

UW-Eau Claire: Research team works with Eau Claire Downtown Farmers Market to address food insecurity

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As a college student living on his own for the first time, Luke Plagens already was figuring out that it's hard to eat healthy on a small budget.

However, it's his work as a student researcher and community volunteer at a local farmers market that is helping the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire sophomore understand just how important it is for people from lower income households to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Plagens is part of a UW-Eau Claire faculty-student undergraduate research team that collects and analyzes data relating to a community initiative that helps people who are food insecure to purchase more fresh, local and healthy foods at the Eau Claire Downtown Farmers Market.

"Our primary goal is to increase fresh fruit and vegetable access for food insecure families because good nutrition can increase the quality of life for low-income families," Plagens says of his research team's collaboration with the Eau Claire Downtown Farmers Market Match Incentive Program. "Often, unhealthy food is the only kind of food people living in poverty can afford, and the market match program takes steps to reverse this problem."

A campus-community research partnership

Through the incentive program, people can use their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cards to purchase tokens at the farmers market, which they use to buy food from vendors. For every SNAP dollar they spend on tokens,

they get a \$1 match of up to \$10 a week, giving them \$20 to spend weekly on fresh food at the downtown market.

The research team's focus is on the market behaviors of SNAP participants when they are given the additional purchasing power via the dollar-to-dollar match, says Andrew Lindaas, a McFarland native who will graduate in May 2023 with degrees in economics and political science with a pre-law professional track and a certificate in legal studies.

"We want to know if providing a market match incentive will lead to the purchasing of more fruits and vegetables," Lindaas says. "With a general notion that SNAP funds are used for unhealthy and cheap foods, we hope to find strategies to direct those funds toward local and healthy food options."

Lindaas and Plagens are among the dozens of Blugolds who've been involved in the ongoing, multiyear market match project, says Dr. Eric Jamelske, a professor of economics who leads the project.

Some students work with the market match program as researchers, others volunteer at the market and a few — like Plagens — are both researchers and volunteers.

"This is a great opportunity for our students to work with a program that is investing in the community," Jamelske says. "It's a project that helps SNAP households access fresh food, it supports local vendors who sell their goods at the farmers market and it helps our students gain valuable research skills."

"It's an excellent example of student-faculty research involving a community partner that also has a service-learning component. It reflects so many of the marks of excellence that make UWEC so special."

Using data to tell a story

Jamelske — who has been involved in the match program since 2016 — and his students contribute greatly to the program's success, says Nancy Coffey, a current volunteer who started the program when she served as the Eau Claire County FoodShare coordinator.

Saying she's "totally impressed" by Jamelske and the student researchers, Coffey credits them with providing valuable data and analysis that helps organizers grow

and strengthen the program. For example, their research makes fundraising easier because she can use it to document for donors the program's impact on the community, she says.

"Thanks to their work, we can show how helpful this program is to our families of limited income who participate in SNAP — people who are going through a rough patch and need help to have access to healthy food," Coffey says.

Deidra Barrickman, manager of the Eau Claire Downtown Farmers Market, also appreciates all that Jamelske and his students are doing to support the match program. Their work has had a "huge impact" on their ability to secure funding, saying the data and analysis the Blugolds provide are "extremely helpful" in their communications with donors and sponsors.

Jamelske says his students understand that telling the program's story in "consistent and formal ways" is critical to its success.

"If they give away \$30,000 in match tokens each year, the program can't exist without the same amount in donations," Jamelske says. "The folks at the farmers market were collecting information before we got involved, but we refined the process, cleaned it up and made it more accurate. So, now they have what they need to tell stories that help donors see that this is a program that's worth investing in."

Helping solve community problems

While the program already is serving an "impressive" 700-800 people a year, many SNAP households still are not using it, says Plagens, a Valley City, North Dakota, native who is majoring in economics and accounting and pursuing a certificate in advanced business communications. Hopefully, he says, their research will lead to more food insecure people accessing the incentive program.

In 2019, the number of households using the market match incentive represented less than 10% of the Eau Claire County SNAP caseload, and nearly half of the households using it made only one visit to the market that year, Jamelske says.

When the number of Eau Claire families facing food insecurity grew in 2020 and 2021 because of COVID-19, more SNAP households did use the match program, Jamelske says. However, even with the increase, still just 11% of SNAP households

used it to shop at the farmers market, he says.

So, Jamelske's team focused its efforts on learning why people did or did not use the program. Students surveyed SNAP shoppers at the market and mailed surveys to households that didn't visit the market.

From the surveys, they identified barriers that keep people away from the market or limit their visits, including the market's limited hours/locations and difficulty getting to/from the downtown market. Jamelske and his team are now working to identify possible strategies that organizers could use to remove the barriers, such as expanding the match program to other farmers markets in the area.

Embracing opportunities

Annabelle Howat, a senior from Aurora, Illinois, appreciates being part of what she calls "eye-opening and fulfilling" research. A health care administration major with minors in management and Spanish for health professionals, she says this is exactly the kind of experience she hoped to have as a Blugold.

"I have a passion for health and helping others, which this project dials in on," Howat says. "We're helping people have better access to healthy foods, helping make them feel like a part of the community and reducing their food insecurity."

"Doing research was on my list of things I wanted to accomplish during my time at UWEC and this not only checks that box, but I feel like I'm part of something bigger than myself, which is amazing."

Plagens agrees, calling his work with the program "an amazing experience." He now has a new appreciation and respect for people who are struggling with food insecurity, he says, adding that all the program participants he's met have been "gracious, kind and fun."

Morgan Dekan, a sophomore economics major with minors in math and environment, society and culture, says the project has reminded her that "people are generally good." "I believe the work we're doing helps real people, so it makes me happy to be a part of it," she says.

Growing up in Altoona, Dekan already was familiar with Eau Claire's Downtown Farmers Market, but her work as a student researcher is helping her appreciate it in new ways.

“I visited more this summer than I ever have to support the local farmers,” Dekan says. “Overall, the farmers market is just a great place to be, and I always leave feeling better than when I came.”

Service-learning opportunities

In addition to his team of student researchers, Jamelske also invites Blugolds from across campus to join the project by volunteering at the market. It’s a way for students from all majors to fulfill their required service-learning hours while also helping local people who are food insecure, he says.

“Many students struggle to meet their service-learning hours because they don’t know how to find something that feels meaningful to them,” Jamelske says. “So, when they have a chance to be involved in a great community program, they’re excited to do something that’s near and dear to their hearts.”

Like the student researchers, the Blugold volunteers contribute greatly to the match program and learn valuable lessons as they interact with community members who are food insecure, Coffey says.

“They learn that market match participants look just like you and me; they learn that all of us sometimes need a bit of help along the way,” Coffey says. “Also, when they connect with people who are helped by the program, they start to see the immense difference these programs make in people’s lives.”

Describing the student volunteers as “professional, articulate and friendly with our customers,” Barrickman says their contributions to the market are “invaluable.”

Coffey credits Jamelske with getting students excited about being both researchers and volunteers.

“He really believes in this program, so he fires the students up about it and they’re committed to it because he’s committed,” Coffey says of Jamelske. “It’s wonderful to have them all so involved.”

Preparing for future success

The lessons students take from their experiences with the match program prepare them to be leaders in their future jobs and communities, Jamelske says.

That's true for Plagens, who says the research and service work he is doing with the market match project are helping him better understand issues around food insecurity, and also are shaping how he's thinking about his future.

"Since starting, I've thrown around the idea of pursuing graduate school," Plagens says. "I'm considering pursuing a Ph.D. in economics because I want to create policy changes in agricultural industries to subsidize fresh produce costs. I want to do what I can to help, and a Ph.D. can help me understand the process of changing prices and how it will affect the overall economy in addition to providing for low-income families. I just simply want to help others, and this research instilled that interest in me."

Barrickman says interacting with the people using the match program as well as the farmers market vendors — many of whom come from low-income households — is helping the students better think about their community and its residents in new ways.

"Through conversation I have with students, I've found that some of them weren't aware of the issues of food insecurity in our area," Barrickman says. "I believe it's opened their eyes to it, and to the diversity of people using the FoodShare program. I've seen genuine concern from them for our customers."

Plagens says his work on the project has been "extremely meaningful" and already is making him a more engaged and connected student.

"I feel fulfilled through helping others, and this research has helped me feel more content as a student," Plagens says. "I don't think I'd be this invested as a student if I wasn't an undergraduate researcher."

Howat says the research skills she's gained will be valuable in her future career as she works to identify improvement and other processes to enhance quality of care to her patients and residents.

"Plus, I will definitely carry with me all the interpersonal connections I've made helping an underserved population as I have a goal of being an advocate for the elderly population," Howat says.

In the future, Dekan hopes to work in the field of environmental economics. She says the research project is "a good steppingstone for me because it is showing me

how to work in a group, analyze data and apply economics to a real-world concept.”

Lindaas says many of the skills he’s learned as a student researcher will help him regardless of what career path he chooses. For example, he’s learned “many tips and tricks” to engage audiences during presentations and he knows how to problem solve when he runs into data difficulties, he says.

He says it was especially valuable to be part of a project addressing food insecurity during a pandemic.

“It’s fascinating to be on this research team during such a pivotal point in history, especially with the government response toward people in need,” Lindaas says. “I hope to go to law school or work for the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency in the future. Either path will be greatly influenced by the work I’ve done as part of this team.”

His students’ reflections on what they are gaining from the project are why he makes undergraduate student research a priority, Jamelske says.

“I engage students with data that tells a story about something real that relates to economics and society,” Jamelske says. “They learn about data collection tools, analysis and programs, but also how to use the data to tell a story. Data skills are important but just generating a graph doesn’t translate into telling a story or feeling confident standing in front of an audience.”

Jamelske says 34 students have been part of the match program research over the years, with most students working on the project for three or four semesters.

When students are part of multiyear research projects, they gain the skills and confidence they need to gather and analyze data, but they also learn how to talk about their research with audiences of any size, Jamelske says. Being able to share their research in a meaningful way will matter whether they are presenting in front of hundreds of people at a conference or talking to a potential employer, he says.

“A lot of people have good grades, lots of students take hard classes but not everyone did this kind of work,” Jamelske says of the research. “People who are interested in hiring them will want to talk about it. So, it’s super valuable for students to go into the world with something cool to talk about and the skills to articulate what they’ve done.”

In October, Jamelske's student researchers gave two oral presentations about the project at a Wisconsin Economics Association conference in Stevens Point. In April 2023, they will present it at the National Undergraduate Research Conference, which will be hosted by UW-Eau Claire.

Since the match program research began, Jamelske's student researchers have delivered nearly 50 oral presentations and nearly 25 poster presentations on campus and throughout the country.