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Intercultural Advocacy and Communication: Establishing Campus Food Pantry at the University of Iowa

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INTERCULTURAL ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION: ESTABLISHING CAMPUS
FOOD PANTRY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Interdepartmental Studies

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Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Interdepartmental Studies have been completed.

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Interdepartmental Studies Honors Advisor

Honors Abstract

Intercultural Advocacy and Communication: Establishing a Campus Food Pantry at the
University of Iowa

Ben Marks

University of Iowa

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Why I Chose This Project

In fall 2015 I was searching for a topic to pursue for Dave Gould's capstone prep course. While doing research I stumbled upon the issue of college food insecurity. I began to dig deeper and I was shocked to learn the extent of the problem. National statistics estimated that 48% of college students nationwide went hungry, yet it was a topic almost no one talked about. I did some more research and discovered that the University of Iowa was one of only two Big 10 schools that didn't have a food pantry and right away I knew I needed to bring the topic of food insecurity to the University of Iowa campus. As part of Dave's class, I put together a panel discussion on the topic. I invited speakers from around the community, Iowa State, and even as far away as Michigan State. I held it on a chilly Friday evening and had 50 interested attendees asking questions and engaging with the audience. Afterwards, despite my sense of accomplishment, I still felt like something was missing, and that's when I realized I didn't just want to stop at awareness, I wanted to actually impact hunger on campus. I'd seen how hunger had affected not only my friends and classmates, by myself. I knew there were people like me who needed help, and so I began the process of starting a food pantry on campus.

Abstract

This project's main goal was to establish a campus food pantry at the University of Iowa, a goal accomplished through collaboration and communication with dozens of different departments and organizations, as well as community partners. The first part of the project began by identifying the various departments around campus who could impact the development of a pantry on campus. This included the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership, the President's Office, the Center for Diversity and Enrichment, University of Iowa Housing and Dining, Associated Residences Halls, and University of Iowa Student Government. I knew that something like this had never been done at the university before and it would require a lot of input from various departments. Eventually I connected with some other students who were also interested in starting a pantry on campus, and we formed the UI Pantry Steering Committee. As a team, we began to do research on the issue. We created and sent out a survey to the UI community regarding food insecurity. We received over a 1,000 respondents and discovered that around 30% of students at the UI were food insecure. We were able to then use that data to prove that food insecurity was a real threat to our campus. We also reached out to dozens of different schools around the country, both in the Big 10 and out, to find out how they ran their own pantries. We collected their data, budget, client and distribution numbers to estimate where we might see ourselves in one or two years. We spoke with the Crisis Center of Johnson County and discussed how we could supplement their services without stepping on their toes, and today, the Crisis Center has become one of our most important partners.

With all of this information, we spent the next few months creating a proposal we could put before UISG and ask for funding. The proposal was 12 pages long and contained a summary of all of the data we'd spent the last half a year collecting. After hearing our proposal, UISG voted to unanimously grant us our request for \$10,000 start up funds. After that, the steering committee only had one more task, and that was appoint who would actually be running the pantry and I

was selected alongside two other members of the steering committee to be on the executive board of the pantry.

What's Next?

After the pantry was given its \$10,000 start up funds, I spent the next year working as a co-director to run the pantry with an executive board of four. Since we opened our doors on August 22, 2016, we've grown the pantry to over 200 clients, and 7,000 lbs. of food distributed. The pantry is at a place today that we thought we'd be in two years. Our growth has been amazing but also concerning, because this suggests that I've gained worlds of experience and knowledge, not just about food insecurity, but about being a leader for a student organization, interacting with high level administrators, trying to move the slow machinery of the university, and about the impact that one dedicated group of students can make. I'm excited to take my experiences at the pantry as well as ESI and apply them to the wider world. My dream to continue to make an impact by working in the non-profit sector, whether that be with food insecurity, or homelessness, or some other worthy cause.