

Published May 30th, 2018

Gael Pantry helps food insecure SMC students

By Sora O'Doherty



SMC student Leora Mosman inspired the Gael Pantry's inception with her study of student food insecurity. Photos Sora O'Doherty

With increasing tuition and housing costs, many higher education students find ways to cut overall expenses through their food budget, and recent studies have put a spotlight on the often hidden problem of food insecurity, with almost half of the 30,000 students at two- and four-year universities surveyed in a 2016 study stating they had some level of anxiety about getting food or being hungry. The Gael Pantry, which opened two years ago on the Saint Mary's College campus in Moraga, is increasingly combating food insecurity among its students.

The brainchild of SMC student Leora Mosman, the food pantry occupies a bright spot on campus where students can drop in on Tuesday, Wednesdays and Thursdays for help in meeting their nutritional needs. The program, which now serves over 200 students, has experienced steady growth of about 30 percent per semester since its inception.

Nick van Santen, assistant director for Student Services who manages the pantry, sees the growth as a result of better information about the existence of the facility, rather than evidence of increasing need. Students hear about the Gael Pantry during Welcome Week at the beginning of the academic year and are encouraged to sign up to volunteer.

Sodexo, the campus food service provider, donated the space for the pantry and the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano Counties donated food storage bins. The food itself is donated and the pantry is staffed entirely by student volunteers, who receive basic volunteer training and work in pairs for one-hour shifts. Over 60 students who volunteer in the pantry worked a total of approximately 180 hours last semester.

The athletics department and the School of Education have donated food to the pantry and the library accepts food for fines, providing over 150 pounds of donated food to the pantry, which is intended to supplement, not replace, a student's food requirements. The pantry is open to everyone, to minimize any possible stigma that might be associated with accepting help, and operates on the honor system.

Currently only open to students, van Santen said that in the future the college might consider opening the pantry to faculty and staff, few of whom live in Moraga but commute in from more affordable areas. Students who live on campus are required to have a meal plan with Sodexo, except for some juniors and seniors who live in dorms with kitchen units. Commuters and graduate students are not required to have meal plans, but can purchase them. Saint Mary's merit-based scholarships specifically exclude help with housing or food.

At the Gael Pantry, student IDs are collected for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the system and to keep track of the student's point usage. Each student is allowed 10 points per week to acquire different types of food available. For example, one point can be used for canned beans, energy bars, macaroni and cheese or oatmeal. For two points a student can get canned tuna, fruit, soup or vegetables, while for three points cereal, rice, pasta or jam is available. Van Santen's job is to keep food on the shelves and manage the student volunteers.

Karin McClelland is the Director of Saint Mary's Mission and Ministry Center and oversees the pantry. While she also tries to provide food to students at events, McClelland says that the college does not have a huge endowment and is limited in what it can do. The food pantry is one of the ways that Saint Mary's can live out its mission, she says. Mosman is graduating this year and going on to an internship in Washington D.C. but leaves her legacy at Saint Mary's in the food pantry.

The Gael Pantry is open during academic terms on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6 to 8 p.m. and also on Wednesday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., which is a time when no classes are scheduled. In total, the pantry is open 7 hours a week, nearly 100 hours a semester.



The Gael Pantry offers Saint Mary's students a way to supplement their nutritional needs.