

The Big Idea



How can OU students combat hunger on their own campus?

Establish a free food pantry that assists faculty, staff and students alike.

BY KATHERINE PARKER

As you read this are you looking forward to your next meal? Maybe you'll enjoy a hot flaky croissant for breakfast, a fresh salad for lunch or a home-cooked meal for dinner. But did you know, according to the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, that 44 percent of students cut the size of their meals or skip meals entirely because they don't have enough money for food?

Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough food or limited and uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate food. And according to the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, one in six Oklahomans struggles with hunger.

That's why the University of Oklahoma Food Pantry was created — to eliminate food insecurity and ensure that no student ever has to choose between his or her education and having enough to eat.

The OU Food Panty is for all those in need of a little assistance to feed themselves and their families. It doesn't matter if someone is a student, staff member or faculty because inclusion is key.

"Community is at the heart of the pantry. That's why it's important to us that we only require an OU ID to use the pantry. Trust is also so important. We want those we serve to know there is no judgment, no stigma for being here," says Haley Begala, OU Food Pantry student director.

Open since 2017, the pantry began as an OU Student Government Association idea that grew with the support of

Housing and Food Services and the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. Today, the pantry serves approximately 60 to 70 people per week and is open 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It offers a variety of nonperishable items including canned goods, boxed meals, peanut butter, rice and even the occasional toiletries like toothpaste or soap, which come from the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma or donations.

Located in Stubbeman Village, 1113 Elm St., the space is bright and cheerful with murals splashed across the walls — another demonstration of collaboration for the cause.

"So many people across campus have shown support for the pantry. The College of Arts and Sciences painted one of our murals and Housing and Food Services, along with some other campus members, painted a second one. Students from the Innovation Hub even made shelving for the pantry," says Matt Marks, graduate student and pantry adviser. "All of this has played a big part in creating the pantry's welcoming, comfortable atmosphere of acceptance."

Many are familiar with the longtime running joke that college students live

off ramen. But that's exactly why Marks thinks the pantry has so many enthusiastic supporters.

"There's a lot of people who remember eating ramen every day or are still living like that. The pantry is a resource that brings people together to solve the problem of hunger and creates unity through this shared experience," he says.

Begala says her passion for the pantry grew, much like that





One in six Oklahomans struggle with hunger – including OU students. “We want those we serve to know there is no judgment, no stigma for being here,” says OU Food Pantry student director Haley Begala, right, seen here with pantry adviser and OU graduate student Matt Marks.

Hugh Scott

of her classmates, because she saw a side to OU’s community that she had never experienced – no other sorority, student club or volunteer group created the same kind of connection.

“As a student, you typically only see other students, faculty and staff in one role, but at the pantry, people show another side when they are looking for help. They’re more vulnerable. It’s a humbling experience.

“Everyone at the pantry is open and friendly, and new relationships are built weekly. For me, I’ve gotten to know some of

the faculty and staff on a personal level like when they bring their kids with them. If I weren’t part of the pantry, I wouldn’t have gotten to know my community in this way,” she says.

The OU staff also values the pantry for the opportunity it provides to interact with students. Many are brought out from behind the scenes of operations and get face-to-face time with students who often express their gratitude for what staff members bring to the university.

“I feel very welcome and keep coming back,” says Gabriela

Lopez, Housing and Food Services staff.

Lopez has been coming to the pantry for about six months. She first dropped by with a friend and coworker. But she now is confident enough to come on her own.

“Everyone is talking to you and friendly. I can always find what I need,” she says.

Logistically, the pantry receives structure and guidance from Housing and Food Services to help manage funds. But Housing and Food Services Associate Vice President and Director Dave Annis emphasized that students raise all funds themselves and that students make all the decisions.

“It’s their time and energy that has made this successful. I’m very impressed our students were able to organize this, as well as keep it running,” Annis says.

But it hasn’t been easy to raise funds and keep up with the demand. Marks says it’s been possible only through the gener-



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Matt Marks and Haley Begala stock shelves with donated items at the OU student-run pantry, located in Stubbeman Village.

Additionally, students who don’t use all of their meal points can donate them to the organization Swipe to Share, which utilizes these points to purchase items for the pantry.

Bari Creager, a community volunteer from University Lutheran Church, says she is impressed with students’ dedication and encourages others to volunteer.

“It’s fantastic that the university recognizes there is a need, and is helping to make an impact,” Creager says.

“There is no better place for

people to help their community. It’s on campus and it’s safe. And the people who come here are so grateful. I will come back whether they want me to transport supplies or stack boxes. It’s something to be proud of.”

“We want to increase our partnerships, find a way to incorporate fresh produce into our product selection and maybe even move into a bigger space,” Marks says. “But whatever we are able to accomplish, big or small, it’s going to be a success because everyone in the community is playing a role.”

For more information, visit www.ou.edu/foodpantry.

Katherine Parker is a freelance writer from Oklahoma City.

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osity of the Sooner nation.

“Every contribution goes a long way, and we’ve gotten donations from across the country. The more alumni that join us to end hunger on our campus, the better we’re making OU. The better we’re making our students who can focus on the classroom instead of ‘when’s my next meal?’ The better we’re all becoming.”

Recently, the pantry held a fundraising campaign with a goal of \$5,000.

“We raised \$5,005. All of it came from individuals. This money makes it possible for us to continue. It’s critical to our mission, and we’re thankful for every one of our donors,” Marks says.