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Food Insecurity Resources at the University of Mississippi

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April 2020 Summer Jefferson; Anne Cafer, PhD; Georgianna Mann, PhD

Study Recommendations

- **Awareness about the Ole Miss Food Bank needs to improve among faculty and staff.** This group has the ability to reach a large number of students who might need the Food Bank and their long-term presence on campus makes investments in their awareness particularly worthwhile. Additionally, many staff do not make a living wage, and this service may be of use to staff, in addition to students.
- **The Ole Miss Food Bank requires improvements to its nutritional offerings.** The comparisons to the USDA's MyPlate recommendations suggest nutritional gaps in the food bank's offerings.
- **The Ole Miss Food Bank should implement a profiling system.** Profiling systems allow for easy communication with donors about the food bank's needs and have been shown to increase donations of a particular nutritional standard.

Background and Purpose

Food security is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as, "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle."[1] Estimates of food insecurity on college campuses range from 19-46%, but 20-25% of students who are not classified as food insecure still report anxiety about food shortage.[2] Marginalized populations such as students of color, students from low income households, and first-generation students are most at risk.[3] Consequences of food insecurity include decreased health outcomes and academic success, such as lower GPAs.[2] These personal and academic outcomes have very real, negative consequences for university and college campuses.

The purpose of this policy brief is to contextualize the results from research on the campus awareness of the Ole Miss Food Bank and the nutritional analysis of the Food Bank's offerings.

Data and Methods

Data on campus awareness came from two random, anonymous surveys. One was created for faculty/staff and the second for students. Both groups were asked about general awareness and perceived use of the Ole Miss Food Bank by race and socioeconomic status. Additionally, students were asked how they learned about the Ole Miss Food Bank.

Data for the nutrition analysis was collected twice at random times during 2019. The results were compared to MyPlate standards.[4] The salt and sugar contents were compared to the National Heart Association standards for salt consumption and the National School Lunch Program sugar guidelines, respectively.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the means of administering the surveys. The survey was emailed to all Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College students, and publicized at tabling events on the University of Mississippi campus. This could result in an inflation of campus awareness estimates given the frequent Food Bank advertisements and volunteer opportunities present in Honors College newsletters.

A second limitation is the number of times nutrition data was collected from the Ole Miss Food Bank. Nutritional assessments were only conducted twice so the data is a specific snapshot of offerings and might not be a representative picture of yearly offerings.

Results

Student survey results indicated that 66.2% of students were aware that there was an on-campus Food Bank. Only slightly better, 74.3% of faculty and staff were aware of the on-campus food bank's presence. Students and faculty and staff reported similar perceived uses of the Food Bank by socioeconomic status and race. The Food Bank is perceived to be used most by individuals of lower SES, followed by equal numbers of working and lower middle class individuals. However, faculty and staff and students diverged in their perceptions of upper middle class use of the Food Bank. More faculty and staff respondents also thought that upper middle class individuals were utilizing the Food Bank. By race and ethnicity, there was approximately equal perceived use by Asian, Hispanic, and White clientele, the lowest perceived use by non-Hispanic Latino clientele, and the greatest perceived use by African American clientele.

When students were asked how they had heard about the Food Bank, a majority answered it was a result of word of mouth or other organizations fundraising for the Food Bank, followed by the official Food Bank advertisements on campus, and lastly from faculty, staff, or university offices (Figure 1).

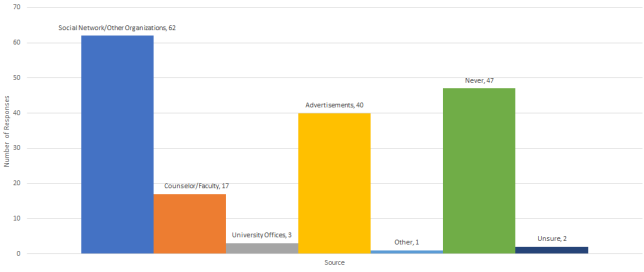

Figure 1: Student responses to where they learned about the Food Bank.

For the nutrition analysis the Food Bank, contents were broken down into standard food categories: vegetable, protein, dairy, grain, and fruit in addition to a "complete meal" and "other" category. Foods such as chicken noodle soup were placed in the "complete meal." Condiments, cranberry jelly, and other miscellaneous food items were placed in the “other” category (Figure 2).

The largest category, vegetables, was further broken down using the National School Lunch Guidelines (Figure 2). A significant portion were classified as "Other" vegetables, which included pickles, green beans, artichokes, and green chilis. The second most prevalent vegetables were "Starch" vegetables, which include potatoes and corn. Approximately equal amount of "Red/ Orange" and "Beans, Peas, and Legumes" were present. Red/ Orange vegetables include tomatoes and carrots. There was

also a small amount of canned mixed vegetables which are present in Figure 2 as "Mix of Red and Other." It is noteworthy that there were no vegetables present within the "Dark Green" category in the Ole Miss Food Bank. A majority of the "Red/ Orange" vegetables are present in the form of canned tomatoes, tomato sauce, and tomato paste.

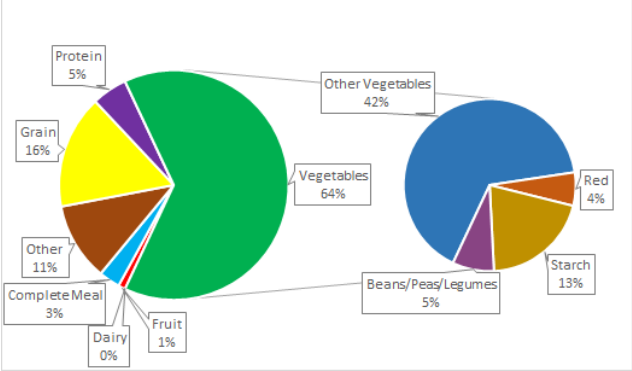

Figure 2: Ole Miss Food Bank offerings by food category, including the vegetable subcategory.

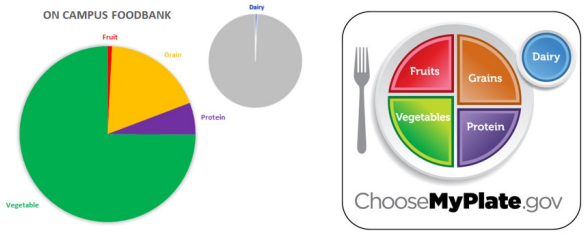

Figure 3: Ole Miss Food Bank offerings compared to MyPlate recommendations.

When the traditional food categories of vegetable, protein, dairy, fruit, and grain are compared to MyPlate, there are significant deficits (Figure 3).

Additionally, sugar and sodium contents were analyzed. The National School Lunch Program advises against foods that are greater than or equal to 35% sugar by weight. Of the contents of the Food Bank, 5.33% of foods were greater than or equal to 35% sugar by weight.

Sodium content was analyzed using the National Heart Association definitions of high and low sodium foods. Of the contents of the Food Bank, 9.23% was classified as a high sodium food, while 51.47% was classified as low sodium food. The remaining foods fell in between marks for high or low classification.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Only two-thirds of responding students were aware of the Ole Miss Food Bank. Food Bank awareness amongst faculty and staff was only approximately 10% better than student awareness. Given that faculty and staff have permanent, long-term positions at the university and have significant contact with students, their awareness is critical for increasing and then sustaining awareness levels amongst students.

The Ole Miss Food Bank was significantly lacking in dairy, fresh fruit, and fresh vegetable offerings, and the fruits and vegetables that were present were in the forms of canned goods and tomato sauce. The Ole Miss Food Bank also lacks a profiling system and nutritional recommendations for their donors.

The following recommendations can improve awareness and nutritional deficits.

1. Marketing for the Ole Miss Food Bank should expand its focus to include faculty, staff, counselors, and other offices that have significant amounts of contact with students. Due to the long term positions, this is a worthwhile investment. In addition to forming relationships with students, teaching faculty and staff also have syllabi, which contain student resources such as Student Disabilities Services. The addition of a small, pre-written syllabus section could be easily implemented, and could have a significantly large audience and potential impact.
2. An increase in the quantity of protein, dairy, and fruit donations should be targeted, along with increased quality of grains offered. Given the presence of a freezer and refrigerator, Food Bank leaders can emphasize the donations of more fresh fruits and vegetables to move closer to MyPlate recommendations. This can specifically help increase the non-existent amounts of “Dark Green” subtype vegetables.
3. For simple and effective communication with donors, nutrition policies can be implemented based on profiling, a way of grouping and labeling foods. Profiling has been successful in community food banks and other on-campus food banks with color codes. One example is the traffic light labeling system: using colors such as green, yellow and red. These codes identify foods which should be consumed or donated in abundance (green), in moderation (yellow), or in small quantities (red). Basing a campus Food Bank profiling system on a simple, pre-existing system is advantageous because student leaders, who change leadership positions annually and who are not always knowledgeable of nutritional standards, can easily and correctly reference, code, and implement this type of system.

   A published profiling system allows donors to have a reference guide for foods the Ole Miss Food Bank needs to more closely align with MyPlate guidelines (Recommendation 2), without requiring the student Food Bank leaders or donors to have a deep nutritional knowledge. Literature indicates that most donors rely on the Food Bank to request the nutritious foods they need in stock. Thus, if guidelines are implemented, the Ole Miss Food Bank could begin to decrease its deficits in certain food groups without much effort.

Conclusion

The results and subsequent recommendations of this study are important because they can be used by the Ole Miss Food Bank to better mitigate the effects of food insecurity on the University of Mississippi campus by increasing both student and faculty/ staff awareness and creating methods to improve nutritional offerings of the Food Bank.

References

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