



Feeding the Body and Soul of Pre-Clinical Occupational Therapy Students: The Fruits and Roots Community Fridge

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At the University of Scranton, occupational therapy programs are entry-level with occupational therapy coursework beginning in year one of our Master of Science (5-year) and Doctoral (6-year) programs. To facilitate our second-year students in making connections with important concepts, faculty utilize many unique community partnerships to provide authentic learning experiences which include exposure to new and different populations and situations. One of these partnerships is with the Fruits and Roots Community Fridge. The aim of the Community Fridge initiative is to facilitate access to fresh fruits and vegetables for neighbors that are food insecure by collecting excess food from grocery stores, schools, and members of the community, and stocking the Community Fridge for anyone to access as needed (Fruits & Roots Community Fridge, n. d.). The Fridge serves as a bridge between excess and access and is a simple idea that provides real impact.

Background

Many people experience the effects of food insecurity. According to Feeding America (2026c), 47 million people in the US do not have enough food to eat or do not have access to healthy food. The food insecurity rate in Pennsylvania is 13.2% (Feeding America, 2026b). The Fruits & Roots Community Fridge (the Fridge) is a non-profit organization located in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania (northeast Pennsylvania). The food insecurity rate in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania is 15.1%, exceeding the statewide rate (Feeding America, 2025a). The Fridge addresses this need as a volunteer-run, mutual aid project that makes fresh food available to the community via an open-access refrigerator located in a central and accessible location, in this case, outside of a public library just beyond the city of Scranton. Community members, including local schools and grocery stores, are invited to donate excess fruits, vegetables, and beverages to the Fridge. Many volunteer groups and individuals provide pickup and delivery service for the Fridge, including University of Scranton second year occupational therapy students. The process involves contacting the Fridge coordinators to arrange for pick up of food items from various community partners.



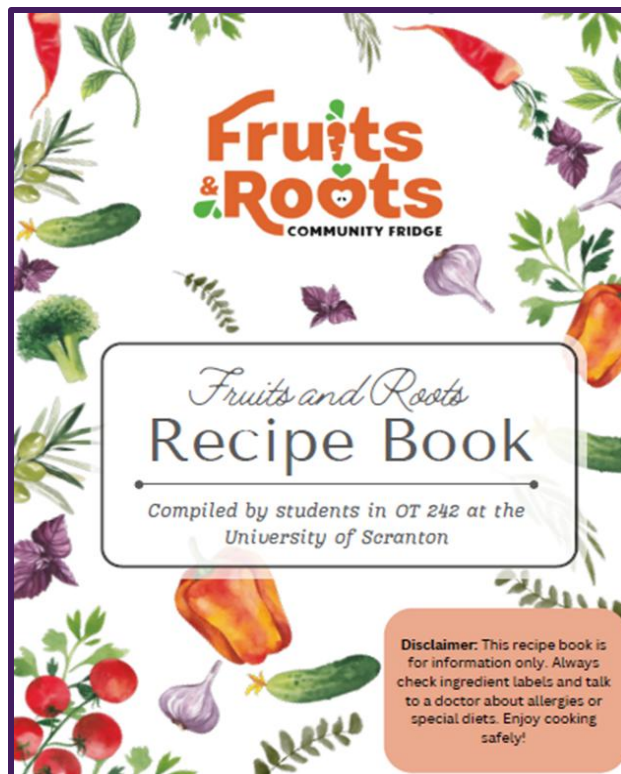
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The students then go to the location, acquire the food items, and deliver the items to the Fridge. Students are also encouraged to clean the Fridge on each visit and neatly organize the food items inside.

Members of the community can access the Fridge 24 hours a day to retrieve whatever items are available at no cost. The Fridge is stocked intermittently, sometimes multiple times per day. The food items available change with the seasons, which promoted the idea of having students create a cookbook each year that provides simple recipes for how to cook and serve the donated food items. Working on the cookbook is a great option if students do not have transportation and cannot easily facilitate the delivery of food. Students identify the food items that are common in the deliveries, search for simple recipes using those food items, and include accompanying images and nutritional information. Our students have displayed a great deal of creativity in designing the cookbook and have included recipes for breakfast, snacks, desserts, smoothies and lunch. Once completed, the digital cookbook is provided to Fruits and Roots, the Community Fridge sponsor, who makes the cookbook available to the community (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Cover of Cookbook Designed by OT Students



Note: Photograph showing cover page of student-designed cookbook, by Carrie Griffiths, 2026.

How Community Fridge Connects to Curriculum

Our partnership with the Fridge seeks to address many concepts discussed in our graduate Promoting Health and Well-being course. In this course, community-based occupational therapy services are introduced with particular emphasis on the three levels of prevention intervention, the eight dimensions of wellbeing, and the social determinants of health. These concepts are specified under ACOTE standards B.1.3 (demonstrate knowledge of the social determinants of health and epidemiologic factors impacting public health) and B.2.5 (occupational therapy's role in health and prevention). Proper nutrition and healthy food choices are key factors that impact overall health and influence productive aging (AOTA, 2020; Juckett & Robinson, 2019; Schmelzer & Leto, 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2016). Healthy People 2030 (HP 2030) is covered in this course as well. An objective of HP 2030 is to reduce health disparities and empower individuals by providing health information in an understandable and usable way (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n. d). OT students address these objectives by facilitating the stocking of the Fridge (reducing disparities by facilitating access to healthy foods) and by supporting health literacy of the Fridge users with the creation of a plain-language, illustrated cookbook that provides step-by-step instructions and inspiration on how to prepare simple healthy meals using the foods acquired from the Fridge. Health literacy is also addressed in the ACOTE standards (B.3.19), in particular, instructing communities at their level of understanding.

This community-based learning experience also provides the students with the opportunity to observe best practices and experience how those practices are derived from research findings. Hyett et al. (2017) advocates for both occupational therapists and community participation to improve health outcomes. Adams et al. (2022) identified perceived stigma associated with the use of food security programs and how important it is for recipients to have a choice in what food they receive. The Community Fridge addresses both of these elements by its availability twenty-four hours per day in an outdoor and accessible location where recipients can take what items they desire. Schmelzer and Leto (2018) found that individuals living in poverty, specifically homelessness, may not have had life experience in food preparation nor the items needed to prepare food. The cookbook begins to address this issue by providing simple recipes with step-by-step instructions using minimal ingredients (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Example of Simple Recipe from Cookbook using Donated Food Item

Snacks



Ingredients

- 1 medium apple
- 1/2 teaspoon of ground cinnamon, optional

Directions

1. Preheat air fryer to 300°.
2. Cut apple into 1/8-in. slices; throw away seeds, stem and pit. Working in batches, lay apple slices in a single layer in air fryer basket. Sprinkle with cinnamon, if desired. Cook 15 minutes, flipping halfway through.

Nutritional Facts

Calories	77
Total Fat	0.0 g
Saturated Fat	0.0 g
Trans Fat	0.0 g
Polyunsaturated Fat	0.0 g
Monounsaturated Fat	0.0 g
Cholesterol	0 mg
Sodium	1 mg
Total Carbohydrate	21 g
Dietary Fiber	4 g
Sugars	15 g
Protein	0 g

Diabetic Exchanges: 2 starch

Apple Chips from Taste of Home Recipes
-Servings 1 | Serving Size 1 apple-

Note: Photograph showing recipe example, by Carrie Griffiths, 2026.

Outcomes

Students have found this experience to be overwhelmingly positive. The pickup and deliveries can be done whenever students are available, making this service activity flexible within a busy schedule. They have expressed value in facilitating the sharing of food resources to reduce food waste, while simultaneously providing availability to community members that may not otherwise have this access. Students have even appreciated the accomplishment of cleaning out the fridge and organizing it so it is clean and neat for the community members, respecting their human dignity (see Figure 3). However, the most valued aspect of this learning experience has been when students meet community members using the Fridge. They have had the opportunity to interact with people, have been thanked for helping to stock the fridge, and have gained the perspectives of community members who may not have the resources to otherwise access these food items. This activity has provided a tremendous opportunity to experience first-hand the social determinants of health and how they impact individuals and families particularly by observing how quickly the Fridge was depleted and how great the need is. Through these

experiences, students further gain a feeling of contributing to the community at large and learning how meaningful and gratifying the role of a volunteer can be. They have also referred community members to the organization so they can become a volunteer to assist with stocking the Fridge.

Figure 3

Cleaned, Organized, and Stocked Community Fridge



Note: Photograph showing fully-stocked fridge, by Fruits and Roots Community Fridge, 2026.

A second part of this community-based learning experience is the submission of a reflection on the experience. The instructions for the reflection are to make connections, through this Fridge service experience, to three concepts studied in the course. The reflections are typically of a positive nature and refer to principles of wellbeing, social determinants of health, and satisfaction related to the volunteer role (AOTA, 2020). Some of the most representative student quotes are compiled below to offer first-hand accounts:

"This service provided by the Fruits and Roots Community Fridge reflects critical aspects of SAMHSA's eight dimensions of wellness, mainly physical, social, and environmental... primarily physical wellness by offering nutritious food options... social wellness by fostering a collaborative spirit. It relies on donations and volunteers who wish to help their neighbors...the environment was one of generosity, care, and mutual aid..."

"This experience has deepened my understanding of the connection between health, social support, and community resources..."

"The primary level of preventative intervention focuses on preventing ...disease through the promotion of healthy habits. The Fridge...focuses on providing the community with healthy eating options as a means of encouraging healthy habits."

A few students did not find this to be an optimal community-based experience. There have been instances where students completed their cleaning, stocking, and delivery without meeting community members. One student in this circumstance described the activity as "boring". One other challenge has been if students do not plan ahead for the pick-up of food items, as recommended, the activity can involve extra time as food is collected while they wait. This can impact schedules as the time commitment is of longer duration.

Conclusion

The partnership with the Fruits and Roots Community Fridge has been a positive learning experience for pre-clinical occupational therapy students. It has afforded the students the opportunity to practice communication skills, both oral when interacting with community members, and in writing, by integrating health literacy concepts into the cookbook, such as plain language, use of imagery, and simple instructions. By promoting access to nutritious food, supporting health literacy, and engaging with the community through this service activity, OT students supported the community's occupation of health management. Students also gained valuable insights related to dimensions of wellness, both community and personal (SAMHSA, 2016) and social determinants of health (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n. d.). Finally, the students function as contributing members of a community and experience the gratification of making a positive impact on recipients' lives.

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