

## **Starving for a change: How food insecurity among college students is being combated**

By Ashley Williams

MONTEVALLO, Ala. — “No longer having to worry about consistent access to food or housing can sometimes give them that piece of hope to hold on to. That’s one of the main things that keeps me motivated,” Adrianna English said.

According to the 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 23% of undergraduate students face food insecurity while 12% of graduate students do. In other words, over four million college students are food insecure.

Food insecurity exists on mostly every college campus, including the University of Montevallo. Counseling Services has established the Falcon Food Pantry in order to help combat this issue.

At Counseling Services, Adrianna English is the Senior Case Manager for the UM CARE Team and Threat Assessment Team. Her job is to oversee case management, crisis services, and food and financial assistance.

English has been working as the case manager for four years now, where she helps oversee the food pantry’s operation.

The major Falcon Food Pantry is in Puryear House while others are located in Farmer Hall and the TRIO building.

Common food items provided are cereal, oatmeal, granola bars, ramen noodles, instant mashed potatoes, pudding cups, crackers and microwavable meals. Besides food, the pantry also offers laundry detergent, toiletries and other basic needs items for students.

“I started working in the case management field right after I graduated from undergrad in 2018. During this time, I was able to help families in the community access the resources they needed so I saw first-hand how big of an impact basic need insecurity can play in a person’s overall well-being,” Adrianna said.

She along with other workers at Counseling Services have noticed some trends regarding food insecurity among UM students.

According to Adrianna, food and basic need insecurity greatly increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and when gas and grocery prices went up so did these insecurities.

On UM’s campus, there are specific times during a semester when the demand for the pantry increases. English said there’s usually an increase at the end of the semester because many students’ meal swipes and flex points are running out.

“It is pretty common that we have students come to us for assistance to make it through the holiday breaks, especially if they typically live on campus and don’t plan to go home,” Adrianna said.

Like UM, the University of Alabama at Birmingham is also combating food insecurity among students by having a food pantry. They call it the Blazer Kitchen and it has provided more than 145,000 meals last year.

Those who work or attend UAB can also shop at the pantry like a grocery store but with no costs. The Blazer Kitchen is supported by the UAB Benevolent Fund in order to keep providing food and other resources.

According to Adrianna, the main way her and the other workers track use is by keeping a total number of food distributions and the weight of food they give out. Last year, they gave out 278 food distributions, which was about 3,867 pounds in all.

However, there are some limitations. “The majority of our inventory comes from donations. We are a Central Alabama Food Bank site so we can order food from our local food bank. However, this means we are only able to get items that they have available at the time,” she said.

English also said the pantry does receive financial donations from local churches and Greek organizations and clubs.

Even so, there are certain barriers that discourage students facing food insecurity to reach out such as stigma. To Adrianna, she believes stigma is a larger problem beyond UM’s campus.

“Our goal with the food pantry and our case management services is trying to bridge this gap. We try to do a few outreach events during the year to normalize food and basic need insecurity, as well as encourage students to ask for help if they need it,” she said.

According to her, one way Counseling Services tries to get students’ attention is by having the Pop-up Pantry Bingo, where they set up a game in Farmer Hall and have a “pop up” pantry available at the event.

In spite of their efforts, not all students have a positive experience with the pantry. In fact, for graduating senior Isabella Wilson, it was the complete opposite.

“The thing with the food pantry is that you are given food, but it isn’t what I would call proper food. The Falcon Food Pantry puts food in my stomach but I’m eating tuna from a can and only that. It ruins your already poor mental health,” Isabella said.

Wilson was still struggling at this time, getting some food from her roommate as well. She then started to work at Subway, receiving a free footlong. Later on, Isabella began to receive food stamps and rely on them.

According to her, she believes the Falcon Food Pantry should turn into the Falcon Food Bank, where fresh milk, bread, meat and other things that can feed a person for more than two days.

“I would like to see improvements to the university such as this so we can help all students be able to thrive and get their education without them having to struggle to properly fuel their bodies,” Isabella said.

Adrianna English said she thinks there are many big changes that need to happen in order to address the issue fully and they must start with awareness first.

“There is a lot of stigma surrounding this issue and a lot of people don’t want to acknowledge that it is an issue around them. Acknowledging this is happening and making small changes adds up over time,” she said.

Just recently, the Falcon Food Pantry has informed the public they will be providing food boxes for students who need assistance during Spring Break since the cafeteria will be closed.

According to Adrianna, students facing food insecurity can reach out to Counseling Services by calling their number, emailing them or stopping by their office in Puryear House.

In addition, no appointments are needed and when students arrive in the office, they will sign two forms, giving their contact information along with their consent to receive food from the pantry.

However, English said Counseling Services recognizes the pantry isn’t a long-term solution based on the limited things they can provide.

“There are no limits to how many times someone can use the pantry, but we will offer to help connect students to other resources if we notice they are consistently in need of things,” she said.

Adrianna also said a major way the campus community can help support the pantry’s mission is by donating. It can be donating food items or making a financial contribution.

For more information on how to donate, people can call Counseling Services or email them.