



CASE STUDIES

Nurturing Success: Empowering Human Services Students to Lead a Campus Food Pantry

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Recent research has shed light on the concerning issue of food insecurity among college students in the United States. According to recent reports, approximately 30% of college students experience food insecurity (CUFBA, 2020). This problem has serious implications, as financial concerns often force students to leave college without completing their degrees (Johnson, 2009). In response to this growing challenge, campus-based food pantries have emerged as a potential solution. However, colleges and universities are facing budget constraints and funding limitations, making it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of financially struggling students.

This article explores the role of Human Services programs in addressing food insecurity on college campuses through the development of campus food pantries. By utilizing service-learning, internships, and field practicum courses within Human Services programs, colleges and universities can effectively tackle this issue. These programs can provide the necessary labor force and expertise, while also partnering with local agencies to secure essential supplies. This approach becomes crucial when state resources are limited or reduced.

Engaging Human Services students in campus food pantries not only helps address the immediate need for food assistance, but also offers valuable experiential learning opportunities. Students gain practical experience in serving their communities and understanding the challenges associated with food insecurity. This symbiotic arrangement benefits both students and the college communities they are part of, creating a win-win situation for all involved.

Over the past decade, the issue of food insecurity among college students has become a significant concern. The number of students reporting hunger has been on the rise. Food insecurity refers to the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate food, or the inability to obtain food in socially acceptable ways (CUFBA, 2020).

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According to the College and University Food Bank Alliance (2020), 30% of college students in the United States experience food insecurity. Among food-insecure students, 56% are employed, 75% receive financial aid, and 43% participate in some form of school meal plan. Additionally, a study by Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, and Cady (2018) found that 36% of university students and 51% of community college students face housing insecurity, with 14% of students experiencing homelessness.

The rising costs of tuition, medical care, books and supplies, transportation, and living expenses have forced students to make difficult choices between paying bills and buying food. While financial aid packages have increased in response to rising tuition fees, they often do not consider the rising cost of living (St. Amour, 2020). Obtaining a college education involves not only tuition but also access to safe housing and adequate resources, including food. Many students are forced to drop out of college without completing their degrees, with financial concerns being the primary cause (Johnson, 2009).

There are altruistic reasons for universities to address students' daily living needs. Many college and university mission statements emphasize "community-building" and a "student-centered" approach to education. However, there are also practical reasons for academic institutions to ensure that students have enough to eat. Student retention has become a critical focus in colleges and universities, as it is crucial for the survival of these institutions (Hanover Research, 2014). One way to support student retention is to remove barriers to success, such as chronic hunger.

Although some college students may qualify for assistance programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) food stamps, there are often obstacles to accessing such programs. Transportation and time constraints may prevent students from reaching community food pantries. Moreover, "stigma and shame" associated with food insecurity can

discourage students from seeking help (Henry, 2017). Ideally, food assistance programs for college students should be conveniently located, well-publicized, and designed to provide support rather than shame, ensuring that students feel empowered to meet their nutritional needs. Campus food pantries have emerged as a promising solution to address these challenges.

Campus food pantries are typically established to assist low-income students. Ongoing food insecurity among students has significant implications, including poor academic performance, mental health issues, and overall poor health (Gupton et al., 2018). As a response to these concerns, many academic leaders have established on-site food pantries to meet the basic needs of students. The College and University Food Bank Alliance, which had 88 members in 2012, reported over 700 members in 2020 (<https://cufba.org/about-us/>), indicating a substantial increase. This growth reflects colleges and universities' efforts to promote educational achievement and enhance the health and security of individuals and families (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, et al., 2018).

The UNG-Gainesville Campus Food Pantry

History

The University of North Georgia's (UNG) Gainesville campus recognized the need for an on-campus food pantry when a Human Services student raised the issue in 2011. However, due to concerns about liability and space limitations, the institution did not address the matter at that time. Over the years, faculty members observed an increase in student food insecurity and homelessness. Interacting with students daily, faculty members had firsthand knowledge of the challenges they faced, especially within the Human Services program, which provided close mentoring and practical instruction. (Redding & McDaniel, 2023)

By 2014, faculty members started encountering individual cases of visibly hungry students during office hours. Some faculty members began keeping food in their offices for students in need. As the demand grew, it became evident that this was not an isolated issue affecting only a few students. In 2015, a student disclosed to a faculty member that she and her mother had recently become homeless and required assistance. The student's situation was addressed in a Human Services course that covered resources within nonprofit organizations. The students not only provided resources for the family but also proposed the establishment of a stable on-campus food pantry.

The original vision for the proposed pantry was for it to be faculty-led but primarily operated by Human Services students, including the Human Services Association, a student club on campus. The proposal addressed concerns about liability, student demand, and included local community statistics on food insecurity to support the needs of university students. After a year of research and negotiation, the university permitted the Human Services department to start a pantry. However, the university made it clear that it would not bear financial responsibility or provide resources for the pantry. The Office of Student Involvement allocated part of a storage closet to house the pantry, and in April 2016, the pantry opened on the campus that housed the Human Services program. Initially, human service student volunteers staffed the pantry. From late May and early June, pantry staffing hours were offered as internships and service-learning opportunities for Human Services students. By the end of the summer of 2016, the pantry saw an increase in utilization by students, staff, and some faculty members. To ensure a more stable food supply, the pantry partnered with two local food banks (Redding & McDaniel, 2023)

In 2017, the Food Pantry experienced further growth in usage, leading to the realization of the need for a consistent workforce. The inclusion of perishable items in the pantry also became necessary. A personal donation from a campus administrator allowed the purchase of a refrigerator to store perishable items like meat and dairy. That same semester, the Human Services department encouraged students in certain courses to work in the pantry

and assist clients. Roles were assigned to students based on their level of study, with responsibilities ranging from client assistance to social media management and volunteer coordination. By the end of 2017, the Food Pantry had a dedicated workforce, an increase in clients, and the need for a larger space. In 2018, the university granted additional space, expanding the pantry's capacity, and allowing for the purchase of additional refrigerators and freezers. The pantry also began collecting clothing, including winter coats and professional attire for internships and job interviews. The launch of a Master of Sciences program in Human Services Delivery and Administration further increased internship opportunities, with graduate students joining undergraduates in running the Food Pantry. In 2019, the Food Pantry hired its first official employee, a recent graduate of the Human Services undergraduate program. Currently, the Food Pantry relies entirely on donations and grants (Redding & McDaniel, 2023)

In 2016 and 2017, a faculty member from another UNG campus approached the faculty founder of the original pantry, expressing interest in starting a food pantry on their campus. Working together, the Human Services department and the faculty members established a food pantry on the second-largest campus in 2017. As of 2023, four of five UNG campuses have their own food pantries, each with varying physical space, funding sources, resource offerings, and labor pools.

In 2019, the Gainesville campus Food Pantry became a provider for GNAP (Georgia Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) clients and started assisting clients with program registration. GNAP is Georgia's version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program that provides nutrition benefits to low-income individuals and families. However, due to SNAP's regulations and policies, many students do not qualify for assistance. Moreover, those who are eligible are often unaware that they can apply. Currently, only approximately 20% of college students receive SNAP benefits (Freudenberg et al., 2019).

The UNG-Gainesville Campus Food Pantry Personnel and Operations

The UNG-Gainesville Campus Food Pantry operates with a team of dedicated individuals. The Director, a faculty member in Human Services, is responsible for overseeing the pantry's operations. Their duties include securing funding, forming partnerships, recruiting volunteers, and ensuring the pantry's stability. Assisting the Director is the Assistant Director, a graduate student who handles day-to-day operations, such as partnership formation, volunteer management, supply ordering, data management, and maintaining cleanliness.

The pantry staff consists mainly of Human Services students who fulfill internship requirements. There are two types of internships: those requiring 15-25 hours per semester and those requiring 150 hours per semester. Interns work directly with clients and take on leadership roles based on their

strengths and qualities. They also supervise volunteers and ensure the pantry adheres to ethical standards, especially regarding confidentiality (Redding & McDaniel, 2023)

Volunteers, including students outside of the Human Services program, contribute between 10-35 hours per semester. They may require training and sign confidentiality agreements before starting their work in the pantry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Food Pantry workers were considered essential personnel, ensuring the pantry could continue providing resources to the campus community while offering valuable educational experiences for Human Services students preparing for essential roles in their future careers.

Partnerships and Services

The UNG Food Pantry benefits from collaborations with various local agencies and companies. Partnerships with organizations like the Atlanta Community Food Bank (ACFB) and Georgia Mountain Food Bank (GMFB) provide a stable supply of food. ACFB distributes food to numerous nonprofits, while GMFB connects more food to those in need in North Georgia. Additionally, the pantry partners with Kroger grocery stores, allowing customers to donate accumulated points towards monetary contributions. Collaborations with the South Hall Rotary Club, On My Mother's Shoulders nonprofit, and the Human Service Association (a student club) provide further support through fundraising efforts (Redding & McDaniel, 2023).

Services provided by the pantry include the distribution of both perishable and nonperishable food items year-round. SNAP applications are available for clients who may qualify for additional assistance. Winter clothing and business attire are provided to address the specific needs of college students. The pantry also stocks basic school supplies, hygiene items, and pet food when available. A community resource guide, created by Human Services students, offers suggestions for further assistance.

Mobile Pantry and Student Access

The UNG Food Pantry collaborates with Georgia Mountain Food Bank to offer a Mobile Pantry service (briefly suspended due to COVID-19). Through this initiative, a refrigerated truck is set up in the commuter parking lot of the Gainesville campus, allowing members of the community to drive-thru and receive food assistance. This service resumed in summer 2022.

The pantry is accessible to UNG students, staff, and faculty. Upon their initial visit, users sign a liability waiver and complete an intake form. They are encouraged to collect enough food to meet their household's needs for one week. Subsequent visits require showing a UNG ID card and signing a liability waiver. The pantry operates five days a week for approximately five hours during normal semesters and three days a week during session breaks. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the pantry shifted to curbside pick-up and remained open five days a week.

Discussion

One of the key factors contributing to the success and sustainability of the UNG Food Pantry is the utilization of Human Services students as the primary workforce. These students have a genuine desire to meet the needs of others and improve the quality of care provided to individuals. By working at the pantry, they actively address the issue of food insecurity within their own community. Additionally, the pantry serves as an internship training opportunity for Human Services students, providing them with practical knowledge that will benefit them in future employment.

The involvement of Human Services students in various levels of the program contributes to their growth and development. Introductory course students participate in service-learning hours, providing direct service to clients. As students progress through the program, they engage in internships that require increasing hours of service. This allows them to gain experience and take on administrative roles within the pantry. Faculty members have the opportunity to observe students in different capacities, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and witness their problem-solving strategies and helping skills.

An illustrative example is a student who began as a 150-hour intern in the pantry. Through her experience, she gained insights into the challenges of running a pantry and the balancing act between consistent volunteers and increasing service demands. Inspired by her internship, she applied for a work-study position with the pantry, delved into its history and operation, and actively promoted it in the community. Her dedication led to the hosting of mobile pantries that served both the campus and the surrounding community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many agencies assisting food-insecure families shut down and students were unable to access the campus, the pantry faced significant challenges. Fortunately, the dedicated student intern had graduated just before the pandemic and was hired as the pantry's first paid employee. Her efforts, along with a small team of volunteers, allowed the pantry to continue operating, serving more people than before. The commitment and drive of Human Services students and professionals like her make a tangible difference in our communities.

Moreover, the Food Pantry benefits from having a committed group of student workers who are already passionate about entering helping professions. Unlike other work-study positions, the involvement of Human Services students aligns with their academic and career interests. They appreciate the opportunity to apply classroom concepts to benefit their campus and community directly.

By utilizing the labor and dedication of Human Services students, the University provides much-needed resources to members of the campus community without direct financial investment. These students bring energy, passion, and knowledge of helping others, allowing the Food Pantry to

effectively serve the student population and the surrounding community. It is a mutually beneficial scenario where students, the University, and the community all benefit from the continued operation of the Food Pantry.

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