Unions Catering Company Reduces Waste by 'Boxing Up Hunger'

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The next time you attend a campus event with food from Arizona Catering Company [1], don’t fret that the leftovers will go to waste. They may very well end up on the tables of University community members who use the Campus Pantry.

Boxing Up Hunger began as a pilot program a year ago. The program is a partnership between Arizona Catering Company ? a unit within Arizona Student Unions ? and the Campus Pantry [2], which is run by the Associated Students of the University of Arizona [3].

Focusing primarily on banquets and events that serve several hundred attendees, Boxing Up Hunger collects the food that wasn’t served, said Todd Millay [4], executive director of Arizona Student Unions.

Unions staff take those items to the commissary kitchen in the Student Union Memorial Center’s basement, where sous-chefs and cooks portion the food into individual meals that resemble TV dinners.

The meals are sealed, labeled and stored in a blast freezer, which freezes food more quickly and more safely than a traditional freezer. They’re then offered at the pantry’s distribution the next day.

The program adheres to regulations on safely handling and repackaging food, Millay said, and all team members handling the meals are certified through the National Restaurant Association’s ServSafe [5] program. Members of unions kitchen staff are led by Michael Omo, executive chef of Arizona Student Unions.

Items at the pantry are distributed based on a point system, Millay said, with each client receiving the same number of points when they arrive at a distribution. Items, including Boxing Up Hunger meals, are assigned a certain number of points ? or a fraction of a point for some items ? and clients can take as many items as the point allotment allows.

The pantry was established in 2012 by student volunteers to provide food to members of the University community at no cost. Located in the union’s basement, the pantry distributes food several times a week. It is managed by students, with help from Bridgette Nobbe, the pantry’s full-time coordinator.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office found last year [6] that food insecurity rates among U.S. college students are wide-ranging, but regardless of the number, students’ “ability to study or change the world or be retained is in jeopardy” when they don’t know where they’ll find their next meal, Millay said.
Nobbe said Boxing Up Hunger increases the pantry's accessibility by providing food options that can be prepared easily. Some pantry clients, she said, don't own or have access to items such as a can opener, let alone a full kitchen with a stove. Microwaves can be found throughout the union's food court.

"They can just put the full container right in the microwave and have a nourishing, sustainable and usually pretty healthy meal in a matter of minutes," Nobbe said.

When Boxing Up Hunger began last fall, it wasn't clear if the program could be operated quickly, safely and consistently at a large scale, or if there was a demand for leftover meals, Millay said. Union staff started by focusing on large events ? those that served about 600 people. Though events of that size are irregular, they typically can provide leftovers for about 40 people, he added.

The response was "overwhelmingly positive," Millay said. Knowing that demand for the leftover meals was high, staff began collecting leftovers from smaller events, those that serve about 200.

Funding provided through the student services fee [7] allowed Boxing Up Hunger to expand even further by allowing for the purchase of equipment that staff now use to haul, package and label large quantities of meals, as well as the industrial blast freezer.

The expansion has paid off: Boxing Up Hunger helped provide more than 3,000 meals to pantry users between August and October, and the program is on track to top 5,500 meals before the end of the semester, Millay said. That's a significant jump from the roughly 800 leftover meals that were distributed during the spring semester. The program distributed about 200 meals in its first semester, last fall.

Boxing Up Hunger items are now the pantry's third-most requested item, Nobbe said, after produce and milk.

Demand for the Campus Pantry's services are growing, too: It serves an average of 950 people per week ? up from 550 a year ago, Michaela Davenport, the pantry's student director, told the Faculty Senate at its December meeting.

"We imagine that both the need is going up, and that also marketing and word-of-mouth is getting around," Davenport said, adding that as costs such as housing continue to rise, so will the demand for the pantry's services.

The next phase for expanding Boxing Up Hunger involves tapping into the leftovers created by the 36 restaurants on campus, Millay said. Doing so, he explained, would not only feed those in need but also would be another step toward eliminating waste [8].

Donations to the Campus Pantry will be accepted at the union’s Information Desk through noon on Sunday, Dec. 22. Visit the pantry's website to find a list of most-needed items [9]. The pantry will host its annual benefit dinner on Friday, Feb. 28, at 6 p.m. More details [10] will be made available on the pantry’s website.

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