

Northern Illinois University

DeKalb County Community Gardens Food Security Project

Student Engagement Fund

Marissa Nowakowski



OSEEL

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Final Narrative Report; SEF

Summary:

My name is Marissa Nowakowski, I assisted in Undergraduate Research project with the leadership of Courtney Gallaher and Kris Wilson. This project was about the food security issues that lie here in urban DeKalb. DeKalb and NIU campus, are in a food desert. This project was created to insure food security for the area that is considered a food desert. These mentors work with the NIU University and the DeKalb County Community Gardens to distribute food to the community through local food pantries. The project included interviewing pantry goers to get a perspective on the restrictions that apply to definition to a food desert and to look for a solution to accommodate those needs. The student engagement fund funds this project in pursuing the necessary objectives.

Discussion:

I joined this ongoing project in February to assist in transcribing interviews, entering data into excel, and then creating a map of the accessibility within the food desert. A food desert is defined as an area with low vehicle access and no grocery stores within two miles of the populated areas. Much of DeKalb's grocery stores are located off campus and northeast of the main neighborhoods. Many of the people interviewed, reported that money to pay for food and

accessibility was the biggest complication. Many of the residents rely on the bus system or friends to commute to their local grocery store. Although, there are many pantries, the hours of operation also complicate accessibility. These pantries are only open during afternoon or morning hours when most people are at work or school. The DeKalb police department works with the Huskie food pantry in delivering bags of food to residents that cannot access the pantries. Much of DeKalb county is consisted of farmlands which are mostly owned by large county-wide industries. Some farmers were interviewed and reported that they donate their excess food supply to the local pantries or either through street food markets. Many of the residents of DeKalb are unaware of these pantries and community gardens. This project helps communicate that information to the public. Some community gardens are even open to the public for free to use for their own garden needs. The SEF funds the project in paying the interviewers for their personal experience with the food desert. My responsibility in the end was to use my GIS skills learned here at the NIU University to create a visualized example of proximity to local pantries. My map shows pantry patrons and whether they use their local pantry. What hinders them from using certain pantries, is accessibility. The bus system may not reach that area or the hours of operation may not be suitable for the patrons. Most of these residents that were interviewed reported that they also were on food stamps. SNAP only gives a limited amount of money each month to go towards grocery needs. Most of the residents reported that those funds were not enough which enforces the reliability of the food pantries and community gardens. In hopes of decreasing food insecurity, this project is important to get the word out. For future goals, we hope to create a possible transport system just for grocery runs at certain times of the day that accommodates each resident's needs. My map was entered to the Geography Department's Undergraduate Map Competition.

Reflection:

The SEF funded all the interviews. These interviews helped bring to light the real problems that lie within the food desert of DeKalb and NIU campus. Doing so, will help create future solutions for food security. Many families rely heavily on these community projects to help put food on the table.

DeKalb County Community Garden's Food Security Project

The DeKalb County Community Garden (DCCG) works with local community gardens to help feed the community. Many local pantries take in the local food supply and make it available to the community. DeKalb is considered a food desert although much of the county is made up of farms. Residents were interviewed about the food security in their households. Even with food stamps (SNAP), residents still heavily relied on their local pantries for their grocery needs. As shown below, many of the residents do not use their closest pantry for their food source. Money, hours of operation, and vehicle accessibility play a role in the amount of their reliability.

