

# Bridging the Gaps: Promoting Student Activism without “Student Superheroes”

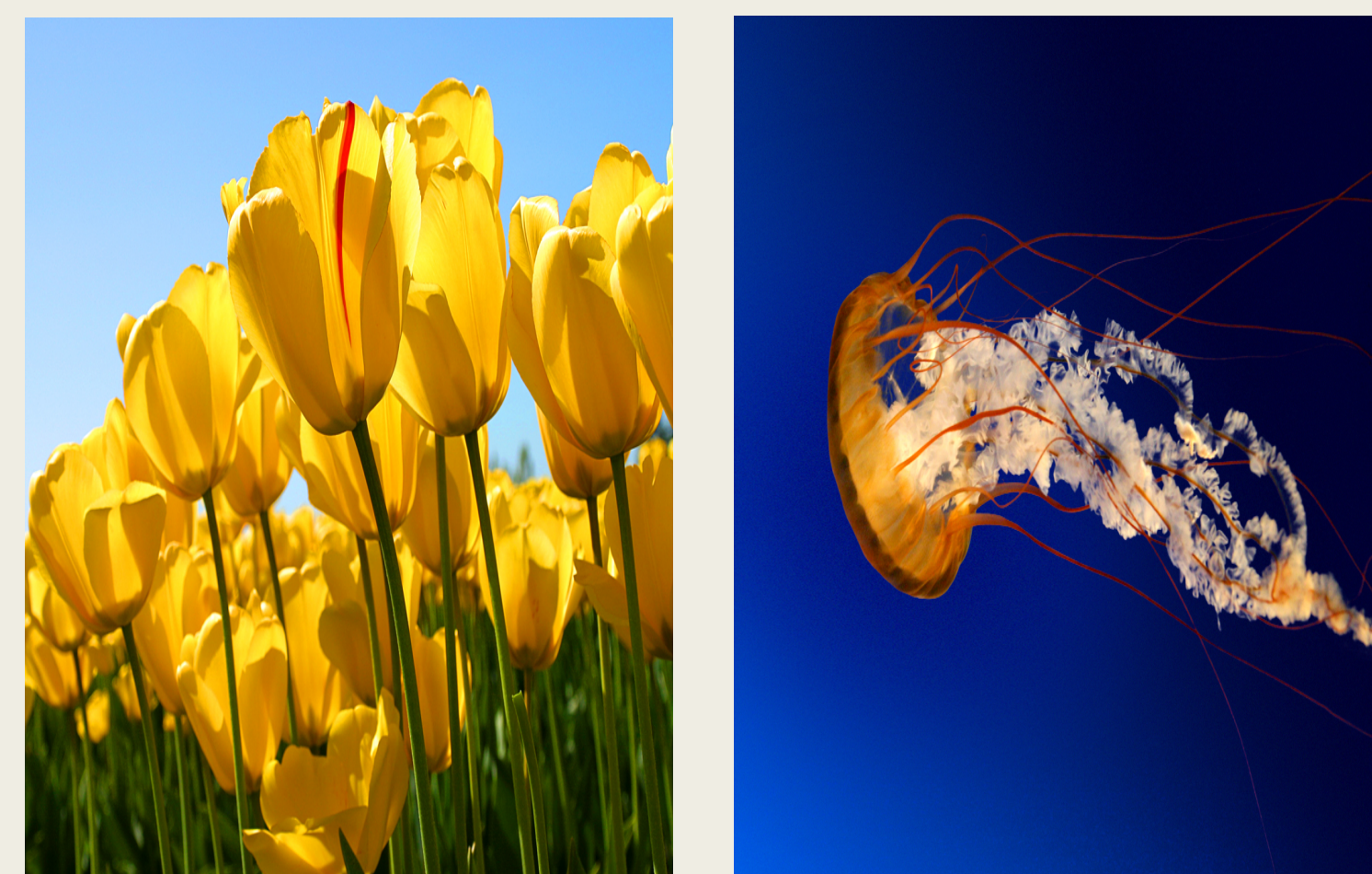
By Emily Hall, UC Santa Barbara Global Food Initiative Student Ambassador

## Introduction

I began this year with the purpose of learning as much as I could. The Global Food Initiative at UCSB is so fruitful, it took me a while to get my bearings. I had conversations with other interns of our sustainability program who were doing work around food systems at UCSB, including food recovery, waste management, student farmers and gardeners, and students and staff involved in communications of food resources. I also talked to students and staff involved in campus entities that were unaffiliated with GFI. My goal was to hear a specialized perspective. In my conversations with student activists, most specifically students involved with Associated Students, I tried to understand their needs, specifically regarding food security, and find out how the university could better serve them.

What I noticed in many of these conversations, was that many students had similar needs and project ideas for how the school could address food issues, but were unaware of the projects the university was already funding. In conversation with the manager of our closest grocery store, the Isla Vista Food Co-op, I realized that this redundancy of ideas was a very common block to progress, which she termed the “student superhero” problem.

It is very easy in such a large and changing community such as UCSB, to come up with a good solution to a hard problem and disregard the similar efforts that are already taking place. Unfortunately, these powerful but scattered ideas lose their efficacy when they are so spread out. I decided that instead of trying to institute new programs on my own, I would focus my efforts this year toward supporting a network of great work that was already going on and encourage the excited students who I talked to do the same.



## Project Goals

My main goal for this year was to help create a unified network around food systems, focused on strengthening the projects already in place and pinpointing needs as specifically as possible in order to find specific solutions. These were the tactics I used to achieve this:

- Listen to student needs and project ideas
- Disperse information on resources on a large and small scale
  - Food Security Presentations
  - Individual Meetings
  - Resource Guides
  - KCSB Segments
- Work with potential student superheroes to connect them to other groups with similar ideas and encourage them to move forward as a part of the network, not outside of it

## Presenting Food Security Data

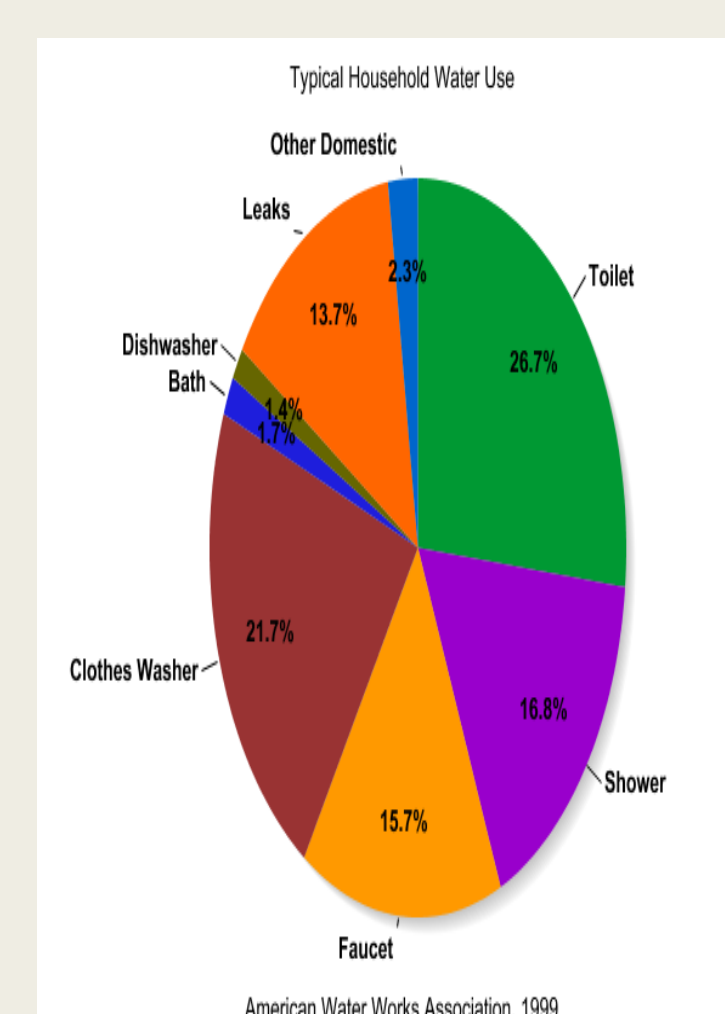
In order for students to make improvements on campus, they first need to have all the information on an issue. Building off of the work of the previous ambassador, I updated presentation slides that presented the food security data from the GFI survey. In more formal settings, like presentations to our Grad Student Association or Standards of Excellence presentations to students in Greek Life, I used these slides to present the staggering statistics we found and explain the more specific intersectional studies in the data to show the need for food system efforts like GFI. I made sure also to begin every smaller meeting with people who were not already familiar with food security at UCSB by going over these findings. I think having a shared knowledge base is key so that students know the specific needs of specific groups they can target to make their efforts as effective as possible.

## Communicating Resources

Information has the potential to disperse so rapidly and widely in such a concentrated institution like UCSB. Throughout the year, in both large presentations and small meetings and through very digestible resource guides, the communications team and sustainability interns worked to get students connected with the resources they need. I dispersed this information with a few specific intentions: to get students in touch with resources directly, to give students, staff, and faculty who I interact with directly the knowledge base to become a resource for others, and to inform potential “student superheroes” about existing programs and solutions to problems that are already in place, so they can navigate and find their place within a growing network.

## Broad Outreach

I first became interested in food systems after listening to a podcast series called *The Sporkful* and reading books by Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver. Methods of education and outreach like these require some effort and intention from the participants, so they are not necessarily the best way to target specific groups or reach an entire student body. However, I think presenting this information in a non-lecture, non-work setting is very valuable. Over the past year, I worked with our local radio station, KCSB, to highlight different food system projects that were going on in the UCSB and Isla Vista communities, both GFI-affiliated and unaffiliated. I interviewed students and staff of the university as well as members of the Isla Vista community including UCSB waste management staff, UCSB Greenhouse and Garden Project and Edible Campus Program representatives and the general manager of the Isla Vista Food Co-op. I saw this medium as a way to get broad outreach about these amazing programs that are already instilled in the local community as a way to highlight best practices, increase student involvement, and hopefully promote a culture which cares about food from both the eating side and the production side.



## Reducing Redundancy

When I was doing my rounds at the beginning of the year, learning as much as I could about different food systems projects, I found that many students groups dedicated to specific programs such as our Community Affairs Board and Environmental Affairs Board were already committed to improving specific issues around food. Where I noticed the most need for direction was in our student government, where many students were coming in with ideas for food security projects as part of their platforms without knowing that similar projects already existed. I worked a bit with this year’s senators to channel their food security work, but my biggest accomplishment here was to create food security collaboration within the incoming senators and help them find the most effective use of their power for the upcoming year by setting up a meeting with all of the incoming senators who had food security on their platforms (it was a very popular concern this year!) and having a broad discussion about food security and the projects in place and then having specific discussions about the logistics of each individual project idea. Though I could not anticipate every barrier to the success of their future projects, we ended up having a great discussion and laid a solid foundational knowledge base of the food security network in place and after our discussion the senators decided to have a coalition within student government specifically devoted to food security issues.

## Conclusions and Future Goals

As someone focusing on communications and coordinations of efforts, it is hard to measure any specific numbers or outcomes of my work this year. I think the effects of my work can be discovered in students’ feeling of connectedness and assurance that the university is working to help them. It can also be measured in partnerships formed and general project ideas informed with data and knowledge of existing networks and thus narrowed down to satisfy more specified needs in the UCSB community.

Moving forward, my goal is to communicate the work I have done this year in an effective way to next year’s Student Ambassador. What I want to continue the most from this year is the work with Associated Students Senate, which will hopefully continue their internal food security partnership, and broad outreach that involves listening and presenting data findings to various student, staff, and faculty groups through formal presentations and quick, easy-to-navigate handout guides.