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Abstract

NourishTank, a Shark Tank-style event, saw students propose food and nutrition insecurity solutions. Twenty-eight students formed 11 teams, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. The winning idea, 'Farm2Fork Gone Mobile,' earned \$1,000 toward their proposed project. NourishTank, through partnerships and media, highlights student-driven efforts combating food insecurity and raising awareness.

Introduction

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life (USDA, 2023). Food insecurity is a significant concern in Utah, with 1 in every 11 people being food insecure (Feeding America, 2019). Furthermore, the Utah State University (USU) Extension 2023 Statewide Needs Assessment also identified food insecurity as a top priority across Utah (Narine, 2023).

The high prevalence of food insecurity highlights the complex challenges individuals and communities face in Utah and beyond. While many interventions exist to provide emergency food assistance at the individual level, there is a gap in systems and environmental interventions that can promote long-term sustainable solutions (Yaroch et al., 2020).

Creating sustainable long-term systemic change requires multifaceted approaches that engage diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, community leaders, health professionals, educators, and individuals. USU's Hunger Solutions Institute (HSI) developed a unique and innovative program, NourishTank, to address the concerns of statewide food insecurity. Objectives of the NourishTank program were to (i) spread awareness on issues around hunger among university students, (ii) engage students from multiple academic disciplines to collaborate and develop original ways to address food insecurity, (iii) invite innovative proposals from student groups to develop into an extension program.

Response & Target Audience

NourishTank follows the concept modeled after the popular reality show Shark Tank, where individuals "sell" their business proposals to key investors. For our purposes, students were asked to pitch their projects to a panel of experts, investors, and industry leaders to identify innovative ways to address food insecurity. The panel would then evaluate their idea, provide suggestions for improvement, and potentially fund their project.

NourishTank entails a multiple-step approach:

1. Call for Submissions: Opened a call for public health innovation submissions, inviting students to submit projects focused on food and nutrition security.

2. Selection Process: Utilized a committee of public health experts and industry professionals to review the submissions. They assessed each proposed project's potential impact, feasibility, scalability, and innovation. The committee selected a shortlist of 5 promising applicant groups to move forward to the pitching phase/ main event.
3. Nourish Tank Event: The event included five teams pitching their projects/ solutions around hunger to a panel of judges. The judges for the main event were different from the initial selection committee. After each pitch, the judges could ask questions, seek clarifications, and provide constructive feedback to the presenters.
4. Investment and Mentorship: The judges then deliberated privately and decided which potential project stood out as unique and sustainable. Their decision considered the project's likelihood of success and alignment with HSI's program goals. The winning team received a monetary scholarship, and Hunger Solutions Institute or partner organizations will implement their project.
5. Follow-up and Implementation: Once the winner was selected, the team had a chance to work closely with HSI faculty to bring their project to life.

NourishTank was created to support student-driven projects addressing food and nutrition security. The program was open to all students at USU. Our focus on students was warranted as they have a fresh perspective on their local community's needs and a unique capacity to recognize the specific challenges and opportunities linked to food and nutrition security (Ahmed et al., 2021; Bloomsights, 2023). To invite students, a call for proposals was sent to deans, department heads, and professors across different colleges at Utah State University. The program was also advertised through USU's official social media platform, entrepreneurship center, community engagement center, and student association.

Outcomes & Impact

The first-ever NourishTank event was held in October 2023 at the Eccles Conference Center. The success of NourishTank was based on indicators selected by the planning and evaluation team prior. It included the following:

Number of students who participated in the program: 28 USU students applied to NourishTank, which formed 11 teams. The top 5 teams, comprised of 17 USU students, were invited to compete at the main event in front of a panel of judges.

Students from various disciplines: Students came from 19 fields of study across the university (e.g., nutrition and food science, plant science, climate, and global communication).

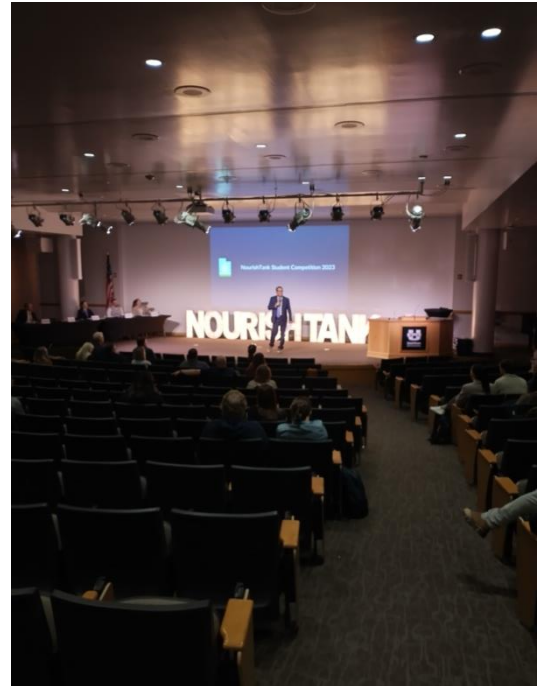


The winning student team, Farm2Fork Goes Mobile, comprised of 3 graduate students who represented multiple disciplines.

The number of people who attended the event: More than 60 individuals attended the event. Most of the audience was present in person, allowing for the opportunity to network at the event.

Number of partnerships developed: Many partnerships were developed due to the NourishTank program. Some of the partnerships include FJ Management, Dairy West, Utah legislation, Utah Farm to Fork, Utah Farm Bureau Federation, Schreiber Foods, Food Security Council, Utah Department of Agriculture, Miracle of Ag Foundation, Clayton Family Fund, USU Center for Entrepreneurship, USU Extension and USU Hunger Solutions Institute, Create Better Health Utah, and the EFNEP program. Members of these organizations were either part of the panel, provided funding for NourishTank, or committed to collaborating with Hunger Solutions Institute on the winning proposal.

Diversity of submitted projects: A diverse range of projects were submitted in response to the call for submissions, including increasing food production, increasing food access, and reducing food waste.



NourishTank program in progress.



Dr. Palak Gupta interviewed by Utah State University's news broadcast station.

Awareness raised about the NourishTank program: As of November 2023, three press releases and four interviews focused on NourishTank were done. These have been picked by various news media outlets and shared with the broad community.

Winning Proposal: The winning proposal, 'Farm2Fork Gone Mobile,' is focused on reducing food insecurity in Title I elementary schools in the Provo School District. This will be done by coordinating with local farmers to donate produce that is either in excess or not fit for selling and bringing it to the families of elementary school students. The

proposal also focuses on providing nutrition education to students in partnership with Create Better Health. The winning team received \$1,000 in scholarships and is closely working with Hunger Solution Institute to develop it into a program.

Public Value & Next Steps

The inaugural NourishTank event marked a significant milestone in fostering innovation and collaboration to address food insecurity and related issues. The success of NourishTank was supported by the various indicators selected by the planning and evaluation team. Overall, the success of NourishTank's inaugural event sets a promising precedent for future endeavors in addressing food-related challenges through innovation, collaboration, and community engagement. As the winning proposal evolves into a sustainable program, NourishTank remains poised to make a meaningful difference in the fight against food insecurity.

The program's next step is implementing the winning project into an extension program. The Hunger Solutions team is working to identify and apply for a grant focused on the winning project. The Institute is also in the process of developing further collaborations to make the program sustainable. Schreiber Foods, Clayton Family Fund, and the Miracle of Ag Foundation are interested in funding Hunger Solutions Institute for their food security and NourishTank work.

The USU Hunger Solutions Institute team has held one-on-one meetings with the student teams to identify additional support needed to develop their proposed project into a viable program. Additionally, USU Hunger Solutions Institute will continue to develop a NourishTank process evaluation to identify ways to improve the program.

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