

An Ecological Approach to Understanding Program Management Practices for Food Pantries in Rural Communities

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted in Mississippi, a state comprised of 82 counties, many of which are rural and highly impoverished. To gain a greater understanding of the food needs of residents from across the state, a representative sample of food pantries from each region of the state was identified. For this project, researchers with the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project formed a partnership with the Mississippi Food Network to interview partner pantries across the state. Interviews were conducted with food pantry managers and volunteers to examine various issues, challenges, and successes related to their operations. All interviews were transcribed and coded using a systematic analysis of codes to generate major themes related to pantry management protocols. Using an ecological framework, our study yielded five major areas of consideration for optimal pantry management: volunteer recruitment, operating and control systems, patron needs, collaboration, and advocacy.

Introduction

In 2018, 11.8 million U.S. households reported being food insecure, defined as being unable, at some point during the year, to provide enough food for each member of the household due to a lack of resources (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, n.d.). Furthermore, 4.5% of these households reported *very low* food security, indicating challenges in providing enough food for each member of the household, along with a reduction in food and disrupted eating patterns. Low and very low food security have been especially prevalent in nonmetropolitan (rural) areas, among ethnic/racial minorities, and within households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty line (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbit, Gregory, & Singh, 2016). Moreover, in 2015, 12.7% of Americans were food insecure, and rural households suffered higher levels of food insecurity than other households (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). In 2019, with a population of just under 3 million people, Mississippi is hampered by both the highest rate of poverty at 19.8% (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts Mississippi, n.d.) and food insecurity at 18.7% (Health of Women and Children, n.d.) Prevalence of food insecurity has prompted public and private agencies and organizations to continue the implementation of strategies to alleviate this need and its associated health and social issues (Daponte & Bade, 2006).

Data from three federal programs—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, and Women, Infants, and Children—provide evidence of this pervasive need. Some 59% of food insecure households used at least one of these three federal programs in 2015. Historically, charitable groups have also provided food to those most in need, through the establishment of emergency kitchens, food banks, and food pantries (Greenberg, Greenberg, & Mazza, 2010).

Despite these conditions, scant literature exists regarding food pantry operations and best practices for managing food pantries in rural communities. Furthermore, advancements in community engagement among higher education institutions present a growing challenge to understand the contextual factors for serving diverse populations, particularly in rural communities. In relation to food security, this role is vital in addressing social disparities plaguing at-risk groups and communities.

Collaborators in the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project noted this gap in the literature and the potential function of organizational factors in pantry utilization patterns (Paynter, Berner, & Anderson, 2011). In this article, researchers share findings from a food insecurity study that sought to add to the literature in this area. Specifically, this research highlights perspectives regarding pantry providers' delivery of services within an

ecological framework, and in so doing, offers key considerations in the management of rural, faith-based, and non-faith-based food pantries.

Literature Review

The collaborative nature of community/university efforts to eradicate food insecurity rests on the premise that community members and university researchers combine expert knowledge in pursuit of research-based solutions. The subjective nature of this work centers on the specific needs of the community and identifying challenges and solutions germane to their needs. This approach juxtaposes traditional research paradigms that embrace objectivity and challenges the notion of how knowledge is created to address critical issues in the community (Dodd & Nelson, 2018). These partnerships provide an avenue for access to a range of opportunities for enhancing the community's capacity for development. Cooper, Kotval-K, Kotval, and Mullin (2014) claim that the breadth of community/university partnerships underscores a cultural shift in society's recognition of the invaluable contributions that communities and universities can make when they work together. Research regarding a range of social services (Brown & McKeown, 1997; Degeneffe, 2003; Ebaugh, Pipes, Chafetz, & Daniels, 2003) has focused on short-term outcomes. Yet, collaborative efforts between university and community partners provide an avenue to promote sustainable development for a community's social, educational, and economic well-being.

Priority areas of interest for faith-based organizations and non-faith-related groups have included services to the homeless, incarcerated, orphaned, and hungry (Boddie, 2002; Scales & Kelly, 2016). Efforts to address the needs of such groups have led to the development and implementation of housing, educational, and employment services and food assistance programs. Moreover, Poppendieck (1999) suggested that a significant number of congregations offer food assistance programs, in response to the pervasive reports of food insecurity within local communities.

Theoretical Perspective

Food pantries' delivery of services to vulnerable populations may be viewed as a behavior within an ecological context. Ecological frameworks have been posited to explain human development and behavior for more than half a century (Brofenbrenner, 1977, 1979; McLeroy,

Bibeu, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). Within such frameworks, an individual is affected by external factors and, by the same token, that individual has the capacity to affect the environment. External factors may be categorized as interpersonal (e.g., relationships, social networks, and supports), organizational (e.g., social institutions), community (e.g., relationships between institutions), or societal (e.g., public and social policies at local, state, and national levels) (McLeroy et al., 1988). While each of these factors may influence the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the individual, the person may in turn contribute to changes within social networks, organizations, communities, and society through her/his behaviors. Understanding this reciprocal relationship between the individual and her/his environment aids in explaining and changing attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices. Reciprocity refers to the continuous exchanges that occur between people and their environment (Payne, 2014); thus, the effort to support the needs of under-resourced individuals and families through collaborative efforts improves the overall quality of life for the community as a whole.

Limited research on food pantry management and its role in addressing food insecurity exists (Remley, Kaiser, & Osso, 2013). The research in this paper is intended to expand our understanding of food pantries by examining organizational management efforts in a rural setting using an ecological framework to understand the interconnected nature of all components of emergency food programs. Viewing food pantries within the context of an ecological framework may aid such organizations in assessing factors impacting their operations.

Collaboration With the Food Bank

In August 2015, the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project started as a collaborative university research initiative at Mississippi State University among faculty in the disciplines of sociology, social work, political science, nutrition and health promotion, and food science, with the purpose of identifying, examining, and documenting issues related to food insecurity in Mississippi. In fall 2015, members of the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project met with the Mississippi Food Network (MFN) administrators to discuss their individual and shared goals and endeavors. From this meeting, several MFN priorities were identified, including a need to gain insights into pantry managers' experiences within their pantries

and their successes, challenges, and issues within the pantries. Both entities were seeking a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of food insecurity across the state.

With consideration to their shared interest in understanding food insecurity and efforts to alleviate it, university researchers initiated an exploratory study largely focused on emergency food programs, otherwise referred to as food pantries, throughout Mississippi. Local church congregations, who sought ways to address food insecurity in their communities, ran more than half of the food pantry programs in this study. The remaining organizations were secular providers offering identical services in their communities. All participating organizations are members of the MFN, which exclusively serves as a food bank for almost 70% of the counties across the state (Mississippi Food Network, 2017).

There are approximately 430 member agencies throughout the state that partner with the MFN and distribute food in their communities. The MFN receives food from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other sources and distributes to the partner agencies based on their requests, demand, and availability. Offering low-cost food items on a monthly inventory list, the MFN invites partner pantries to purchase these items at a reduced cost. In addition to the MFN's resources, most individual partner pantries also receive donations from businesses such as Walmart, Kroger, and other private donors. Items received from these sources must be inventoried and shelved separately from food items received from the USDA, per federal requirements and auditing purposes. While the MFN is an extremely valuable resource for hundreds of partner food pantries, the organization has rigorous administrative reporting requirements that pantries must adhere to in order to comply with the nonprofit's organizational procedures.

Based on information from this preliminary meeting, we sought to develop an exploratory, descriptive research project that: 1) described the experiences of food pantry providers in the state, 2) documented the barriers food pantry providers face, and 3) examined assets and resources utilized by pantry managers and volunteers.

Methods

Participants

The MFN leaders supported the research project and provided a list of 283 partner food

pantry member agencies. To garner interest among the agencies, the MFN introduced the research project during an annual conference for food pantry managers and volunteers. Participants were recruited through two strategies: recruitment at the annual conference and telephone contacts. Using convenience sampling, we telephoned several agency affiliates, inviting them to participate in the study. Similarly, we extended an invitation to participate in the study to food pantry managers who contacted us and expressed interest in participating in this Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved study.

Data Collection and Analysis

From September to December 2015, several research team members interviewed 25 food pantry providers/volunteers at 14 food pantries located in nine counties in Mississippi, representing four geographic regions of the state (North Central, Central, Delta (East), and Southwest). For this qualitative research project, faculty researchers developed a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. Interviews were scheduled and conducted on-site at the individual participating food pantries. Participants signed informed consent forms and were assured confidentiality. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours and were audio recorded and transcribed. Questions included the following:

- What factors contribute to food insecurity in your county?
- What can you tell us about the clients you serve?
- What can you tell us about your service delivery process?
- How many volunteers serve in your organization?

Once interviews were complete, the seven-member research team collectively identified relevant codes that captured the aim of the study. In this process, the discussion yielded multiple codes that were defined and operationalized by the group. Codes were entered in MAXQDA (qualitative analysis software), yielding themes that helped the researchers gain a better understanding of food insecurity and food pantry management.

Results

Of the 14 food pantries where we conducted interviews, nine self-identified as faith-based organizations. The remaining five were run by nonprofit community organizations, with a parallel focus on alleviating hunger for local citizens. The pantries ranged considerably in level of complexity and capacity, from physically small operations with one or two service providers to complex, administratively robust operations with a director, support staff, volunteers, complex administrative intake systems, and large physical space. All pantries expressed the sustained (and at times increased) demand by their constituents for more food and more days of operation. An ecological framework proved useful in understanding the dynamics of food pantry program management. Findings related to five domains within the ecological framework: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and society.

Individual

At the individual level, volunteers are the heart of food pantry operations. Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, and Washburn (2009) assert the desperate need for skilled individuals who aid in the provision of technology services, program development, staff training, and strategic planning; however, volunteers are often thought to be underused and undervalued resources for tackling tough challenges within the organization. The food pantry managers in this study were candidly honest about the administrative demands and operational oversight needed for the food pantry. These include but are not limited to: pick-up and unpacking food, tracking donations and maintaining inventory, submitting monthly reports to the food bank, tracking patron allotments, and in some cases delivering food to homebound clients. Participants in this study talked at length about the varying responsibilities associated with operations; they highlighted the importance of having a strong, dedicated core group of volunteers with diverse talents and skills. From an ecological perspective lens, individual volunteers have a unique vantage point to affect the organization's environment. Of volunteer recruitment, one faith-based pantry manager said:

You've got to have somebody in that church, if not the pastor, somebody that's interested in the food pantry or whatever project that you need volunteers to really

promote it. You've got to have somebody in the church; you can't just put in the bulletin or announce it. You've got to have somebody that promotes it.

Similarly, another pantry manager said:

We are very fortunate in volunteers that we have.... We get them from campus, and we get people in town. We got two or three that don't go to this church, and they are some of the strongest volunteers I have. They show up every time, and they do whatever you ask them to do.... These are people with professional degrees. And they're here packing groceries for someone else, and that's a beautiful thing to see.

Due to a myriad of responsibilities associated with food pantry management, the scope of services often exceeds the physical abilities of a few individuals. Pantry managers stressed the importance of intentionality regarding volunteer recruitment and ensuring that collectively, individuals possess a range of transferable skills that can be utilized within the food pantry operations system. Reliance on community volunteers from a range of agencies and organizations sets the stage for successful services targeting a broad range of community members.

Interpersonal

The importance of interpersonal relationships undergirds the work on emergency food programs. Relationships or networks within the ecological social environment can be classified as symbiotic or reciprocal (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Reciprocity means balance, mutuality, working together to meet real needs; everyone teaches, everyone learns, everyone serves, everyone is served (Davis, Kliever, & Nicolaides, 2017). Through partnerships, institutions are able to engage with each other through mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships. In this instance, academic institutions that are intimately established within their local communities have the propensity to make a sustainable impact on society; likewise local communities can have a seamless network with academic institutions in order to maintain an equal and positive partnership (Jacoby, Sutin, Weidman, & Yeager, 2015). One manager reported that, "In October, November, December we have a network with [a local grocer]

for [a supply of] boxes. You have got to have numerous boxes because you can't have people bring their boxes back." While another said, "Walmart gives us a lot of bakery items They give a lot of meat that we can give to [patrons]."

In a similar fashion, a participant shared,

We have a [partnership] and we get food from them. We're partners with [another organization] and they write a check for us to get food. We're partners with a local bank and they write a check to help us with food. We get a chance to put nutritional food in their [bags].

Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq and Morrison (2010) challenge the notion that relationships spring up from nothing by highlighting the importance of context and interactions between entities. When examining the interpersonal nature of the connections between food pantries and the organizations that support them, a common thread is their commitment to the patrons and the community at large. This commitment is uniquely characterized as a transformational relationship. Clayton et al. (2010) state that in transformational relationships people "come together in more open-ended processes of indefinite and longer-term duration...to develop systems they work within" (p. 8). Community/university partnerships highlight the important attributes that interpersonal relationships have within communities, particularly rural communities. Combined efforts to address food insecurity from a macro perspective within a rural setting challenges all stakeholders to embrace symbiotic strategies to foster transformation for individuals and the community as a whole.

Organizational

The complexity of organizational structure and the level of bureaucracy related to service provisions are characteristics that define the organization and its ability to carry out the mission and achieve goals (Katz & Gartner, 1988). These characteristics are most evident in organizations with an increased level of intentionality, or purposefulness in their work. Additionally, these organizations possess resources, such as physical and financial capital that advances the work they do. Many of the food pantries in this study started from humble beginnings with a goal of addressing a pressing need in their rural community; they have developed systems and processes to guide the

expansion of services. For example, a manager for a community-supported pantry recounted the historical evolution and growth of the current food pantry, explaining how the organization moved from a small operation out of a broom closet to occupying a renovated gymnasium. Pressing social issues of poverty and unemployment that plagued their community fueled the structural changes and expansion of services within this organization.

Bureaucratic processes provide structure in almost all the food pantries in the study. Not only do these processes help define the boundaries of operations, they help solidify a framework for service. One manager of a church-operated pantry explained their process for operations, stating:

We have a group that does the interviewing, files the records, and we have a group that bags and distributes. Somebody manages the volunteers, and they'll send out calls for volunteers. } We've got some other people that function as staff.... We have a group of people we call in-takers who interview the patrons. They come in and they verify that all the documents that are needed in order to be eligible to participate in the program. We have a group that pulls the records. Some of them are the same people that do different things at different times. But that's basically the various functions.

Community

The emphasis on the needs of community members and advocacy efforts for change at the macro level is highlighted in the work done by these pantries. Inherent in the efforts for change is the need for community building to promote sustainability. Hardina (2013) espoused the importance of including residents in the development and decision-making processes to promote citizen participation. The food pantries in this study came to fruition because of the stated needs of food insecure community members. In working collaboratively with other community stakeholders, food pantry managers and volunteers can effectively meet the needs of community members. Of interest in collaborative partnerships is the desire to work with a range of other service providers to help citizens. One pantry manager said:

On a normal day we may have a health provider call in [and say] I'm at this

person's house and they don't have any food, can you give me some food [for them]? We ask if there are any dietary stipulations.... If they say they're on liquid diet then what normally we'll do is we'll have to go out and buy some Ensure or something that can hold them until we can get a prescription from their doctor.

Similarly, a pantry manager from a larger urban area highlighted the importance of community collaborations to offer optimal services to food pantry patrons. The dimension of community in systems theory highlights the importance of influencing existing social institutions for the benefit of people who are excluded from power structures in society (Payne, 2014). Furthermore, Clayton et al. (2010) explain the importance of mutual transformation whereby power is more evenly shared and there is an exchange of resources. Thus, the work of food pantries in rural communities brings to light a clear effort to ensure that dietary challenges of marginalized and/or disenfranchised citizens are addressed through partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

Society

When examining the macro implications of emergency food service programs, it is important to remember that these services are controlled by federal guidelines. Food pantries in this study are members of a network of food pantries that receive assistance from the state food bank, which administers The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a program under the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (n.d.). Public and private organizations that participate in TEFAP are distributors of food specifically for home use, either through distribution or prepared meals for low-income citizens.

Participant eligibility is determined at the state level, where each state can adjust income requirements to assure the food assistance is provided to those households most in need. While TEFAP is administered at the federal level, the program is carried out at the state level where administrative funds are distributed. Also, TEFAP creates and updates administrative guidelines, such as record keeping, food storage, and reporting requirements. Additionally, federal guidelines create parameters for the types of foods available

through TEFAP, with the intended goal of ensuring that recipients are offered a variety of quality foods to meet their dietary needs. Within the context of rural communities struggling with poverty, federal emergency food assistance programs are a primary source for food provisions, particularly for older adults.

Discussion and Recommendations

Community/university partnerships centered around emergency food programs are poised to help address critical social issues related to the overall well-being of community members. However, to the authors' knowledge, there is a dearth of such partnerships in the literature, thus, increasing the significance of the current study. Based on the findings from this study, careful consideration must be practiced when examining factors related to effective and efficient operations. These include: 1) volunteer recruitment, 2) operating and control systems, 3) patron needs, 4) collaboration, and 5) advocacy. These findings highlight the interconnectedness of domains within the perspective of ecosystems, with specific emphasis on how pantry managers navigate the environment to accomplish the work of their organization. These recommendations highlight the central role of volunteers to help ensure that all functions of the organization are operating as designed. Addressing the range of needs of pantry patrons highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships with other community entities and organizations. The role of advocacy in creating opportunities for service hinges on establishing and maintaining relationships that help promote organizational growth.

Volunteer Recruitment

Food pantry managers identify a core group of volunteers with diverse skill sets who work regularly with the food pantry. The managers in this study were candidly honest about the administrative demands and operational oversight needed for the food pantry. These include pick-up and unpacking food, tracking donations and maintaining inventory, submitting monthly reports to the food bank, tracking patron allotments, and in some cases delivering food to homebound clients. With a myriad of responsibilities associated with food pantry management, the scope and services exceed the physical abilities of a few individuals. Participants in this study talked at length about the varying

responsibilities associated with the operations; they highlighted the importance of having a strong, dedicated core group of volunteers. For this reason, recruitment of a diverse group of volunteers is highly suggested. Eisner et al. (2009) state the desperate need for skilled volunteers who can help provide technology services, program development, staff training, and strategic planning, as volunteers can be underused and undervalued resources for tackling tough challenges within the organization. Pantry managers note the importance of being intentional in volunteer recruitment and ensuring that volunteers possess a range of transferable skills that can be utilized within the food pantry operations. However, each community possesses unique characteristics, and food pantry managers must carefully assess the varying needs of the patrons they serve. In analyzing the results of their assessment, it is incumbent upon the leaders of the organization to consider the number of volunteers needed to help meet these needs.

Operating and Control Systems

Operations are the procedures put in place to run the pantries and control is characterized as the process through which results are compared with the goals and objectives (Florin & Carmen, 2013). Operation and control systems regulate the day-to-day functions of the pantry. From the findings, the operational plans for many of the organizations were developed around needs such as completing administrative paperwork, verifying client information to see if they qualify for services, managing inspections, and staff meetings and trainings.

Pantry managers should be encouraged to develop an operational and control plan to ensure program maintenance and continuity. During holidays, vacations, or at other times when volunteers are unable to fulfill their obligations, operations and control systems will ensure that the pantries continue to operate with minimal interruptions. While the literature does not present guidelines on the development of policies and procedures for food pantry operations, our findings suggest that pantry managers can and have constructed manuals explaining the process for managing clients' information, completing inventories, reporting to donors and food hubs, etc. Such manuals can then be used to train staff and volunteers.

Patron Needs

Recognizing that the needs of patrons may exceed the services offered by the food pantry, pantry managers spoke of networks and partnerships with other service providers. Given the realities and presence of poverty for many of the patrons served by these food pantries, programs to assist with employment and living expenses were noted. In addition to not having adequate, healthy sources of food, many citizens struggle with the challenge of meeting other basic daily needs, such as clothing and shelter. In January 2016, over 82,000 Mississippians deemed as able-bodied adults without dependents became subject to a three-month time limit for receiving SNAP benefits (Mississippi Center for Justice, n.d.). Food pantry providers made mention of an ever-increasing number of patrons being served prior to these policy changes, and thus got a head start on addressing patron needs.

Collaboration

Nolen and Krey (2015) highlight the valuable resources and assets provided by religious congregations working to end child hunger in Texas. They specifically noted the importance of partnerships outside the congregations, coupled with support from congregants, as key components in successfully implementing targeted programs for a geographical area (Nolen & Krey, 2015). As these needs are made known, pantry managers continually find themselves creating alternative solutions to address various problems that did not fall within the scope of their services.

For example, in rural communities, the lack of public or reliable personal transportation may create a barrier for some patrons. Coveney and O'Dwyer (2009) note that the lack of viable transportation in rural communities exacerbates a range of issues, such as finances and health. This challenge must be taken into consideration when planning food distribution.

Alternative plans for food distribution help shore up the overall efforts to meet the needs of patrons. In some cases, volunteers may choose to offer delivery services, and in other cases, a proxy may be used for pickup. Additionally, a recognition of the interdependency of churches with other community and public organizations, as well as the cultural component that informs services, is necessary. According to Boddie (2002), rural congregation networks encompass private and public institutions within the community, creating

patterns of service and interaction that facilitate formal and informal exchanges that serve to support and maintain local social service programs.

Additionally, understanding the nuances that exist between various entities helps build strong community/university partnerships. Dorado and Giles (2004) identify three behaviors that characterize relationships: learning, aligning, and nurturing. Learning behaviors lay the foundation whereby partners become familiar with each other; aligning behaviors include those actions that are designed to improve the working relationship among partners; nurturing behaviors are identified as actions and interactions that support, develop, defend, and expand partnerships (Dorado & Giles, 2004). Community/university partnerships in varying phases still offer a heightened level of commitment to addressing social injustices. More pointedly, students involved in these collaborative structures gain exposure to intimately witness and learn from these relationships.

Advocacy

Though less salient in the responses of our participants, advocacy may play a pivotal role in the success of food pantry providers' efforts. Several researchers investigating food security within rural regions note the influence policy has on the allocation of resources, which broadly affects the lives of food insecure residents, services of food pantry providers, and communities (McArthur, Ball, Danek, & Holbert, 2018; Calancie, Stritzinger, Konick, Horton, Ng, & Ammerman, 2017).

Through the establishment of food policy councils, food pantry providers and other community members may more accurately determine the extent of food insecurity within their area, and identify the collective impact of their services. With this information, food policy councils can devise strategies that leverage the resources from diverse council members. Additionally, findings should be reported to local and state leaders and elected officials to garner support for policies that address food insecurity and allow for the provision of necessary resources to address this health disparity (Calancie et al., 2017). Community initiatives may increase accessibility of nutritious food items through discounts and coupons at local grocery stores and farmers' markets (McArthur et al., 2018). State-level authorities may also establish policies that create or enhance employment opportunities that in turn reduce barriers facing residents attempting to meet their daily needs.

Conclusion

The pervasive nature of food insecurity requires steady and decisive action to curtail the permeation of this societal challenge. Across the country, significant rates of poverty impact a number of individuals and families. This exploratory study establishes a preliminary foundation for understanding the varying needs of food pantry managers in Mississippi. Results should be interpreted with care because only 14 of 283 food pantries participated. Major findings involved historical significance of faith-based organizations in meeting the needs of marginalized and oppressed citizens and demonstrate the power of community engagement to address various social issues. Emergency food programs serve a role that is vital in meeting the needs of citizens who are food insecure and who may not see an end to being in this predicament. Careful attention must be given to planning and implementing these services, with special focus on recruiting diverse volunteers, identifying collaboration and partnership opportunities, examining the critical needs of the patrons in relation to the services offered by the pantry, and maintaining manageable operations and control systems that support the capacity of the organization.

This study illuminates the possibilities for collaboration between local universities and the communities surrounding them. The community/university partnerships offer a viable means to address some of the needs of food pantry managers in terms of human and technical resources. For instance, land-grant universities and Cooperative Extension services have an inherent focus on outreach and community engagement. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education are initiatives that aim to improve the nutrition knowledge and dietary behaviors of families through university and Cooperative Extension resources (Mississippi State University Extension Service, 2019a; Mississippi State University Extension Service, 2019b). Faculty members, especially those teaching community-engaged or service-learning courses, may develop opportunities that enable students to learn about social, agricultural, and economic factors that contribute to food insecurity. Such an opportunity may be similarly beneficial for food pantry providers if students and faculty are tasked with proposing possible solutions to enhance recruitment of volunteers or community support to improve organizational operations.

Future research is needed to further explore the needs of patrons and how collaborative partnerships can inform policy and advocate for measures to address a range of challenges presented by the patrons. Addressing these issues is vital for helping underserved citizens in communities across the country. Tackling food insecurity through a multi-pronged approach allows stakeholders from all arenas to contribute to enhancing the quality of life for all. Promoting social welfare policies provides an appropriate and measured response to food insecurity. Yet, the proliferation of poverty necessitates a more direct approach to alleviating food insecurity, especially in rural communities. Community engagement efforts from higher education institutions should span the gamut from empirical research to hands-on learning and practice opportunities. Ultimately, these efforts offer a viable means for addressing the root cause of food insecurity.

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