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CHAPTER 22

Display of Plenty

Addressing Food Insecurity on Campus

Adrienne Warner, Sarita Cargas, and Sarah Johnson

When I and the other students on the team had our first meeting to create a library exhibit on food insecurity, I felt overwhelmed. I had never done a project like this and wasn't sure how it would turn out. However, as the project progressed, I got to see how my teammates' talents worked together to create a visual piece. I also came to realize how many little details go into creating an exhibit.

One of the biggest things I learned in putting together the exhibit was that creating a visual piece is a process of constantly trying to improve things. Using resources from Adrienne, our librarian, our group discussed the font sizes, heights, and colors that would best bring our message to the audience. We printed several copies of the title and questions to see which ones we liked best, and I made many changes to the weekly slideshows as the exhibit progressed.

—Sarah Johnson, undergraduate student
who cocreated the *Basic Needs* exhibit

Introduction

Academic libraries have long supported undergraduate research; however, in the past several years, they have been recognized as places where undergraduates work through and present their research in public ways.¹ Students can design and produce media elements for projects with specialized software and support in digital laboratories. They can stitch LED lights into fabric in makerspaces, and they can both progress and reevaluate progress as they get hands-on learning outside the classroom. As libraries continue to make spaces more conducive to learning, they are also pursuing ways to showcase this kind of student work.

At the University of New Mexico (UNM) University Libraries, we work to center undergraduate research experiences through instruction sessions, collaborations, awards, and more.² UNM's Albuquerque campus sits on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia³ and has three main libraries, separated according to subjects (Zimmerman, Centennial Science and Engineering, and Fine Arts and Design), as well as two that service the health sciences and law campuses. The student population of UNM is varied with Hispanic students comprising 46 percent of the population and 8 percent designated as American Indian.⁴ These populations qualify UNM as a minority-serving institution, one of the few in the nation that is also a Carnegie Classification R1 institution.⁵ More broadly, a rich cultural history threads together a state vibrant with arts and innovation. However, the rates of poverty and hunger in the state are among the highest in the nation.⁶

Similarly, students at our university also experience food insecurity. The term *food insecurity* is defined by combining the two lowest categories of the USDA's four levels of food security, low and very low (the others are moderate food secure and secure).⁷ Low food security can include a limited variety of basic foods and substitution of cheaper and less nutritious foods. Very low food security indicates some degree of caloric deprivation, such as skipping meals or going a full day or more without eating.⁸ The Basic Needs Project, a large-scale longitudinal research study being conducted by coauthor and researcher Sarita Cargas and a team of researchers, found that almost 40 percent of undergraduates at our institution were food insecure, and of them, 20 percent were very food insecure.⁹ Extrapolating from this data suggests that several thousand students on our campus may experience hunger on a regular basis. In the US, tens of thousands of students are likely to be food insecure (see research done by the Hope Center¹⁰). As found in other studies, the students hardest hit at UNM are in specific minority groups, including American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students.¹¹

Researchers have also found that food insecurity affects students' health and academic success¹² At UNM, we learned that "food-insecure students dropped out at a higher rate than their food-secure peers. This was especially true for students with very low food security."¹³ Many of them held paying work, and interviews revealed the struggle involved in going to school while working one or more jobs.

Setting the Stage

The UNM University Honors College course, *The Human Rights of Students*, focused on the issue of food insecurity by asking small groups to creatively address it on campus. Cargas, the instructor of the course, drew upon a robust collaborative history with the library,¹⁴ recruiting librarian and coauthor Adrienne Warner as the Honors College liaison to guide a group in creating a library display. Four students, including coauthor Sarah Johnson, who enrolled in this course, chose this as their semester project. They created a multifaceted, interactive library display that incorporated analog elements, such as infographics and handwritten notes from library-goers about their experiences with food insecurity, as well as digital elements like QR codes linking to campus resources and a form to submit personal stories about food and hunger (figure 22.1).

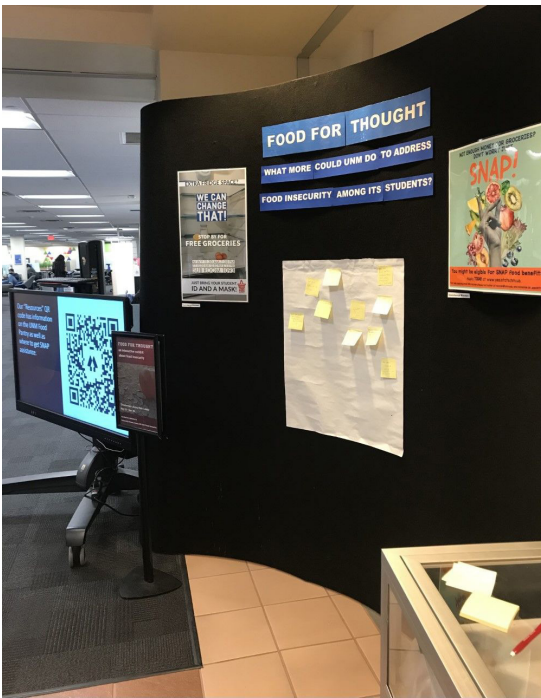


Figure 22.1

Photo of the interactive exhibit *Food for Thought* situated at the entrance to the library learning commons. The exhibit was created by four undergraduate students, including Sarah Johnson. Here, the exhibit displays week four's Question of the Week, "What more could UNM do to address food insecurity among its students?" and participants' responses on sticky notes below. Photograph taken by Adrienne Warner on November 30, 2021.

At their first meeting with Warner, the group learned about the space where the display would reside, just inside the entrance to Zimmerman Library's undergraduate learning commons area. Zimmerman is one of the most heavily used buildings on campus, regularly attracting 8,000 visitors per week, pre-pandemic. Inside it, the learning commons is home to boisterous group study sessions, student computing and printing, and the library's main service desk. The group chose this location because of these factors, in addition to the existing display space—a large, black-fabric-covered board measuring twelve feet long by seven feet tall near one of the main entrances to the library. The group also planned for the display to be up for the month of November, a time frame that coincided with a potentially difficult period for some students, who shared that their student loan money can run out by this time of the semester. Beyond these constraints, the students could choose to get as creative as they wanted. And get creative they did.

Learners Pursue Social Justice through Visual Practice

The group's first decision was to make the display interactive, a choice that guided future selections and became a part of the display title, *Food for Thought: An Interactive Exhibit*. This choice to make the display interactive reflected the group's desire to learn directly from students who might be experiencing hunger or other symptoms of food insecurity. With this decision, the students elevated the project to go beyond the passive presentation of information to a platform where viewers could also participate in creating information. Although they would not have articulated it this way, many of the group's decisions pursued social justice through visual literacy pedagogy. According to the 2022 ACRL *Framework of Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereafter referred to as the VL Framework), "learners pursue social justice through visual practice,"¹⁵ and the group's actions can be further associated with specific dispositions within this theme, as detailed below.

In one of the social justice-oriented visual literacy dispositions, learners "Identify as contributors to a more socially-just world by intentionally and ethically including a diversity of voices in their visual media projects."¹⁶ The group went into the campus community to talk with staff providing resources in order to collect material for the display and to humanize the process. They visited the food pantry and Women's Resource Center, whose staff provided application assistance, and they received permission to take pictures of the staff and spaces to incorporate into the slideshow and further resources.

Befitting the learning commons space, the group centered students as the target audience and explored a range of ways to invite interaction with the display, strategizing that multiple options could yield more responses. The Question of the Week prompt asked viewers to write a response on a sticky note and place it under the question at the top of the display (see figure 22.1). The prompt was changed three times over the course of the month and was printed using the designated color scheme. The sticky notes were a hit. This low-barrier interactive option allowed viewers to move beyond being passive consumers of information to contributors and participants in a wider conversation. Each week, a new question was posted on the display, and each week, people responded. Themes included societal factors that prevented more students from availing themselves of campus resources, the substantial effects of hunger on students, and additional ways the university might provide support.

The group's decision to prioritize those directly affected by food insecurity in a variety of visual media further elevates the social justice tenets of this project. Rather than speaking about students who experience food insecurity, as in a traditional research paper, the group members would speak *with* them, using visuals to facilitate the dialogue. Beyond the rehearsal display mockup, the week before the exhibit went live, Warner and Cargas stayed out of the decision-making process, stepping back to let the group decide which

questions to ask, comments to highlight in subsequent weeks, and content to provide in the slideshows and applications.

Likewise, another visual literacy disposition declares that visual literacy learners “Prioritize ethical considerations for cultural and intellectual property when creating, sharing, or using visuals.”¹⁷ One of the charges to the group was to incorporate previously created infographics into the display. In an earlier course, art students were asked to market campus resources via infographics and subsequently created dozens of original works. The challenge for the exhibit group was twofold: to evaluate the students’ infographics for suitability as a component of the display and to assess them as visuals in both print and digital formats. Out of the dozens to choose from, the group decided on two to print: one advertising how to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and one showcasing the campus food pantry to display on the board. They chose several more for weekly slideshows. Because the infographics had been created over nine months before, information about hours and locations of services needed to be updated. After obtaining permission from the original artists to use their work in the display, the group updated the information while honoring the original design aesthetics. Then, the group again contacted the artists to gain approval for the changes before inserting the visuals into the print display and digital slideshow. This iterative process prioritized ethical considerations when using and sharing other students’ visuals.

Finally, the visual literacy disposition that argues that visual literacy learners “Reflect on the dual role that visuals may play in either fostering or subverting harmful, restrictive, social, or cultural norms”¹⁸ is without a doubt demonstrated by this project. Food insecurity carries a social stigma for those who experience it,¹⁹ and for college students whose interactions often involve socializing over food while studying, for example, the stakes can be even higher. Acutely aware of how this dynamic could be replicated by participants responding to the exhibit, the group created two digital options for interaction with the display so that participants who might be feeling the stigma of food insecurity could participate later without the threat of social repercussions. Viewers could share their stories of food insecurity privately using an online form accessed by a QR code that cycled through the slideshow. Although this element of interactivity attracted only one response, the prompt had the capacity to evoke compassion from anyone who viewed it. In other words, the Share Your Story option underscored the personal nature of food insecurity, a “we see you” for those experiencing it and a “we walk among you” for those who don’t. In addition to Share Your Story, participants could scan a different QR code that linked to a slideshow of campus resources, privately allowing participants to pull up information about applying for benefits, receiving assistance, and the hours and new location of the campus food pantry.

These information access options allowed participants to maintain privacy when accessing the resources. While the group wanted to subvert the social stigma surrounding food insecurity by creating awareness, they also understood the potential implications of students being seen consuming sensitive information in a public space. This

understanding reflects a high level of compassion and embodies another facet of the frame “Learners pursue social justice through visual practice.” The group understood the dual role of the interactive display to both subvert the stigma surrounding food insecurity and also recognize the stigma as a limiting factor in the consumption of visual information in a public space. They took this momentum to pursue social justice by actively creating change in their campus community, not metaphorically, not hypothetically, not in the future, but tangibly and immediately.

Display Dry Run

When the time came for the group to create the exhibit, the students, instructor, and librarian met in the space several days before the display was scheduled to be installed so that we could assess design elements and the group could make adjustments. As the students affixed the exhibit components to the board with Velcro, it became apparent that the scale of the board had not been adequately taken into account. The title looked fine, but the infographics were too small. Cargas and the students made a plan to print larger versions at the campus copy center. Then the students experimented with the placement of the rolling digital display, which played the slideshow, settling on adjacency to the black display board and opposite the writing desk. See figure 22.1 for the final placement and appendix A for additional recommendations. Johnson changed the slides each week to incorporate some of the participants’ responses from previous weeks. This choice expanded the amount of information shared as facts were added, increasing the value of the information.

Information Has Value

Students have the opportunity to study social issues and workshop their effects and consequences in real time, with immediate feedback from others, as a way to effect change. The 2016 ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereafter referred to as the IL Framework) guides the way librarians think about information literacy and highlights “information has value” as a core tenet.²⁰ In this frame, *value* has many facets, including socioeconomic, legal, and personal. Like the VL Framework, the IL Framework outlines the knowledge practices and dispositions learners exhibit when working with each tenet. As before, we outline how this project meets certain dispositions of information literacy.

In the IL Framework, one knowledge practice states that “Learners recognize issues of access or lack of access to information sources.”²¹ Not only did the group maintain sensitivity around participants’ privacy, recognizing that social stigma affects access to information sources, they also approached the audience as a population likely to not consider themselves as eligible for benefits. The “starving student” trope normalizes hunger as a regular part of the student experience²² and may contribute to students

prematurely denying themselves access to assistance. This trend is borne out in the data provided in the 2020 *Basic Needs* report, which notes that 24 percent of UNM student-respondents did not avail themselves of the campus food pantry because they did not think they were eligible or that others needed the help more than they did.²³ If students perceive a lack or reduced need for assistance in the first place, then they may not seek out information on their own to temper that perception.

Going Live

It was both exciting and stressful to be putting my work into the library space. I had worked hard and was ready to see that come to fruition, but I was also nervous about doing this heavy topic justice. We worried about our project's impact since we were unsure if people would stop to look at it or feel comfortable answering the weekly questions in a public space. In light of those worries, it was amazing to see how many sticky note responses we got as well as how different people reached out to interview us or put together flyers for our exhibit. We were able to show our viewers what their peers thought and/or were going through.

—Sarah Johnson

After the group made design tweaks and the larger infographics were printed, they erected the display on November 3, 2021. Responses came flooding in. These public conversations, spanning over a hundred sticky notes over four weeks, raised awareness of the issue and strengthened civic engagement. At the library level, respondents to the first question, “What word comes to mind when you think of food insecurity?” shared thoughts and fears related to hunger, as well as the social systems that perpetuate the lack of adequate resources. For the second week’s question, “What are the effects of food insecurity?” responses mirrored those in the Basic Needs Project, including stress, inability to concentrate, and social stigma. The third question, “What keeps you from using resources?” pointed to a lack of knowledge as to what was available and feelings of being judged for using them. When prompted to brainstorm ideas in the fourth week, with the question “What more could UNM do to address food insecurity among its students?” respondents brainstormed about free food giveaways, vouchers, and extending the hours of the campus food courts. The value of the group’s efforts were reaffirmed when the library display was included in the subsequent version of the campus basic needs report.²⁴

As the conversations around the interactive exhibit gained momentum in the library, they jumped beyond the library’s walls to the university’s administrative offices. In a

campus-wide communiqué, the university president praised the efforts of the interactive display group and situated their work within the larger campus conversation about basic needs and the university's efforts to address them. After that, the conversation expanded again—this time from the campus domain to the surrounding community when a local television news reporter interviewed the group about the project.²⁵

Ultimately, another IL Framework disposition seems fitting for this project as well: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities recognize they are often entering into an ongoing scholarly conversation and not a finished conversation.” At the end of November, the group took down the display, collected the responses, and presented the project to a group of their peers and invited guests. In addition to discussing their process of developing and designing the exhibit, the group members talked about how the project expanded their understanding of food insecurity and the resources needed to combat it at the campus level. Audience members, including the associate-provost for student success, spoke with the group about the logistics of expanding services at the campus level. As their presentation came to a close, the group members noted that the interest this project generated was a welcome surprise and how students can be agents of social change.

Conclusion

In starting the class, I assumed that food-insecure students would only be those going hungry. However, through working on this project, I learned what the actual definition is as well as how prevalent the issue is on the UNM campus. We worked to dispel myths or stigma surrounding those experiencing food insecurity, and by doing so, we were able to learn more about the issue ourselves. It was very rewarding to see the payoff of that hard work. I also loved how connected I felt to my fellow students with the interactive elements as it let the voices of food insecure students be heard and be a part of the exhibit. Having that individual association allowed me to connect with this issue, and I think this was the same for those viewing it.

—Sarah Johnson

As students engage with their coursework and the pedagogy of information and visual literacies, deeper learning occurs both for the students and for the wider community, and in this case, bending the arc toward a more socially just society. The students in this group approached the project intending to learn from students who experience food insecurity and with an intuitive understanding of the negative connotations that may occur when

students are perceived to be associated with needing assistance. By the time the interactive exhibit was taken down, group members had expressed a deepened understanding of how social this issue is, an outcome also documented by other student food insecurity projects.²⁶ And when libraries can provide a crucial learning space, conversations and impact expand. As libraries continue to grapple with often competing space needs, for both library assets and campus collaborations, they should prioritize the provision of space for students to engage with their coursework.²⁷

The effects of this project continue to ripple in ever-expanding circles. Recognizing the effectiveness of peer conversations, the library wants to extend training to its student employees so that use of campus resources can continue to increase. Opportunities for future displays in the library are also possible as a newly renovated space supporting the creation and exhibition of multimedia digital content has opened and invites students from across the campus to engage in digital scholarship. The team coordinating the Basic Needs Project will base future focus group and interview questions in part on responses gathered with the sticky notes and is pursuing state-legislated funding to expand the project. When we leverage our students' extraordinary capacity for creation and connection, we can help ameliorate food insecurity in our students and change widely accepted norms about the role of higher education.

Appendix A

This chart displays the considerations and recommendations for librarians and instructors who are interested in implementing an interactive display in their local context. This type of program could be developed with a course instructor, as outlined in this chapter, or it could be adapted as a collaboration with another campus entity that has regular contact with students, such as student success or service learning coordinators. This chart assumes that the librarian or course instructor or coordinator will be working with students to reach out to the wider campus and community, represented by the last two columns in the chart. For the sake of clarity, we have organized recommendations into three broad categories: preparation, implementation, and evaluation, though distinctions between steps and communities may be more fluid than represented here.

	Library	Course Instructor/ Program Coordinator	Campus	Broader Community
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory display infrastructure. • Consider optimal site visibility. • Complement best practices^a with in situ experimentation. • Encourage at least one dry run to address unforeseen challenges and gauge scale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the social factors using the social justice frame within the <i>Framework for Visual Literacy</i> as a discussion guide.^b • Devote class time for group work. The group found this time to be invaluable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research initiatives and programs already in place for collaboration or to fill a gap. • Build relationships with staff who provide basic needs services. • Invite them to review the display material before going live. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact community interest groups that may be able to contribute pamphlets, stories, photographs (keeping in mind copyright and privacy issues).
<p>a. A colleague provided Warner with recommendations for the visual design of displays. In particular, Beverly Serrell, “Ten Deadly Sins and 14 Helpful Research Findings,” in <i>Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach</i> (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 233–236, was the most accessible, though Glasgow Museums, <i>A Practical Guide for Exhibitions</i>, https://www.britishcouncil.in/sites/default/files/guidelines_for_museum_display.pdf served as a quick guide.</p> <p>b. Association of College and Research Libraries, <i>The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education</i> (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 8, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf.</p>				

	Library	Course Instructor/ Program Coordinator	Campus	Broader Community
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite library student employees to help maintain the display. They were invaluable partners. • Promote on social media. • Visit the display periodically as issues may arise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule group members to maintain the display by collecting artifacts, such as sticky notes, visually documenting use. • Remain flexible. Original plans for this project included a weekly rotation of print infographics, but printing costs were prohibitive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market at the campus level, including centrally administered digital display monitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market the exhibit via press releases.
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate according to course objectives and library-specific measures, such as a strategic plan, not the degree of the polished product. This may be students' first time designing and implementing a thematic display. Group members noted that none of them had an art background and that this project pushed them to think about design in new ways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit early conversations around visual and information literacy in order to identify areas of growth, change, or learning about the issue. • If possible, ask the students to present at the end of the project and invite campus and community partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they are unable to attend the final presentation in the course, follow up by visiting the campus offices that provided resources in order to provide an overview of the program's success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on the degree to which the project was incorporated into the larger community and whether outreach efforts garnered attention or if further marketing is preferable.

Notes

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