

What Schools in the Big 12 and Surrounding Region are Doing to Combat  
Food Insecurity on College Campuses

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## ABSTRACT:

In the past several years awareness of food insecurity on college campuses has increased, this has led to an increase in support from students and administrators alike. Nationwide, roughly 30% of students at two and four year universities experience food insecurity (McCoy *et al.*, 2022). At Oklahoma State University 43% of students experienced food insecurity as of a 2020 survey (Forrest, 2021). As universities in the surrounding region have begun work to reduce these rates, each university has a different approach. This paper is based on a series of interviews designed to learn what different universities are doing to ensure all students have access to the nutrition they need and how that may change moving forward.

## INTRO:

Nationwide college campuses face food insecurity rates of about 30 percent (McCoy *et al.*, 2022). When coupled with the national rate of 10.5 percent of households experiencing food insecurity, an obvious issue arises. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) food insecurity is defined as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle” (*Definitions of Food Security*). Studies show that food insecurity has significant disparities among minority groups McCoy *et al.*, 2022). During the pandemic students aged 18 to 24 were the most likely to experience unemployment, worsening the chances of food insecurity among college students (McCoy *et al.*, 2022).

Students experiencing food insecurity can have a lower GPA than their food secure counterparts (McCoy *et al.*, 2022). Food insecurity can also be a contributing factor in poor attendance and completing assignments (McCoy *et al.*, 2022). Food sources that stretch the dollar are often associated with more processed foods, which can contribute to poor health and obesity (McCoy *et al.*, 2022). It can be difficult to identify the causes of food insecurity, but college campuses have to be innovative in how they approach lowering food insecurity rates while breaking down stigmas.

In the '21-'22 school year I served as the Student Body Director of Food Insecurity at Oklahoma State University, where I had firsthand experience dealing with food insecurity on campus. Oklahoma State was the last campus in the Big XII to have a plan to combat food insecurity, even though 43% of students experienced food insecurity in 2020 (Forrest, 2021). At OSU we have two food pantry systems. They could be compared to a grocery store and convenience store, with one having a more complete shopping experience and the other prioritizing availability and accessibility. Pete's Pantry was started in the fall of 2020 by a student who saw a need on campus and an empty conference room. Pete's Pantry expanded into The Pete's Pantry Network, which operates closer to a convenience store and the grocery store model absorbed the name Pete's Pantry.

## OBJECTIVES:

Serving as the Student Director of Food Insecurity spurred me to inquire with other universities about what they were doing to combat food insecurity on college campuses. The main objective was not to solve any specific issue but rather to explore options for improvement. Having firsthand experience with the issues that face food insecure students at Oklahoma State University, I was curious to find out what those struggles looked like for students in surrounding regions. Drawing parallels between resources offered.

## METHODS:

As food insecurity on college campuses has gained traction in campus conversations, different universities have been innovative and dedicated in combating the issue. From completely student run initiatives to very little student involvement I interviewed leaders asking what various universities in the Big XII and surrounding region are doing to lower food insecurity rates. To learn more firsthand I emailed and interviewed representatives from

- University of Arkansas
- Texas A&M University
- University of Texas
- University of Baylor
- Iowa State University
- Missouri State University
- Texas Tech University
- Kansas State University
- University of Kansas
- Southern Methodist University

To find the contacts for each university, I googled “Food Insecurity “insert university name `””. The only universities that did not respond were Texas A&M, Kansas State University and University of Kansas.

As an initial interview I inserted Oklahoma State University into my search criteria. Since I was the contact the search yielded, a food insecurity researcher in the Department of Agriculture Economics did a mock interview to identify the questions. As I would be interviewing my counterparts at other universities this allowed me to collect a list of questions that discerned the most pertinent information within a reasonable time period. The goal for an interview is to not exceed twenty minutes.

While the interviews were non structured in nature, and could vary organically depending on the person and the statements they made, each subject was asked the following questions.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?
- What is your pantry model?
- How is the stigma surrounding food insecurity different at private universities?
- What is your level of student involvement?
- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?
- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

While most conversations led to other questions being asked, each of the above listed questions was asked to each university, to provide for consistency in results.

## RESULTS:

Oklahoma State University (do we want to do the results for OSU??):

A 2018 study showed 43% of Oklahoma State Students suffered from food insecurity. This spurred a sophomore student to make an accessible resource to students on campus. The Food Insecurity Committee was founded in 2018 and in 2020 Pete’s Pantry was formed with a handful of Student Government Association shelves, donated goods, an empty conference room and a white board reading “Pete’s Pantry”.

From 2020 to 2022 the pantry ran strictly on student donations, operating on a by students, for students model. As the opportunity and resources became available via monetary

donations we were able to expand The Pete's Pantry Network to three total locations across campus. Attempting to serve the student body no matter where they were on campus. In this model we ask no questions and place no limits. Meaning students can take whatever they want whenever they want, provided the building housing the pantry is open. As a result of this we take no data on students, allowing all to retain anonymity, to reduce and be conscious of the stigma that surrounds food insecurity. In the spring of 2022 we became a recipient of a portion of Alpha Gamma Rho's philanthropy efforts, allowing us to expand cold storage and buy inventory that is not frequently donated.

In the spring of 2022 an administrative effort was started to combat food insecurity on campus. Pete's Pantry, located in the downstairs of the student union, is available to students on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, from 10-12 and 12-2, respectively. Students swipe in with their student ID up to twice a month and volunteer shopping assistants help them pick items from the shelves to take back to their housing arrangements. Each of these models helps us have a diversified approach to lowering food insecurity rates and meets students where they are.

### **Missouri State University: Bear Pantry**

I spoke with graduate assistant Sarah Waterman for this interview.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

The pantry was started in 2019 by a graduate social work student, it began as a closet and has grown to be a basement of a building.

- What is your pantry model?

Client choice, members can come in during operating hours to shop. Members weigh items for inventory purposes. Inventory is through donors with the Missouri State University Foundation and the money can be specified to the Bear Pantry. They shop once a week and pick it up at Sams. This allows for consistency in products for members. On campus food drives have a large impact as well. Recently finalized a contract with Ozark Food Harvest, SW missouri food bank, allows them to buy food from the food bank. Started buying food in April 2022. In the nonfood room there are menstrual products, toiletries, first aid, sometimes socks, and dental products.

- What is your level of student involvement?

Student workers help organize the daily tasks while the Graduate Assistants oversee the big picture. Student volunteers can sign up for 2 hour slots each time slot is limited to one volunteer at a time. There is a student who oversees three hydroponic tower gardens for the Bear Pantry.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

Connecting students with SNAP is a high priority. Making sure eligible candidates are using the benefits. Graduate Assistant who is a social work student in that program and making that connection with the Graduate Assistant and the bear pantry. Expanding to potentially a second location and having readily available produce are a priority as well.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Students come down the stairs or the elevator and are greeted by pantry workers. If they have not been to the Bear Pantry before they are given a quick verbal description of how the pantry works and the food room and nonfood room. Students are told to take whatever they need. Most items have limit signs which work on an honor system, if students take more than the suggested limit that is fine. New members are given a reusable bag and encouraged to bring it back the next time they visit. Once they are ready to checkout they use the scale to checkout and fill out the form, which asks for their student ID number, last four digits of their social, their Missouri State Email,

and how many pounds of food they used. Students can use an online form to order their items and receive a text when the food is assembled and ready to be picked up.

### **University of Arkansas: Jane B Gearhart Full Circle Food Pantry**

I spoke with Briana Roden, the chair for the Jane B Gearhart Full Circle Food Pantry.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

Founded in 2011 when Julia Lyon, a student at the time noticed that containers were being taken into the dining halls and filled to be taken home for the weekend. She took it to the people at the Center for Community Engagement. Led to Full Circle Pantry being founded. Later there was a former Chancellor and his wife, Jane B. Gearhart. She acquired the space where the pantry is currently housed, in the kitchen of an old dorm hall. In the first month the pantry was open 12 household members were served, now they serve between 700 and 800 household members each month.

- What is your pantry model?

Client choice. Members come in the lobby and fill out an order form. The volunteers will fill the bags. Typical pantry items are available and laundry detergent, tampons and shampoo when available.

- What is your level of student involvement?

Completely student led, one of six programs under the volunteer action center. The pantry has nine board members, each board member has a different role. Chair, intern for food purchasing, intern for cooking matters, food drives Coordinator, Alternative assistant to run garden and SNAP, Communications Coordinator, Volunteer coordinator, Mobile Food Coordinator, Data and Operations Coordinator.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

The next student board aims to increase awareness on campus and expand the variety of food offered. Whether that be through expanding partnerships or being intentional about purchasing the foods not frequently donated.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Students would walk up to the pantry and the student worker would ask them if they have an online order or a walk up. If they have a walk up order while the volunteer fills out the order form they can browse the lobby where extra food is stored. When the student volunteer returns they ask the member to fill out a form that asks for a student ID number and how many people are in their household. New members have an account created for them and existing members use their existing account. There is an option for students to fill out the mobile services. Which would allow their product to be delivered to a satellite location or lockers right outside the pantry if the student was not available during the pantries open hours. The lockers are open 24/7 and students are asked to pick up their food within a week, otherwise it is placed back in the pantry. If they choose to have it delivered to a satellite location a student worker would deliver it on Thursday or Friday and an email would be sent when it was ready to be picked up.

### **University of Texas: UT Outpost**

I spoke with Valeria Martin, UT Outpost Coordinator.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

In 2016 UT Outpost was born when it became apparent students living off campus did not have enough to eat. There was a pantry in West Campus, an area where lots of students live, that was

supported by a church. The university took note of the high volume of students visiting the pantry and knew something had to be done. In 2017 the first coordinator for the position was hired and in 2018 UT Outpost had its first soft opening. The name was chosen by students, the university wanted to be intentional in making students feel comfortable in the space.

- What is your pantry model?

UT Outpost is a shopping model. The intent is for the space to model a store where students can come and shop for their items. Students are recommended to visit once a month and take 20 pounds of food. This is a loose limit. Students are welcome to take 10 pounds of food twice a month or if they need more than 20 pounds per month, students are encouraged to take what they need.

- What is your level of student involvement?

“The intent is for the pantry to really feel owned by the students.” There is a full time staff member who runs the space and a graduate assistant who works alongside the staff member. Five students sit on a student leadership board, holding paid positions. Each student has a specific role. The positions are: Daily Operations, Career Closet Student Leader, Food Pantry Student Leader, Sustainability Student Leader and Outreach Student Leader. These students work the front desk on a daily basis alongside volunteers.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

Post-pandemic many students were not on campus to be aware the resource exists. Moving forward with students on campus the goal is to make sure each University of Texas student knows about the UT outpost. The student board aims to be intentional about tabling, pop-up events as they call them. The allergen friendly foods seem to be flying off the shelves the quickest, in the future they want to be intentional about what foods they are purchasing while being mindful of serving the international student body. “Help students feel more at home that aren’t necessarily from here.” Having a delivery option for students who cannot get 20 pounds of food to their residence is a possibility in the future too.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Students walk in and see the career closet and a front desk where a student leader is present to welcome students. Student leaders are trained to welcome students and instruct them on how the space operates. If students are going to use the career closet they are asked to fill out a liability form, and if they are headed to the pantry they do a quick check-in process where they fill in their student ID, if they are a part of a housing group on campus, sharing their name is optional. If it’s their first time to visit they receive a new tote bag. New users are shown the pantry and cold storage room and told the general guidelines for the pantry. Once students are done picking up the items they need, student leaders check them out and weigh their items.

### **Baylor: The Store**

I spoke with Scott Alexander, the graduate apprentice for Food Security/The Store at Baylor.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

A faculty member in the school of Education has a long-term interest in food insecurity. He was doing research on food insecurity at private four year universities. His work with his graduate students caught the eye of stakeholders at Baylor and in December of 2017 The Store was founded. Graduate students started the Fridge Project around the same time, aiming to place small fridges around campus and fill them with food.

- What is your pantry model?

Maximizing student agency and minimizing barriers to students being able to access the resources they need. The Store is currently partnered with Central Texas Food Bank. There are certain accountability requirements in place to partner with a regional food bank. Students have to fill out an intake form, which can limit student agency. Once the intake form is complete students can visit however often they choose. There are suggestions on the shelving to guide shoppers on how much to take but they are encouraged to take what they need. "Take what you need, we will figure out on our end how to replenish our inventory."

- How is the stigma surrounding food insecurity different at private universities?

Yes it is different but they are working to make it a resource just like tutoring or any other on campus resource would be considered. In one conversation, a shopper was relieved to not be the only one on campus struggling with food insecurity. The stigma surrounding food insecurity is part of why it is called "The Store". If a student tells their friends they are going to the store, there is no inclination it is a food pantry.

- What is your level of student involvement?

Transitioning out of a pandemic the level of student involvement is being revamped. Numerous student orgs have reached out expressing an interest in running a donation drive. Students are used as workers in the store and a recent partnership with the Student Government Association has helped increase the level of student engagement and involvement.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

They recently made the decision to hire a full time coordinator position for the store, basic needs would be included in the role. Thinking about the transportation barrier students may face to access the store and the limitations of current operating hours. Expanding operations that may have closed down due to cleanliness issues following covid to allow more students to access nutrition. The store entrenching itself into university life is a priority in coming years.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Assuming the student in question is already certified, they walk in and use a card swipe to open the door. They walk in and see the refrigeration units and frozen goods, next to it is the grab and go wall of items. There are also items to create a more substantial meal and personal and feminine hygiene products. There is a dialog box to submit requests for different items. There are wire baskets with fruits and vegetables. Once the student is done shopping they leave. The card swipe is used to gather aggregate data, telling the story of the pantry while prioritizing students' privacy. The data helps see what student groups utilize the pantry the most. Moving forward "getting a broader scope and more voices from our students around the issue. So we really understand, get a better understanding of what this issue looks like, who it's affecting, how it's affecting them and how we can better respond to them."

### **Iowa State University: Students Helping Our Peers (SHOP)**

I spoke with Megan Lampright, Students Helping Our Peers Co-President.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

In 2010 students from the SSN Learning Community at Iowa State, a food science, human nutrition program at Iowa State, founded the food pantry as part of a class project. In 2011 SHOP opened its doors in the food science building on campus. By 2020 it had been moved to a full size classroom and partnerships began to develop.

- What is your pantry model?

The pantry closely resembles a grocery store. There are grocery baskets available, reusable bags are an option, and shoppers can choose their own items. Once they are done volunteers check

them out and count their food items. Food is weighted for data collection. No data is taken on the students, only on how much food was used in a trip.

- What is your level of student involvement?

Students are integral in keeping the pantry open. Recruiting members at club fest, hosted in the fall and spring, helps keep volunteers in the pantry.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

Increased awareness on campus, partly due to partnerships with the athletic department. Every tackle the football team made, the Iowa Farm Bureau made a \$25 donation, up to \$15,000. The executive team was able to go to a basketball game to receive the \$15,000 dollar check.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

You would walk through the doors and to the right there is a wall full of additional information and calendars with meal ideas. If you did not bring your own bag there are shopping carts. The signage in the isleways helps direct users to the food they prefer. All the cold storage is at the back of the room, similar to a grocery store. Once users are finished shopping they head to check out where volunteers weigh the food.

- As the longest running pantry system I interviewed for, how have you sustained success as a student run pantry?

“It kind of all goes back to what our mission...who we are as a student organization. So we're just wanting to engage with anti-hunger advocates and serve the student population at Iowa state university by increasing hunger awareness and food insecurity.”

## **Southern Methodist University**

I spoke with Elsie Johnson, Director of Student Advocacy and Support.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

Administration began to notice an issue among the student body and wanted to address the issue of students feeling too vulnerable to outright ask for help. A donation was made around the same time, funding the pantry pilot.

- What is your pantry model?

In order to make sure students did not feel singled out there is no intake process, it is located in the central library. The space is open late into the night and accessible to students. Students visit the Fondren Library Main desk and check out a pantry key and are given a reusable bag if they do not have one already. Students are encouraged to only access the pantry once a week but are able to visit more often if needed.

- How is the stigma surrounding food insecurity different at private universities?

The stigma is present everywhere but it manifests differently at SMU. The significance in shame and the juxtaposition between students who have needs and do not. The students who have a need look around the parking garage and question whether there is a resource for them in a place where everyone else has incredibly nice vehicles.

- What is your level of student involvement?

Students host food drives and there is a graduate assistant who has responsibilities involving the pantry. Student Senate recently passed a resolution to incorporate Swipe Out Hunger, a meal swipe donation program, on campus.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?



Numerous partnerships across campus to make the pantry a lower barrier, fuller stocked resource for students.

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Students visit the main library front desk and ask for a key. There is only one key for student privacy. A reusable bag is provided if the student does not have one. In the pantry there is a pamphlet with additional resources on campus and a comment card, where students can leave food requests or leave a note. Recipe cards are available to help students utilize the raw materials in the pantry. Gift cards to the grocery store are available to pantry users as well.

### **Texas Tech University: Red Raider Food Pantry**

I spoke with Preethi Kasilingam, who oversees the Red Raider Food Pantry, for this interview.

- How did your pantry get started and what made you aware of the need on campus?

The pantry was started in 2017 when a space became available for the need apparent on campus.

- What is your pantry model?

The pantry is in a small space in a far off building on campus. This is limiting for obvious reasons but students will come up to the pantry, where they are greeted with an iPad with an intake form. This covers students basic information like international or domestic and if they have any specific dietary needs. The pantry hands out bags with different food options. Options are: Gluten Free, vegetarian, Raider Red, Matador. Students pick the bag and workers stuff the bag and hand it back to the student. Custom bags are an option but students typically pick through what they do not want and put it in bins to go back into the pantry. The bags are preselected, moving forward the pantry is looking to move to an online shopping system, similar to Baylor. This would allow the experience to be more personalized moving forward for students, make it easier to keep track of inventory, and ensure a stocked pantry. .

- What is your level of student involvement?

The pantry is highly student driven with students doing their part to keep the pantry stocked. Numerous organizations will have food drives, along with departments and office spaces.

- How do you see your pantry evolving and changing moving forward?

“In ten years...I would hope we'd be in a bigger space, but I think we would be put together with other resources on campus... Kind of what I envision as a resource center.” This could include things like financial aid, student concerns, rise office, a scholarship office and potentially a space for clothing. “A big resource center where all of the resources on campus would be in one convenient spot for students to access.”

- Walk me through what it's like for a student to use your pantry?

Students walk in and fill out an intake form, no name is required, just their Student ID number, email, what type of student they are, whether they are single or living by themselves and if they have any long term needs. Knowing long term needs can help the pantry connect them to the student concerns office to assist students in location resources to improve their situation. Students will then pick their pre-packed bag option and be asked if they would like fresh peppers or eggs in their bag if they are available.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The similarities and differences presented in the interviews were typically along the same lines. Each university wanted to offer a resource to students that kept them well fed and welcomed in the space. Differences were in student involvement, partnerships, availability of fresh product and cold storage. The private universities of Baylor and Southern Methodist University, painted

the differences between the students who drove expensive vehicles and those who struggled to make ends meet as stark. When students at those universities learned they were not the only ones struggling to make ends meet, relief was apparent. Each university struggled to remove barriers to students accessing the food, whether it be through hours opened, food limitations, or intake forms. These barriers were oftentimes byproducts of the spaces the pantries were housed or stipulations of stakeholders or food donors, in the case of Baylor. The longest running operation was at Iowa State University, being open since 2010, and completely student run. According to Megan Lampright, “It kind of all goes back to what our mission...who we are as a student organization. So we're just wanting to engage with anti-hunger advocates and serve the student population at Iowa state university by increasing hunger awareness and food insecurity” is the secret to their sustained success.

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