

# Writing and Research: Connecting Undergraduate English Majors To the Food and Nutrition Community Through Discovery, Learning, and Engagement

Jennifer Bay<sup>1</sup>, PhD, and Amy R. Mobley<sup>2</sup>, PhD, RD, <sup>1</sup>Department of English, <sup>2</sup>Department of Foods and Nutrition, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

## Abstract

English 203, an undergraduate professional writing course in the Department of English, introduces students in the major to the application of research methods. During the fall of 2010, the course instructor and students partnered with the Department of Foods and Nutrition, local food bank (Food Finders) and statewide outreach program, Indiana's Food for the Hungry, to undertake a service learning project. The objective of the project was to conduct a survey assessment related to nutrition, food and education needs of emergency food programs in a 16 county region. Essentially it will connect the Purdue University goals of discovery, learning and engagement. Students (n=18) were charged with conducting brief interviews with workers of emergency food programs (n=50), such as food pantries, to assess food and education needs including items most requested or underutilized by the community. The results of the interviews will be used to develop future training and outreach materials for the Food Finders Food Bank and the Indiana's Food for the Hungry Program. Focus groups will also be conducted with the students once they complete the course to determine their understanding and attitudes about the research process within a service learning experience.

## English 203 at Purdue University



*Research in Professional Writing serves as an introduction to research sources and methods useful for professional writers. The course focuses on collecting print and online information; interviewing, surveying, and conducting observations; and on evaluating, summarizing, analyzing, and reporting research.*

## Background

This project emerged from Professor Jennifer Bay's desire to have students engage more with an area of their daily lives: food. While there has been an increased interest in local foods, the slow food movement, and urban farming, less attention has been paid to bringing those values--and the larger value of nutrition—to food pantries and food banks.

To develop this project, Professor Bay applied for and was awarded a Community of Service Learning Faculty Fellows Grant. During the Summer of 2010, she partnered with Professor Amy Mobley in the Department of Foods and Nutrition at Purdue University and Ms. Katy Bunder at Food Finders Food Bank in Lafayette, IN to have students complete a needs assessment of local emergency food outlets. Because of these partnerships, English students learn about food and nutrition while also applying their research, writing and publishing skills. Furthermore, cross collaboration of faculty among disciplines will result in articles related to the scholarship of engagement.

## Linking Learning + Discovery + Engagement

### LEARNING

- During this experience, students in English 203 learn:**
- Survey methods
  - Interviewing techniques
  - Application of survey research methods to real-life situations
  - Issues about food insecurity in Indiana and the reality of hunger
  - Problem solving skills related to emergency food program distribution and nutrition
  - The process of reflection resulting in an interview report based on their experiences
  - Writing and publishing skills to develop outreach materials based on a needs assessment

### DISCOVERY

- Students in English 203 experience the stages of applied research through:**
- Purdue University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) CITI training
  - Hands-on application of research methods in the community including pilot testing of survey questions
  - Interviews with emergency food workers (n=50) from agencies in the sixteen counties served by Food Finders food bank
    - The interviewer-administered survey consisted of 20 questions regarding emergency food worker training, items most and least requested at the food pantry, availability of fresh produce, and distribution needs
  - Data analysis of interview responses
  - Technical writing resulting in a research report about food insecurity and issues with local food pantries

### ENGAGEMENT

- As a major outcome from their learning and discovery experiences, students in English 203 apply findings by:**
- Writing a recommendation report for community emergency food programs based on data collected
  - Presenting findings to Food Finders Food Bank about the research conducted and problem solving strategies used in the process
  - Sharing findings with a statewide outreach program, Indiana's Food for the Hungry, for strategizing future educational efforts
  - Planning the development of future resource materials for emergency food programs

