Unpacking Hunger on Campus: 
An Analysis of the WSU Hunger Awareness Initiative

Katie Thanh Le  
Faculty: Deborah Ballard-Reisch

Elliott School of Communication, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Abstract. The present study reports phase 1 results of an on-going community-based, participatory initiative to enhance understanding of hunger issues on campus, the WSU Hunger Awareness Initiative. Data were collected through surveys made available online through a social media campaign directed toward the WSU community, during a food-packaging event, and through focus group discussions.

Results indicated that while hunger stories varied widely among participants, several themes were found within participant groups. Stories offered by international and graduate students indicated that food insecurity was an issue for them.

The WSU Hunger Awareness initiative is the first step in a coordinated effort to understand hunger and food security awareness on college campuses.

1. Introduction

In the U.S. we use phrases like “starving college student with levity, but how much truth lies behind this cliché? According to Feeding America (2010), 395,870 Kansans or 14.3% of the population, are food insecure. However, existing data on hunger does not effectively address the question of hunger on college and university campuses. This paper reports on methods and findings of the WSU Hunger Awareness Initiative and discusses this process as a model for campus-based hunger projects.

Goal 1: To increase hunger awareness on the Wichita State University campus
- Social Media Campaign
- Dinner and Conversation Event
- Numana SWIPE Event
- ESC Communication Week Events

Goal 2: To assess the nature & scope of hunger within the WSU community (WSU IRB approved)
- Dinner and Conversation Event
- “Share your Story” web survey

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

This project was grounded in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. CBPR is a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities (Israel et al., 2005), research grounded in community to promote positive change (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), and sustainable community-based action through cooperative, empowering, and evidence-based activities (Israel et al., 2005).

Data from 44 individual surveys and 50 focus group participants were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

Shame, Stigma, and Pride

There is a strong sense of shame in admitting food insecurity, especially due to the stigma of asking for help and personal pride.

Low Nutrition or Inexpensive Food

Students often eat inexpensive, low nutrition foods.

Income Instability

Lack of a stable income results in food insecurity, making the purchase of nutritious, high quality foods particularly difficult.

Support System

Even with familial or community support (or lack thereof), many participants would rather go hungry than ask their families for help.

Food Assistance

Participants are aware of local food assistance programs, but state that they often do not go due to
lack of transportation, circumstances, shame, etc.

**Scarcity of Time**

Students report that inconsistent or extended class schedules often result in skipping meals. Participants also report that there is often limited time to cook.

**Economic Conditions**

Current economic conditions play a key role in food insecurity especially if students do not have jobs, or have fallen on tough times.

The analysis of the “Dinner and Conversation” event and surveys resulted in several key themes. Each section was helpful in learning more about the scope of the issue. For example, the analysis found that nearly all of the participants have had experience with hunger personally, or through someone they know.

**3. Conclusions**

Students are a population that seems to deal with hunger frequently, whether it is lack of food, or lack of nutritious food. The events showed that while there is not published research on food insecurity on college campuses, the reality is that there are food insecurity issues that impact students, and because college students are varied, the issues related to hunger on campus are also varied. While hunger is a complicated issue, there are ways that WSU can help its students.

Suggestions of a food bank or pantry are relevant, but the logistics and structure behind them would take some time to develop. However, what the thematic analysis of study data indicates is that starting the conversation on hunger is a necessary first step, and having a consistent forum for students to express their interest, ideas, or need for such services is worthwhile.

Recommended future steps would be to conduct more research on target groups who are food insecure including international students, low-income, and students with families. Key informant interviews would be valuable in the context of framing the issue, as well as obtaining more data. The planned second phase of this research will include a quantitative look at the nature and scope of hunger within the WSU community.

**4. Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the WSU Hunger Awareness Initiative research team including: Shae Blevins, Jack Brand, Alan Burch, Carol Jester, Cindy Kelly, Idd Ligongo, and Shen Tao.