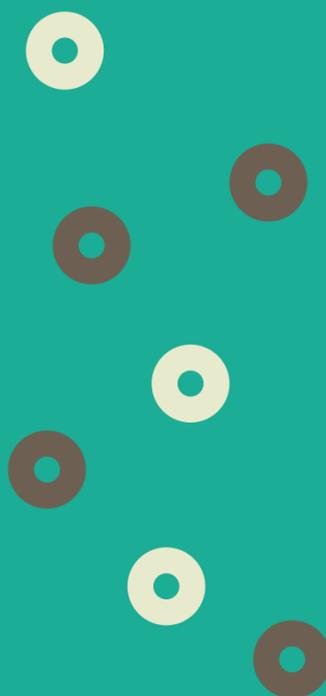
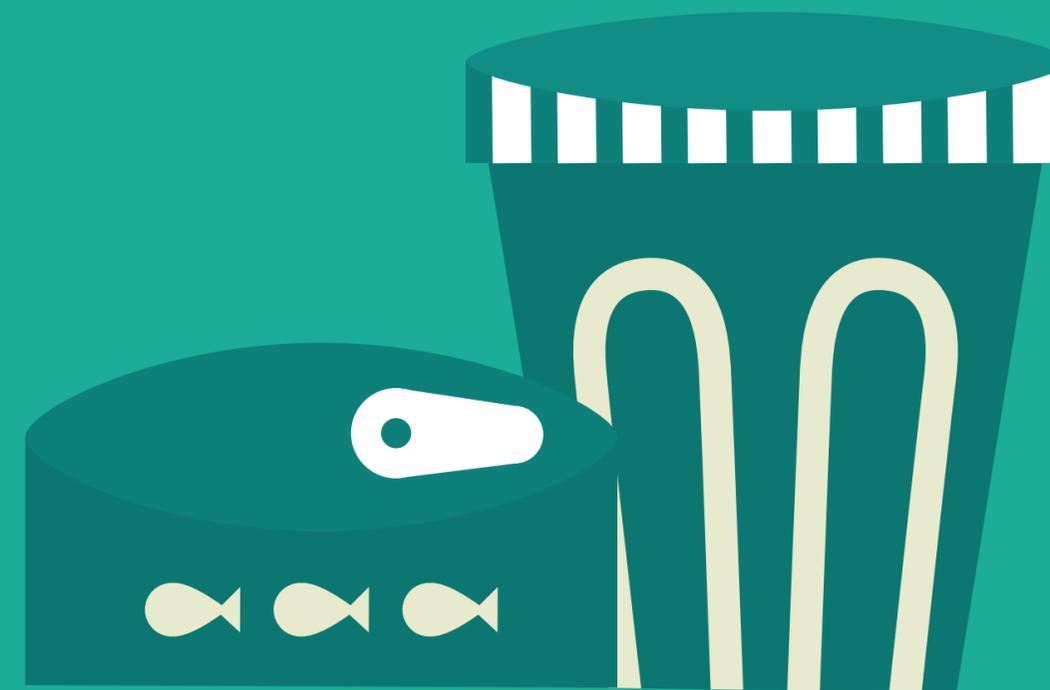


# It's food for thought – not food *or* thought

Why food support services are becoming increasingly more important for post-secondary students



**M**olly Ezzard was nervous to reach out and ask for help. But when the full-time student in MacEwan University's Bachelor of Arts program found herself worrying about her next meal, she turned to the Pantry for assistance and felt so much more at ease. She says using the Pantry service was both humbling and easy. "They made it painless to access help when my family and I needed it the most."

The Pantry is a confidential Students' Association of MacEwan University (SAMU) food support service that gives students access to hampers of non-perishable food items. There's no strict criteria; the only requirement to access the service is being enrolled as a student at MacEwan.

"The Pantry's goal is to provide food security to students," says Maura Frunza, student services manager at SAMU. Students typically have the option of getting a pre-made hamper or visiting the Pantry and assembling one themselves. However, due to the campus currently being closed, visiting is not an option. According to the SAMU website, hampers are available in regular, vegetarian, gluten-free, vegan, and pork-free options. Frunza says around 50 students a month utilize the Pantry.

Frunza expects the number of students utilizing the service to increase even further in the coming year, especially since the Alberta government made budget cuts significantly impacting post-secondary students, as announced in Budget 2020 on Feb. 27. The five-year freeze on post-secondary tuition increases has been lifted, and interest rates for student loans are increasing. As reported by the Edmonton Journal, tuition costs are expected to increase by an average of 6.9 per cent in the 2020-21 school year. These costs are able to increase up to seven per cent per year for three years. This means tuition could increase by 21 per cent by 2022-23.

Not only will students face this rise in tuition, many will also be dealing with hardships brought on by the recent global pandemic. "The potential decrease in registrations (due to COVID-19 forcing classes online) does mean a decrease in funding for the service, coupled with the lack of employment and funding support for students can mean an increase in usership for the Pantry," Frunza says.

Since COVID-19, Frunza says the biggest challenge the Pantry staff have seen is in how they operate. The Pantry is one of the

few university food banks in Canada that offer food hampers as a walk-in, grocery-style service. "Since campus is closed, it wasn't safe to have students come through the Pantry, so instead we now send them a form with all of the food options and they can choose what they'd like," Frunza says. The hamper then gets built and the student is able to pick it up outside of campus. Typically, a hamper would only last about three to five days, but with

## "They made it painless to access help when my family and I needed it the most"

— Molly Ezzard

the current circumstances, the Pantry service is now offering hampers that are intended to last around two weeks.

Around the time the pandemic began, the Pantry saw a spike. "In March and April we saw a significant jump in usership. Since April, while usership is down as it tends to be in the spring/summer terms, it still is more than we've seen in previous years," Frunza says.

Canadian students are facing extraordinarily high costs for university. In the 2019-20 year, Statistics Canada reported the average cost of undergraduate tuition was \$6,463. When you add on the cost of living, this number increases by \$2,000 to \$4,000 for those living at home, and significantly more for those living independently (according to ALIS Alberta). These costs have resulted in students taking on enormous sums of debt and leaving many graduating with loans totalling more than \$25,000, as seen in Statistics Canada's National Graduates Survey. In 2018, Canadian students collectively owed more than \$28 billion in student loans to various levels of government, as stated in an article by Global News. With a significant rise in tuition, these numbers will only continue to climb.

The Pantry's service does more than just help students financially. Katrina Dubois, a registered dietician at Revive Wellness and My Viva Plan, stresses the importance of proper nutrition for learning. "The two most important aspects in regard to nutrition and learning are meal frequency and balance," she says. If students are unable to properly fuel their bodies, they are not feeding the brain the fuel it requires to function. "This can very much impact our ability to concentrate, focus and be productive, which ultimately could lead to a reduced capacity to learn." The Pantry gives students access to food that they might otherwise struggle to afford.

Unfortunately, many student's eating habits are impacted by the costs associated with school. A 2016 survey by Meal Exchange, "Hungry for Knowledge," concluded that approximately 40 per cent of students are considered "food insecure." Of these 40 per cent, 23.7 per cent reported that their physical health was

affected. Over half of all surveyed said they skip buying healthy food in order to cover essential expenses like rent and tuition.

This lifestyle habit is concerning to Dubois. "It's not just about the timing of food, it is also about what the food is," she says. "When this balance is off, there is a good chance we may experience energy slumps, fatigue, cravings, or even stomach discomfort — all of which will impact a student's ability to learn."

With the looming increase in tuition fees and financial effects of COVID-19, the number of students who find themselves food insecure and reliant on food support services will also increase. This means the Pantry will be looking for more aid from students and faculty — who help to partially fund the service through donations — in order to provide to more students.

No student should have to worry about whether or not they'll have dinner to eat when they get home from class. If they're skipping these important meals or going long periods without food, Dubois says there can be negative effects. "This is due to the importance of fueling your brain regularly to provide consistent energy to help fuel your studies and reduce adverse outcomes such as fatigue, cravings, and productivity."

However, the Pantry is committed to helping these students in need. "While we may see a decrease in our student-fees-based funding, we are still committed to supporting students and offering robust hampers," Frunza says.

Frunza got involved with the Pantry after finding a passion for volunteering and working for a students' union when she was in university. "After graduating, I had a lot of different jobs, but I was always looking for a job as great as the one I had at the SU," she says, "I get to be a part of this hopeful future-shaping community

## "I get to be a part of this hopeful future-shaping community and being able to support said community is fulfilling"

— Maura Frunza

and being able to support said community is fulfilling."

For Ezzard, a supportive environment made all the difference when she had to pick up a food hamper. "It's definitely embarrassing sometimes to access help, but when I went to pick it up, they didn't ask any questions or make me feel bad about it."

Students like Ezzard see the importance of resources like the Pantry and what they offer to those struggling financially. "I think it's really important because there are so many people from different walks of life in university," she says. "Some people are still living with their parents, some with kids of their own, or living on their own for the first time. It's important because we all require the basic necessities to excel in school. If we don't have that, what's the point of throwing what money you have at school?"