

# Bridging the Gap: Building a Culturally Responsive Food Pantry

By Marc A Tager

## Slide 1: Title Slide

“Hi, my name is Marc Tager, and welcome to my senior project presentation ***Bridging the Gap: Building a Culturally Responsive Food Pantry in Covelo***. In this video, I'll walk you through the questions I explored, what I learned through research, and how this project can help address food insecurity in Native and rural communities. This work is more than academic; it's personal, collaborative, and grounded in a vision for community healing.



## **Slide 2: Abstract / Overview**

This project was built through months of research, direct engagement with the Round Valley Tribe, conversations with the local community members, and ongoing coordination with the Mendo Food Network. Our goal is to build a pantry that doesn't just hand out food, but reclaims food as culture, health, and empowerment. Throughout this presentation, you'll see how each decision from budget to outreach has been rooted in equity and collaboration.



### **Slide 3: Understanding the Need**

Covelo is one of the most geographically isolated communities in Mendocino County. That isolation, compounded by poverty and systemic neglect, creates severe food insecurity. According to Gundersen and Ziliak (2018), rural food insecurity is often overlooked, even though the challenges are deeper and the safety nets thinner. For many here, getting groceries means long travel or settling for low-nutrient options from gas station markets.



#### **Slide 4: The Grant Proposal**

To build a lasting solution, I developed a comprehensive grant proposal requesting just under \$66,000. This funds a part-time Pantry Coordinator, shelving, outreach materials, culturally relevant food sourcing, and nutrition workshops. The proposal emphasizes equity reaching 500 households weekly, trying to integrate some traditional Native foods, and offering disease prevention education.

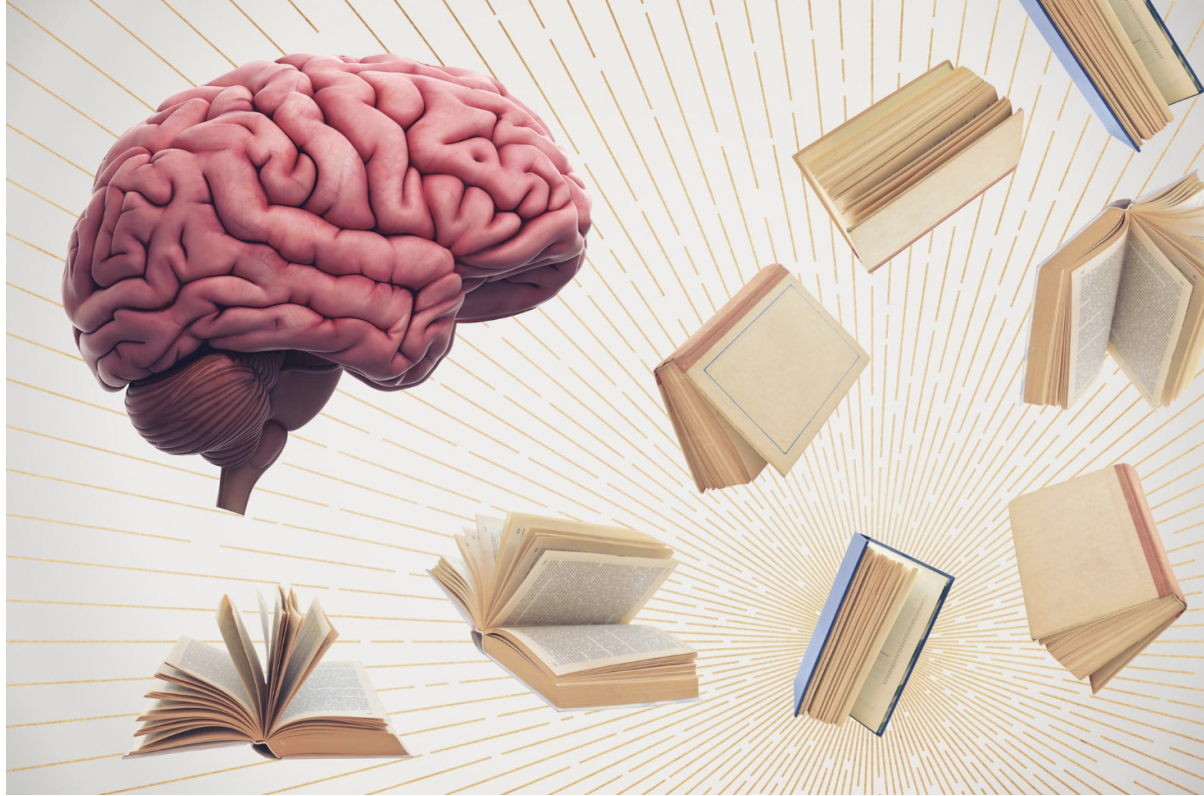




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### Slide 5: Core Community Partnerships

Collaboration is the backbone of this project. From day one, I worked closely with a member of the Round Valley Tribe, he brings local knowledge and cultural grounding. I also engaged the Mendo Food Network to coordinate logistics and regional food sources. I also spoke with small farms to incorporate local produce and reduce supply chain vulnerability.



### **Slide 6: Phase I Groundwork and Grant Writing**

I began this project by studying successful rural pantry models and interviewing people running similar programs. I also relied on literature like Johnson et al. (2015), which emphasized the importance of tailoring food security models to the unique infrastructure and cultural realities of rural areas. This research shaped the first draft of my proposal and logic model.



### **Slide 7: Phase II Community Engagement and Site Search**

Initially, I spent several weeks holding one on one meetings and small group listening sessions with tribal leaders, elders, single parents, and youth organizers. These conversations revealed critical needs like a walkable location, respect for traditional foods, and a focus on dignity over charity. This phase truly transformed the project from a plan to a shared vision.



### Slide 8: Phase III Operational Planning

This is where I got into the nitty-gritty volunteer recruitment, pantry layout, food storage systems, and intake tracking. I leaned heavily on research from Cistrunk et al. (2019), which outlined effective volunteer run pantry models and how to prevent burnout. I also used my own knowledge from working with Mendo Food Network staff about systems and tracking.



#### **Slide 9: Phase IV – Sustainability and Final Proposal**

By May, I refined our full proposal with an emphasis on long-term sustainability. Inspired by Solrwine et al. (2019), I added components like healthy food workshops, seed saving exchanges, and plans for local hiring. I also started a donor engagement plan and mapped out tentative grant cycles to support Year 2 and beyond.



## Inputs

- Grant funding
- Partnerships with Mendo Food Network, local farms, Round Valley tribal organizations, and local businesses

## Activities

- Finalize lease and set up pantry facility
- Hire and train Pantry Coordinator
- Conduct regular food distributions (starting Once weekly)
- Implement data tracking system for food distribution and client feedback

## Outputs

- Operational centralized pantry facility
- Pantry Coordinator and volunteer team fully trained
- 500+ households served weekly by the end of Year 1
- Outreach materials (flyers, posters, social media) distributed throughout Covelo

## Short-Term Outcomes

- Immediate improvement in food access for Covelo residents
- Increased community knowledge about nutrition and food resources
- Strengthened partnerships with local organizations and food suppliers

## Long-Term Outcomes

- Substantial reduction in food insecurity rates in Covelo
- Sustainable, community-owned food distribution system
- Improved community health outcomes related to nutrition

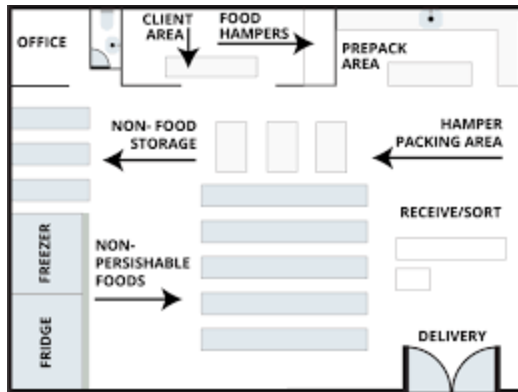
## Slide 10: Logic Model

This slide outlines our logic model inputs like funding, partnerships, and staff; activities like distributions and workshops; and measurable outcomes including household reach and community illness metrics. This model will help guide implementation and serve as an accountability tool for our stakeholders and funders.



### **Slide 11: Nutrition and Cultural Education**

Our workshops will center on seasonal cooking using traditional ingredients. These are co-designed with tribal health educators and will incorporate teachings about nutrition, heritage, and chronic disease prevention. I want to reclaim health education in a way that resonates culturally and spiritually.



### Slide 12: Pantry Layout and Service Design

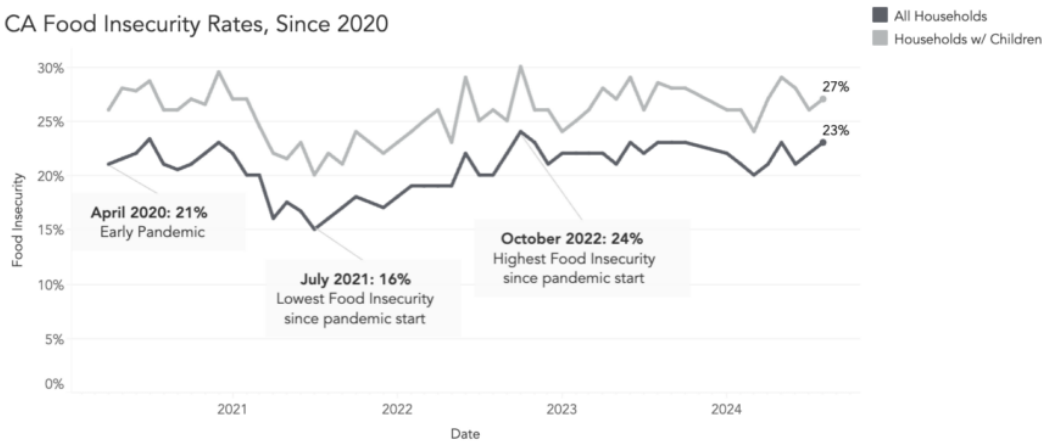
This slide illustrates the proposed setup for the pantry, including refrigeration, dry goods, and a check-in space that's friendly and welcoming. I also will work with Round Valley Health Center to bring food to elderly and travel challenged residents once a week.

**Data as of August 2024**

**23% (3,088,684) Households**

**27% (1,032,305) Households w/ Children**

CA Food Insecurity Rates, Since 2020



### Slide 13: Data Snapshot: Rural Food Insecurity

Here is a glimpse of California food insecurity rate. Covelo's numbers are among the highest in the region, particularly for Native households (Jernigan et al., 2017). This chart validates the urgency of our work and justifies the need for targeted funding.



#### **Slide 14: Community Feedback**

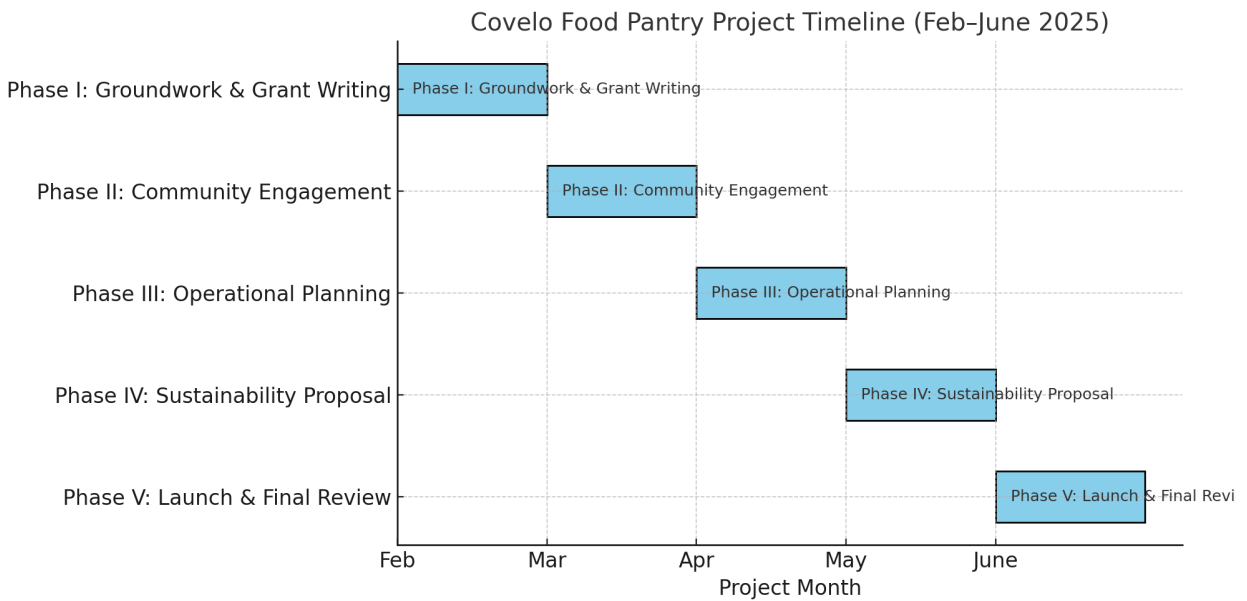
This slide shows a crowded food distribution site. Residents spoke of choosing between gas and groceries, their concerns, and hope in having a chance to reclaim their food traditions. These voices shaped my pantry's vision, from logistics to the kinds of food I'll stock.



Budget Line Items			Funds Requested
<b>A. Salaries</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Total</b>	
<b>PI</b>	\$25/hour x 25 hrs/week x 52 weeks	\$32,500	
<b>Co-PI</b>			
<b>Other Personnel</b>			
<b>Line A: Total Salaries</b>			<b>\$32,500</b>
<b>B. Fringe Benefits (15% of total salary)</b>			<b>\$4,875</b>
<b>C. Equipment (only for item individually over \$500)</b>			
<b>D. Travel</b>	<b>Domestic</b>		
	<b>Foreign</b>		
<b>Line D: Total Travel Costs</b>			<b>\$0</b>
<b>E. Other Direct Costs</b>	<b>Supplies</b>	<b>\$1000</b>	
	<b>Equipment</b>	<b>\$4000</b>	
	<b>Publication</b>		
	<b>Consultants</b>		
	<b>Computers</b>	<b>\$1000</b>	
	<b>Other</b>	<b>\$12,000</b>	
<b>Line E: Total Other Direct Costs</b>			<b>\$18,000</b>

### Slide 15: Grant Budget Summary

Our \$65,981 budget is strategic and transparent. The largest share funds our Pantry Coordinator, ensuring reliable leadership. Other funds go toward food purchasing, outreach, and equipment like refrigeration. I've kept overhead low by building partnerships and tapping into existing community infrastructure.



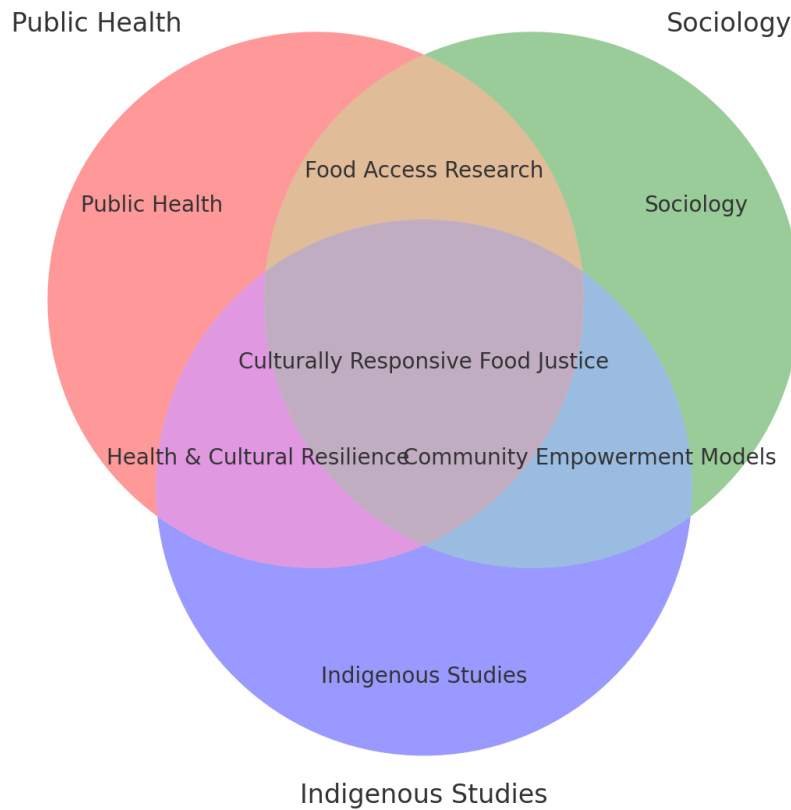
### **Slide 16: Timeline and Milestones**

This project runs from February through June 2025, covering planning, community input, grant writing, and sustainability design. You can see each phase here with its corresponding outputs.

**Slide 17: Anticipated Outcomes**

By the end of year one, I anticipate serving over 500 households weekly, hosting quarterly health and food sovereignty workshops, and creating a replicable model that other communities can adapt to their unique needs.

## Interdisciplinary Lens: Food Pantry Capstone



### Slide 18: Interdisciplinary Lens

This project blends leadership studies, sociology, Native food systems, grant writing, and public health. It's been an exercise in interdisciplinary thinking pulling knowledge from many fields to solve a real-world problem in a grounded, community centered way.

**Slide 19: Lessons Learned**

This has been a year of incredible learning. From navigating tribal government relations to revising budgets, from juggling two jobs to letting go of perfectionism I've grown as a leader and a collaborator. I also learned to adapt when things didn't go as planned and to lean on the strength of community.





### **Slide 20: Call to Action and Future Directions**

As this project transitions from planning to implementation, I welcome all support. Whether it's funding, volunteering, or collaboration, I am ready to grow. Our goal is long-term food resilience not just charity but a collaboration for change.



# **My Reflections**

## **Slide 21: Summary**

### **Feeding My Purpose: My Capstone Journey Into Intersectionality and Food Insecurity**

This semester has been a transformative journey, blending academic learning, practical application, and deeply personal growth. My senior capstone project, focused on establishing a culturally responsive food pantry in Covelo, California, was not just a theoretical exercise it was the culmination of hundreds of hours of hands-on work, community engagement, and applied research that shaped my understanding of food insecurity and how to combat it through grant writing and grassroots action.

From the outset, the core of this project was anchored in my experience as a Community Outreach Coordinator for the Mendo Food Network. Over the past year, I logged more than 700 hours volunteering and interning, working alongside staff, tribal leaders, small-scale farmers, and local residents who were all, in one form or another, trying to address the persistent hunger and inequity in Mendocino County. These hours were invaluable; they gave me a front-row seat to the logistical, emotional, and economic challenges facing rural communities. More importantly, they gave me a blueprint for how to move forward.

Before I even launched into my capstone, my simultaneous focus on my Wicked Problem helped frame my thinking. That project focused on analyzing complex, interwoven social problems that lack straightforward solutions. By grappling with the structural drivers of hunger, poverty, and health disparities in that assignment, I gained a sharper lens through which to understand the food insecurity crisis in Covelo. It helped me recognize the need for more systemic, cross-sector help, not just short-term charity. This early perspective became a foundational insight that I carried into the capstone, shaping everything from how I approached community engagement to how I structured the grant proposal.

Another critical layer in my learning came from my prior experience in the business world. Having worked in business and operations management before returning to academic and nonprofit work, I understood the importance of financial stewardship. Every dollar matters when you're running a nonprofit, and waste can be the difference between feeding 100 families or 500. This experience helped me approach the grant budget with a sharp eye, cutting out frivolous expenses and prioritizing investments that would have the highest impact. It also made me more confident in negotiations, cost assessments, and logistical planning, blending my business acumen with my growing understanding of social justice and community needs. This intersectionality where business, public health, sociology, and Indigenous studies meet—became one of the defining strengths of the project.

One of the first things I learned in my grant writing course was that good grant applications do more than request funding, they tell a compelling, data-backed story. Research by Gundersen and Ziliak (2018) underscored the disproportionate rates of food insecurity in rural areas, especially among Native communities, due to geographic isolation and under-resourced infrastructures. This provided an evidence-based foundation for my proposal, allowing me to argue convincingly that Covelo's food insecurity rates demanded targeted, place-based interventions. My literature review also included works like Jernigan et al. (2017), who emphasized the need to incorporate Indigenous food sovereignty into hunger solutions, ensuring cultural relevance alongside nutritional access.

Moving from research to application was both thrilling and overwhelming. Drafting the actual grant required me to break down big picture goals into concrete, fundable pieces: staffing, infrastructure, food sourcing, outreach, and evaluation. I had to calculate budgets, map out timelines, and construct a logic model showing inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Through this process, I learned that clarity and specificity are everything. A reviewer needs to know not just why you care, but how you will execute, how you will track progress, and what success will look like (Brady et al., 2023).

My internship experience gave me an edge here. Having worked the floor at food pantries, helped set up mobile distributions, and coordinated volunteers, I understood the “nuts and bolts” how many staff hours it takes to run a weekly distribution, what kinds of cold storage are needed for perishables, how to maintain health and safety standards, and how to design an intake system that preserves client dignity. These are things you can't learn from books alone; they come from stacking boxes, filling bags, listening to clients, and troubleshooting problems in real time.

Perhaps the hardest and most bittersweet part of this semester was my decision to step away from my role at the Mendo Food Network. Due to ongoing funding cuts, the organization was forced to scale back its operations. I realized that staying on might take up resources better directed elsewhere, and though it saddened me deeply, I knew that leaving was the right choice for the health of the organization and its mission to end food insecurity in the county. This experience taught me not just about operational realities, but about leadership, humility, and the importance of prioritizing the greater good over personal attachment.

Reflecting on this capstone project, I am struck by how interdisciplinary the work has been. It brought together public health principles, sociological analysis, Indigenous studies, nonprofit management, and applied leadership. I drew on case studies like Sowerwine et al. (2019), who documented the success of collaborative tribal university food sovereignty projects, and I adapted operational insights from Cistrunk et al. (2019), who examined rural food pantry management practices. Each piece of research added another layer of depth and practicality to the project.

Most importantly, this project has shown me what is possible when research meets action. Grant writing, when done well, is not just paperwork; it is a vehicle for justice, resilience, and community transformation. As I move forward, I am committed to applying these skills not only in Covelo, but in other rural and Native communities that deserve equitable access to food and health.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the people who made this learning journey meaningful: the staff and clients at Mendo Food Network, the tribal leaders and residents of Covelo, my professors and mentors at Cal Poly Humboldt, and the many scholars and practitioners whose work guided my thinking. This has been a semester of learning, unlearning, and relearning and I am grateful for every moment of it.



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