-Staters.

Future Cats Cupboard Advisory Board will address Who Should Cats Cupboard Serve and Limits. Additional usage data and funding will help guide this discussion. Current limits include a maximum of 25 items per visit and one visit per day. Specific limits on selected items (such as: produce and dairy) are based upon product availability.

An advisory board member inquired as to whether formal advertising had resulted in the higher number of visitors. Shelly indicated that no formal advertisement had been done to promote the new location. Adelaide and Jess indicated they would like to have a presentation about Cats Cupboard presented to SGA. They will be visiting with Shelly and Kathleen to discuss a presentation to SGA. More information about food insecurity on campus needs to be shared.

A brief discussion was held regarding SGA support of Cats Cupboard. Adelaide indicated that it was too late to submit a proposal for funding from Student Center Tuition Advancement for this academic year. The deadline was last spring semester. Eric Holderness indicated that donors respond positively to support programs that student organizations also contribute. Tamera also recommended that the

Cats' Cupboard operating team and perhaps the Advisory Board interact with Robert Eger to learn more about operating a pantry for students based on his extensive experience.

Discussion Topics for Future Cats Cupboard Advisory Board Meetings
- Operating expenses and funding sources to sustain Cats Cupboard
- Collaboration with other programs addressing food insecurity in Manhattan
- Who should Cats Cupboard Serve and limits?

Upcoming Cats Cupboard Events
- First Look for invited guest including Advisory Board Members
  September 15, 2023 from 3:30-5:30 p.m. (RSVP to K-State Foundation Invitation)
- Open House for K-State and Manhattan Community
  September 22, 2023 from 3:00-5:00 p.m.

Future Cats Cupboard Advisory Board Meetings
- Thursday, November 9, 2023 1:00-2:30 p.m. – location TBD
- Thursday April 11, 2024 - time/location TBA

The meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m. and members toured the new facility.

Respectfully Submitted
Jessica Ramirez, Co-Chair Cats Cupboard Advisory Board and Acting Secretary

Figure 3. Meeting minutes submitted by me, as Co-Chair and Acting Secretary

Appendix B

Appendix B showcases a deliverable from part of my Applied Practice Experience (APE), where I had the opportunity to lead a group of students in the Alternative Breaks Program to Garden City, Kansas. During this trip, we explored how migration, labor dynamics, and food insecurity intersect, particularly in relation to the meatpacking industry. The town of Garden City serves as a microcosm of broader food systems issues, especially regarding the immigrant workforce and its role in food production.

In the blog post titled "Learning about community systems opens eyes and minds, strengthens learning", I utilized systems thinking frameworks to reflect on the complex relationships between immigration policies, labor exploitation, food production, and food insecurity. This post is a direct reflection of our field experience and the reflective discussions we had throughout our trip. I aimed to use systems thinking as a tool for analyzing how different variables—such as economic factors, immigration laws, and labor practices—interact and create the food security issues we encountered in Garden City. This analysis also allowed us to explore the complex feedback loops that perpetuate food insecurity, particularly among those who work in food production.

Systems thinking, as a framework, allows us to view food insecurity not just as a consequence of individuals' choices but as the result of interconnected social, economic, and political systems. The food system, for example, is deeply influenced by labor dynamics and migration policies, which in turn affect food access, particularly in immigrant and refugee populations.

The blog post highlighted how, in Garden City, the meatpacking industry relies heavily on immigrant labor, which is essential to the production of food that feeds millions of people. However, the workers involved in the industry often experience food insecurity themselves, due to low wages, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions. This paradox—the fact that those who are responsible for food production are themselves unable to access adequate food—points to deep-rooted structural inequities within the food system. These issues are compounded by immigration laws that make it difficult for many immigrant workers to access nutritional assistance such as SNAP benefits, despite their integral role in the food production process.

Through systems thinking, we were able to explore the causal loops at play in this situation. For example, low wages in the meatpacking industry lead to food insecurity, which in turn negatively affects workers' health, ultimately reducing their productivity and further entrenching them in poverty. Similarly, immigration policies create barriers for workers to access food assistance, which exacerbates their financial instability and increases their reliance on cheap, often unhealthy food. These systems interact and create a cycle that perpetuates food insecurity.

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Learning about community systems opens eyes and minds, strengthens learning

Posted on April 8, 2025 by Staley School of Leadership

Jess Ramirez, a graduate teaching assistant at the Staley School of Leadership, steps in as a guest contributor to reflect on her recent experience with K-State Service teams as they traveled to Garden City, Kansas, for an Alternative Break. This immersive program hosted by the Staley School gives K-State students the opportunity to serve within a community during regularly scheduled Kansas State University breaks, in this case, spring break.

Each of us carries a particular vision of Kansas, shaped by our own lived experiences. For many, the state is a vast stretch of farmland and small towns, often overlooked in discussions of diversity, resilience, and systemic complexity. Before this trip, my understanding of Kansas, too, was incomplete. But my time in Garden City shattered my preconceptions and revealed a community that is, in many ways, a microcosm of global migration, economic interdependence, and the deep interweaving of food systems and human stories.

This was my second Alternative Break with K-State Service Teams, and while my first was meaningful, this trip was transformative. Alternative Breaks are not just about traveling to a new place—they are an introduction to new people, new ways of living, and new ways of practicing leadership. Two months after returning, I still find myself reflecting on the experience daily. In fact, I am now in the process of producing a documentary on food access and food systems, with a focus on Garden City, because this journey left me with more questions than answers. But before I get ahead of myself, let me take you back to the beginning.

As we left Manhattan, excitement buzzed among us. Each of us came on this trip having done prior research—whether on the region, the organizations we would visit, or the populations we would meet. Without even knowing it, we had already begun to form connections to the people and places we would soon encounter. And yet, nothing could have truly prepared us for the learning, the stories, and the moments that lay ahead.

That first evening, we shared dinner at the home of Andrew and Amanda Lee, a couple deeply connected to the K-State community. Walking into someone's home for the first time can bring a sense of nervousness, but their hospitality immediately put us at ease. As we sat together, getting to know one another beyond surface-level conversations, we began to feel a sense of belonging—not just in their home, but within the journey we were about to embark on. As we left that night, Jadhida—a junior in Agronomy and Global Food Systems Leadership, who typically sees herself as shy—turned to us and said, "Well, now I feel at home." That sentiment would follow us throughout the trip,

Recent Posts

- Learning about community systems opens eyes and minds, strengthens learning
- Mobile Food Distribution scheduled Friday, April 11
- Celebrating Applied Learning Experiences at K-State
- Spotlight on Strengths: Mike Finnegan highlights success

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reinforcing the idea that community is not just about geography—it is about connection, shared experiences, and the ways we choose to show up for one another.

Day one began with a visit to Charles O. Stones Intermediate Center, where we spent time with fifth and sixth graders, many of whom had never met a college student before or even considered higher education as a possibility for themselves. This experience was different from the others on our itinerary; for once, we weren't the ones asking the questions. Instead, these students wanted to know about us—what college is like, if it's hard, if it's fun, and if they, too, could see themselves there one day.

In these small groups, we saw parts of ourselves reflected in them. Andrew, whose father sought refuge in Garden City after the fall of Saigon in the 1980s, connected with students whose families had also risked everything for a better life. Jadhida, fluent in Spanish, found herself in a room full of newcomer students, bridging the gap between uncertainty and possibility with her words. At first, they were hesitant, their questions tentative, their voices barely above a whisper. But as she translated, their eyes brightened with recognition—someone who understood them, who spoke their language, who could give them answers without barriers.

One boy, his voice laced with both curiosity and doubt, finally asked, "Is college hard?" Jadhida met his gaze, a warm smile spreading across her face. "It is," she replied in Spanish, "but it's also an adventure. And one day, you'll be a college student—maybe even at K-State." In that moment, the weight of uncertainty lifted, replaced by the possibility of a future he hadn't dared to imagine before.

For Sunday, a doctoral student in Leadership Communication and an international student from Nigeria, the connection came through food. One sixth-grader, new to the U.S. from Kenya, told us she rarely ate the food served at school because, to her, it simply wasn't food. It wasn't a matter of preference but of unfamiliarity—nothing looked, smelled, or tasted like home. She was adjusting, but in a place where everything felt different, she couldn't help but feel like the outsider. Listening to her, I thought of my own grandfather, who immigrated from Mexico, struggling to navigate a world that felt foreign in every way. In that moment, I saw parts of myself in that child. And when we left the school, we all joked—but sincerely meant—that we had just met little versions of ourselves.

Our next stop was Catholic Charities, where we were welcomed with a home-cooked Haitian meal and an in-depth discussion about refugee services. The warmth of the meal mirrored the warmth of the people—nearly every staff member had their own migration story, and each one was now working to make a difference for others. That theme followed

us throughout the trip—stories of people who had come seeking refuge, opportunity, or simply a place to call home.

At the Finney County Historical Museum, Johnetta, a lifelong resident, painted a vivid picture of Garden City's past. She recounted tales of early settlers and the agricultural boom but did not shy away from the town's painful racial history. She told us of the community pool her father helped build—a pool her darker-skinned sister was forbidden to swim in. Her words carried both heartbreak and hope, as she explained how the town has reckoned with discrimination and come together to stand against hate.

That resilience carried over to the meatpacking industry, a backbone of the region's economy. Touring Brookover Feed Yard, we saw firsthand the grueling labor required to sustain the state's beef industry. Later, at the Tyson meatpacking plant, we were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of operations. Thousands of workers—many of them newly arrived immigrants—moved with precision, performing repetitive, physically demanding tasks that kept the country fed.

Then, the paradox hit us. The very people responsible for feeding America were often the same people who struggled with food insecurity themselves. Research shows that refugees are disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity due to systemic inequities, yet here they were, ensuring others never had to go without. It was impossible to ignore the contradiction.

That night, as we processed everything we had seen, Andrew called his father, who had worked at that very Tyson plant in the 1980s. His father described the dangers of the job, the long hours spent in cold and fast-paced environments, and the camaraderie among workers who all understood what it meant to be 'the stranger in town.' He told us how the work was grueling, the pay was just enough to get by, and how there was an ever-present risk of injury. Yet, it was a job, a means of survival, and a stepping stone toward a better future.

Listening to him, we realized the invisible sacrifices made by so many—the laborers who kept the food supply chain intact while struggling to afford the very products they processed. It was a sobering reminder of the contradictions within the food system, where those most essential to production are often those most marginalized.

The weight of these stories stayed with us as we continued our day after touring the Tyson plant with a visit to the local food bank, the first formal food bank in the area, where we volunteered to pack backpacks full of food for children. These backpacks were designed intentionally—no stigma, just a simple bag filled with meals to sustain students through the weekend. While there, we spoke with community organizers who explained how access to food is a persistent challenge, particularly for immigrant and refugee families who face additional barriers to stability.

From there, we met with Matt Allen, the City Manager, to ask deeper questions about the intersection of policy and community engagement in a town where over 30 languages are spoken at the local high school. He spoke about the importance of cultural competence, about how understanding diverse lived experiences is critical to fostering an welcoming and thriving community. 'The key,' he told us, 'is not just welcoming people but making sure they have a voice in shaping the community they now call home.'

On our final morning, we met Amanda Lee for coffee at a local café —coincidentally, the same café featured in the 'A Stranger in Town' documentary we had watched our first night. Saying goodbye to Amanda felt like leaving a new friend, and leaving Garden City felt like departing from a community we had grown to care for deeply.

Even now, weeks after returning, we continue to reflect on the people we met, the connections we made, and the lessons we learned. Garden City was not just a place we visited—it became a part of us, a lens through which we now see food systems, migration, and leadership in a new light.

Our experience in Garden City was more than a trip—it was an immersion into the interconnected realities of food systems, migration, and leadership in action. It was a reminder that leadership is not about a title but about showing up, listening, and engaging with the complexities of the world around us. This trip challenged us to think critically, to step outside of what we thought we knew, and to build relationships that extend far beyond a single week of service.

But the work does not end here. The stories we heard, the people we met, and the lessons we learned have left a lasting impact, one that continues to shape our perspectives and future actions. This is the power of a K-State Service Teams Alternative Break—an opportunity to not just witness change, but to be

part of it. for those who seek to grow, to challenge their own perspectives, and to make a tangible impact, there will always be another community, another story, and another opportunity waiting.

Maybe it's *your turn* to experience an Alternative Break.

-Jess

Figure 4. Published Blog Post on Garden City Food Systems Experience

Appendix C

This appendix contains a hyperlink to the co-authored non-academic article that I contributed to in collaboration with the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) and the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI). The article focuses on key insights into rural food access and highlights the challenges faced by rural grocers in Kansas. This article was developed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of rural food security, as part of a larger effort to inform both academic audiences and community stakeholders about critical issues impacting rural food systems.

The article highlights the following key findings:

- **Aging Grocers and Lack of Transition Planning**: A critical issue identified in the survey was that many rural grocery store owners were aging and lacked plans for transitioning their businesses to new ownership. This gap in succession planning threatens the long-term sustainability of rural food access.
- **Challenges of Distribution and Competition**: Grocers faced significant challenges from large-scale retailers and rising distribution costs. The article suggests that rural stores can overcome these challenges by differentiating themselves through expanded services such as delivery, curbside pickup, and offering locally sourced products.
- **The Role of Extension in Supporting Grocers**: The article emphasizes the important role of Extension personnel in helping rural grocers navigate these challenges. By connecting grocers with local resources, small business development centers, and financial advisors, Extension can play a pivotal role in sustaining rural grocery stores and enhancing food access.

Access the full article here: The 2021 Kansas Rural Grocery Survey: Revaluating Extension's role in rural grocery issues

Appendix D

This appendix contains the grant proposal that I co-developed to begin the establishment of a SNAP Outreach Program at Kansas State University (K-State). This grant proposal was submitted to secure funding through the Kansas Health Foundation's Hunger-Free Kansas Initiative, which supports programs designed to alleviate food insecurity and improve access to nutritious food for low-income populations.

Grant Proposal Overview:
The proposal aimed to establish the first-ever university-led SNAP Outreach Program in the state of Kansas, specifically targeting K-State students who are eligible for but not currently utilizing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The project was designed to bridge the gap between the university community and existing state and federal assistance programs, offering students guidance on the SNAP application process, resources to navigate eligibility requirements, and a reduction in the stigma surrounding food assistance.

For the full grant proposal, please refer to the document included in this appendix.

Introduction. Project Title

K-State Food Assistance Outreach Program

FI 1. Primary Extension agent contact for the project:

Lisa Ross

FI 2. Primary Extension Agent Email:

lkross@ksu.edu

Q21. Primary Extension Agent phone number:

785-532-2714

FI 3. Name of Local Extension Unit leading the project. This organization will serve as the fiscal agent for the project.

Extension Nutrition Program-Kansas State University Research and Extension

Q20. Please list additional Extension agent partners on this project, including their local unit if from a different unit.

Leah Tsoodle, Department of Agriculture Economics Kansas State University

Q22. Which of the categories of work does the project relate to? Select all that apply.

- [ ] Cross-Sector Learning
- [ ] School-Based Nutrition Programs
- [ ] Alternative Food Systems
- [x] Social Services Access

PD 1. Please briefly explain your idea and why it is needed in your community. How will these efforts increase food security in your community? Support your idea with data and/or community-based information. 500 word limit.

The proposed K-State SNAP Outreach Program aims to address the "SNAP Gap" among Kansas State University students by increasing awareness, participation, and retention in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Food insecurity—a condition defined as limited or uncertain access to sufficient nutritious food—affects a significant portion of students nationwide. A 2020 survey by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice revealed that over a third of students experience food insecurity, a problem worsened by rising food costs. Despite SNAP's effectiveness in alleviating hunger, 69% of income eligible students do not receive benefits. This gap is part of a larger issue, as only 82% of all eligible individuals nationwide are enrolled in SNAP, leaving 18% in need. In Kansas, where over 351,000 people – including more than 120,000 children – are affected by food insecurity, the need for effective interventions is critical. Food insecurity among postsecondary students poses a significant public health challenge with far-reaching implications. A 2017 meta-analysis by Bruening found food insecurity rates among college students as high as 42% with financial independence, poor health, and negative academic outcomes are consistently associated with this issue. Food-insecure students are less likely to complete their degrees and addressing these barriers is essential to ensuring students' academic and personal success. One of the primary barriers to SNAP enrollment among students is the complexity of the application process which includes a 27-page food assistance form. Misconceptions and stigma surrounding SNAP, especially among immigrant and student populations, further complicate outreach efforts. Many fear that applying for SNAP could jeopardize future legal residency, while others view SNAP as something they do not deserve, exacerbating feelings of guilt and shame. These challenges highlight the need for a tailored and student-centered approach to outreach and support. The proposed K-State SNAP Outreach Program addresses these barriers by establishing a one-stop resource center designed to support students throughout the SNAP application and renewal processes. Services will include pre-screening , assistance with completing applications, and help in gathering required verification documents. A dedicated URL for student application submission, streamlining the process and providing metrics for evaluation and continuous improvement. The center will also feature resources, such as trained staff to ensure that students have access to all necessary tools. Outreach efforts will include educational workshops, on-campus booths, partnerships with student organizations, and collaborative initiatives like the Double Up Food Bucks Program, which enhances access to fresh produce for SNAP participants at local Farmers Markets. By addressing misconceptions and providing clear, accurate information, the program will empower students to make informed decisions about SNAP participation. Modeled after successful initiatives, such as California State University Chico's SNAP outreach program and their respective 22 sister campuses, the K-State program reflects a proven approach to tackling food insecurity in higher education. This initiative aligns with the goals of Hunger Free Kansas and the 2024 agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and t Education, which seek to strengthen SNAP access for college students. By reducing enrollment barriers and addressing stigma, the K-State SNAP Outreach Program will play a transformative role in improving food security, academic performance, and overall well-being for students at Kansas State University and beyond.

Q24. Please explain the population of particular need this project will serve, if any. 250 word limit.

The proposed SNAP Outreach Program is designed to serve Kansas State University-Manhattan students, a population significantly impacted by food insecurity. A 2024 study (ACHA-NCHA III, 2024) found that 43.6% of K-State students reported experiencing food insecurity; this percentage is up from 39.9% in 2022. This sharp upward trend emphasizes the critical need for tailored interventions. College students often face unique challenges that contribute to food insecurity, such as limited financial resources, lack of knowledge about available support programs like SNAP, and stigma associated with seeking assistance. These challenges disproportionately affect low-income students, first-generation students, and those juggling academic responsibilities with part-time work or caregiving roles. This program aims to address these barriers through a peer-led outreach initiative. Peer navigators will guide students step-by-step through the SNAP eligibility, application, and recertification processes, providing support in a manner that is approachable and relatable. By leveraging peer-to-peer interactions, the program can reduce stigma and increase awareness among students who may not realize they qualify for SNAP benefits. The initiative also focuses on dispelling myths about SNAP eligibility, particularly for students who may misunderstand the program's requirements or fear negative repercussions. With a significant portion of the student population experiencing food insecurity, this program offers a critical solution to ensure students can meet their basic needs, ultimately improving their academic success, health, and overall well-being. By addressing these challenges, the K-State Food Assistance Program Outreach initiative has the potential to create lasting change for food-insecure students at Kansas State University.

PD 2. Please describe how your idea advances the goals of both the Next Gen K-State Strategic Plan and Hunger Free Kansas. 250 word limit.

This program directly advances the goals of the Next Gen K-State Strategic Plan and Hunger Free Kansas by fostering innovation, leveraging resources, and addressing critical food security challenges among college students. By focusing on reducing the SNAP Gap, the K-State Food Assistance Outreach Program creates a sustainable support system for students, contributing to long-term progress in combating food insecurity. This initiative will be housed within Cats' Cupboard, the K-State Food Pantry, maximizing existing resources and creating synergistic partnerships that align with K-State's vision of fostering community engagement and well-being. The program also supports accurate data collection, establishing systems to aid in estimating the economic impact and effectiveness of SNAP spending among college students. This shared measurement approach enhances research accuracy, informing policy adaptations at the state and federal levels. The economic benefits of SNAP are clear, generating $1.50–$1.80 for every $1 invested, with additional potential gains from increased retention and graduation rates. By linking students to SNAP and other public benefits, this program strengthens their financial stability, enhancing academic success and degree completion rates. Research, including findings from The Institute for College Access & Success (2024) and Balzer Carr and London (2020), underscores the transformative impact of SNAP enrollment for low-income students. Their findings of improved retention rates and reduced food insecurity demonstrate the critical role of public benefits in higher education. This program embodies the innovative, resource-driven strategies essential to achieving both K-State's strategic goals and Hunger Free Kansas' mission of sustainable food security solutions.

PD 3. Describe the timeline for implementing your idea throughout 2025. Highlight a few key milestones you expect to accomplish.

The implementation of the K-State Food Assistance Outreach Program will follow a structured and strategic timeline to ensure its success. Below is the detailed plan broken into monthly milestones: Month One (January): Preparation and Initial Setup Purchasing Equipment: Acquire all necessary technology, including computers, printers, fax machines, and supplies for application processing. Staffing: Open applications for peer navigator positions, focusing on recruiting students who demonstrate a commitment to addressing food insecurity. Conduct interviews and finalize selections. Policy and Procedures Development: Establish a handbook outlining roles, responsibilities, confidentiality guidelines, and step-by-step instructions for peer navigators. Partnership Coordination: Confirm agreements with the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) to establish a secure URL for SNAP applications and direct communication processes. Month Two (February): Location Setup and Training Initiation Setting Up at Cats' Cupboard: Install equipment and ensure the location is fully functional, with private spaces for one-on-one application assistance. Testing Secure URL: Collaborate with DCF to verify the secure URL is operational and integrated with existing SNAP processing systems. Training Kickoff: Begin peer navigator training, focusing on SNAP eligibility requirements, application processes, and document verification. Developing Marketing Literature: Design and produce educational materials such as flyers, posters, and social media graphics to raise awareness about the program. Month Three (March): Training Refinement and Outreach Preparation Scenario Practice: Conduct role-playing exercises and mock scenarios to prepare peer navigators for real-world interactions with applicants. Finalizing Marketing Plan: Begin distributing materials across campus, including residence halls, libraries, and other high-traffic areas, while ramping up social media promotion. Community Engagement: Collaborate with campus organizations to spread awareness and host informational sessions about the outreach program. Month Four (April): Launch and Initial Rollout Program Launch: Officially open the K-State Food Assistance Outreach Program at Cats' Cupboard. Outreach Events: Host a launch event with presentations from campus leadership and community partners to generate interestand establish credibility. Service Delivery: Begin providing step-by-step assistance for SNAP applications, including initial submissions and renewals, and monitor progress. Ongoing Training: Provide continued education and support for peer navigators to address challenges and refine processes as needed. Months Five to Twelve (May to December): Expansion and Evaluation May to August: Focus on increasing outreach during summer orientation programs to reach new and incoming students. Collect feedback from early users and adjust processes to improve efficiency. September to December: Begin evaluating the program's impact through data collection, tracking the number of students assisted, SNAP application success rates, and feedback from participants. December: Prepare a year-end report summarizing accomplishments, challenges, and goals for the following year. Present findings to K-State leadership and explore opportunities for additional funding to expand the program.

Q23. Explain how your project will advance policy, systems, and environmental change. 250 word limit.

The K-State Food Assistance Outreach Program will advance policy, systems, and environmental change by addressing the root causes of food insecurity among postsecondary students and creating sustainable pathways to equitable food access. Current SNAP eligibility policies, rooted in 1970s assumptions that college students have temporary economic struggles, exclude many students from accessing critical food assistance. These policies have led to the "SNAP Gap," where 69% of eligible students nationwide do not receive benefits, despite widespread food insecurity. With national calls, such as the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, urging modernization of these rules, our program aligns with and accelerates these policy goals by providing direct enrollment support and demonstrating the need for systemic reforms. This program leverages student peer navigators to streamline SNAP enrollment, bridging the gap created by complex eligibility criteria and an onerous 27-page application process. By assisting students step-by-step, we address barriers at the systems level and improve access to existing resources. The program also establishes a secure application process and data tracking system, enabling precise evaluation of SNAP's impact on food insecurity and academic success. This data will inform future policy adaptations and strengthen arguments for simplifying SNAP eligibility rules. Environmentally, the program transforms food access at K-State by creating a centralized resource hub within Cats' Cupboard, normalizing conversations about food security, and fostering a culture of support. By reducing food insecurity, enhancing retention, and promoting academic success, the program positions itself as a replicable model for other campuses to drive widespread systemic change.

PD 4. Explain how your project will enhance collaboration with others at K-State, especially campus partners, specialists, or other state programs. If you have a specific partner in mind, please provide their name and contact information. If you don't have a specific partner in mind, please explain what areas of your project could benefit from campus support. 250 word limit.

The K-State SNAP Outreach Program will foster meaningful collaborations across campus to amplify its impact. Cats' Cupboard leaders, Shelly Williams and Kalie Kehler, have committed to providing space for the Outreach Center during pre-specified dates/times to ensure visibility and accessibility. Anna Welsh and Julie Kehr from Housing and Dining have agreed to review and guide the proposal and program development, offering insights that will help tailor outreach efforts for students in on-campus housing. Additionally, establishing connections with the Office of Student Financial Assistance, multicultural student organizations, and other groups serving low-income and marginalized populations will ensure that the program's strategies remain inclusive, culturally responsive, and well-informed. A defining feature of this initiative is its partnership with students as peer navigators who are committed to serving their fellow peers. Any student with an interest in advocacy and support can become a peer navigator, with a focus on those who have firsthand experience of food insecurity. Jessica Ramirez, a PhD student in Leadership Communication and Public Health Nutrition and the student leader spearheading these SNAP efforts. She brings experience from working in the SNAP Outreach Program at California State University, Chico, and personal insights gained as a SNAP recipient. She reflects: "Helping another student access this vital resource is profoundly fulfilling. Having endured the frustration and isolation of the application process myself, I know the powerful impact SNAP can have—it completely changed my life as a student. Being able to say, 'I understand what you're going through,' and truly mean it because I've stood in their shoes, is an experience like no other."

PD 5. Explain how your project will enhance collaboration with other community entity/entities or key partners in your community. Please list the key partners and contacts for each. 500 word limit.

The K-State SNAP Outreach Program is being built upon strategic community collaborations aimed at strengthening the safety net for students facing food insecurity. Over the past year, extensive discussions have taken place with administrators at the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), who are integral to implementing this initiative. These ongoing meetings have provided invaluable insights into ensuring that student SNAP applications can be submitted efficiently, accurately, and securely. DCF has already supplied training materials that will be integrated into the peer navigator program, preparing navigators to guide students through complex eligibility requirements and application procedures with confidence and clarity. Beyond DCF, the program seeks to forge alliances with the Kansas Board of Regents, whose endorsement and support would amplify the program's reach and credibility. The initiative will also collaborate closely with local farmers' markets, which serve as vital community touchpoints. By establishing a presence at these markets, the program can connect students not only to SNAP enrollment assistance but also to information on how to maximize their benefits through initiatives like Double Up Food Bucks. These efforts encourage students to purchase more fresh, healthy foods while simultaneously supporting the local agricultural economy. Recognizing that not all students will ultimately receive or apply for SNAP benefits, the program will partner with community-based food assistance organizations, local food pantries, and nonprofits dedicated to hunger relief in the Manhattan area and beyond. Establishing a referral network ensures that every student who seeks help—regardless of SNAP eligibility—will leave with information about alternative community resources. This comprehensive approach reflects a commitment to addressing food insecurity holistically, rather than relying solely on one program or benefit.

PD 6. Please upload a letter of support from one key community partner to enhance your application. Additional support letters from other partners are helpful, but not required.

CC%20Letter%20of%20Support%20-%20draft%2012.18.24.pdf
236.9KB
application/pdf

PD 7. Please briefly describe any existing efforts, capacity or coalition building, or other activities you have already taken on this idea. 250 word limit.

Over the past year, the project team has engaged in a range of preparatory activities and conversations to lay the groundwork for a successful launch. Multiple meetings with the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) have clarified procedural requirements, and DCF has provided training materials to adapt for a peer-navigator model. This ensures that those assisting students will have the precise tools and information they need. In addition, the team has consulted with California State University, Chico's SNAP Outreach staff, benefiting from their extensive experience implementing a similar program. Their insights have helped the team anticipate common challenges, identify effective strategies, and plan for scalable outreach. On campus, the team has maintained open communication with Cats' Cupboard leaders, Shelly Williams and Kalie Kehler, discussing logistical details for housing the Outreach Center, and integrating services with existing food resources. Discussions regarding statewide nutrition education policy considerations with the EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs in Kansas, have helped the team understand the importance of providing alternative food access options for students who may not qualify for SNAP. Collectively, these efforts have provided the team with a clearer picture of the student food insecurity landscape, established a strong network of supportive collaborators, and ensured that the initiative's design is informed by best practices, proven approaches, and a commitment to meeting students' diverse needs.

E 1. How will you measure success of the project? What data points will you report on? What success stories do you hope to capture? Briefly explain your evaluation processes for the project. 500 word limit.

The project's evaluation will be guided by four key Scope of Work (SOW) objectives: (1) the number of SNAP applications submitted, (2) the number of SNAP applications approved, (3) the timely submission of semi-annual reports, and (4) the number of annual recertification applications submitted. These data points will be compiled and analyzed monthly, allowing the team to continuously assess progress and refine outreach strategies. Because current SNAP participation data for the K-State Manhattan campus is limited, the initial phase will emphasize establishing benchmarks. The team will measure success not only by approved applications, but also by the overall foot traffic at the Outreach Center. This includes documenting the number of individuals who visit, whether they ultimately choose to apply or not. By comparing the volume of visitors against the number of submitted and approved applications, the team can gain insight into the application process' accessibility and the effectiveness of marketing and communication efforts. Over time, as the program matures, monthly documentation of both new and renewed applications will guide adjustments to outreach methods. The difference between submitted and approved applications will be monitored to identify potential barriers; although reasons for denial will not be shared in reporting, understanding these patterns will help refine assistance approaches. Additionally, tracking renewals will provide valuable insights into the program's sustainability and students' long-term engagement with SNAP. Success stories—such as improved academic focus, reduced financial stress, or stronger overall well-being—will be captured qualitatively. These narratives will complement the quantitative data, offering a more holistic picture of the program's impact on the K-State community.

E 2. As an expectation of this award, please type your name below to acknowledge the following: I agree to complete a final impact report as required by KSRE and KHF.

Lisa Ross

B 1. Total amount of funding requested:

20,920

B 2. Please upload an outline of your budget detailing how the funds will be used. Provide justification for each budget item in your budget document. General budget categories are acceptable, as long as sufficient explanation of the need and types of expenses are provided. If applicable, please include any additional funds leveraged in the work.

Hunger%20Free%20KS%20Budget.xlsx
33.5KB
application/vnd.openxmlformats-officedocument.spreadsheetml.sheet

E 3. I commit to at least one staff member completing a provided one-day training at the beginning of your project. This training can be included in your project budget to cover the costs. Please type your name to consent to this.

Lisa Ross

E 4. Awarded projects are strongly encouraged to send one person to the 2025 Kansas Local Food Summit in Salina. Expenses for this event can be included in the grant budget. Do you plan to send one team member to the Kansas Local Food Summit in Salina in 2025?

- (●) Yes
- ( ) No
- ( ) Unsure

Q17. Please upload a letter of support from your local unit director, local Extension board, or regional Extension director (whichever is most applicable).

Letter%20of%20Support%20Hunger%20Free%20KS%20mini%20grant.pdf
155.1KB
application/pdf

F 1. Is there anything that we have not asked that you feel would be important for us to know?

Figure 5. Submitted Grant Proposal

Appendix E

This appendix contains an example of the social media content created for the SNAP Outreach Program currently being established at Kansas State University (K-State), designed to increase awareness and engagement among students regarding the availability of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. This content was developed as part of a broader outreach strategy to reduce stigma and educate students about potential SNAP eligibility.

Social Media Strategy Overview: The primary objective of this social media content is to normalize the conversation about food insecurity and SNAP, creating a platform where students feel informed and supported. By using various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, we aim to reach students where they already engage online, delivering key messages that were accessible, informative, and student-centered.

Struggling to afford groceries?
THERE'S A WAY TO
SNAP
OUT OF THAT
VICIOUS CYCLE!

What is SNAP?

SNAP stands for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It's a government program that gives you money each month to help buy groceries — like fruits, veggies, bread, and more.

How does it work?

If you qualify, you get a card that works like a debit card at most stores. It's meant to make sure you don't have to worry about affording food while in school.

How do I know if I qualify?

Our SNAP Outreach team can help you determine if you may be eligible. If you'd like to apply for benefits, we can help you with the application process as well!

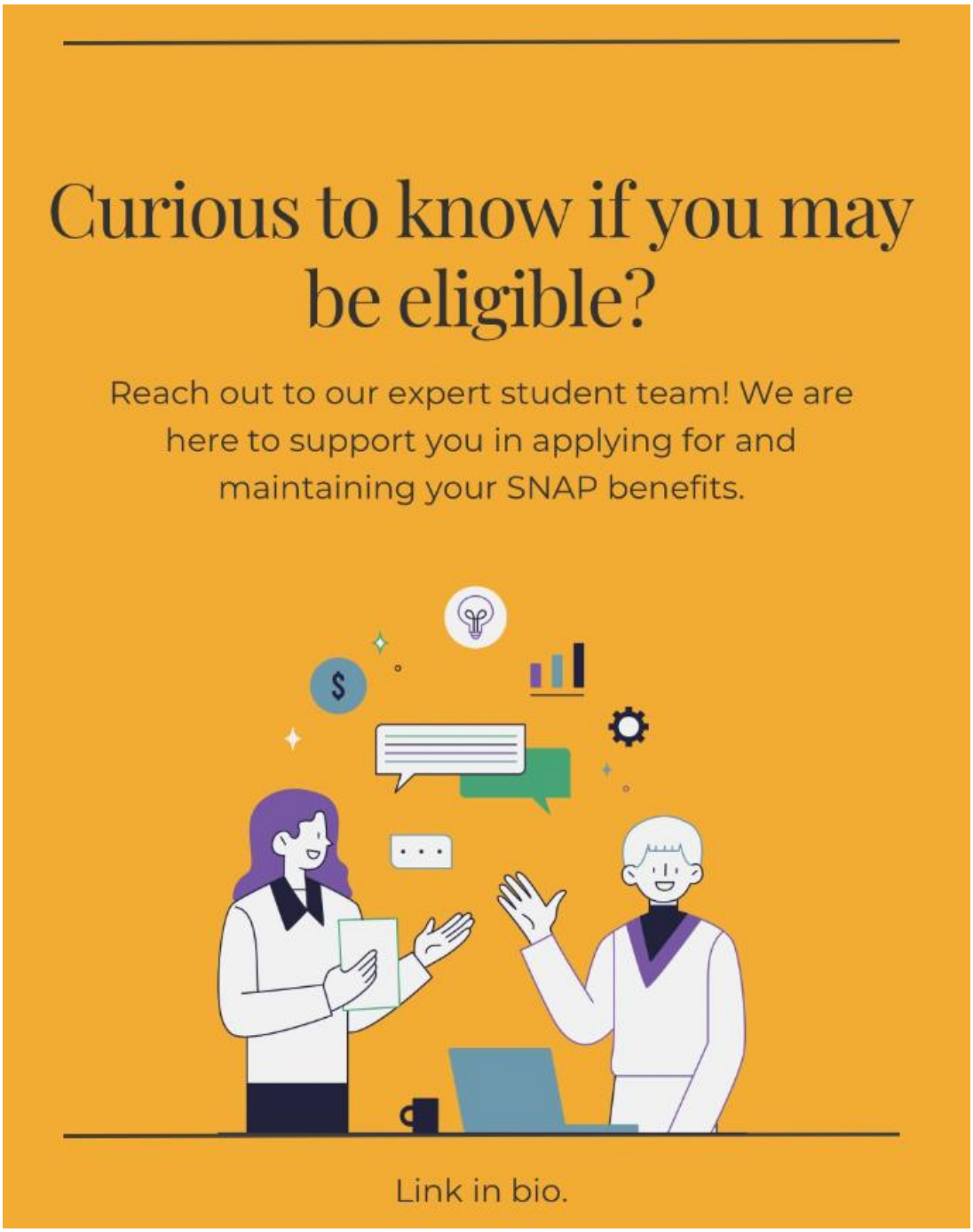

Figure 6. Social Media Content Created for the SNAP Outreach initiative