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Service Learning Experience

My first time experiencing the food offered at Northeastern, I was somewhat disappointed. Compared to the rich flavors and taste of growing up with a Hispanic family, I was shocked to taste the food offered at a university such as Northeastern. I felt no flavor, spice, or quality with every bite. I could tell that the food was not made for enjoyment but to feed the masses of the undergraduate student body of Northeastern. It saddened me to know that I would have to deal with subpar food quality for the next four to five years of college. I could not live with that. Food is meant to be an enjoyable experience that makes each tastebud party. I found relief in knowing that the dormitory I was living in for my first year at Northeastern contained a kitchen that the students could utilize. Considering the quality of food offered at the dining hall compared to my cooking ability, I decided to make my own food for the semester. However, I quickly realized how expensive it was to buy my ingredients and make them from scratch every day. The money I had started with at the beginning of the semester quickly diminished. It was a difficult first few weeks, and I wondered if I was the only one dealing with such a problem? I soon came to find out that I was not.

Thanks to my first-year writing class, I became aware of the concept of food insecurity and hunger. Both are problems that heavily affect many people across the country, especially noticeable across various college campuses. Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle. It is often correlated with poor diet quality, low self-reported health, depression, difficulty concentrating, lower grades, and even academic delays (Laska, 2021). It is a severe problem that has recently grown exponentially thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and one that isn't receiving much attention. A study conducted in 2018 by the Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice surveyed around 86,000 students at 123 two and four-year colleges, in which it was revealed that "45% of students had admitted to limited or uncertain access to food in the previous 30 days. More than 1 out of 3 students said they cut the size of meals or skipped meals because they didn't have enough food or money" (Flannery, 2021). Out of various studies conducted, there always seemed to be an average estimate of 45% of students surveyed have somehow experienced food insecurity. That is almost half of the students! Many of these students

experienced going hungry and losing weight as a result.

Furthermore, studies also demonstrated how minority groups such as "African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Native American/Alaskan Native, or multiracial had noticeably high rates of Food Insecurity" (Laska, 2021). In addition, students that identified as "transgender, non-binary, or other gender, groups already burdened with health vulnerabilities, also experienced high rates of food insecurity" (Laska, 2021). It just shows how many the problem of food and hunger can affect. Even after all the studies and the data showing how profound food insecurity is, there is still a lack of response or at least not enough reaction. So far, the only temporary solution that has been put in place, thanks to the pandemic, was the inclusion of significant exemptions for the SNAP program (Fu, 2021). The exemptions helped students receive the help that they couldn't have before. However, this solution alone is not enough, as the issue requires more hands-on work. Many people have decided to take matters into their own hands and start to make a change now.

I wanted to help fight food insecurity too. Across various campuses in the United States, many people, including students themselves, have fought food insecurity heads on by feeding the masses through food pantries. I wanted to look for a food pantry near me to start making a change. Service-learning helped me discover that Northeastern has a food pantry, which NUMutualAid manages. Before I knew it, I volunteered at the food pantry every Wednesday. Every day there would always be a line of almost 100 people waiting to receive a food bag, which contained different food items. Volunteering at the food pantry revealed how severe hunger may be in my community.

However, most of the time, it wouldn't be enough. It was almost a consistent occurrence. The need for food is visible, and the need for people to help alleviate that need is equally visible. While there was an abundance of people who wanted to provide food for others at the pantry, there was always a limited amount of food to give away. This revealed to me how the problem of food insecurity is more heavily reliant on the scarcity of food—being able to have more food readily available in the central part of resolving such an issue. This leads to the importance of community-driven food drives and communal fridges to obtain and provide more food for the community. I also noticed a frequent pattern in the people who often attended the food pantry among these revelations. There always seemed to be people looking for specific items. These items ranged from onions and carrots to other vegetarian foodstuff options. These patterns led me to believe that these people consistently search for ingredients to utilize in their cooking. However, as I experienced first hand, grocery shopping every week for ingredients becomes expensive, explaining why these groups of people would go to the food pantries in search of items they need.

Participating in the food pantry taught me a lot about food insecurity and

demonstrated the demand and need for community-led projects to give back to the community and help feed those who suffer from such an issue. The greater sense of community that I was able to obtain made me feel more aware of my community and made me feel good that I could help people. I encourage people to participate in these projects, as not only does it teach you a lot, but it reveals many truths about one surrounding community. The need for help is present, and you can help fill that need.

Bibliography

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