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FEATURED

IU working to address food insecurity exacerbated by pandemic

By Phil Steinmetz The Herald-Times
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Rebecca Aleman, left, and Olivia Leos, right, graduate assistants for Crimson Cupboard at Indiana University, restock shelves Friday at their Campus View location. (Rich Janzaruk / Herald-Times)

Nearly 25% of IU students could face food insecurity this semester.

That figure comes from an IU Dining presentation during an Indiana University Board of Trustees meeting in August.

By the time the meeting had ended, Molly Connor, chair of the board's Student Relations Committee, said she had already received more than two dozen emails from people asking how they could help address food insecurity on campus.

"I have sort of known that the issue of collegiate food insecurity has been really pervasive for a while, but I think the pandemic has really exacerbated a lot of those issues that already existed," Connor said.

The U.S Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Consistent access to adequate food can be difficult for some college students to afford, and the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has only made things worse. The U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics reported this summer the unemployment rate among 20 to 24-year-olds went from 9% to 26%.

In Bloomington, restaurants and other businesses closed due to COVID-19. This meant that some students didn't have the income they needed to purchase food as usual, which can lead to food insecurity. Multiple IU organizations have recognized the increased need and taken steps to help students now and in the future.

Helping students who stayed

When classes were moved online in March because of COVID-19, a lot of students went home but some stayed in Bloomington. Carl Ipsen, director of the IU Food Institute, then had a conversation with Executive Director of IU Dining Rahul Shrivastav and different groups dealing with food issues on campus.

The IU Food Institute has been on campus for about five years. It is an entity that helps students conduct food study research, engage with food scholars and earn an undergraduate certificate in food studies.

It was difficult to say exactly how many IU students remained in Bloomington after classes moved online in the spring. But it was clear that Shrivastav's staff was underutilized because they were feeding a much smaller number of students than usual. The IU Food Institute and IU Dining then decided to partner to make sure students struggling to make ends meet were getting enough food.

"The food institute got involved in this in a way that it hadn't been before," Ipsen said. "It's really not part of its mandate."

It took about three days to put it together, but the Emergency Meal Project began April 13 after the IU Food Institute accepted donations on its website to help cover the cost of making the meals, which were about \$5 apiece.

They distributed free meals five days a week and got up to about 100 meals per day. By the time it was finished at the end of July, they had distributed about 5,000 meals total.

About 75% of those meals went to graduate students.

“Historical records that we have on food insecurity show that — and this isn’t just for IU but nationally — graduate students tend to suffer from food insecurity at a higher rate,” IU Graduate and Professional Student Government President Dakota Coates said.

Campus Kitchen was the primary organization that distributed the meals after they were cooked by IU Dining.

Campus Kitchen was first established at IU as a student organization in the spring of 2019. The organization aims to reduce food waste and food insecurity on campus. One of the ways this was accomplished was taking leftovers from IU catering events and turning them into meals that students could pick up for free.

Since spring 2019, the organization has served or donated more than 2,400 pounds of food acquired from IU Catering, served 880 individual meals, and collaborated with Pantry 279 in Ellettsville to divert excess food from their weekly community meals with students.

Challenging fall semester

Campus Kitchen Faculty Advisor Olga Kalentzidou said this semester has been challenging because they cannot cook the meals or prepare them. They would normally operate out of the food lab in the Department of Geography because it was a licensed kitchen facility, but IU recommended they shouldn’t do any cooking because of social distancing guidelines.

Now, Campus Kitchen distributes grab-and-go bags with fresh produce directly from the IU campus farm. They’ve given out 117 bags so far this semester. Since they currently don’t have access to the food lab, IU Dining allowed them to store produce and operate from Goodbody Eatery.

"That is hugely important for the students," Kalentzidou said. "It shows a commitment by IU Dining to support all student needs, not only those who can pay on a regular basis, but also those who primarily are off-campus and need more support."

If some of the bags aren't claimed, Crimson Cupboard, IU's food pantry, will give them to students. The Crimson Cupboard used to be a place where students could browse and pick up available groceries of their liking, but they've had to change how they operate due to COVID-19.

Over the summer, the Cupboard was one of the few places that remained open on campus. Brandon Shurr is the senior assistant director of community engagement within the Division of Student Affairs, but he also oversees the Cupboard.

Shurr would operate the Cupboard each Wednesday from 1-3 p.m. during the summer by himself with about 55 people picking up groceries each time.

IU Student Government donated money to the Cupboard back in March, and that helped them purchase staple foods from a food bank. They now have pallets of peanut butter, rice, pasta, tuna, black beans, vegetables and other food. Purchasing from a food bank allowed them to acquire more groceries because it was cheaper than buying through a grocery store or wholesaler.

This meant the Crimson Cupboard wouldn't have to worry about running out of food each week.

"We have a stable source of food, which is pretty good for a food pantry," Shurr said. "I think that's because of IUSG and the Division of Student Affairs putting a staff member in charge of it. They have kind of created stability. There's not usually stability in food insecurity or in a pantry at all."

Even with reduced hours, the Crimson Cupboard has seen similar or slightly more usage this semester. This shows the number of students facing food insecurity has remained steady or increased.

This semester, COVID-19 precautions restrict students from going inside the pantry themselves. The cupboard now offers a walk-up option outside of Campus View Apartments where students can choose between a vegetable or meat and then grab a presorted bag of food.

IU Dining has also been working with the Crimson Cupboard to make sure no food goes to waste. Whenever food that's packaged is approaching expiration, they make sure it gets to the Crimson Cupboard for distribution to help address food insecurity.

The Division of Student Affairs also used \$15,000 to purchase 1,500 IU Dining meal cards worth \$10 apiece to pass out to those in need.

"We're working hard," Shrivastav said. "This semester is very challenging. I'm not going to try and sugarcoat that. We are doing everything that we can to make sure we combat food insecurity by donations, by supporting our folks at the Crimson Cupboard, by making sure people are focused on delivering that food."

Project could return

Shrivastav also said there's a good chance the Emergency Meal Project will return in November for students who remain in Bloomington over Thanksgiving break. Classes will be taught exclusively online again from after Thanksgiving break until early February. But this will only happen if they see a demand for it, because they don't want to take away money from other places that might need it.

One of the main ways IU Dining plans to help with food insecurity in the future is an "all-you-care-to-eat" program for the dining halls at Forest and McNutt quadrangles. Students will only have to use a single swipe of their Crimson Card and will be able to get as much food as they want, rather than paying for each item. The program is expected to begin in the fall of 2021.

Shrivastav said he understands that budgeting is an important tool but dining shouldn't be a barrier. IU Dining should instead be teaching students how to eat properly and where to get the right nutrients.

"That is not an area that you need to be worried about," Shrivastav said.

Food insecurity is something that a lot of universities, and people in general, struggle with across the country. This semester and the past few months have provided more challenges to combating food insecurity than those of the past, but IU has adjusted and found ways to continue helping its students with it.

"I think we can start getting those messages out that basically say like, 'Hey, we're all in this together,'" student trustee Molly Connor said. "It doesn't matter whether or not you're coming from a lower-income background, a well-to-do background. We're all part of the same community. I think that's going to be a big push for this as well, is just sort of marketing, in an effort to get rid of the stigma behind food insecurity."

Michael Reschke