

## Stepping Up to the Challenge: Human Services Students Help their Community in a Time of Need

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During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, communities in the United States have experienced social upheaval, widespread illness, and economic challenges. Before this pandemic, universities increasingly have been called upon to contribute meaningful development projects within their communities. As a result, universities recognize the need to prepare students to actively apply the knowledge learned in their courses beyond the classroom by assisting and facilitating the development of surrounding communities. Beyond the benefits provided to the community, such engagement also provides students with real-world experience. This opportunity can positively impact student learning and professional development and contribute to the research and teaching programs of the university (Fullerton, 2015).

Human Services programs are two to four-year degree programs at numerous colleges and universities throughout the United States. The National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) characterizes the broad field of Human Services as “uniquely approaching the objective of meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base...and maintaining a commitment to the overall quality of life of service populations” (NOHS 2021). Students in this academic program are required to study and think critically about society's problems while simultaneously assessing their place within the larger social structure. At the heart of these programs are service-learning sequence courses in which students complete service hours in the field.

Through service-learning with faculty supervision, students apply what they have learned in class to real-world settings from the first day in the program. The scope of Human Services programs is broad and encompasses skills that universities can

### ABSTRACT

Research indicates that food insecurity among college students has been on a steady incline. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified economic vulnerabilities, which has led to increased food insecurity among college students due to the closure of campus resources and high unemployment rates in jobs that college students typically hold. Universities have long recognized the need for on-campus pantries and the institutions' role in preparing students to apply the knowledge learned in their courses in real-world settings. This article uses a case study to illustrate how one university worked with service-learning students in its Human Services department to provide food support to the campus community by becoming essential workers during a crisis. This created a sustainable solution to improve the quality of life for an entire university community and provided Human Services students the opportunity for applied experience and professional growth and development.

leverage to fill community needs gaps. The idea of the relationship between Human Services students and community development is simple: students take collective action to generate solutions to common problems. The role of the Human Services student is to have an important voice in helping university communities overcome the barriers to necessary change and provide the energy for transformation, empowering individuals with knowledge, resources, and capacity to strengthen their communities.

COVID-19 has placed Human Services students in the front-line of the pandemic in terms of helping provide numerous essential services in greater demand from the healthcare crisis. One such service area is that of providing food support to the campus community. As part of their future profession, Human Services students often generate community improvement programs and development projects. As part of their coursework, students within the Human Services Delivery and Administration (HSDA) program at the University of North Georgia acquire the knowledge and capacity to offer various resources to help the surrounding community develop solutions and create opportunities to grow and succeed. Students within the HSDA program may choose to complete their service-learning at the campus pantry, which helps the university operate this resource without using state funds. Additionally, these students have the ability to develop and run campus food pantries and have the grant writing and fundraising skills to support a pantry long-term. This creates a sustainable solution to improve the quality of life for the university community.

### **College Students and Food Insecurity**

Over the past decade, food insecurity among college students has been a growing concern, as the number of students reporting hunger has increased. Food insecurity is defined as the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate food or the ability to obtain foods in socially acceptable ways (CUFBA, 2020). The College and University Food Bank Alliance (2020) reports that 30% of college students are food-insecure, 56% of food-insecure students are employed, 75% of food-insecure students receive financial aid, and 43% of food-insecure students are enrolled in some type of meal plan. In addition, 36% of university students and 51% of community college students are housing-insecure, and 14% of students are homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). The growing cost of tuition, medical care, books and supplies, transportation, and living expenses, results in students often having to choose between paying bills or purchasing food. Many students are forced to leave college without obtaining degrees, and most undergraduates who leave college point to financial concerns as the primary cause (Johnson, 2009). Today, students need more support from universities in meeting basic needs than they are receiving. One way of addressing this lack of support is through the emergence of campus food pantries.

### **Food Insecurity during COVID-19**

Research indicates that college students have higher rates of food insecurity than the general population (Bruening et al., 2018). Literature suggests that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 3 college students experienced food insecurity (Laskea et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified economic vulnerabilities, which increased food insecurity among college students due to the closure of campus resources and high unemployment rates in jobs that college students typically hold. The Pew Research Center (2020) states that 46% of adults ages 19-29 were laid off because of COVID-19

in the months following the first known cases of the virus in the United States. Additionally, college students are less likely to have health insurance and cannot afford medical care, especially first-generation college students (Riddle et al., 2020).

Moreover, other key demographic groups, including women, Black and Hispanic adults, adults under 30, and those who have not yet obtained a college degree, are among the most likely to suffer financial hardships, such as the inability to pay for rent or mortgage (Parker et al., 2020). Housing insecurity among college students was emerging as an issue before COVID-19. This pandemic exacerbated the struggle.

Another barrier to food security for college students is that many cannot access federal food assistance programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), due to long-standing student restrictions (Freudenberg et al., 2019). In 2019, the Gainesville campus Food Pantry of the University of North Georgia (UNG) became a provider for GNAP (Georgia Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Georgia's version of SNAP) clients and offered the service of registering clients for the program. However, only approximately 20% of college students currently meet the eligibility requirements and receive GNAP, as the program has strict work requirements that often disqualify students. The GNAP requirement of employment has been particularly challenging for college students to meet during COVID-19. In addition, most research suggests that college students possess a lower level of food literacy. Food literacy is defined as the ability to access, process (food skills), and have a sense of supportive health regarding food systems (Cullen et al., 2015). Collectively, these issues place students in a high-risk category for food insecurity, especially during COVID (Owens, et al., 2020).

### **Intent of this Paper**

This article is primarily a conceptual exploration of the relationship between Human Service students and their community during a time of stress. We use a single case of a campus-based food pantry and its student workers during the COVID-19 pandemic as an illustrative case. While this paper does not make full use of the case study method, as described by Yin (2002), we assert that the example described here illuminates the dynamic relationship between students and the greater community. It may also provide a partial template for other campus groups seeking ways to help their local communities.

### **History and Usage Trends of the Food Pantry at the University of North Georgia (UNG)**

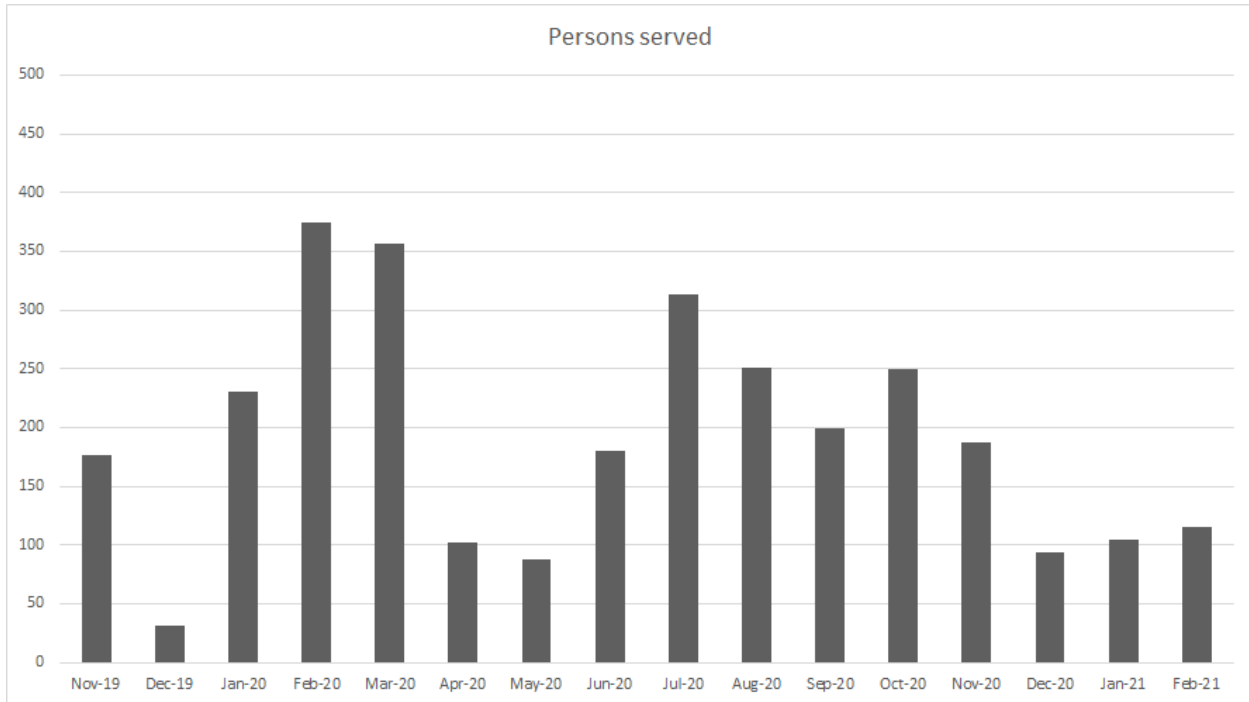
The creation of the UNG Food Pantry was a direct result of the advocacy efforts of faculty and students in the Human Services program on the Gainesville campus of the university. It is not uncommon for students in Human Services programs to come from the same populations that most need direct services, and they have often benefited from the organizations that eventually employ them. In 2015, a faculty member was alerted to classroom efforts to raise money for students in need. The faculty member worked with students to assist in obtaining needed resources. It quickly became evident that food insecurity on campus went well beyond this single student. As a result, an informal Pantry was set up in a faculty member's office and primarily served Human Services students; however, the need for a more formal, larger pantry was clear. Human Services faculty-initiated an effort to establish a formal Pantry and

presented a written proposal to the University's Presidential Cabinet. After a year of research and negotiation, the President's Cabinet granted approval and the Pantry, stocked with shelf-stable items, opened on the Gainesville campus in spring 2016. By the end of summer 2016, pantry workers saw an increase in the facility's utilization by students, staff, and faculty members. The Pantry, which had previously relied on donations from the campus community, partnered with two local food banks 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, and the need to add perishable items became evident.

The Gainesville Campus Food Pantry has now been replicated on 4 of 5 UNG campuses. However, the organizational structure of the Gainesville Campus is, by design, unique. The original vision for the Pantry was that it would be faculty-led but run primarily by Human Services students, including the Human Services Association, a student club on campus. During the first two months of operation, the Gainesville Pantry was staffed entirely by Human Service student volunteers. In late May and early June 2016, Pantry-staffing hours were offered as an internship and service-learning opportunity for Human Services students. This structure provided unique challenges and opportunities but has ultimately been a significant part of the Pantry's success.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many agencies that benefited those who were food insecure shut down. Students were not allowed on campus. However, the UNG Food Pantry was able to have Pantry workers classified as essential workers and continue providing services through the Pantry. As a result, the Pantry served more people than we had before the pandemic (prior to COVID-19, the Pantry served an average of 107 individuals monthly). Essential workers kept the Food Pantry open four days a week, including one paid employee and six volunteers.

## Usage Trends of Food Pantry @ UNG (with COVID-19 period highlighted)



### Changes made during COVID-19 at UNG

When college campuses began to close in March 2020, it became vital for the UNG Food Pantry to remain open for the community. We requested to remain open, and employees asked to be classified as essential workers. Since the pantry is deemed

a nonprofit organization, permission was granted, running as part of the UNG Foundation. As part of the agreement with the University, we were asked to provide curbside delivery only, in alignment with social-distancing protocols. Human Services workers developed an online form that allowed clients to indicate needs specific to their families. The link to the form was placed on all of the Food Pantry's social media outlets and linked to a QR code posted at all entries and exits to the building which housed the Pantry (which had been locked at the beginning of COVID). This solved multiple issues for the Pantry. It allowed us to remain operational during this time of need for our community. It also allowed a more convenient way for individuals to get the items they needed with a greater degree of discretion.

Additionally, the Human Services students gained critical knowledge of how to operate a nonprofit organization on a day-to-day basis. New skills learned included coordinating volunteers, the basics of fundraising and promotion, and assessing outcomes of the overall program distribution during times of crisis. The students also experienced, viscerally, the importance of being an essential worker.

### **Payoff to the Community**

Prior to COVID, the Gainesville Campus Food Pantry of UNG took a very personalized approach to services offered to the community. Typically, first-time clients would be provided with a Pantry tour and were encouraged to select the items they needed. The Pantry on the Gainesville campus is set up to evoke the aisles of a small grocery store, and the ability for clients to "shop" autonomously helps them maintain their dignity at a time when that may be in short supply, given their current circumstances. This approach also allows them to choose items tailored specifically for their family, instead of receiving a generic box of household staples that may or may not be appropriate for their needs.

Feedback gathered from Food Pantry clients indicated the benefit of keeping this resource safely open and available during COVID lockdown. One client, who described herself as a single, divorced mother of two and a full-time college student, shared that she appreciated the setup of the Pantry and the approach of the student workers who helped her.

*The idea that I had some say as to what I wanted to shop for....to select items for what our family really needed was such a foreign concept to me. I was met with a welcoming smile and a tour of the pantry. I was awestruck. I genuinely felt at that moment I got a little bit of my dignity back. I was able to choose what I wanted to put in my bag... I wasn't powerless, it was okay to take an item off the shelf and bring it home. When I would come home and bring the occasional treat here and there it almost felt like a present to the whole family. We would even gather at the kitchen island with appreciation.*

During COVID, although the Pantry was physically off-limits to clients, the personalized approach continued through the clients' use of online forms that allowed clients to "check off" the items most appropriate for their families. The numbers of clients served by the Food Pantry immediately declined (although it did not stop) as soon as the campus was locked down, but picked up again once adjustments were

made to ordering and delivery procedures. Also, the push for greater publicity allowed more community members to become aware of this resource at a time of great need. By mid-summer 2020, the Pantry saw enormous growth in the number of clients served.

### **Payoff to the Essential Service-Learning Student Workers**

As a university-based Food Pantry, we uphold our mission of educating students while continuing to help the community. Becoming classified and serving as "essential" workers during the most significant health threat to humanity in a century presented an extraordinary learning opportunity. One student worker described the situation dramatically:

*Twenty-twenty was ... [a] sudden change in how we operate in day-to-day life. Many clients that were already struggling to make it found themselves in more [desperate] need. I have seen many people come to the food pantry who have a deficit of financial means in some way. That is not to say that they do not work hard, maintain a job, or manage their money wisely, this is because of a bigger issue regarding the economic opportunity available for full-time college students, especially those with families before entering[the] University.*

The same student describes the changes they saw as a result of COVID:

*This pandemic exacerbated this [food insecurity] issue and brought to light many more. With the virus, sending those who had no choice but to work into situations that compromised their life was very disheartening. Many of the people that came into the food pantry were just coming out of quarantine or had just been put on quarantine. Many of those same people do not receive support from family or have a large friend group they could depend on for support. In the pantry, I saw many individuals who did not receive any unemployment, were not eligible for the stimulus, and had no experience of navigating the social support system.*

Another student worker described the experience of working in the pantry during lockdown:

*A typical day in the pantry consisted of working through the various online orders, preparing them for curbside pick-up, and sending out follow-up emails confirming their orders. This would be from the time I opened the pantry to close, and we were open four days a week. The one day of the week we were closed was used to restock the pantry. During the first few months of quarantine, I saw the food bank look almost completely cleaned out, and there was a time when I could not order anything for the pantry. Fortunately, our University of North Georgia community cares about our mission, and we had massive donations. This was most helpful because, without these donations, it would have been impossible to serve the community.*

As educators, we are heartened that our Human Services students not only rose to the challenge of serving their community in times of extraordinary need but that they

clearly articulated the perspectives of Human Services providers that we promote in their courses.

### **Community helping Community**

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 internships, and 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 service-learning students 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. The use of the Human Services program and its students 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 the Human Services program, including student energy, passion, and knowledge of helping others, the UNG Food Pantry allows our community to function effectively by utilizing our internal resources to meet the basic needs of our student population and the surrounding community.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

While the example of the response of UNG Human Services service-learning students does not represent the entirety of crisis intervention or mutual aid in action, it does serve as an illustrative case of what is possible when motivated students work toward meeting community needs. Young adults are initiating calls for significant progress towards mutual aid, social justice, and social equity to take responsibility for caring for one another and to change social conditions. The Human Services students at UNG have united in solidarity-based support to address food insecurity rather than leaving individuals to fend for themselves. This generation of college students has been described as the most educated, socially active, and technologically-driven generation in history (Fry and Parker, 2018). These are all characteristics that drive community development and social innovation. Students working at the UNG Food Pantry have organized this university resource and turned it into a self-directed nonprofit in which all students have the power to influence the mission and vision of the Pantry. This has led to students becoming accountable and responsive to the complex needs of their community.

This effort is the very definition of mutual aid, which Spade (2020) describes as when people get together to meet each other's basic survival needs, with a shared understanding that the systems we live under are not sufficient to do so. Together, the community can meet the needs. Mutual aid efforts often arise during moments of crisis, which is precisely what happened on many college campuses during COVID. At UNG's Gainesville campus, our population is composed of nearly forty-percent racial and ethnic minorities. Gainesville, GA, is considered the chicken-processing capital of the United States; as such, we have a high immigrant and low SES population. Thirty percent of our student population are first-generation students, and another thirty percent receive Pell Grants. Many of our students face homelessness and food insecurities. Students working at the Pantry understand that the situation and social



structure are creating this crisis for our community, not the people suffering under it. This attitude clearly reflects the perspectives of Human Services providers that we articulate in their courses, and the UNG Food Pantry demonstrates that the students have taken this to heart. Students recognize the inequalities on campus, including the high prevalence of food insecurity and the need for action on college campuses.

Utilizing Human Services students is a way to develop grassroots efforts and evaluate strategies on university campuses that assist in filling a gap that is becoming more widespread. Additionally, this experience of responding to the pandemic crisis will prepare Human Services students for future crises and position them to organize and respond when called upon quickly. Our study suggests that Human Services students' intervention on college campuses can assist with such crises and will likely yield a sustained decrease in economic hardships for students, although further study of different cases would be informative.

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