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Overview of Project

It can be disturbing to think that the student sitting next to you is hungry simply because they do not have food to eat, however this is the reality for many college students, and the problem is getting worse. Hunger and food insecurity are realities everywhere – especially on community college campuses.

Today’s college student faces serious financial challenges. As the cost of education rises, more students must live on a shoestring budget. Over 70 percent of SouthArk students receive financial assistance. Many are nontraditional students and/or have children. Many of them work part-time and are not eligible for government assistance. Union County has a population of 40,334 with 20 percent living below the federal poverty level. The average federal tax liability for Union County residents is below 800 dollars annually.

According to Journal of Poverty, food insecurity in student populations has a negative impact on student GPA, with undernourished students performing in the 2.0 to 2.49 range while those with easy access to food fair in the 3.5 to 4.0 range. Data suggests that food insecurity is an issue for a large percentage of community college students which can have a devastating impact on academic performance.

Purpose of Project

The 2018-2019 Community Service Project provided Phi Beta Lambda (PBL) at South Arkansas Community College (SouthArk) opportunities to Create, Lead, and Inspire. Since the members experience great success with the Career Closet, they voted to add a Food Pantry to help SouthArk students, employees, and their friends and family avoid food insecurities. Although the focus is on students, SouthArk employees and members of the surrounding community are encouraged to obtain supplies from the Food Pantry and Career Closet.
Statement of Project Goals

Sigma Epsilon members believe in service, education, and progress and strive to incorporate all three into each of the chapter’s activities. When members selected the Food Pantry and Little Food Pantries (LFPs) as its community service project for the year, they developed specific goals for the project. These goals are to:

- Provide food, recipes, and educational resources to students and employees to help them eliminate food insecurity on a local level.
- Demonstrate the importance of community service and encourage all members to incorporate community service into their lives.
- Establish Little Food Pantries around campus to ensure food is readily available to SouthArk students between classes.
- Develop a marketing campaign that reaches everyone at SouthArk and those in the community at large.

Service to Community and Its Citizens

SouthArk PBL wanted a community service project that would encourage all members to participate. The Food Pantry built a foundation for long-term participation and convinced more people in the school and community to become involved. Over 95 percent of PBL members participated in this project in one form or another. Over 1,500 hours of member involvement were contributed in planning the project, updating the facilities, obtaining donations, organizing the items, and marketing the project.

The project also gave students an opportunity to work in a business-like environment, network with the community, and apply many of the concepts learned in their business classes. The project provided students with opportunities to become involved in leadership roles while working with the college and community in order to establish a caring atmosphere, easing the economic circumstances faced by students and their families.
More importantly, both students and employees not affiliated with PBL have become involved in various ways such as volunteering in the Food Pantry and Career Closet, providing food donations, and sharing information with those in need. Unsolicited donations received from FBLA groups, Girl Scouts, local churches, and civic organizations brought new networking opportunities to PBL members and allowed stocking of the Food Pantry and four Little Food Pantries located throughout campus that provide students with a quick snack or small meal between classes.

Planning and Development of Project

Planning

Members began brainstorming ideas for a community service project during the 2017-2018 National Leadership Conference in Baltimore, MA. While assisting students with food insecurities was a preconceived topic many expressed enthusiasm about, exactly how to accomplish this had not yet been determined. As members researched the topic, it was discovered that over 600 colleges across the United States had implemented some variation of the food pantry concept to assist students suffering from food insecurity. Members also discovered a novel approach for extending the reach of a lone food pantry in the Little Food Pantry (LFP), a model developed by Jessica McClard in 2016 in Fayetteville, Arkansas, whereby food is placed in small dispensaries at various locations, encouraging passersby to “take what [they] need, leave what [they] can”. Members agreed on a plan to incorporate both ideas into the community service project.

Development

Once the initial plans were laid, members obtained permission from SouthArk President, Barbara Jones. Running a food pantry is a significant undertaking that requires careful planning and a dedicated team of leaders and volunteers. The first item of business was to establish a Food Pantry Advisory Committee consisting of administrators, faculty, and consultants who would provide assistance and
guidance to PBL members. Members and advisers personally invited a diverse group of SouthArk employees to serve on the Food Pantry Steering Committee. SouthArk professor, Dr. Ken Bridges, was designated as the Food Pantry ‘expert’ due to his experience with organizing food donations in the past. Campus involvement in the project was paramount and efforts were made to include as many departments as possible. Below is an alphabetical list of the members and their positions.

**Food Pantry Steering Committee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title or Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ken Bridges</td>
<td>History Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindy Farley</td>
<td>Programming and Outreach Librarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mani Haynes</td>
<td>Director of Radiologic Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Howell</td>
<td>Director of Upward Bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Cynthia Meyer</td>
<td>Director of Occupational Therapy Assistant Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra Muñoz</td>
<td>College &amp; Career Pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Reaves</td>
<td>Counselor/Advisor of Career Pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Spicher</td>
<td>Director of Education Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karsten Tidwell</td>
<td>Instructor, Automotive Services Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna Tracy</td>
<td>Case Manager for ACAP Academic &amp; Career Achievement Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The committee met with PBL representatives to help establish a timeline and offer guidance on project organization. Accepting the suggestions of the committee, PBL members divided into groups to work on various aspects of the project, which included one group working with the Food Pantry, one with the Little Food Pantries, and one with developing a marketing plan.

The group working on the Food Pantry quickly began developing a list of goals, of which cleaning and sanitizing the kitchen space that would serve as the headquarters for donations and distributions was top priority. They also determined the space would need repairing and upgrading and shelving would be necessary to store the food items. The group responsible for the Little Food Pantries had two major tasks before them – one was obtaining four newspaper dispensers for housing the food in various locations across campus,
which would then need to be sanitized, and the other was organizing a campus-wide design contest for decorating the Little Food Pantries. This was viewed as an opportunity to introduce PBL’s plans to the SouthArk campus and encourage involvement from the student body while benefitting from design ideas that would appeal to passersby.

The final group was busy developing a marketing plan for the Food Pantry and the LFPs that would introduce the community service project to the faculty, staff, and students. The students organizing the design contest joined the marketing team to assist in designing flyers and advertisements for social media. PBL members attended Student Government Association meetings to provide updates on the project. It was also important that the student body be made aware of the Food Pantry as a valuable resource available to them even before it had officially opened.

**Implementation of Project**

Implementation of the Food Pantry presented many challenges initially; however, the Steering Committee’s advice proved to be an invaluable resource. All SouthArk students and employees received emails introducing the 2018-2019 PBL community service project. Food donation boxes were placed in six different buildings on campus with posters and flyers stating their purpose and giving information regarding the project. Members were tasked with checking the boxes on a weekly basis and collecting the donations that were left. As the holiday season drew closer, members decided to host a special Holiday Food Drive which resulted in a remarkable turnout, garnering contributions of over 1,500 food items. Plans were made to use the items received in Holiday Baskets for Thanksgiving as a means of broadening awareness of the Food Pantry; unfortunately, the onset of the flu season coincided with this time period, resulting in only 3 people participating.
The team responsible for the Food Pantry began their task of preparing the location. Three members met with the Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Derek Moore, and requested funds to purchase commercial shelving, which resulted in three units being ordered. Two SouthArk staff maintenance workers assisted students in assembling the shelving units while others on the team focused on cleaning the facilities in preparation to receive donations. Having accomplished their goal sooner than expected, they shifted their focus to the future and began formulating a list of duties that would be necessary to maintain the space and keep it in good working order.

At the same time, the team responsible for the Little Food Pantries began their work of preparing the dispensaries. After a campus-wide competition, a winning design was selected. Members cleaned the dispensaries and prepared them for painting and the addition of decorations. Once the dispensaries were completed, they were donned with signs saying, “Take What You Need, Leave What You Can”. High traffic areas on campus were selected as locations to place the dispensaries and snack items and quick meals were placed inside. Contact information and a brief explanation of the services offered at the Food Pantry were also placed at the dispensary sites for individuals or families in need of additional food items.

The team working on marketing began designing a series of surveys to determine the most effective ways of marketing the Food Pantry and to monitor the spread of awareness of its existence. After receiving administrative approval, surveys probing on-campus awareness of the project were distributed via SouthArk’s email roster, asking students and faculty how many had visited the Career Closet and if they were aware of the Food Pantry and/or the LFPs. This was followed by another survey distributed to alumni, asking if they were familiar with the Career Closet or Food Pantry, and if they would consider supporting PBL’s efforts to provide food or business attire for SouthArk students. Both initial surveys indicated that very few were familiar with the Career Closet or the Food Pantry, however the amount of feedback, which included over 30 alumni working in local businesses, indicated that enthusiasm existed. The surveys
themselves served to spread awareness of the Food Pantry program, prompting members to deem them highly effective as a marketing tool.

Further efforts were undertaken to market the project with a focus on raising awareness of the Food Pantry and encouraging students to visit, volunteer, or receive assistance. Much publicity was generated via non-PBL affiliated SouthArk staff who received informative brochures, ads, flyers, and fact sheets created by PBL members to hand out to their students (see Appendix).

By utilizing the Career Closet database, a PBL project from a past year, members have access to an accurate record of donors and inventories for both projects. The database delivers information quickly for sending invitations and thank you cards. Members continue to work on designing more efficient and informative handouts to meet the needs of Food Pantry visitors. Some consist of simple recipes that use the supplies available in the Food Pantry, which helps students use the supplies provided even if they are not experienced cooks. Other handouts list 50 common cooking and baking substitutions. One member is working on a small basket of food coupons to include in the information distributed. The members continue to focus on providing something helpful to everyone who visits the Food Pantry.

**Uniqueness of Project**

The LFPs are unique for South Arkansas and while the concept itself is borrowed, the idea of placing dispensaries filled with quick foods on college campuses that serve as both food distributors and donation acceptors is an exclusive conception. SouthArk PBL has also experienced an unprecedented amount of support from non-PBL members, both students and faculty, which has provided opportunities to raise awareness of both the challenges economically disadvantaged students face, and PBL’s role in community service. To date, over 35 non-members have volunteered more than 500 hours, many of these hours...
resulting from people wanting to help before or after classes, and PBL membership numbers have risen as students learn about the principles the organization stands for. This enthusiasm has served as encouragement for PBL members working on the project and has inspired others to take a more active role.

The Food Pantry project has also presented a unique opportunity for students to put the skills learned in their various business and technology courses to practical use. Project coordinators use SignUp.com (formerly VolunteerSpot) to design and coordinate scheduling to ensure that the Food Pantry is always available to those in need. The site allows the creation of work calendars and time slots which can then be selected by anyone with access to an internet connection. The service also provides the volunteer with an account of service hours worked, access to online waivers, and a reminder of scheduled dates and times. PBL members are tasked with sending out emails on a periodic basis to the student body with a link to the site.

Additionally, members expand their technological literacy through the use of scheduling software for coordination of Steering Committee meetings, and utilize their management skills as they record, transcribe, and distribute meeting minutes. This, along with the many flyers, ads, brochures, and posters, provides the opportunity for members to utilize desktop publishing and graphic design, and to build confidence in their abilities so they will be well prepared when they take their place in the workforce.

The community service project has also opened new opportunities for students to interact with local businesses, community members, and state affiliated satellite organizations. Networking and encouraging involvement from the community have reinforced the need for skills in communicating professionally and confidently. The Union County Cooperative Extension Service, an affiliate of the University of Arkansas, is an organization that promotes economic well-being through non-formal education. They have played an enormous role by providing PBL with handouts for planning meals on a
budget, satisfying the project goal of providing food related resources to those who choose to utilize the Food Pantry service. Other local organizations have made substantial donations to the Food Pantry. One civic organization sent over 2,000 items including full-sized bottles of cleaning supplies, detergent, and personal hygiene products. Camp Fire Club #62 collected items independently and surprised the Food Pantry volunteers with their delivery. The largest donation to date was from the Charles-McDonald Area Women’s Missionary Society, who reached out to SouthArk after hearing about the project. These local organizations have provided PBL members with a unique opportunity to build relationships that will enable them to be effective and productive members of the community.

**Impact and Benefits to the Community**

The establishment of the Food Pantry and LFPs has the potential to affect many lives in Union County and the surrounding areas. According to co-founder of the College and University Food Bank Alliance, Clare Cady, food insecurity is a threat to student success on college campuses and can negatively affect academic performance, wellness, and behavior. All of these factors have a bearing on student retention and completion rates. Since Arkansas colleges are funded based on completion rates, the impact can have serious consequences on a large scale. SouthArk had 2,867 students this year with over 70 percent receiving some form of financial aid. Many SouthArk students are first generation college attendees as well as single parents. Providing services to those in need increases the likelihood of graduation, benefitting the student, the college, and the community as a whole. With this in mind, SouthArk PBL developed and adopted the following mission statement:

“*The Sigma Epsilon Food Pantry assists SouthArk students and their families by providing free, accessible, and nutritious food. The pantry strives to promote student success by providing resources so students may focus on their academic careers and achieve success at South Arkansas Community College without the barriers of fighting hunger or food insecurities.*”
When students lack the resources to eat or feed their children, they are often faced with the dilemma of making a sacrifice. They must choose between continuing their education or finding ways of obtaining or providing sustenance for themselves and their families. Many times, this leads to the abandonment of their educational goals and reduces their chances of becoming financially independent in the future. Since January of this year, the Food Pantry has served 26 different students with food donations, many of them returning as volunteers as their circumstances allowed. The SouthArk PBL chapter believes that assisting those in need will increase the chances of academic success, leading to better employment options in the future.

The LFP placed on SouthArk’s East Campus is located near the Adult Education classroom and receives a high amount of traffic. The dispensary is frequently empty necessitating daily replenishment. One instructor reported that students were initially hesitant to use the LFP, but she asked them to place her donation into the dispensary, and they realized it was for them. The instructor reported that enthusiasm was apparent, and students expressed a desire to repay the LFP when they had completed their coursework and had become employed. This give and take model has eased some of the reluctance experienced to take advantage of the LFPs.

When the Food Pantry has more food than it needs or the expiration date is near, PBL reciprocates in the process of donation, and sends items to other local charity services including Turning Point (domestic violence center) and the Salvation Army. Cooperation with other organizations enables SouthArk PBL to further expand its reach beyond the college campus and into the community at large. Although the full potential is not yet known, opportunities to serve the students of SouthArk and the community as a whole remain abundant. It is the hope of the Sigma Epsilon chapter of PBL that over time, this project will create a significant and measurable positive impact on students’ lives in South Arkansas, easing the difficulties they face so they are able to devote more of their time and resources on completing their education.
Evidence of Publicity

The Food Pantry and the LFPs have received a remarkable amount of publicity during the semester. PBL members have spread the word through interactions with friends, family, and employers. Word of mouth remains one of the project’s best forms of advertisement of the services provided to those in need. The Customer Service and Professional Projects classes have also helped plan and organize publicity for the Food Pantry.

In the months following the launch of the Food Pantry and LFP project, the decision was made to evaluate the successfulness of the marketing campaign. As surveys had proven to serve a dual role as both an efficient data collection method and an effective publicity tool, the members elected to use this method. Survey I was sent to SouthArk students; Survey II was sent to 50 alumni working locally. The surveys resulted in over 200 replies, and over 30 alumni responded in less than two weeks. Questions included whether the respondent was aware of the Food Pantry project and if so, what was the source that had made them aware. The data was compared to earlier surveys and assessment indicated that awareness had risen (Figures 1.1, 1.2). Marketing modality effectiveness was also recorded and analyzed for insight into ways of improving contact with the public (Figure 1.3). Also, the PBL community service project has been publicized on three occasions in the El Dorado News Times:

“The idea is to support our students who don’t have enough to eat. A lot of our people in Union County are living below poverty. A lot of them are female and most of our students are female so we want to support them. We’re asking for food donations. We’re also asking for toiletries, personal items, things of that nature.”

Jones said Williams is working with business instructor Donna Hendricks on the campus wide community service project. Board
trustee Kermit Parks mentioned that North Arkansas Community College has a similar program and recommended that organizers consult them.

Hendricks is an advisor to the SouthArk chapter of Phi Beta Lambda that was awarded on the national level for its Career Closet, according to a previous News-Times report.

Additionally, press releases have been sent to other local newspapers, the local cable company, and local radio stations which resulted in generous donations from four organizations. A recent open house event was held and successfully received visits from college administration, faculty, and students. Members are using social media to publicize the Food Pantry with the Career Closet on the organization’s Facebook page which is used to post notices and articles that appear in the media. Efforts are made to post pictures of the Food Pantry, LFPs, and Career Closet so donors know how valuable their donations are.

Conclusion

The Food Pantry and LFP project has required a huge amount of time and effort to organize and prepare for meeting the needs of the students suffering from food insecurity; however, PBL members, SouthArk faculty, and the surrounding community have taken an active role in supporting this project and working towards its success in meeting the goals that were set in planning the project.

With the Food Pantry and Career Closet organized, volunteers are able to provide food, business attire, cleaning supplies, and/or personal products for students and employees in need. PBL members made a commitment to keep the Food Pantry and the Career Closet together and by doing so, have been able to expand assistance in both areas. Donations have been generous, and many students have and will continue to benefit from this project including PBL members. The service-learning components of these projects are invaluable to those participating to make it a success. Members are developing plans so that additional resources will be available in the future. With continued coordination, determination, and dedication this project can continue to benefit SouthArk students, employees, and the surrounding community for many years to come.
Works Cited


Appendix

Marketing and Publicity Materials

Food Pantry Brochure (outside)

Food Pantry Brochure (inside)

List of Resources for Students