Feeding UCSB Student Families Feeds the World

Jessica Alvarez, UC Global Food Initiative; Student Engagement & UCSB Ambassador

The Global Food Initiative Challenge:
How to sustainably and nutritionally feed a world population expected to reach eight billion by 2025?

By “Deploying UC’s research to shape, impact and drive policy discussions around food issues at the local, state, national and international levels”, we hope to launch a powerful response to the complex and growing “food crises”, and ensure equity and access for all, starting with each UC Student and their family.

Campus-Wide to Worldwide
How do we model and put into practice effective and transformative solutions to the growing global food crises on the level of each campus, and yet reproducible across states and nations facing similar challenges?

In the United States we have a growing crises with increased rates of obesity, high rates of childhood poverty, and a lack of universal access to fresh and healthy food (either due to barriers like cost or information). Many studies also tell us that “low-income households tend to eat less nutritious diets than other households”, and that “affordability, defined as the ability to bear a cost, is a surprisingly complex concept to measure.” (USDA) Time, money, information all present reasonable barriers to access, and it is undeniable that eating healthfully and sustainably is significantly easier if you have the resources to do it.

UC Student Families Matter
This project seeks to communicate the immense need and unprecedented opportunity to create a “food-caring culture” within our Family Student Housing Communities, and to recognize the struggle of UC populations that are traditionally underserved and unanticipated by a System biased towards the more traditional student experience. As a non-traditional undergraduate student living with my child and partner in UCSB’s Family Student Housing I have come to identify a common desire amongst my fellow students and their families:

Communities united in their goals towards higher education and improved opportunities for their families, desire a satisfying social paradigm that emphasizes wellness, and a higher quality of life.

If the University seeks to deploy meaningful solutions to the campus food security crises, then this also requires looking towards the communities that have a wealth of experiences, struggles, and solutions of their own to contribute to this conversation.

Challenges
● Students and their families have tight budgets, and often cite cost and time as barriers to accessing healthy and sustainable food (organic, etc.) Many families also utilize SNAP/Cal-fresh benefits to make ends meet.

● Student Family Communities are traditionally hard to engage and involve in campus/system wide Initiatives like the UC Global Food Initiative and the Carbon Neutrality Initiative.

● Student Families are underserved and under-recognized by the University System and the broader campus experience.

Opportunities
● Students and their families desire a higher quality of life, and recognize the importance of healthy eating and good food values like sustainability and pesticide-free.

● Student Families respond to programs that meet an immediate need for better access to higher quality food, and desire for Community and enrichment (social/cultural).

Growing A Food-Caring Culture
The United Nations recognizes the family, as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society, and entitled to protection by society and the State.”

If we recognize that familial frameworks are often key to the development of widespread social and cultural behaviors, we should also recognize the immense opportunity to develop a culture that unites a diverse community in the struggle to improve health, well-being, and the planet through “Food.” A “new paradigm” for society that utilizes the universal currency of Food to communicate social, environmental, and cultural values.

Family Student Housing perfectly models an ideal “test society”, defined by immense diversity (ranging from non-traditional, to graduate, and international student families), limited resources, and a pronounced desire to realize values like: Community, Wellness, and Sustainability. Student families with children are especially attracted to incorporating these values into their day-to-day life.

Community Gardens are Transformative Spaces

Perfectly reflecting the condition of Family Student Housing, the Family Student Housing Community gardens are underserved and suffer from a lack of dedicated resources and support.

Throughout the UC System we have a veritable wealth of community garden spaces that suffer from similar issues related to student turnover (lack of permanent communities managing the space), and lack of supportive infrastructure.

Many families are very eager to start a garden and grow their own organic fruits and veggies, but are often constrained by the lack of information, resources, and available time to dedicate to a garden plot. Many plots are abandoned, and the assignments process leaves many frustrated wondering why they continue to sit on an often year-plus waiting list.

Student families face unique challenges, and fundamentally deserve the opportunity to participate in a Just Food System: one that allows them the power to afford “good foods” that are healthful, nourishing, ethical, and sustainable. As families gather around the table there is a growing awareness of the glaring inequities of our current food systems: Why are the most inexpensive food choices often the most damaging to the environment and to our well-being?

As a University System we must hold ourselves accountable to seize those opportunities: the “low-hanging fruit” that would help us to transform our student communities in a way that generates common-sense, and creative solutions to complex social and economic issues.

Connecting Communities
The original intent of this project, was a focus on creating a network of resources, people, places, and ideas, that connect student families to the values of an idealized food system in a real and meaningful way.

A very important milestone within this project has come from the establishment of a partnership with another underrepresented student community: The American Indian and Indigenous Garden Alliance, is a student group led by a group of students with proud Native ancestry or identify themselves as allies in the fight for social justice. By working with the Family Student Housing Tenants’ Association, the newly formed Family Student Housing Council is also working on establishing a larger Communal Food garden project to allow more families the opportunity to participate and grow food in our community gardens.

By creating an intersectional space, that provides a direct hands-on approach to acquiring Food Justice values, and a regard for people and the planet we are illustrating the power of co-collaboration and the importance of creating a sense of permanency and visibility for issues that will not be solved overnight. If we are serious in our intention to build equitable and sustainable societies that can effectively meet the food challenges of the future, then we have not better case-study than our Family Student Housing Communities.

Building in an awareness of Native cultures, and an intersection of food justice, Social justice, and Sustainability within the experience of Family Student Housing would be unprecedented, and our growing “network” between the local Chumash community, the Native American Student Association, the Family Student Housing Tenants’ Association is a great start to a long-term vision.

The Family Student Housing Memorial Day Garden Party and Blessing Ceremony