

BRIDGING

THE GAP



MBA STUDENTS BUILD UNIFIED DATABASE FOR GUILFORD COUNTY'S FOOD SERVICE NONPROFITS

Amid inflation, people have struggled to put meals on the table, and food pantries have reported more requests for help. The good news is that Guilford County has more than 60 nonprofits focused on collecting and distributing food to those in need. But without strong coordination, efforts can be duplicated, food can be wasted, and people may even be left hungry.

"We know that there are millions of pounds of food available, and yet one-third of it gets wasted every year," says Leslie Loyd, president and COO of A Simple Gesture, an organization that works to combat food insecurity. "We want to make sure all of us who work in food non-profits are talking to each other, so no extra food goes to waste."

Earlier this year, Loyd took her dilemma to the Bryan School of Business and Economics. The Bryan School's Capstone project pairs MBA candidates with local companies and organizations – the students provide business consulting in exchange for real-world learning experience. MBA students Lukas Greff, Michelle Lawler,

Caroline Lowdermilk and Bianca Meister took on A Simple Gesture's challenge, working together to research Guilford County's current food distribution process, identify gaps and needs, and make recommendations for improvements.

"It was such interesting and impactful work," says Dr. Mike Beitler, director of MBA projects and senior lecturer at the Bryan School. "The community's needs are huge and getting food to the right places is critical."

With the help of three community partners, the students built a list of local nonprofits working to address food insecurity. They surveyed these organizations and interviewed all those who responded, gathering and analyzing data about how they picked up food and provided it to those in need.

From there, they developed what Loyd and others consider the most important deliverable: an accessible and user-friendly database showing which businesses are donating food, as well as the pickup locations, schedules and the types of products provided. The database also includes which

nonprofit organizations are picking up from each location and when, so partners can share knowledge and avoid duplicating services.

Loyd was surprised to learn that many nonprofits are not picking up food anywhere, but instead relying on more limited private donations and drop-offs. "We can help these nonprofits make new connections if they're willing to go pick up food," she said. "This can really help nonprofits if they want to grow."

The effort also helped to identify businesses that could be new potential donors, says Michelle Lawler, one of the MBA students. For instance, one well-known restaurant franchise donates food from one of its locations now, but 16 of its other storefronts in Guilford County are untapped.

This powerful finding may not have been uncovered without the Capstone project, said Mary Herbenick, executive director of the Guilford Nonprofit Consortium. Most small nonprofit organizations simply don't have the staffing or funding to conduct this type of comprehensive research.

"We know that there are millions of pounds of food available, and yet one-third of it gets wasted every year."

"The Capstone Project is a huge asset for nonprofit organizations that are exploring new strategies and partnerships to improve how they deliver products and services," Herbenick says. "The students are experienced and self-directed, and with a small investment in time to define the project and agree to deliverables, nonprofit organizations receive significant value from the students' expertise. Every project I have seen has been actionable with recommendations that can move quickly into implementation. The program connects nonprofit needs to talent, which helps advance the mission of organizations within our community."

In addition to the database, the Capstone students also provided a comprehensive report and industry analysis, a technical manual on how to use the database, and a contact list of key stakeholders. "I feel like a kid at Christmas," Loyd joked as the students outlined the resources they were sharing. While the database will need an owner, students intend for every nonprofit to be able to update it with current, actionable information.

It was refreshing to be able to use their business skills outside the classroom to contribute to a worthy cause, said Lukas Greff. "This was not necessarily about dollars, but more about making a positive impact on society by helping to feed people," he said.

All organizations – including non-profit groups – can benefit from principles of strong business operations, added Bianca Meister. "We hope this project will be very helpful for all food-related nonprofits in Guilford County because it will open up so many more resources," she said. "We're all really proud to be a part of that."

It's just the kind of collaboration necessary to solve difficult problems like food insecurity, Herbenick adds. "We all have to work together, and this database is one demonstration of how that can happen. Kudos to all the non-profits who contributed their data to this project and to the students who provided this kind of digging and human resources." ■

A Simple Gesture combats food insecurity through three programs:

- **Green-Bag Program** – Each month, residents fill a reusable grocery bag with non-perishable food. Volunteers pick up the bags and deliver them to food pantries.
- **Food Recovery Program** – Volunteers pick up perishable food from grocery stores and restaurants and quickly deliver it to nonprofits that serve food.
- **SHARE Program** – Refrigerators in all Guilford County schools allow students to share their unopened lunch items with other students in need.

LEARN MORE
go.uncg.edu/bbr_bridging_the_gap