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## A Win-Win: Utilizing Human Services Students to Run a Campus Food Pantry

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### **Abstract**

Recent studies have examined the growing problem of food insecurity among college students in the United States. In recent reports, as many as 30% of all college students are food insecure (CUFBA, 2020). It is imperative that college campuses address this issue, as many students are forced to leave college without completion in order to address financial concerns (Johnson, 2009). Over the last decade, campus-based food pantries have emerged as one means of addressing growing food insecurity among students. However, colleges and universities are facing budget cutbacks and other funding restrictions, creating greater challenges for meeting the needs of financially struggling students. This article addresses how developing campus food pantries utilizing service-learning, internships, and field practicum courses in Human Services programs can assist with addressing this need. By using the labor of Human Services students, as well as partnering with local agencies, colleges and universities can address the need for labor and supplies when few or reduced state resources are available. At the same time, students working in campus food pantries gain an invaluable experience in serving their communities. This equates to a win-win situation for students and the college communities in which they learn and live.

*Keywords:* Food insecurity, College, Pantry, Students, Human Services

## Introduction

Food insecurity among college students has been a growing concern over the past decade as the number of students reporting hunger has increased. Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate food, or the ability to obtain foods in socially acceptable ways (CUFBA, 2020).

In fact, the College and University Food Bank Alliance (2020) reports that 30% of college students in the United States are food insecure, 56% of food insecure students are employed, 75% of food insecure students receive financial aid and 43% of food insecure students participate in some type of meal plan at school. In addition, one study reports that 36% of university students are housing insecure, a number that increases to 51% for community college students. The same study found that 14% of students are homeless (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez and Cady, 2018). The growing cost of tuition, medical care, books and supplies, transportation as well as living expenses have resulted in students having to make a choice between paying bills or purchasing food. While financial aid packages have grown in response to rising tuition prices, they usually do not account for increased costs of living (St. Amour, 2020). The cost of a college education also involves having safe housing and relatively stable resources, including food. Many students are forced to leave college without obtaining degrees and most undergraduates who leave college point to financial concerns as the main cause (Johnson, 2009).

There are certainly altruistic reasons for universities to help students meet their needs for daily living. “Community-building” and “student-centered” approaches to education feature in many contemporary college and university mission statements. However, there are practical reasons for academic institutions to ensure that members of their student bodies have enough to eat. There is much emphasis on student retention in colleges and universities today, as a matter of survival of these institutions (Hanover Research 2014). One way to help retain students enrolled in a college is to reduce obvious barriers to success, such as chronic hunger.

While some college students qualify for assistance programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) food stamps, there are often barriers to access such programs. Some college students may lack the transportation or time required to access community food pantries. Other students confront “stigma and shame” when facing food insecurity (Henry, 2017), and may be reluctant to seek assistance. Ideally, food assistance for college students should be conveniently located, well-advertised, and provide enough discretion that students feel supported, rather than shamed, in trying to meet their nutritional needs. A key means of addressing these issues is through an emerging trend: the development of campus food pantries.

### Emergence of Campus Food Pantries

College campus food pantries are generally planned to help lower-income students. If students experience ongoing food insecurity, there are a multitude of implications, including poor academic performance, issues concerning mental health, and poor health in general (Gupton, Trost & Collins, 2018). Therefore, many academic leaders have responded to the growing concerns of food insecurity on college campuses by creating on-site food pantries to meet the basic needs of students. The College and University Food Bank Alliance reported over 700 members (<https://cufba.org/about-us/>, 2020) in 2020, a substantial increase since the original 88 members in 2012. This increase has been an attempt by colleges and universities to

promote educational achievement as well as individual and family health and security (Goldrick-Rab, Cady and Coca, 2018).

## **The UNG-Gainesville Campus Food Pantry**

### *History*

At the Gainesville campus of the University of North Georgia (UNG), the need for an on-campus food pantry was first brought to the attention of college administrators by a Human Services student in 2011. Due to concerns about liability and space restrictions, the issue was not addressed by the institution at that time. However, as time went on faculty noticed an increase in student food insecurity and homelessness. Faculty members interact with students on a daily basis, and have direct opportunities to make a difference in their lives. Also, the nature of Human Services teaching, with close mentoring and highly applied instruction, positions Human Services and related faculty to have a great deal of awareness of the daily struggles of our students.

By 2014, faculty members began to report individual cases of students who came to office hours visibly suffering the effects of hunger. Some faculty members began to bring food to have on hand in their offices for students. As the need grew, faculty became increasingly concerned that this was more than an issue isolated to a handful of students. In 2015, one student reported to a faculty member that she and her mother had recently become homeless and were in need of assistance. This need was addressed one afternoon in a Human Services course designed to cover resource and opportunity availability within nonprofit organizations. The students addressed this particular situation by supplying resources for the family, but further suggested that the university needed a stable food pantry established on campus. The students and professor wrote a proposal to the university, requesting that the institution provide non-perishable food items, as well as basic school and hygiene supplies.

The original vision for the proposed pantry was that it would be faculty-led, but run primarily by the Human Services students, including the Human Services Association, a student club on campus. The proposal addressed concerns about institutional liability, perceived student demand, and included statistics on food insecurity in the local community in order to address the needs of university students. After a year of research and negotiation, the university allowed the Human Services department to start a pantry, with the acknowledgement that the university would not be financially responsible, nor would it provide financial resources for the pantry. The Office of Student Involvement donated part of a storage closet to house the pantry, and in April of 2016 the pantry opened on the campus that houses the Human Services program. During the first months of operation, in April and May of 2016, the pantry was staffed by human service student volunteers. Beginning in late May and early June, pantry staffing hours were offered as an internship and service learning opportunity for Human Services students. By the end of summer 2016, pantry workers saw an increase in utilization of the facility by students, staff, and some faculty members. The pantry, which had previously relied on donations from the campus community, partnered with two local food banks in order to provide a more stable supply of food and other items.

By the beginning of 2017, the Food Pantry saw a further increase in use and the need to have a stable labor force became evident. Also, the need to carry perishable items in the pantry became clear. A personal monetary donation from a campus administrator allowed the purchase of a refrigerator to store meat, dairy, and other perishable items. That same semester, the Human

Services department encouraged students in four courses (one service learning and three field placement courses) to address the need for more workers to cover the hours the pantry was open. Students in service learning courses and 1st year practicum classes were asked to work in the pantry and assist clients, while students in their 2nd year practicum courses were asked to take on roles such as management of social media and volunteer coordination. Finally, students in their last year (3rd field practicum) were given the opportunity to work as manager and administrators of the pantry and assist with oversight of needed paperwork, fundraising and grant writing.

By the end of 2017, the Food Pantry had a strong, dedicated workforce, an increase in clients, and a need for a larger space. In 2018, the Food Pantry was granted an additional space by the university, which tripled the size capacity and allowed the purchase of additional refrigerators and freezers. In addition, clothing, including winter coats and much-needed professional attire (for internship and job interviews) was collected for distribution from the pantry. At this time, the Human Services program began offering a Master of Arts in Human Services Delivery and Administration, which required additional internship opportunities for students. This led to a small number of graduate students working with undergraduates in order to run the Food Pantry. The need for the services of the pantry continued to increase and in 2019, the Food Pantry hired its first official employee, a recent graduate of the Human Services undergraduate program. As of now, the Food Pantry is operated completely on donations and grants received.

In 2016/2017 a faculty member from a second campus of the university reached out to the faculty founder of the original pantry about starting a food pantry on their campus. The Human Services department worked with the faculty member and in 2017 a food pantry was opened on the second largest campus. As of 2020, all five campuses have food pantries. The physical space, funding sources, resource offerings and labor pool varies among these facilities.

In 2019, the Gainesville campus Food Pantry became a provider for GNAP (Georgia Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) clients and is able to assist clients in registering for the program. The GNAP program is Georgia's version of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program that provides nutrition benefits to low-income individuals and families. However, due to the regulations and policies in the SNAP program many students do not qualify for assistance. Students who do qualify for these benefits often are not aware that they may apply. In fact, only approximately 20% of college students currently receive SNAP (Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck, 2019).

### ***Description of the Pantry Today***

**Physical Structure.** The UNG Food Pantry is located in the Student Center, which is in the center of the Gainesville Campus. The space used for the pantry was originally a storage closet used by the Office of Student Involvement, and it is situated behind an information desk. Currently, the expanded space is composed of a renovated study room, small staff break room and storage closet, which amounts to approximately 300 square feet of space. (The original space designated for the Food Pantry in 2016 was approximately 75 square feet). The pantry contains seven utility-style shelving units, two standard refrigerators, two deep freezers, and two clothing racks for storing internship/business attire. In addition, a section of the pantry houses a weight scale for food, two carts for curbside delivery, and a small desk for pantry staff.

**Financial Structure.** At UNG, like many other institutions, the operational budget comes from a mixture of donations and grants. The UNG Food Pantry, since it is not financially supported by the university, was set up as a nonprofit organization on campus through the UNG

Foundation. Many of the donations come from faculty, staff and administrators who contribute monthly to the Food Pantry by utilizing pledged donations through payroll deduction. As a general rule, the UNG Food Pantry operates through partnerships with Georgia Mountain Food Bank and Atlanta Community Food Bank. These partnerships allow the UNG Food Pantry to operate by spending on average \$1600 monthly. The monthly payroll deductions allow the pantry to operate even without other donations.

In addition, community donations, in the forms of goods and funding, assist in sustaining the Food Pantry. Grant income has been helpful, but is highly variable year-to-year. Notably, local organizations such as the Rotary Club have been the most helpful and reliable in assisting the pantry, both in funds, product donation, and promotion in the local community.

**Personnel.** The personnel ensuring the efficient running of the pantry include a faculty Director, a graduate student Assistant Director, Interns (150 hours per semester), Junior Interns (15-25 hours per semester), and Volunteers. The Director is responsible for ensuring the pantry has adequate space, securing funding, forming partnerships, recruiting volunteers, and ensuring that the foundation of the pantry is stable enough to continue serving clients. The Assistant Director ensures the day-to-day operations of the pantry are running efficiently and that clients are served effectively. The Assistant Director also performs an array of tasks throughout the year, including forming partnerships with University clubs, promoting the pantry, managing volunteers, ordering supplies, securing delivery of pantry products, ensuring all data is up to date and entered into the appropriate systems, and ensuring the pantry is clean and well-maintained for clients.

Aside from the Director, who is a faculty member in Human Services, students within that academic department fill all other positions. Graduate Assistants serve the role of Assistant Director, while internships are filled by Human Services students. Currently, there are two types of interns: those who require 15-25 hours of field service for class, and those who require 150 hours of field service. In the pantry it is mandatory for students to provide direct services to clients during their internship time, although not all positions require students to be present on campus. There are four internship positions that prepare students for work in a nonprofit setting: Operations Manager, Volunteer Coordinator, Outreach Coordinator, and Social Media Manager. Students are interviewed for these positions, trained prior to their start dates, and assigned their jobs. The 15-hour interns assist the interns with 150 hours, and are typically working directly under them.

Every intern is assigned a job based on their strengths and qualities, and their roles may be expanded during their time in the pantry. Every intern takes a leadership role, while also supervising volunteers, and ensuring the integrity of the UNG pantry is being maintained. The pantry adheres to Human Services ethical standards, and confidentiality is strictly enforced. Volunteers on average typically donate between 10-35 hours per semester, and only stay at most two weeks. Some of the volunteers are not part of the Human Services program and require a confidentiality agreement and training prior to beginning work in the pantry. The confidentiality agreement is for the protection of our clients' personal information and identity. During COVID-19, Food Pantry workers that chose to continue working were given "essential personnel" status so the pantry could continue providing needed resources to the campus community. In addition, this assisted in providing a vital educational moment for Human Services students who will likely be essential workers in their future careers.

**Partner Agencies.** The UNG Food Pantry benefits from partnerships with a number of local agencies and companies, including Atlanta Community Food Bank (ACFB). ACFB

partners with more than 700 nonprofits, including food pantries, community kitchens, childcare centers, shelters, and senior centers. They distribute food to insecure families in 29 counties across metro Atlanta and North Georgia. ACFB is a member of Feeding America, the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity. Georgia Mountain Food Bank (GMFB), through community partnerships, assists in increasing the availability of food supplies of North Georgia, effectively connecting more food to the people who need it. The food GMFB distributes comes through our partnership with the Atlanta Community Food Bank, along with goods donated locally from retailers, manufacturers, distributors and public food drives. The GMFB is the source for the majority of the food our pantry receives.

In addition to working with large food banks, other alliances include a partnership with Kroger grocery stores, which allows customers to choose our pantry as the recipient of accumulated points from shopping towards a monetary donation to the pantry. Additionally, we have a partnership with the South Hall Rotary Club, which raises funds for the pantry through a 5K race. We also have a partnership with a local nonprofit called On My Mother's Shoulders, which provides toiletry items to homeless students. Lastly, the pantry partners with the Human Service Association, a student club on campus, which strongly supports the pantry through their fundraising efforts.

**Services Provided.** Services at the pantry include providing food, both perishable and nonperishable, year round. SNAP applications are available for clients who may qualify for further support outside of the university setting. Winter clothing and business attire are available through the pantry, as these are two items in much demand by college students. Winter clothing is expensive and business attire is needed for internship and job interviews. A multi-page, printed community resource guide, put together by the Human Services students, provides clients who need further assistance suggestions on who to contact to secure additional resources. The pantry also stocks basic school supplies such as scantrons, blue books (needed for many exams), paper, pens and pencils. There is an assortment of hygiene items available for clients, as well as pet food (when in supply).

In an effort to assist the local community, Human Services students developed the concept of offering a Mobile Pantry. By partnering with Georgia Mountain Food Bank, the UNG Food Pantry is able to use a borrowed refrigerated truck and open to the greater community once a quarter. The truck is set up in the commuter parking lot of the Gainesville campus, and members of the community are able to drive-thru and get assistance with needed food items. However, this service has been temporarily suspended due to a lack of needed staff during COVID-19. This service is expected to resume in summer 2021.

**Student Access.** Students, Staff and Faculty of UNG may utilize the pantry at any time. On their initial visit to the Food Pantry, students and staff are required to sign a liability waiver, releasing the university from any liability for accidents that occur in the pantry space, or any adverse reaction a user may have to food provided by the pantry. Pantry users also complete a brief intake form, provide their name and ID number, and are allowed (and encouraged) to collect food adequate to meet the needs of their household for one week. During future visits, the campus community is asked to show their UNG ID card and sign a liability waiver. During normal semester hours, the Food Pantry is open five days a week for approximately 5 hours a day. During session breaks the Food Pantry remains open 3 days a week. However, during COVID-19, the pantry remained open 5 days a week for curbside pick-up.

**Marketing.** The UNG Food Pantry partnered with the Management and Marketing department on campus in order to assist with social media presence and marketing. Currently, the

Food Pantry uses its website, facebook, twitter, and instagram pages in order to communicate with students, staff and faculty. In addition, we are listed as a resource in the student handbook, and participate in all student orientation events with information tables. In the last two years, the Food Pantry has been included in all new student tours on campus. We regularly post fliers throughout campus buildings, as well as outside signage on campus grounds. Human Services interns are assigned the task of keeping social media up-to-date and are asked to post daily when in session.

**Food Pantry Utilization Data**

The UNG Food Pantry keeps detailed records on the usage of its services, including number of clients served and pounds of food distributed (the standard measure of food used by food banks and pantries in the U.S.). Based on the data collected from the inception of the UNG Food Pantry, it grew from serving a few individuals a week when it opened in 2016, to currently serving an estimated 210 clients per month, and distributing on average around 1800 lbs. of food monthly (Table 1). During COVID-19 the Food Pantry has seen an increase in usage and is currently providing the campus community with approximately 3400 lbs. of food, almost doubling usage since the beginning of March, 2020 (Table 2).

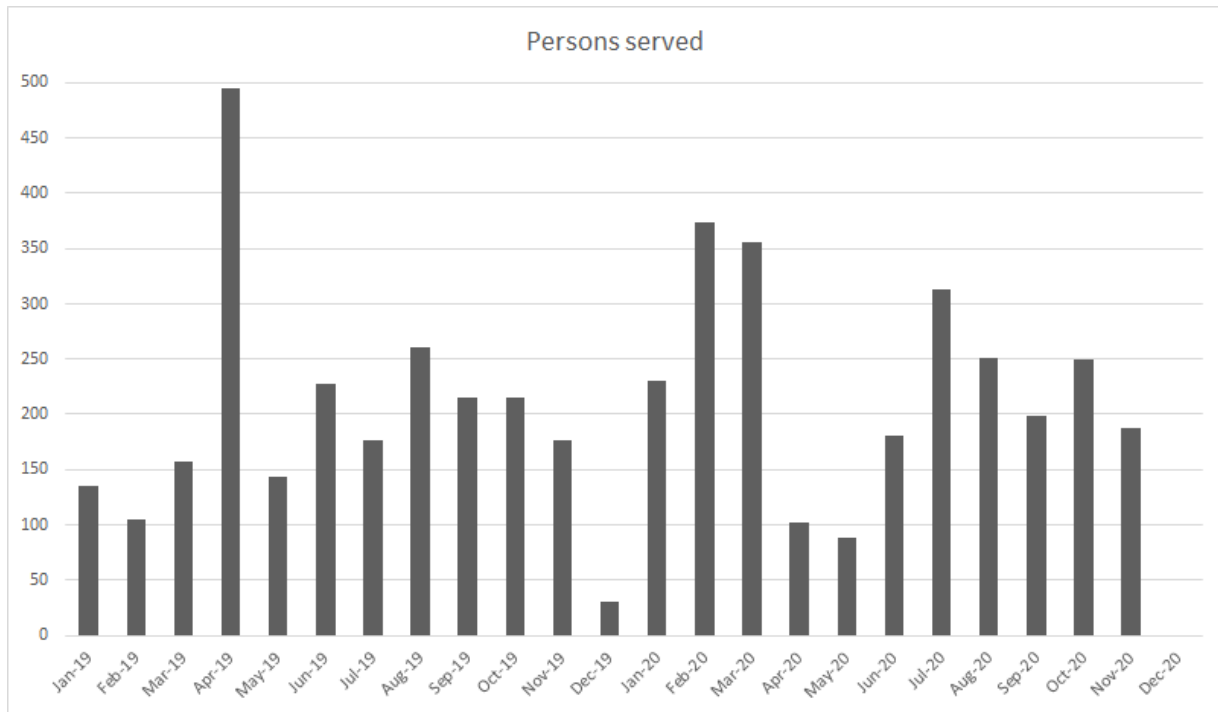


Table 1. Monthly Clients Served by UNG Food Pantry, January 2019 - November 2020





Table 2. Monthly Pounds of Food Distributed by UNG Food Pantry, January 2019 - November 2020

## Discussion

We suggest that one of the primary factors in the successful establishment, growth and maintenance of the UNG Food Pantry is the utilization of Human Services students as the primary labor force. Utilizing student workers from the Human Services department creates a win-win scenario. Human Services students, generally, are a group of giving individuals who are dedicating themselves to meeting the needs of their fellow humans by increasing and improving the quality of care given to others. In this case, they are committing to the remediation of a problem - food insecurity - within their own community. In addition, the Human Services department is able to utilize the UNG Food Pantry as an internship training opportunity to help provide students with an applied knowledge base that will benefit them in their future employment settings. These internships provide students with the hands-on experience of how to run a non-profit organization, from day to day maintenance of the facility and volunteer coordination, to fundraising and promotion, and to assessment of outcomes of the overall program distribution.

Furthermore, the pantry allows the Human Services department to train students at different levels throughout the program. For example, students in the introductory course can participate in service learning hours (15-25 service hours required) and provide direct service to clients. Students within the three upper-level internship courses (150 service hours required in each) can work their way up to administrative positions within the pantry. This allows training at numerous levels of service as students progress through the program. This provides faculty ample opportunities to observe the students in various roles and to gain an understanding of their

personal strengths and weaknesses. Students have a chance to develop and demonstrate their problem-solving strategies, while learning specific helping skills.

For example, one student began working as a 150-hour intern in the pantry during the spring and summer 2018 semesters. She initially began working in this placement in order to gain specific experience in operating a food pantry, having been interested in their operation since having used them as a child. During her first internship she learned a great deal about the amount of effort it takes to keep a pantry running, and learned the difficulty the Pantry had in balancing the need for consistent volunteers with the increasing need for service among students. This is what led her in the Fall of 2018 to apply for a work-study position with the Pantry. It was during this time that she began learning the history of the Pantry, how it originated, how it is maintained, and the challenges the Pantry faced in reaching a larger proportion of food-insecure students on our campus. She was given an opportunity in the summer of 2018 to speak about the Pantry at a 5K benefit race held by the South Hall Rotary Club to help raise funds. She was also given other opportunities to speak about the Pantry to other groups through the Rotary Club, to inform the community about the work the pantry was doing on campus. In the Spring of 2019, UNG hosted the first ever mobile food pantry which served a record number of individuals in need, both on campus and within the greater community. After the success of the first mobile food pantry event, this student was driven to continue hosting other mobile pantries on campus so that both the campus and surrounding community would benefit from the Pantry's services.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many agencies that assisted food-insecure families shut down. Students were not allowed on campus. Fortunately, the student who had been such an involved intern had graduated the December before the pandemic reached north Georgia. She was hired as the first paid employee of the pantry. Through this aligned timing, we were able to continue providing services through the pantry and serve more people than we had prior to the pandemic. This Human Services graduate kept the Food Pantry open four days a week, with the help of one paid employee, and six volunteers. There is no doubt that if her efforts were interrupted, some child, student, senior citizen, or single parent would have gone to bed hungry for multiple nights. This drive and passion is what dedicated Human Services students and professionals bring to our communities.

In addition to providing opportunities for professional growth for Human Services students, the Food Pantry benefits from the labor and dedication of a built-in, committed group of student workers. Unlike many work-study positions, which may or may not align with students' academic or career interests, Human Services students have already decided to enter a helping profession. Rather than perceiving work at the Food Pantry as a chore, many student interns appreciate being involved in a practical application of the concepts they are learning in the classroom, to the direct benefit of their campus and community.

Additionally, the use of these student workers allows the University to provide much-needed resources to struggling members of our campus community without direct financial investment. By tapping into the resources of Human Services students, with their energy, passion, and knowledge of helping others, the UNG Food Pantry allows our community to function effectively by utilizing our own internal resources and providing basic goods and services to our student population and the surrounding community. We consider this to be a true win-win scenario, in that students, the University, and our community benefit from the continued operation of the Food Pantry.

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