UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

January 7, 2019
Shelly Leachman

A Full Plate

Providing another option for students facing food insecurity, UC Santa Barbara has opened a food pantry at Sierra Madre Villages.

With the winter academic quarter now underway, the recently opened Miramar Food Pantry is accessible to any qualifying UCSB student — and especially so to the approximately 5,000 Gauchos living closer to it than to the A.S. Food Bank inside the University Center. Open three days per week, the new facility replaces a small dry food at West Campus Family Housing as well as a mobile pantry that rotated between university apartment complexes.

“A primary focal point of the services provided by Housing, Dining and Auxiliary Enterprises is ensuring that all of our students are properly equipped for success,” said Willie Brown, associate vice chancellor for HDAE. “Our organization and other key units on the campus have worked to safeguard UCSB’s student population from food insecurity. This means helping students through the process of obtaining food, budgeting for meals and kitchen preparation. Miramar Pantry continues these efforts in support of a broader set of initiatives aimed at providing affordable, healthy, local, organic and sustainable food to our student population from farm to table.”

Situated in what was formerly a retail market servicing Sierra Madre, Miramar realizes a long-held vision of campus stakeholders to bring a full-scale pantry to the west side of campus. With refrigeration — not a given for the average pantry or food bank — Miramar specializes not only in free food, but free *fresh* food, setting it apart from similar programs across the country.

“It’s a win-win,” said Jill Horst, UCSB executive director of campus dining. “The space was already outfitted with refrigeration and shelving and everything we needed to open a pantry, so here we found a great opportunity to bring in items that are perishable but still with shelf life. Anything that’s fresh and needs refrigeration is often better for you.

“We’re supplementing what we get from the Food Bank of Santa Barbara and some perishables from grocery stores, and providing additional fruits, vegetables and dairy, to create healthy options,” Horst added. “That’s what we’re really about: having well-balanced, nutritional options in the pantry just as we do in our dining commons every day. Many people hear pantry and they think instant ramen or cup-of-noodles. Those meet a purpose, but we want to expand on that and open the pantry to healthier options.”

Miramar is being both housed and funded by Housing, Dining & Auxiliary Enterprises (HDAE), which also partners with the Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships to offer free dining commons meal passes to students in need (some 27,000 passes are expected to be distributed in 2018-2019). In addition, HDAE supports the student-run Swipes for Us program, which collects and distributes 1,000 donated swipes for campus meals per quarter via the Associated Students Food Bank — and hopes to expand to Miramar.

“In addition to our dining halls and UCen dining operations, this is another way we contribute to students’ nutrition and well-being,” Jill Hurd, director of residential and community living, said of the new pantry. “Residents who find themselves in a financial struggle can now rest assured that there is a way for them to supplement their nutritional needs and instead focus more fully on their academic endeavors.”

Miramar is the latest evolution in UCSB’s advance on food insecurity. The campus was the first in the UC system with a full-time staff member at its food pantry, which launched in 2011. The A.S. Food Bank today services 1,300 students per week and has grown to encompass myriad other efforts aimed at boosting food security. That includes Swipes for Us as well as CalFresh, a state-sponsored food benefit program.

Atop steady growth in CalFresh registrations at UCSB, the campus also now accepts EBT payments at its full-service market, The Arbor. And between the A.S. Food Bank and Miramar, there is a pantry available to students five days per week.

“We’re trying to get it from all angles,” said Horst, who hopes to eventually allow EBT transactions at Tenaya Market at San Joaquin Villages, right across Storke Road from Sierra Madre. “We’re taking it to heart and I know a lot of other departments and folks on campus are doing that, too. It takes a village to make a difference and I’m really proud of what we’re doing.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.