



Rachel Sumekh

On a Mission to Swipe Out Student Hunger

Co-founder and Executive Director, [Swipe Out Hunger](#)

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The seeds for [Swipe Out Hunger](#) were sown at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2009 while Rachel Sumekh was a student. Now a nationwide non-profit organization, [Swipe Out Hunger](#) allows college students to donate excess meal plan points to fellow students in need. The program, adopted by more than 40 colleges across the country, has served more than 1.4 million meals to hungry students. [Swipe Out Hunger](#) was recognized as a [College Campus Champion of Change](#) by the Obama Administration in 2012. And in 2016 Sumekh, who calls herself “a proud Persian Jew,” was chosen as one of the University of California [Global Food Initiative’s “30 Under 30”](#).



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The daughter of Iranian immigrants, Rachel Sumekh recalls receiving free lunch at elementary school. She had a sense that her parents were struggling to make ends meet but she never worried about where her next meal was coming from. “I grew up in a community where no one ever went without. There was always enough food at every dinner table to feed extras,” says Sumekh, who was raised in the largely white Woodland Hills area in the San Fernando Valley. “That’s how the Persian Jewish community operates. We look after our own. For me, helping others doesn’t end there. I want to feed anyone who is hungry.”

So when she and her fellow student friends at the University of California, Los Angeles, had extra money on their campus meal plans at the end of a quarter, they didn’t want those swipes—unused meal credits on pre-paid student debit cards—to go to waste. A friend suggested the group get sandwiches in to-go containers and hand them out to the homeless in Westwood, the upscale neighborhood where the UCLA campus is located. Sumekh was all in. They distributed 300 boxes.

That first informal step eventually morphed into the university-endorsed Swipe Out Hunger. “We soon realized that we had the responsibility and resources to feed our hungry students on campus first,” Sumekh says of the program’s evolution.

Initially the campus administration wasn’t on board with this transfer of dining hall dollars, Sumekh recalls. Food service programs typically use that surplus meal plan money to help fund campus dining—but they came around.

A trip to the Obama White House proved pivotal. “We got two weeks’ notice to come. We fundraised to get our entire team there. That’s when I realized what we’d grown on campus was bigger than UCLA, bigger than any of us,” she says. “It changed our narrative: We were no longer the kids saying ‘fuck you’ to the college administration and breaking the rules. We were innovators and leaders, questioning the status quo. Anyone who wanted to cancel our program had nothing to say anymore.”

Now, students’ excess swipes can be converted into meal vouchers for other students, or used to purchase food at the UCLA [Food Closet](#). “Many immigrant students, low-



income students, students formerly in foster care, have to hustle to survive at college,” says Sumekh, 26. “We expect them to persevere in some of the most expensive locations in the country with high tuition costs. Food is the first thing that gets cut.”

Sumekh has testified at the state legislature in support of government funding for such initiatives. “I believe that through university partnerships and policy change we can end student hunger and ensure that every student has access to food,” say Sumekh. In 2017, Governor Jerry Brown approved \$7.5 million for hunger-free programming on California public college campuses. “Access to food shouldn’t stand in the way of any student and a diploma. We know food insecure students are 52 percent more likely to skip class due to hunger than their friends who have enough to eat on campus,” she says. “We can fix this.”

Over the years, Sumekh has gotten more comfortable articulating her organization’s mission and goals. “I’ve given myself permission to have a vision and be bold. As a young

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woman of Middle Eastern background who grew up speaking Farsi at home, I was raised in a traditional community where there’s a lot of pressure to be submissive and nice,” says the social entrepreneur whose keychain sports the mantra: “Fucking shit up, thoughtfully.”

SWIPE OUT HUNGER



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Even the multibillion-dollar multinational food corporations that provide campus dining around the country have come calling, soliciting Sumekh’s input. Reauthorizing dining dollars to food pantries or meal voucher programs can be a fiscal and legal challenge, especially with colleges that have set long-term contracts with food service companies. Swipe Out Hunger works with administrators to negotiate the value of every unused meal.

Prior to taking the reins at Swipe Out Hunger, Sumekh moved to Chicago for a year to participate in an AmeriCorps community service program. Through the Jewish social change and leadership organization Avodah, Sumekh worked as a case manager for homeless people. “That year instilled in me deep empathy, humility, and the importance of being a good listener,” she says. By September 2013, she was back in LA to launch an office for Swipe Out Hunger as the first staff person for the organization.

Swipe Out Hunger has transferred almost \$500,000 from what would have been unused meals to help feed students and local communities in need across the country in just the 2016–2017 school year alone. There is never enough funding or people to do all the work. With a budget of around \$240,000 and a staff of three, the organization is stretched to keep up with requests for technical assistance. In late 2017, the non-profit received a funding boost with a [WeWork Creator Award](#) of \$180,000. (Sumekh, who travels a lot in her job, works out of a WeWork communal work space in downtown LA.)

The campus-wide movement keeps growing at both public and private universities and colleges. Some students have even held hunger strikes to force their administrations to adopt Swipe Out Hunger. There are signs that more officials are coming around. “For four years we did this work and almost exclusively fielded interest only from students,” says Sumekh. “In 2017, half of our inbound calls came from university administrators looking for solutions to campus hunger. How hopeful is that?”—Sarah Henry