



For Nutrition, Stability, and a Brighter Future: Amplifying the Experiences of Food Pantry Shoppers in a University Community

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Executive Summary

In October 2023, The Workshop for Community+Collaboration at EMU College of Education (The Workshop) hosted a public panel discussion with three community partners that, in recognition of International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, focused on poverty, dignity, and advocacy in Washtenaw County. At this event, we asked our community partners about the work they do and how The Workshop could help them in their efforts to reduce poverty and promote dignity for area families. One community partner, a representative from Food Gatherers, discussed the need for first-person narratives from individuals who shop at food pantries so that policy makers might better understand the lived experiences of people experiencing food insecurity. This study, a collaboration between The Workshop and Eastern Michigan University's Swoop's Food Pantry, emerged in response to this request.

Swoop's Food Pantry is a donation-based choice food pantry on Eastern Michigan University's campus in Ypsilanti, MI, that began serving students in 2015. At Swoop's, members of the university community – students and staff, alike – can shop free-of-charge for food, personal care items, and cleaning and school supplies. During the current academic year, 1,375 people have completed the intake form to shop at Swoop's, where as many as 120 shoppers come to get food and other resources each day. Food-pantry use has increased dramatically in recent years with the number of shopping visits nearly doubling three years in a row, increasing from 6,394 in 2022 to 12,881 in 2023. In 2022, Swoop's saw an average of 50 shoppers per day, and in 2023 this rose to 65 shoppers per day. So far in 2024, Swoop's average number of shoppers per day has been 74. The amount of food Swoop's supplies to the community has also risen, with 109,011 lbs. (54.5T) provided in 2022 and 198,261 lbs. (99T) in 2023, an 82% increase in one year. These statistics demonstrate both the extent of the need for these resources in the EMU community and the

importance of support for pantries, like Swoop's, to continue their work of addressing food insecurity.

For this study, members of the EMU community (students, faculty, or staff) who are at least eighteen-years-old and who got at least some of their groceries from Swoop's during the 2023-2024 academic year were invited to complete an online survey sharing their experiences related to the conditions that led them to shop at the pantry, the items they appreciate most, how having access to the pantry affects their lives, their feelings about shopping at the pantry, and what they want community leaders and policy makers to know about food insecurity and food pantry shoppers. We considered each community member's experiences as an intact narrative to understand their unique perspectives and used reflexive thematic analysis to develop themes from recurring ideas across the stories. We hope to share the narratives we gathered and our findings with The Workshop's community-partner organizations and local and state-level leaders and policy makers to bring greater awareness to experiences of food insecurity and the value of food-pantry access in our communities.

Key Findings

While our analysis of the survey responses is in its early nascent stages, we have identified the following preliminary findings from the shared experiences:

- Food-pantry shoppers said they benefit from shopping at the pantry by having a reliable source of nutritious food, improving their mental health and reducing stress, and managing the demands of life including time and finances. Shoppers described how the food pantry provided them with access to “nutritious lunches and dinner options” and healthy after-school snacks and that access to the pantry gives them assurance and peace, knowing they don't have to worry about their next meal.
- Low-paying jobs, mental health limitations, and managing the pressures of being a college student, i.e. balancing work and courses and living independently for the first time, were major reasons students shopped at the pantry. Shoppers also mentioned providing for others (young children and aging parents), lack of transportation, and increased living costs as motivation for coming to the pantry.
- For university students, shopping at the food pantry supports educational goals because eliminating insecurity gives them time and energy to focus on coursework and prevents them from taking on additional jobs or dropping classes to pay for living expenses.
- Shoppers emphasized the impact it would have if the food pantry closed suddenly. They mentioned impacts to their finances, health, and nutrition and expressed concern for others in the community. They also described having to make hard choices, such as discontinuing their degrees, taking out additional student loans, not being able to provide for family members.
- Shoppers want policymakers to know that, while food insecurity is a much more prevalent problem than many people realize, the impact of having reliable access to food goes beyond reducing hunger. Food pantries can promote stability and resilience, reduce food waste, and provide meaningful employment and community interaction.