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# Food Insecurity: From Research to Action

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# Food Insecurity: From Research to Action

Rachel Morgan

UNI Cornerstone & Northeast Iowa Food Bank

## Introduction

Two sections of UNI Cornerstone worked with the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, and Rod Library to gain a better understanding of food insecurity in the Cedar Valley during the academic year 2016-2017.

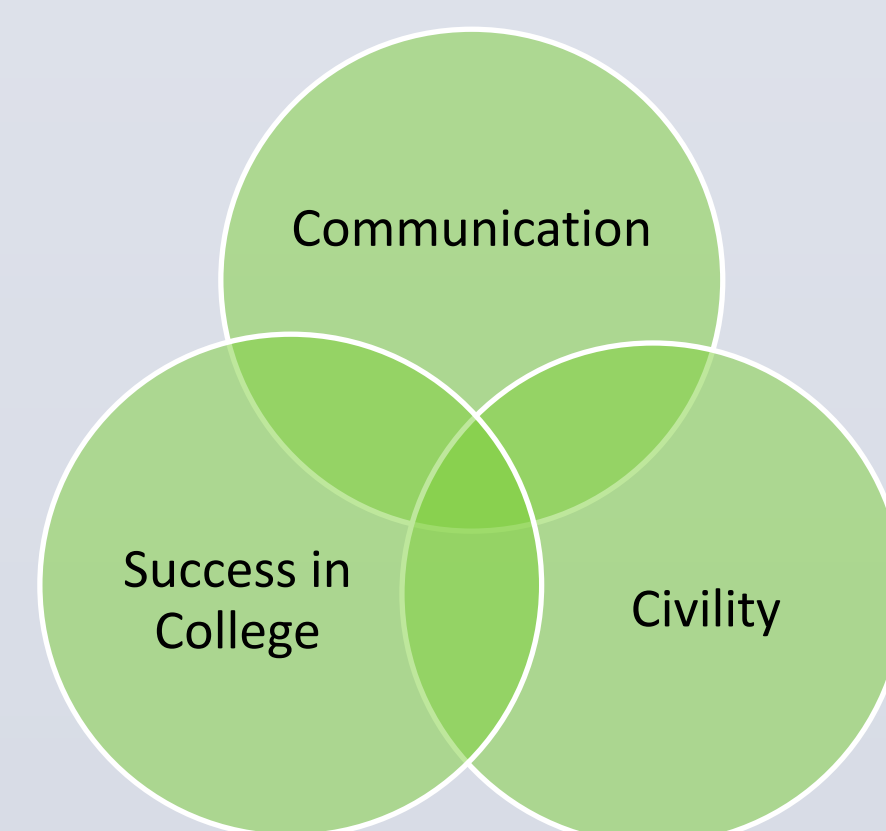
Students engaged in research related to food insecurity, and presented informative speeches on their topics. Students then completed training at the Food Bank, and they volunteered sorting, delivering, and serving food. Students organized a campus-wide food drive, incentivizing different halls to participate and conducted a campus advocacy campaign on food insecurity. By the end of the semester, the students' food drive had collected over 150 pounds of food and over 200 service hours, but most notably a greater understanding of food insecurity in their neighborhood.

## Objective

Service-Learning is a pedagogy that integrates community engaged service with reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Cornerstone is a first-year experiential course at UNI that focuses on written and oral communication, civility, success in college, and critical thinking.

Northeast Iowa Food Bank is a member of Feeding America, and serves sixteen counties in northeast Iowa through its distribution center in Waterloo.



Cornerstone and Northeast Iowa Food Bank partnered to meet the needs of both institutions. Through service-learning UNI students developed a greater understanding of food-insecurity, living wages, poverty, and food deserts. The Northeast Iowa Food Bank gained many new volunteers who not only volunteered at the Food Bank, but also created advocacy campaigns on campus, hosted a food drive, and gave back to their community. Students also created a video narrative of their volunteer experiences, which was shared on social media.

## Materials & Methods

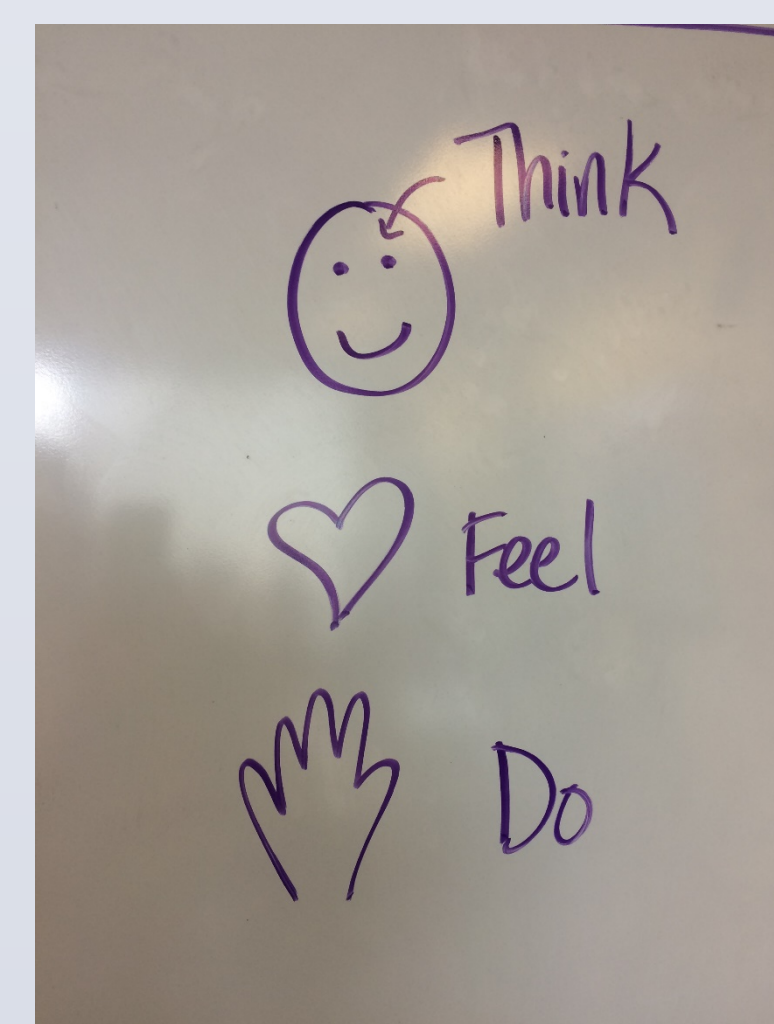
Students began by meeting their community partner, the Northeast Iowa's Food Bank Talent Recruiter, who was a guest speaker in the classes and discussed the work a Food Bank and Food Pantry.

Next, students worked in five groups to research topics related to food insecurity.

- Group 1: Economic & Social Concerns in the U.S.
- Group 2: Hunger in the U.S.: What are the issues?
- Group 3: Food Pantries/Banks: What are the issues?
- Group 4: The Lost Connection: What are the issues?
- Group 5: Specific Food Insecurity Issues

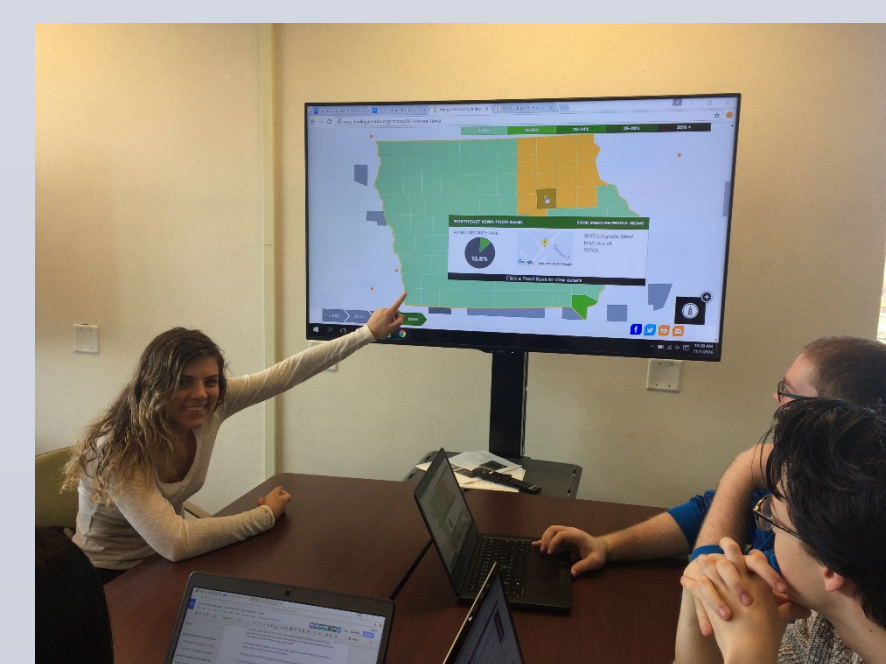
The guided library sessions designed and led by an Anne-Marie Gruber yielded a larger understanding of related complex issues, and helped students situate the issue of food insecurity with issues of economics and infrastructure.

These sessions yielded surprising facts to students, such as: "1 in 8 Iowans is food insecure" according to ([www.feedingamerica.org](http://www.feedingamerica.org)). Using the research, students delivered informative speeches on issues related to food insecurity: 1970s farm bill, food deserts, minimum wage, nutrition labels, rural food insecurity. Next, students used the think, feel, do model and decided on direct and advocacy based-service learning projects.



With the coordinating help of Peer Mentors, fifty UNI freshmen went through training at the Northeast Iowa Food Bank in Waterloo, IA, and then volunteered in various programs such as food sorting, food service, the backpack program, and office work.

Groups made tri-folds on food insecurity and presented the information in UNI's Maucker Union. Students helped deliver food to families in North Cedar during the 2016 flood, and in Spring 2017 students organized a campus food drive that collected over 200 pounds of food.



## Results

"Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models," Tania D. Mitchell, service-learning director for the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University says, "Without the exercise of care and consciousness, drawing attention to root causes of social problems, service-learning may have no impact beyond students' good feelings." Indeed, students did report feeling good about the work they'd done, but more notable is they way students understood and reacted to their work.

Mitchell defines critical service-learning as "an approach that embraces the political nature of service and seeks social justice over more traditional views of citizenship."

In the literature about critical service-learning as opposed to traditional service-learning, three common elements emerge as hallmarks of critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008):

1. Working to redistribute power for all participants in service-learning
2. Developing authentic relationships in the classroom and community
3. Working from a social change perspective

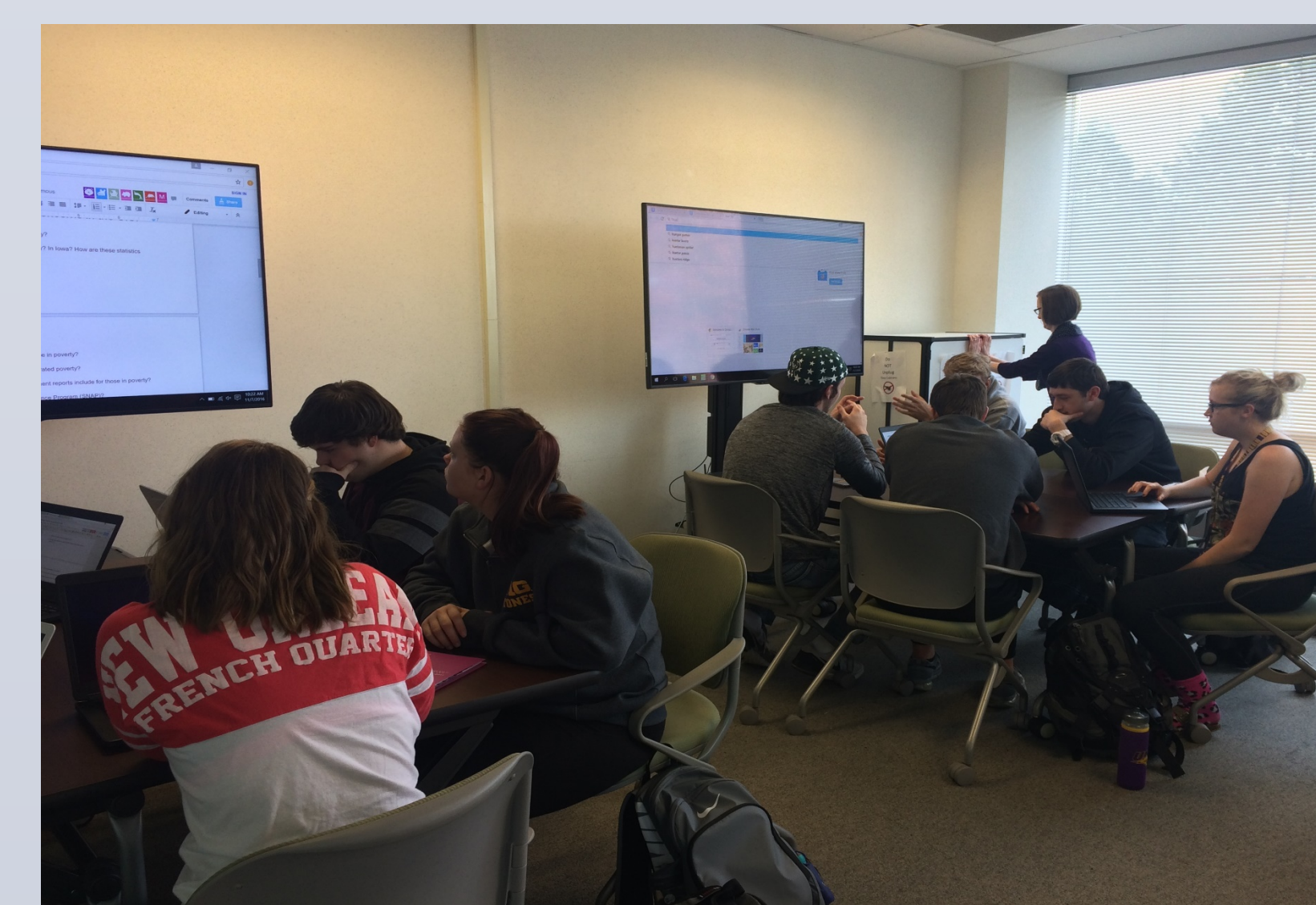
Research and advocacy were the keys to making this project a critical service-learning project. Students saw the research translated to action in their community as fulfilling a need in a broken structure that demands repairing. In their final reflections students wrote the following:

"Before we researched food insecurity and related topics, I thought poverty was something that people caused themselves. However, now I think poverty is really complicated and more about economics and industry than people. This helped me understand poverty and why people need the help they get."

—B.T. class of 2021

"Working at the Food Bank made me feel like I was saving the world, but really it was only a couple hours a week. It was one of my favorite experiences freshmen year."

—S.M. class of 2021



## Conclusions

Incorporating informed and critical service-learning in Cornerstone helped accomplish course goals related to research, writing, and civility. By the end of the year, students' abilities to evaluate sources were stronger, as well as their ability to decipher meaning and application from the sources. Through the various steps of reflection and research, students wrote more and the writing ranged from personal response to critique to persuasive. Students reported not only enjoying the community partnership, but continuing the partnership well beyond the scope of the course.

I found that a critical approach to service-learning, tasked my students with asking hard questions, and as an educator, asked me to focus on social responsibility, and the project created authentic, productive, and transformational learning.

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