A new initiative aims to alleviate food insecurity while providing hands-on instruction for UT students, faculty and staff.

The Grow Lab, a campus community garden located on the corner of S. 21st St. and Terrace Ave., held their grand opening Wednesday evening.

“Food insecurity (…) is our platform and a lot of people (…) don’t think about it in a campus capacity,” Leah McCord, Grow Lab director and food systems coordinator, said. “We have a lot of students who go hungry on campus and it’s kind of (an) invisible aspect of campus life.”
McCord works in tandem with the Grow Lab and the AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, a national initiative that focuses on poverty alleviation. McCord was approached by Jay Price, recycling manager for UT Recycling about heading the Grow Lab.

“We just have the AmeriCorps VISTA position for three years,” Price said. “We could extend beyond that, but the goal is to really integrate (the Grow Lab) into the day-to-day operations of campus.”

The Grow Lab works to supply food for Smokey’s Pantry, the first food pantry specifically designed to cater to UT students and staff.

“If you are hungry, there are resources on this campus,” McCord said. “Don’t think you’re alone.”

In addition to growing and supplying food, the Grow Lab receives discarded food items from the dining services on campus to use as compost.

“We are really trying to stress: don’t waste food,” McCord said. “And the easiest way to do that, especially with campus dining, is don’t take more than you can eat.”

Any food items that have been left on a serving line at events or meetings can be donated and given to outlets like Smokey’s Pantry. Food items that have been taken from a serving line but discarded will be composted instead.

The Grow Lab also offers instructors hands-on teaching resources through the use of the garden.

“We really kind of allocate the beds to classes and organizations,” McCord said. “Right now our goal is really getting professors in who will actually build this into their syllabus.”

Current departments utilizing the Grow Lab include soil science, plant science, landscape architecture and design.

“We’re hoping that (using the Grow Lab) spreads even to things like social work and journalism and anthropology and medicine,” McCord said. “We want everyone really thinking about food security and how to make urban farming especially accessible to the most amount of people.”

According to Price, the idea for a community garden had been discussed among professors and students alike for years but without much development.
“I feel fortunate that I was in a position to be able to make (a community garden) happen,” Price said. “I think a lot of people wanted to make this happen.”

The Grow Lab hopes to expand the operation by enlarging the garden space and adding a pavilion in the middle of the park.

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