

2015

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ScholarWorks Citation

Anderson, Amanda; Hielkema, Jenna; Lenderink, Skyelar; and Marshall, Ryan, "Restore: Bringing Awareness to Food Insecurity and Food Justice at Grand Valley State University" (2015). *Undergraduate Research*. 7.

https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_undergrad/7

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Restore: Bringing Awareness to Food Insecurity and Food Justice at Grand Valley State University

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Abstract

As food insecurity is becoming a factor among many college students, campus food pantries are opening across the country. ReStore is a food pantry at Grand Valley State University, created in April 2009 to help students who are not able to afford food or are unable to get to the local supermarket. The number of these students is alarming. Statistics show 25 percent of students, at the University of California at San Diego, skip meals due to not having money to buy food. ReStore is an asset to GVSU where it helps reduce food insecurity on campus. Campus food pantries run mostly on donations and ReStore is no exception to this. Research has shown food drives are a successful way to bring in food and personal items along with bringing awareness to the community (Access of West Michigan, 2006). Our semester long effort aims to bring ReStore more than one food drive a year to help keep their shelves stocked for the growing demand of students who will utilize this resource. Our group organized a schedule of different departments/divisions associated with GVSU to participate in one of three food drives to be held throughout the year. We unfortunately cannot convince or force faculty/staff to donate, which makes it difficult to ensure the food drives will continue past our involvement this semester. Our hope is that future students will continue the work we have started and that the system we put into place ensures ReStore will continue to stay fully stocked throughout the year to assist those students who need it.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a major issue around college campuses. A study, conducted at the University of California at San Diego, showed that 25 percent of its students skipped meals often for financial reasons (McColl, Sarah, 2015). This statistic can easily be overlooked. There are many food options on campuses and because of this it may appear that students would not struggle with hunger. An article titled *Fighting Food Insecurity on Campus* (Higher Ed Today, 2015) mentioned some startling statistics. Feeding America provides food assistance to 46.5 million individuals and 15.5 million households. They estimate that nearly half, or 49.3 percent, of their clients are in college. Unfortunately, these college clients must choose between educational expenses and food annually. They recorded that 21 percent of the students did choose between educational expenses or food for a full 12 months (Higher Ed Today, 2015). ReStore is a branch of the Grand Valley State University Women's Center that runs a food pantry for students who cannot afford to buy food. With this idea in mind, ReStore is helping the issue of food insecurity around the campus. Our efforts as a team with ReStore are to help bring awareness to the GVSU faculty on the issue of food insecurity, by doing this we hope to help keep the organization's shelves stocked with

food year round. ReStore is an asset to GVSU helping to fight food insecurity on the campus. People need to be made aware of the problem, the consequences it has on college students all across the country and ways in which it can be combated.

Action Plan

Our team wanted to provide recommendations to address ReStore's areas of focus. Those being: time, money and awareness. We developed three ideas to help address these concerns. The ideas were: (1) organize physical and monetary donations, (2) advertising and (3) reaching out to potential donors. After spending time in ReStore, as well as interviewing the Associate Director of the Women's Center and the person in charge of overseeing ReStore, it was decided that holding an annual faculty/staff food drive in February, August and November, would be the best idea to pursue. Not only will these food drives cost little to nothing in funding they will also indirectly help with advertising. Therefore, the food drives will not only increase the donations to ReStore, but will also help promote awareness for students that this resource is available.

Many students grow up in areas where they do not have access to good, healthy food or have a lack in the variety of food options available (Walker, Keane and Burke, 2010). By

involving the internal stakeholders of the Grand Valley community, those in closest contact with our student body, we will help bring attention to this much needed resource, as well as clearly demonstrate that food insecurity does actually exist on our very own campus.

Process

Campus food pantries are becoming more recognized on college campuses around the country. With college tuition already being a large expense, students are struggling with food insecurities, having to choose between buying food or paying for an education. Feeding America (2014) reported ten percent of their clients who receive food assistance are students, two million being full time. With the help from students, faculty and the community, around 200 campus-operated pantries already exist across the U.S. (Wall Street Journal, 2015). The research on college food pantries helped our team gain awareness as to why this resource (ReStore) is crucial at Grand Valley State University. We decided holding staff/faculty food drives would be the best idea to bring in both donations and awareness. Participating in a food drive is a way to bring people together and have a great impact on hunger, a large problem for many people in a community (The Food Bank of Lower Fairfield County). Campus food pantries are run mostly on donations,

so the idea of a food drive seemed the best way to bring in donations. Holding annual food drives are more efficient and impactful than individuals simply stopping by to donate a few items at their convenience. Annual food drives allow the pantry to receive the items they need most and it helps to involve and educate the community on food insecurity and poverty (Access of West Michigan, 2006). Through scheduled food drives the flow of incoming donations will remain more consistent throughout the year versus being sporadic or becoming stagnant. This will not only provide ReStore with what they need but will also create a sense of community by relying on our very own faculty/staff to help keep this resource sustainable for years to come.

In 2009, Michigan State University sponsored its Annual “Help Tackle Hunger Food Drive” and collected 5,500 pounds in donations. UWM (University of Wisconsin) collected 13,877 pounds in food for their 2015 campus-wide food drive. The previous research regarding a variety of campus food drives provides insight as to how said food drives help acquire food and create awareness for the GVSU community. Researching different campus food drives brought insight on how helpful they can be to bring in food and awareness for the GVSU community. Holding food drives will take a lot of the guesswork out of

donating for people. Individuals who want to donate will know when and where the food drive will be held and what is needed. This helps them not have to worry about making an extra trip, deciding what to donate or questioning when they will be able to drop off their donations.

Methodology and Data to be Collected

We collected information on all of the departments/offices at both the Allendale and Pew campuses. This information helped us determine who to contact regarding the annual food drives for each office/department. Once a list was compiled we worked together to break down the list into groups of four offices. Each group will be assigned to either the February, August or the November food drive. A spreadsheet was put together to show a scheduled rotation for each group of offices and the specifics of the rotation to ensure a constant flow of food to restock the pantry shelves all year long. This schedule was shared with ReStore and will make it easy for their staff to maintain the food drives from year to year and contact offices as their assigned month approaches. Our system will also make it so each department is not obligated to donate to ReStore multiple times per year but only during the predetermined scheduled time each year.

Each food drive will be held for two weeks to give plenty of time for donations to be made. Boxes will be provided to the offices participating to collect the donations. After the two weeks are up, ReStore staff or volunteers will pick up the boxes.

Collaboration

In collaboration with the Associate Director of the Women's Center, we developed the plan. Not only will food drives help with donations, it will also bring awareness to faculty/staff that this resource is available on campus. We will then work with staff from different departments/offices, both at the Allendale and Pew campus, to bring together donations and make the food drives a success.

Results

Our team wanted to work on bringing more attention to this resource by involving our faculty and staff, since they work most closely with students. We decided that the best place to pilot our plan on campus was in the Student Services Building, as this is a place students visit often. After communicating with a few of the offices we identified our main contact for the Student Services Division in the Dean of Students office. This division houses the Career Center, Housing and Residence Life, University Counseling Center, the Student Academic Success Center,

Student Life, Campus Recreation, the Children's Enrichment Center, Office of Multicultural Affairs, the LGBT Resource Center and lastly, the Women's Center. We have discussed with our appointed contact our hopes for food drives and advertising for ReStore. She indicated that she would speak with the Dean about our initiative.

After communicating with our appointed contact she informed us the Student Services Division will be having a division meeting on February 3, 2016 and that this gathering would be the perfect time to have individuals from these offices bring donations. We will provide her with a flyer of information on the most needed items as well as some information on ReStore. This flyer will be given to her by exam week and she will then distribute it to the offices that will attend the February meeting. This is a great way to get the information about ReStore out to the offices that work closely with students. It will also help get the word out to faculty/staff involved in promoting this resource.

We have further compiled a list of office/division groups for ReStore to target for setting up subsequent food drives in the rotation. By using the information we have already gathered, it takes out some of the future workload for ReStore volunteers. This will allow their limited staff/volunteers

to put their focus and energies into other tasks.

Challenges

Unfortunately, since we are not the decision makers who say whether or not food drives can be done within Grand Valley offices, we do have to rely on the approval from the individual supervisors/directors who oversee each office or division. Without knowing how many offices/divisions will respond or commit to future food drives, it was difficult to set up the schedule. In turns, it is difficult to ensure that the food drives will continue past our involvement in this class. Trying to put together such an ambitious schedule, which encompasses all of the GV offices/departments will take more than a 15 week semester of involvement.

It will take time and effort by all of the Grand Valley community, but we are hopeful our efforts will decrease the amount of students who feel insecure about food and increase food justice, by giving back the power and control food has (Counihan, 1999). With the progress our group, as well as the staff and volunteers from ReStore have made thus far, we are hopeful these efforts will get them moving in the right, positive direction for our students.

Future Considerations

We want to make sure that ReStore will be able to have more than one food drive per year and that there will be offices committed to donating during each food drive. By using the same schedule each year, ReStore staff will know who will be taking part in each food drive throughout the year and each department that committed to the food drives will know which month they are assigned.

Our goal was to have a system in place so ReStore will have plenty of products available throughout the year for the students at GVSU. Our system will also make it so each department is not obligated to donate to ReStore multiple times per year but only during the predetermined scheduled time each year. We hope that future involvement addressing this issue will pick up where we left off by directing the first drive rotation and organizing succeeding ones. In the end we want to make sure that ReStore always has full shelves and that the community at Grand Valley knows that students do not always have money to pay for food. There is an option for those students to get the food that they desperately need at GVSU, and that is ReStore.

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