Promising Practices for a Welcoming Campus Pantry

As campus pantries become increasingly common at both two year and four year college campuses, there is an opportunity to gather advice and key learnings from individuals who have been running pantries on their campus. The following recommendations were gathered from campus pantry leaders at colleges in Minnesota in the fall of 2024. Additional resources available to campus pantries are linked at the bottom.

Welcome & Signage:

First impressions can be important for students as they enter a campus pantry space. It is important to ensure that there is a bright, welcoming environment and a low barrier check-in process to help shoppers feel comfortable in the space.

Recommendations:

- Place clear signage and visuals to communicate to students and the broader campus community.
- Consider including murals and postings that align with your campus mascot and/or colors.
- Greet visitors to the space and offer easy information for students to understand the service.
- Ensure external signage includes the name of the pantry and hours of operation.
- Decorate the internal space with bright colors, empowering messages, and plants.
- Use a whiteboard to share information in reciprocal ways: communicating updates to student visitors and also allowing shoppers to provide feedback and suggestions.

Check-in & Data Tracking:

Strike a balance between allowing for low-barriers food access and ensuring that the campus pantry can document its impact and usage to the campus community. Remember that there are many ways to learn more information about the students and who is benefiting from the campus pantry service.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that student data can remain as private and confidential as possible - campus pantries may often ask for data in writing so that information cannot be overheard during check-in.
- Confirm the minimum required information to collect (based on campus, food bank, and or TEFAP requirements) so that check-in data can be as basic as possible and additional questions optional.
- Alternatively, gather basic information at the end of the pantry visit instead of at the beginning.
- Utilize common student information, such as a student ID number, to check-in at the pantry.
- Ensure that an appropriate private setting is available for further conversations or support.
- Develop consistent language about the need for gathering basic information: “Everyone is welcome. Collecting some brief information allows the pantry to access additional food and funds.”
- Provide additional resources that will be meaningful based on your student demographics, including but not limited to community food shelves, SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), community meals, housing support, and work opportunities.

Campus Pantry Infrastructure:

Identifying a consistent pantry location that allows for easy student access as well as the appropriate space and equipment for service can be a critical aspect for the success of the program.

Recommendations:

- Invest in glass door coolers and freezers to create a grocery store feel in the campus pantry.
- Add shelving or bins that display fresh produce in a visually appealing manner.
- Purchase clean and matching shelving to store and display dry goods.
- As space allows, provide carts for shopping with an area for bagging food items to transfer home.

Food Shopping Process:

It is important to consider the ease and flow of the shopping process both for a first time and returning shoppers. While the campus pantry might feel familiar to those working in the space each day, the ways of accessing food might feel confusing to a student who is a first time visitor.

Recommendations:

- Place fresh and whole foods (fresh produce, dairy, meat, and eggs) in the premiere positions at the beginning of the shopping experience.
- When possible, allow for aisles and shopper areas to be at least 4 feet wide to allow for each movement of people, carts, and wheelchair accessibility.
- Place food items on shelves that are easy to reach, not too low or high.
- Put excess foods (back stock items) in a separate room or space so that all food in the campus pantry is available to be shopped by students.
- Organize food in easy, meaningful groups with as few categories as possible that allows for consistent shopper sections and flexibility for food sourcing availability.
- Utilize clear signage to identify food groups and the number of choices that shoppers have in each.
- Identify a “bonus shelf” for items that are harder to move or items in abundance.

Increase Food Access:

As the campus pantry establishes itself and develops, look for ways to be responsive to the needs of the campus community while ensuring program sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Identify campus pantry hours that allow for student access when on campus. Developing a consistent schedule is most important and hours can increase as capacity and support allows.
- If the campus pantry is open when not staffed, ensure that appropriate signage and guidance for food access is present for students.
    - Provide clear check-in guidance and shopping expectations in multiple languages appropriate for your campus community. Determine signage accessible to students with visual impairments.
- If campus pantry hours are limited by staffing, explore opportunities to allow food access outside of staffed hours:
    - Post a sign with a point person to assist with food outside of pantry hours.
    - Allow entry into campus pantry space by a student ID.
    - Explore a vending machine option that can be accessed by a student ID.

Additional Resources:

- University of Minnesota Extension Campus Pantry Website
- Hunger-Free Campus Resources
- FFEN Resources: Food Sourcing Strategies and Student Worker Engagement