

Food pantries for hungry students spread at California colleges

By Alexei Koseff akoseff@sacbee.com

Freedom Allison arrived at Sacramento State in late August for the start of fall semester with two weeks to go until her next food assistance benefit from the state's CalFresh program.

After setting aside rent for a new apartment, furnishing her room and buying books, she had little money left for food. Welcome snacks provided by her housing complex helped in the first week; then she bought a bag of chicken to mix in with rice she brought on the move from Redding. She stretched out the simple combination for meal after meal.

So by the time Sacramento State's new student food pantry opened on Sept. 15, Allison was hungry. Walking to class, she noticed a flier advertising the grand opening and felt such a sense of relief that she ran all the way there.

"I've never been so excited to see a can of chili in my life," she said, reflecting recently on the difficult transition to campus life.

Allison, a 48-year-old grandmother returning to California State University, Sacramento, after one previous semester in 2011 and more than two decades in and out of community college, is not your typical university junior. But her experience with hunger resonates broadly at campuses across the country.

The College and University Food Bank Alliance, which began in 2013 with about a dozen schools, now has 223 members. Co-founder Nate Smith-Tyge said he gets queries every week from university administrators who are becoming aware that "there has always been this hidden population of students dealing with food insecurity" or groups of students feeling "the overall crunch of the cost of attendance going up."

Eight California State University and nine University of California campuses operate student food pantries.

The full extent of the problem is unknown, but a 2014 survey of undergraduates at the University of California found that 26 percent of respondents skipped meals "somewhat often" or "very often" to save money.

Eight California State University schools and nine UC campuses, including Davis, now operate food pantries, and both systems launched initiatives this year to track the extent of student hunger. At least two dozen community colleges in the state, among them Cosumnes River College, also have pantries.

Video: Sacramento State students struggle with hunger



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Freedom Allison, a junior who transferred to Sacramento State this year, relies on food assistance and a new pantry for hungry students to eat. (Video by Alexei Koseff)

At Sacramento State, student government leaders first raised the idea about two years ago and ultimately provided more than \$20,000 to get the program started, according to Davin Brown, the university's director of student engagement and outreach.

"The notion of the starving college students is not a new phenomenon. I think it's something that we just swept under the rug as being a cliché," she said. "Now we're beginning to recognize that that struggle is not normal."

Brown oversees the food pantry, which operates Tuesdays through Thursdays out of a small room in an athletic building away from the center of campus. Supported largely by donations, a student manager visits the Sacramento Food Bank each week to keep the shelves stocked.

Needy students can visit the pantry up to once per week. They receive 16 points to spend on nonperishable items and toiletries that range in value depending on how long they will last, from 1 point for a bag of chips or a cup of applesauce to 3 points for a box of pasta or pancake mix.

"That allows students to eat more than once," Brown said. "They can eliminate the amount of stress associated with eating as they prepare for their academics."

Allison, an economics major interested in green technology and helping cities manage their resources, said she finds it difficult to take notes or participate in class when she's hungry.

Once your stomach starts growling, you're not thinking.

Sacramento State junior Freedom Allison

"Once your stomach starts growling, you're not thinking," she said. "It's very discouraging."

She estimates that she can get \$25 worth of groceries from the food pantry – tuna, mixed vegetables, sausage gravy, Cheez-Its – which she supplements with trips to the dollar store or Walmart. She said it stretches her money further so that she can buy better and healthier food.

"Shopping on a budget, especially a low-income one, is tough," she said. "Do you know how fat I would be if all I had to eat was Top Ramen?"

It's most important for Allison to be able to bring lunch onto campus, where even the fast-food options can cost \$8 or \$10. Eating out every day would consume an entire week's worth of her \$189 monthly food benefits from CalFresh.

Yet she's been reluctant to use the food pantry every week.

"Because I have some money, and others have none," Allison said.

Brown and the food pantry have become one of her major support systems at Sacramento State – another is her new faith-based show on the campus radio station, where she plays Christian music and shares advice on Friday nights – but the visits can still wear her down.

“It’s not easy going there, telling people that you need food,” Allison admitted. “I come from a hardworking family. I’ve been working since I was 12.”

Smith-Tyge, who is also the director of the Michigan State University Student Food Bank, said operating out of a college can help break down that stigma for students. Not only does it eliminate the transportation challenges of getting to a community food pantry, he said, but it also makes the service feel like a normal part of campus life.

Michigan State’s food bank, which may have been the first of its kind when it opened in 1993, has been getting 4,000 annual visits in recent years, Smith-Tyge said. More than half are from graduate students, many of them international, who are trying to support their families.

“People view it as no different than going to the financial aid office or going to see a counselor in the academic advising center,” he said.

50 average number of daily visitors to Sacramento State food pantry

Sacramento State is still working to reach that level of awareness. Brown said more than 400 students have used the food pantry at least once since its launch, while average attendance has leveled off to about 50 per day.

On Monday, the program hosted its first fresh-food giveaway outside the student union, with plans to make it a monthly occurrence. The boxes of potatoes and spinach drew curious passers-by, most of whom had never heard of the pantry.

First in line was Allison, who waited eagerly as volunteers finished setting up the booth. Looking forward to a salad, she filled her green reusable grocery bag with lettuce.

Video: How the Sacramento State food pantry works



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Davin Brown, Sacramento State's director of student engagement and outreach, explains the new food pantry on campus. (Video by Alexei Koseff)

Alexei Koseff: [916-321-5236](tel:916-321-5236), [@akoseff](https://twitter.com/akoseff)

How to donate

Cash: Make check payable to Associated Students Inc. with the memo: ASI Food Pantry Donation, and deliver to ASI offices at the student union or mail to Davin Brown, Associated Students Inc. at Sacramento State, University Union, 6000 J St., Sacramento, CA 95819-6011.

Food: Unopened and unexpired items needed include canned goods, such as tuna, chicken, beans, peanut butter, soups, chili, stew, fruits, vegetables, pasta sauce; dry goods such as granola bars, cereals, crackers, pasta and rice; and toiletries such as toothpaste, brushes, soap, shampoo and feminine products. Deliver to ASI Hot Spot on the first floor of the student union from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Source: Associated Students Inc., Sacramento State