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Exploring college student experiences with little pantries: A qualitative study addressing campus food insecurity

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Abstract

Food insecurity is a growing concern among college students, affecting academic success, physical health, and mental health. Food pantries are the most common intervention in higher education to address this issue; however, students often face barriers such as a lack of information about pantry locations and feelings of shame or resistance when seeking assistance. This study evaluates the Little Ram Pantries program, an innovative model developed in collaboration with community food banks and an existing campus pantry. The program provides nonperishable food items in compact containers strategically placed in public campus locations to enhance food access. Using exploratory qualitative methods, we conducted three focus

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

groups with 13 college students at a public university in 2022. Thematic analysis was performed to explore students' experiences with the program. Findings indicate that the Little Pantries improved access to food assistance by offering barrier-free, quick access to essential items. Their placement in multiple public locations helped reduce the social stigma associated with pantry use and increased awareness of campus pantry services. Participants also noted that the visibility of the Little Pantries validated food insecurity as a common challenge among students, normalizing the experience. These results suggest that the Little Pantries program may be a promising way to complement traditional food initiatives and address systemic food insecurity through nonstigmatizing support services. Researchers, community practitioners, and policymakers are encouraged to advocate for and implement similar programs in campus and community settings to improve food access for marginalized and underserved populations.

Keywords
College food pantry, little pantries, food insecurity, focus group, stigma, higher education

Introduction

Food insecurity is becoming an epidemic in college. Approximately one in three college students experiences food insecurity, while the statistics vary to over 50% by college type, location, and characteristics of their student populations (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; El Zein et al., 2018, 2022; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018). The transition into the college years leads to financial stressors with educational investment and independent living. Food-insecure students often struggle to meet other basic needs, such as housing and daily essential payments, and face systemic obstacles to food security and academic growth (Kim & Murphy, 2024). Rising tuition and living costs continue to exceed available financial aid (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). A large body of research shows that these interconnected insecurities have negative impacts on their academic success, physical health, and mental health (Kim & Murphy, 2023; Leung et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019). There is wide recognition across academic, practitioner, and political spheres about the necessity of providing students with meals to ensure their academic achievement and healthy development for decades ahead (Fisher, 2017; Jyoti et al., 2005; Winicki & Jemison, 2003). The first national-scale effort to feed K-12 school students was the Truman administration's creation of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 1946, followed by other programs, such as the National School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1966 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service [USDA FNS], 2017, 2024a). These services and programs are not available once students leave high school. When young adults attend college, they face unexpected barriers to utilizing the benefits from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), historically referred to as food stamps (Freudenberg et al., 2019; USDA FNS, 2024b).

Recently, greater scholarly focus has led to numerous research and programmatic interventions to mitigate this problem and its impacts. Food pantries on college campuses are the most common programmatic intervention in higher education, similar to community food banks in community settings. Since the Michigan State University Student Food Bank was founded in 1993, there has been a notable increase in the number of college pantries nationwide and students' utilization of campus pantries, with instances of usage even tripling at some universities (Callahan, 2018; Gammon et al., 2023; Schweitzer et al., 2022). Research has documented the significant benefits of college pantries in buffering food insecurity and its negative impacts (Gilbert, 2021; Gupton et al., 2018; Mooney et al., 2023).

While growing in presence across the nation, campus food pantries are not without their challenges. A systematic review reports that college pantries tend to be frequented most by students experiencing food insecurity, having a racial/ethnic minority identity, being a first-generation student, having an international student status, living off-campus, lacking a stable living arrangement, or relying on student loans (Idehai et al., 2024). Despite students' significant need for food assistance, research consistently identifies common barriers that hinder their utilization of campus pantries. The studies show that students do not have

adequate information about their campus-based pantries, need help understanding the logistical operations and policies of pantries, and feel resistance or shame about seeking this form of assistance (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; El Zein et al., 2018; Idehai et al., 2024; Jefferson et al., 2024). Also, college pantries face several challenges encompassing deficiencies in inventory management, inadequate funding, and insufficient staffing allocation (Daugherty et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2022; Schweitzer et al., 2022). These barriers lead to concerns regarding privacy, stigma, and the consequent underutilization of services (Idehai et al., 2024). To address the barriers, research suggests the necessity for convenient access through well-located and operational pantries, diverse food choices, and enhanced awareness of pantry services (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; Idehai et al., 2024).

Little Ram Pantries

Our prior research has found that approximately 35% of students at our institution experienced food insecurity (Kim & Murphy, 2023, 2024). To promote food access for college students, this study developed an innovative pantry model in 2021, the Little Ram Pantries Program (hereafter, Little Pantries). Like many other universities, our institution operates a central food pantry, the Ram Pantry (hereafter, Main Pantry). The Main Pantry is open Tuesdays to Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and provides perishable (fresh and frozen) and nonperishable foods in addition to non-food items (e.g., hygiene products). The Little Pantries seek to (1) increase pantry access by deploying miniature food pantries in campus buildings and (2) lower the potential stigma students might feel from utilizing food assistance. The Little Pantries program is inspired by the Little Neighborhood Library movement (Little Free Library, 2023). These miniature food pantries are small receptacles that resemble a newspaper stand. This study team launched the Little Pantries program with five satellite pantries in October 2021 and added eight more in March 2022 (Jones et al., 2024). The Little Pantries offer access to food 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at geographically dispersed points across the university, allowing for near-complete user anonymity. All pilot Little Pantries were deployed inside official university buildings, most in academic or communal buildings on campus, such as the library and gym, with one pantry in the lobby of a residence hall.

The Main Pantry is the logistical distribution center for the Little Pantries. The Main Pantry acquires food through a combination of direct donations from interested individuals and purchases from the regional food bank, FeedMore. Volunteers and student workers regularly pick up prepacked nonperishable dry food and hygiene products from the Main Pantry and then distribute them to the satellite locations of the Little Pantries. The research team attempted to standardize weekly distributions for each Little Pantry and maintain the flow and variety of the available items. For example, item restocking occurs weekly on Wednesdays, and the weekly allocated items are set in terms of quantity, types, and nutrition options. Also, signage on the Little Pantries informs students, faculty, and staff on how to place their donated items in the small stands directly. Student workers monitor and report safety issues (e.g., the presence of unapproved food, damaged food, and vandalism). The Little Pantries program represents a community engagement model through collective efforts from students, volunteers of staff/faculty, and community partnerships.

Methods

The current study is a formative evaluation conducted as part of a larger pilot project that develops and implements the Little Ram Pantries program on a public, urban college campus. We aimed to explore students' experiences with the pilot Little Pantries and incorporate the gathered data to inform on-campus pantry programs. This study conducted qualitative research utilizing focus groups because the program was in the pilot stage. The main research questions were: (1) How do students utilize the Little Pantries and campus resources? and (2) What do students suggest for enhanced food access on campus?

Procedures and Participants

The study's principal investigators (PIs) received approval from their university's Institutional

Review Board (IRB) in fall 2021. We recruited diverse undergraduate and graduate college students using a purposive sampling method in the spring of 2022 (*N*=13). The study participants were recruited via fliers posted across campus, university listserv emails, and word of mouth by their peers, campus staff, administrators, faculty, and instructors. Participants were eligible for the study if they were students at theuniversity, had experienced some level of food insecurity during the current academic year, and had used the Little Pantries on campus. Interested participants completed an initial screening survey to confirm eligibility and provide general background information. To assess the level of food insecurity, the screening survey included two questions: During the academic year, "I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more," and "I have cut the size of one or more meals or skipped meals because I didn't have enough money to buy additional food." The study selected the participants if they responded "often true" or "sometimes true" to either question. To identify college pantry use, the screening survey also inquired about whether and how often Little Pantries were used and what other resources they usually relied on to meet their food needs (e.g., Main College Pantry, off-campus food pantry).

The research team utilized the screening data to ensure a purposeful and informed selection of participants, both to enhance the relevance of the findings for the Little Pantries program and to contribute insights for broader college food pantry initiatives. The selection process involved a multistep approach. First, we identified students at high risk of food insecurity, prioritizing those who responded "often true" or "sometimes true" to at least one of the validated food insecurity screening questions. From this pool, we prioritized individuals who reported regular and frequent use of Little Pantries, as their experiences would offer deeper insights into program engagement and effectiveness. Finally, we selected participants from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, including variations in race/ethnicity, gender, and first-generation status, to capture a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences. The university serves a diverse student population and is designated as a Minority-Serving Institution by the U.S. Department of Education. Over 40% identify as white, around 20% as Black, close to 15% as Asian, and 10% as Hispanic; additionally, over two-thirds identify as female and more than 35% are first-generation college students (College Factual, n.d.; Data USA, n.d.; Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.). Once deemed eligible and prioritized, the research team emailed individual participants to schedule focus group meetings.

We conducted three in-person focus groups, each consisting of four to five participants (*N* = 13), using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide was developed based on our prior research on food insecurity; input from faculty, pantry staff, and students; and pilot testing (Kim & Murphy, 2023, 2024; Kim et al., 2024). To refine the instrument, we piloted it with three undergraduate students who resembled the study's target group and had an interest in campus food insecurity. Their feedback helped us improve the flow of questions and clarify the role of facilitators. Each focus group began with informed consent, the establishment of group norms to foster a safe and open discussion environment, and a confidentiality agreement. The sessions then proceeded with a warm-up question about how participants typically meet their food needs before transitioning to two primary discussion topics: their experiences with the Little Pantries and their engagement with other campus food resources. Specific questions included (1) How did you first learn about the Little Pantries? (2) How have you used the Little Pantries (e.g., frequency, day, location, items)? How do you feel when using the Little Pantries? (3) What are the positive aspects of the Little Pantries? (4) What concerns or barriers have you experienced in using the Little Pantries? (5) What improvements would make the program more effective? and (6) We'd like to hear about what you all know and think about other resources for food on campus and in local communities. We used detailed prompts as needed to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and suggestions, fostering a comprehensive discussion. Each focus group meeting concluded with a debrief and reflection session.

Two of the authors served as primary and cofacilitators, while one of the PIs acted as a sup-

porting moderator and observer. After the completion of three focus groups, the research team conducted a debriefing and determined that data saturation had been reached, as no new information emerged. This aligns with qualitative research guidelines on sample adequacy and data saturation (Hennink et al., 2019; 2022). Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and included a light meal. Participants received a US$30 incentive for their time. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional third-party service. To protect confidentiality, all collected data were securely stored in a locked cabinet in the PI's office and on password-protected computers.

Analysis

Three of the authors completed a thematic analysis via Braun and Clarke's (2021) steps for thematic analysis. After a third party transcribed all data, they reviewed the transcripts along with audio-recordings for accuracy. All personal, identifiable information was removed from each transcript, and participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Next, two authors read through transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data, noting any initial thoughts and codes. They then developed codes for the data line by line, meeting to discuss any discrepancies. The two authors then worked together to generate themes that supported the data and represented the lived experiences of all focus group members. They then met with a third research member to review all codes and themes.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (*N* = 13)

Characteristics	*n* / Mean
Age (years)	23
Gender	
Cis Gender Male	5
Cis Gender Female	7
Transgender Male	1
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	4
Hispanic/Latina/o/X	3
White/Caucasian/Western European	6
Academic Status	
Undergraduate	12
Graduate	1
First-Generation Student	
No	7
Yes	6

Results

The study participants included 13 college students with diverse backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. Half of the participants identified as female (53.85%) or first-generation college students (46.15%), and 46.15% self-identified as white and 30.77% as Asian. The average age of the participants was 23 (*SD* = 7.91), and the majority were undergraduate students (92.31%).

Our focus group analysis identified two central themes related to the utilization of Little Pantries (Research Question 1): notable distinctions from the traditional college pantry model and the perceived myth of resource scarcity. Also, the focus groups offered consistent suggestions for enhancing the visibility of college pantry resources (Research Question 2). We present a summary of these findings, accompanied by representative direct quotes, in Table 2 and provide the detailed results below.

Difference from Traditional College Pantries

Participants shared several benefits of having the Little Pantries. One of the primary benefits was how accessible they were for students. The Little Pantries are placed in academic and event spaces across campus. Participants largely shared that using the satellite pantries is barrier-free and quicker. Using the Main Pantry takes time because of the required forms to fill out and extra travel time by walking or finding transportation. Participants frequently reported limited time and ability to travel to grocery stores or the Main Pantry. Participants highlighted the strengths: "There is no barrier to entry. You don't have to sign up for anything to access it. You can just go and get something"; "Convenience. They're posted in a lot of places I go"; "Yeah, the accessibility and convenience. I start my day every morning at Little Pantries. So, I am able to swing by the [Little] pantry pretty easily"; "Accessible right now, things that I

can just tear open and eat right now"; and "Getting out from here [is] like back to the freeway so I can get home. It does take me scheduling and planning my week out to come to the pantry here [Main Pantry] at the campus." The Little Pantries gave many participants the ability to grab a quick snack between classes to curb their hunger and support their ability to focus. Participants stated, "The first time I used it, I think I got a granola bar out of there. I was in the library, and I was, actually, really hungry and having a hard time focusing. … It, actually, helped power me through, so it was nice"; "More grab-and-go type items show up in the Little Pantries because they can be an immediate like 'I need this today'"; "Having items in there like a granola bar that I can just snack on until I can get food makes it really nice. It makes it really nice. And then, I'm able to concentrate better."

Table 2. Themes and Sample Quotes

Research Question / Theme	Quotes
Question 1	
Differences from Traditional College Pantries	"There is no barrier to entry. You don't have to sign up for anything to access it. You can just go and get something."
	"convenience. They're posted in a lot of places I go."
	"Yeah the accessibility and convenience. I start my day every morning at Little Pantries. So, I am able to swing by the [Little] pantry pretty easily."
	"Accessible right now, things that I can just tear open and eat right now."
	"Getting out from here [is] like back to the freeway so I can get home. It does take me scheduling and planning my week out to come to the pantry here [Main Pantry] at the Campus."
	"To me you only go to the little pantry when you need something right now but versus going to the big pantry. I'm getting stuff, everything I need for the week."
	"… another thing about convenience is that you don't actually have to show a form to see what you want to get. So, you just pick it out from what you see."
	"The small ones are maybe more on-the-go kinds of things. And the big one is for like groceries. I feel like that's how it is right now."
Myth of Scarcity	"I don't want to overuse it because I feel like I know that there is so much food insecurity on campus. So I'm like yeah. I leave it like for the other people."
	"If there's a lot in it, I'll take something. If there's not, I'm leaving it alone."
	"… making sure there is that food so that if it gets low, people don't feel bad taking it."
	"If it's overstocked, I feel a lot better about taking something out because then, I feel like there is still a good amount for anybody else."
Question 2	
Hidden and Invisible College Pantries?	"I told my mentees, they're all first-generation students, I told them about the main pantry [in the student commons]. No one wanted to go. So, then I said I can go with you if you are worried about being judged for going to the pantry. And one student was like 'yeah, I would go if you came with me'."
	"I don't really know the process of getting to it and then, actually, getting the food out of it. So, I would say that's a big one for me. I knew there was one but I didn't know where it was or how to get to it, how to access it."
	"The pantry is so hidden away. It almost feels like I'm making that walk of shame passed [it]."
	"Part of why I feel weird using it sometimes is because the university has never actually put up a sign that says here is the pantry, come and get food if you need it."
	"I think to break this stigma is to make the Little Pantry [and Main Pantry] be more used. If you see more people using it, you will feel comfortable about using it because most of the time, I have the feeling that I'm the only one who is using it."

While appreciating the easy access, students spoke to the limited capacity of the Little Pantries in food options and quantity, which differs from the Main Pantry, where students typically find fresh or frozen products and other items used to make meals in a kitchen. Students wished for more options at the Little Pantries that would benefit their health, especially in academic buildings, the library, or the gym. A student said, "Sometimes, I check to see something interesting or different from the Main Pantry. I could stand [want to see] a box of protein bars." A few students shared their experiences of questioning about food in Little Pantries, saying, "I think it was odd; one day, I went to the little pantry, and it had [blueberry and apple] pie filling [in cans]. ... And I was like, that's awesome. ... And I know they have to go off of what's donated to them. But I thought it was really weird to have—I don't classify that as food [because I cannot make a full meal only with it]. So, that was sort of surprising. It seems like the Little Pantry has such limited space; you'd only want to put very generic things in there. And you'd want to have the more, different, or varied items at the Main Pantry instead. It was just sort of weird that they would have that in and have taken up the space in the little pantry with that, I think is where my head went" ; and "Actually, some of the stuff is expired. So, you have to be careful. ... I guess I'm like, it sucks, but it's free, so you can't complain." Also, students indicated that an increased number of Little Pantries would make them more comfortable using them. For example, one participant shared, "The more of them there are, I feel like the less insecure you feel about taking from the whole stash. Like, if you see them everywhere, then you're not going to be like, oh, this is the only one." This observation resonates with the following section.

Perceived Myth of Scarcity

Participants showed interesting perceptions and behaviors in utilizing the Little Pantries. Participants illustrated a common behavior of limiting what they took from the Little Pantries based on how many items were present, displaying a perception of scarcity of food resources. Some participants went as far as to wonder if there were enough food resources to stock the Little Pantries, commenting, "Sometimes, it looks like the Little Pantry might run out of food." They consistently described being more hesitant to take items if the pantries appear less well-stocked. One participant shared, "If there's a lot in it, I'll take something. If there's not, I'm leaving it alone." This tendency was highly connected to students wanting to ensure that other students would also have access to food. For example, one participant commented, "I don't want to overuse it because I feel like I know that there is so much food insecurity on campus. So, I'm like, yeah. I leave it like for the other people." Another participant agreed by commenting, "You can just picture the person showing up to the [little] pantry after six people, and you have taken something, and them opening it and there is nothing. That fear in my head, I think, if I leave something, then somebody has something. So, I always feel like I have to leave it [for other students]."

Students expressed a desire to ensure that they would not take away food from others, which also led to fears that they might not "deserve" the food. One participant said, "I think I also feel guilty because what if someone else needs it more than me." Students struggled with balancing their own needs with the needs of others when they perceived that supplies were scarce. One student described this struggle: "I would say concern that somebody else needs it more. I mean, I definitely do feel like I need it, but I don't know. I'm always going to think that, I'm always going to feel sort of guilty for using it." Students consistently reported being more comfortable taking food if the Little Pantries were more fully stocked. One student commented, "If it's overstocked, I feel a lot better about taking something out because then, I feel like there is still a good amount for anybody else."

Hidden and Invisible College Pantries?

Participants frequently spoke about their limited knowledge of the Little Pantries and the Main Pantry. Participants described difficulties finding out about the Main Pantry and the available resources on campus: "I have been going to my professors asking for help for the past year and a half. And it was not until this past semester, in November, that someone told me about the Main Pantry. And it just happened to be by happenstance. So, that was

a this is a resource that was not made available to me because I did not know that it existed."; "If it was in the syllabus, if it was actively publicized by the university, it would legitimize it." One participant described his experience asking multiple university employees, "I just started asking people. There's not a clearly defined organizational tree around student support. … I asked just everybody that I could find what resources—is there anything that I can get to help? And no one could provide me guidance." This was particularly true among first-generation students, who had limited information about campus resources. One participant explained, "I definitely felt at a disadvantage compared to my friends who already were pretty well educated [by their informal network] on all of the resources that the school had to offer. I just kind of like am slowly figuring it out." Another participant shared their experience in a first-generation student mentoring program for first-year students, where they discussed the Little Pantries with the new students and took them to one so that they could use them: "I told my mentees, they're all first-generation students, I told them about the Main Pantry [in the student commons]. No one wanted to go. So, then I said I can go with you if you are worried about being judged for going to the pantry. And one student was like, "Yeah, I would go if you came with me."

Student participants associated a feeling of frustration with inadequate advertising and limited institutional support. Students described that the college pantries are not advertised enough for students, and the university appears not to be actively advertising. One participant noted, "It's something that's available, but it's not publicized. [I think] the university itself doesn't encourage using it." Another participant echoed this sentiment: "The university actively does not want people to find the pantries because they're doing nothing to help us find them." They suggested the need to increase advertising and institutional support for college pantries with physical advertisements and signage on campus. Specifically, one participant shared, "I feel like signage is a big one. You could even have signs on the doors to buildings that there's the main pantry inside that building, potentially a sign pointing towards it, definitely towards the main pantry because that one is hard to find."

Students further pointed out that a lack of advertising and institutional support contributed to the stigma around food pantry use. They said it was rare to hear their close peers and university staff discuss the pantries. One participant shared, "Part of why I feel weird using it sometimes is because the university has never actually put up a sign that says, 'Here is the pantry; come and get food if you need it." They spoke to the importance of making the pantries widely used and normalized to reduce the stigma. One participant shared, "Eventually, if it has more signs and is more noticeable, and where it is, and the more people use it, eventually, it won't be as much stigma." Another participant shared, "I think to break this stigma is to make the Little Pantry [and Main Pantry] be more used. If you see more people using it, you will feel comfortable about using it because most of the time, I have the feeling that I'm the only one who is using it." Also, participants suggested that peer support could be a way to increase knowledge of the resource, whether through additional information during first-year student orientation or through a campus club that promoted the campus food pantry and its satellite pantries. For example, a participant stated, "One random thought that came to my head about being able to get Little Pantry or the Main Pantry out more is a club because you'd be surprised how many students, if they learned that there is a club that is here to actively promote and help with food insecurity, how many students would actually do that." They also commented that they believed that the pantries should be a source of pride for the university community: "It also should be a selling point of the university. It should be part of the bull horning announcements." Students underscored that they felt care from the community through sharing and donating food to the pantry.

Discussion

This study is among the first to focus on the on-campus Little Pantries program. Overall, the findings provide invaluable insights into how the Little Pantries may improve food access for college students and offer recommendations for more inclusive practices in addressing systemic food insecurity. This formative evaluation provides solid

evidence of the distinct contributions of Little Pantries to pantry models in college contexts.

First, our research underscores key advantages of Little Pantries over traditional college pantry models, particularly in their ability to improve food availability and accessibility. Focus groups consistently noted that the Little Pantries are "available" in multiple locations across campus, supplying grab-and-go style food in addition to the Main Pantry. Also, focus group participants frequently testified that the Little Pantries help make food easily "accessible" in several ways. The geographic proximity of multiple Little Pantry locations enables students to quickly alleviate hunger between classes. The findings demonstrate that Little Pantries enhance accessibility further by providing an administration-free supply, that is, 24 hours a day without prior planning, administrative check-ins, or direct interactions with pantry staff. These features are distinctly different from traditional campus pantries, which usually demand some level of time commitment and proactive engagement for food assistance. Previous studies document that the primary barriers to pantry utilization include limited knowledge about the presence and daily operations of their campus pantry and lack of time and transportation to visit (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; Dave et al., 2017; El Zein et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024). The majority of the focus groups affirmed that students do not have adequate knowledge about the Main Pantry or hesitate to visit it and that the Little Pantries helped reduce those barriers.

Second, the increased accessibility of Little Pantries seems to reduce the stigma associated with pantry use. As discussed in community-based pantry research, the literature on college pantries reports that many students hesitate to visit college pantries due to feelings of embarrassment and shame (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; Ginsburg et al., 2019; Mooney et al., 2023). Our focus groups suggest that such feelings are often observed among first-generation and minority students, who disproportionately lack adequate information and access to campus resources. Our data also support that Little Pantries' visibility in common campus areas increases the awareness of campus food assistance, particularly for students who did not know about or rarely visited the Main Pantry. We note that the convenient placement of the Little Pantries in public areas contributes to validating food insecurity as a prevalent challenge among students and normalizing both pantry use and food insecurity.

Third, this study suggests several important considerations for enhancing the Little Pantries model. We note that students experience limited food availability in the Little Pantries in terms of options and amount. Although the Little Pantry provides compact container space, the study suggests that students would like a greater range of food items with additional healthy options, such as nutritious protein bars. Another is to improve food availability by maintaining a consistent and adequate food supply. Students expressed feelings of guilt and hesitation about using Little Pantries when stock levels were low. A limited supply led them to question whether pantry resources were scarce, whether they deserved food assistance, or whether they should defer to other students who they perceived as more food insecure. Prior studies have documented similar psychological barriers to food assistance participation, especially among individuals who see themselves as less deserving compared to others in greater need (McArthur et al., 2020; Parks, 2021). Our findings align with this research, revealing uncertainty among students about their eligibility for food assistance.

This study also extends the literature by demonstrating that perceived scarcity itself can influence resource utilization. This insight highlights an important area for further research, both in academic and programmatic contexts. Given that our pilot implementation relied on a combination of service-learning, volunteers, student workers, and research team members to restock the Little Pantries once a week, logistical challenges, such as managing decentralized locations, may have contributed to delays in replenishment and supply inconsistencies. These findings point to the need for administrative systems that ensure steady food availability and reduce psychological barriers to accessing these resources.

Fourth, we note a finding related to food acceptability. Although not many, a couple of students commented about food quality, for example, finding items with expired labels or items of questionable use. Literature on food pantries shows

that poor food quality discourages clients from using pantries and leaves them with concerns, dissatisfaction, and feelings of rejection (Long et al., 2023; Yamashiro et al., 2023). Our Little Pantries program allows community members to donate food items directly into Little Pantries, based on community trust. This finding suggests a need for the pantry's administrative team to monitor acceptable food and donation items and also provide guidelines about expiration dates (e.g., "best if used by" or "sell by").

Fifth, focus group discussions overwhelmingly emphasize the roles of higher education institutions in addressing campus food insecurity. The study finds overall agreement that the lack of publicity and institutional support for college pantries not only discourages students from utilizing campus food resources but also eventually contributes to increased stigma and shame around food insecurity. Students in our focus groups wanted to translate pantries into a visible source of university pride, not a hidden charity. Originating from student-led movements, many college pantries face understaffing and fund constraints and rely on volunteers and donations (Daugherty et al., 2019; Hale, 2020). Our focus group participants reiterated the importance of university support to promote public awareness and resources, consistent with previous studies (Brito-Silva et al., 2022; El Zein et al., 2018; Idehai et al., 2024). College students face systemic barriers to food security and academic success, as rising tuition and living costs outpace financial aid (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; 2017). Addressing structural inequalities in higher education requires stronger institutional support to meet basic needs and ensure student well-being and success. To grow food pantries into more than an emergency safety net, our study recommends advertising public information about the satellite and Main Pantry with an easily accessible map through the university website, social media, and advertisements; providing the information at the student orientations and in class syllabi; training university staff and faculty for identifying at-risk students and referring them to campus resources; and coordinating an integrated service structure that addresses food insecurity (e.g., food pantries, assistance with SNAP application, and healthy eating) with other co-occurring challenges (e.g., financial management, housing, mental health). These efforts will help normalize food insecurity, decrease stigma and self-isolation, and encourage students to seek services for their basic needs.

Limitations

This study is not free from limitations. As this study represents a formative evaluation of a pilot program using qualitative methods, the results should be interpreted with attention to the emerging program context rather than as broadly generalizable conclusions. First, a more representative sample would be desirable to include diverse voices, although our study does not aim to generalize the findings. We attempted to recruit diverse students who might resemble the student population. However, our sample did not include Black students. We recommend future research to have a better recruitment strategy for Black students. Second, our analysis reached satisfactory saturation from three focus groups with a total of 13 participants. Yet, we do not rule out the possibility that data from more focus groups or a larger group size might enrich the findings. Future research should address these potential limitations to improve the transferability of findings and to inform the development of more effective strategies for successful program implementation.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that students view the Little Pantries program as a promising complementary strategy to traditional campus food pantry initiatives. This emerging model offers valuable, context-specific insights that may inform broader community efforts aimed at addressing poverty and promoting food justice. The findings highlight the potential benefits of an inclusive, community-engaged approach that prioritizes accessible, non-stigmatizing support services. While the program shows promise, its applicability may vary across settings, and further research is needed to explore its effectiveness in diverse contexts. Community-based food initiatives, such as mobile food trucks and micro-pantries, have gained attention as effective ways to address food insecurity (Arnold, J. M. (2004; Wilson et al., 2022). The Little Pantries pro-

gram demonstrates one such approach that may enhance food access in college settings and inform similar initiatives in other communities. Notably, the strength of the Little Pantries lies not only in providing additional food resources but also in reducing common barriers and fostering a sense of mutual aid and trust within the community. Addressing food insecurity requires layered efforts across the pantry, institutional, and policy levels. We recommend that universities and colleges adopt the Little Pantries model as part of broader food justice initiatives, in partnership with community partners, to enhance program effectiveness and create equitable access to basic needs for students.

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