

Hunger for Change

Alana Davidson '17 wants to end food insecurity in the U.S.

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Since graduating from UNH in 2017 with a degree in dietetics, Alana Davidson has been continuing the work she began as an undergraduate to reduce food insecurity and building a career committed to sustainable and equitable access to food for all.

Discovering Passion and Determining a Path

When Davidson arrived at UNH in August 2013, she was interested in sports nutrition, but by her sophomore year she realized that she wanted to focus on food insecurity. That year, she conducted a research project on food insecurity among college students that included a campus survey. The results were

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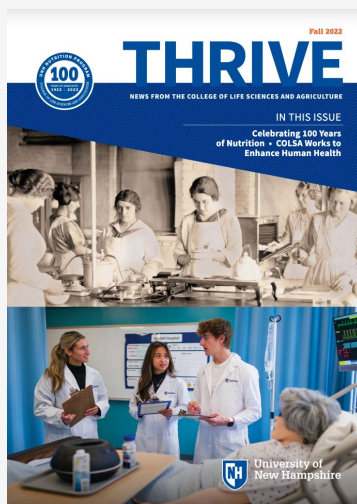
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eye-opening: Of the nearly 1,000 students who responded, 25 percent reported being food insecure — they did not have reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food.

Not content to simply share her results, Davidson worked with the UNH faculty and administration to create Swipe It Forward, a program that makes donated money for meals available to UNH students who qualify. Students can scan their fingerprints or use their meal cards to access meal credits that have been donated to the “swipe bank.”

The experience taught Davidson the importance of designing food security programs that are as non-stigmatizing and respectful as possible, and it continues to influence her.

“There is a quote by Nelson Mandela that I thought about a lot when I was at UNH: ‘Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world,’” she says. “UNH really exemplifies this idea. Through the research



This story appears in the [latest edition of THRIVE](#), the flagship bi-annual print publication of the UNH College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, which is available now!

THRIVE seeks to inform and inspire COLSA alumni, friends, faculty, staff and partners by sharing news and achievements as the college works to continuously strengthen its commitment to research, teaching, outreach and public service.

opportunities and the mentorship of Jesse Stabile Morrell and others, my time at UNH set me on my path to use food policy and research to effect change, both small and large.”

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Beyond starting Swipe It Forward, the list of Davidson’s accomplishments at UNH is long. She is a Hamel Scholar and a recipient of the Presidential Scholarship and has won multiple awards for excellence and research at both the university and program levels.

“It is not hard for those of us who know Alana to appreciate her exceptional dedication to social change, her thoughtful leadership style and her impeccable academic excellence,” says Jesse Stabile Morrell ’99, ’04G, ’13G. “In my 20 years of teaching, I don’t believe I’ve met another student like her.”

After graduating from UNH, Davidson studied food policy at the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, and in 2019 she earned her master’s degree in food policy and applied nutrition with a concentration in law and justice. While at Tufts, she interned at the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), an agency that administers economic benefits, food assistance and workforce training to the state’s low-income residents. Her internship turned into a full-time job as the outreach interagency specialist for DTA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Davidson has been DTA’s director of communications since 2020 and oversees external communications, including the department’s website and social media, press releases, press inquiries and events. She also assists with client communications and outreach materials, some of which are produced in 11

different languages.

An Unexpected Challenge

Shortly after Davidson began her job at DTA, she was faced with a new set of challenges brought by the global pandemic.

She and her colleagues redoubled their efforts to bring new resources to their clients. The department launched a multilingual mobile-friendly website, made updates to the “DTA Connect” app, started online grocery shopping for SNAP participants, initiated the use of text messages in six languages and joined forces with community partners and other agencies to share information via text about COVID-specific resources.

"Something I think about all the time is where can I make the biggest difference? Where can I be that will help the most people? That kind of drives wherever I am."

The increased access to information and support helped lead to a 34 percent increase in the agency’s caseload. Now, DTA is serving more than a million residents, many of whom are receiving SNAP benefits for the first time.

“The pandemic has truly shown the importance of federal nutrition programs and how the federal and state governments and local partners must work together to expand dignified, equitable access to these

critical programs,” says Davidson.

In the early days of the pandemic, Davidson was selected to manage the Massachusetts COVID-19 Command Center’s Food Security Task Force, which was charged with ensuring that food insecurity and food supply needs were addressed during the public health emergency. The task force’s successes include spurring Gov. Charlie Baker to invest \$100 million to support food security and build a more equitable food system.

What's next

When you talk to Davidson, it's hard not to notice her expressions of gratitude. She often begins responses to questions about her achievements with the words "I was really lucky to ..." or "I had the privilege to..." Perhaps it's

because she recognizes that access to success — like access to food — isn't always equitable. Combined with hard work, drive and intelligence, there's a certain amount of serendipity sprinkled in.

"I'm fortunate to have found my passion in college," she says. "But I never expected to be in a communications role. I was interested in food policy, data, research, and advocacy, and I've realized that this role can be used to do a lot of what I want to do."

As DTA's communications director, Davidson has a hand in research and policy, including assisting with the submission of public comments during federal rulemaking and tracking relevant legislation. She has not ruled out the possibility of seeking elected office someday.

"Something I think about all the time is where can I make the biggest difference? Where can I be that will help the most people? And so that kind of drives wherever I am," she says.

When asked what she hopes to have achieved by the end of her career, Davidson pauses thoughtfully. "I think I will have had a hand in helping us, as a country, see the day when every person has access to healthy and culturally appropriate food in a sustainable and equitable way. We have the tools and resources. I do think we can get there. We need to get there."

WRITTEN Sarah Schailer | College of Life Sciences and

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