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Randi Marenburg at work at UMass Boston's food pantry.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 15, 2014

UMass Boston senior Elizabeth Dennis receives financial aid to help cover tuition, shares an off-campus apartment to save on rent, and has a part-time job to pay her bills.

Still, the 21-year-old regularly does not have enough money to buy meals. So, once a week, she stops at her school's food bank, one of the dozen that have sprung up on the campuses of Massachusetts public colleges and universities.

Experts say the pantries cater to an increasingly visible number of off-campus students faced with a wrenching but all-too-real choice: paying for college or keeping themselves fed.

“At the end of the day I know I have something to eat and I don't have to stress out over that,” Dennis said after picking up pasta, peanut butter, fresh produce, and other items at the University of Massachusetts Boston pantry.

In Massachusetts, 12 of the state's 29 public campuses operate pantries, some of which are student-run. Seven other campuses offer vouchers for cafeteria meals, run food drives, or take other steps to distribute food to needy students, according to an informal survey by state officials.

Salem State opened a pantry last December. Bridgewater State opened one this fall.

A pantry serving [UMass Dartmouth](#) is scheduled to open this month. And UMass Amherst officials said they know that about 140 of their enrollees, mostly graduate students, get food from an off-campus locally run pantry, and the university is exploring the idea of establishing a campus pantry.

The experience in Massachusetts is part of a national trend, with more than 100 higher education institutions overall offering pantries.

The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education launched an effort last month to study food insecurity among students more closely. The department's deputy commissioner, Carlos Santiago, said he was shocked to learn how pervasive the problem is, and he applauded schools for establishing food banks and taking other efforts to help ensure their students don't go hungry.

“In some respects, it's a very sad commentary on the difficult lives

students face,” Santiago said.

Experts blame a confluence of factors. As more young people from low- and middle-income families have enrolled in college as a way to improve their odds of financial success, the costs of tuition and textbooks have risen sharply.

Meanwhile wages have stagnated, costs of other goods and services have risen, and the 2008-2009 recession left many parents struggling to help pay for their children’s education.

Lack of food often hinders student performance. North Shore Community College established a cafeteria voucher system after hearing reports of students fainting from not eating because they didn’t have enough money to buy food, officials said.

“How can they achieve their potential if they’re hungry and can’t concentrate and pay attention in class,” said Jane Doherty, a staff associate in Bridgewater State’s chemistry department who started a food bank for students at the school.

At UMass Boston, more than 140 students are signed up to collect food from the campus pantry, which last year received and distributed an estimated 12,000 pounds of food donated by students, faculty, and administrators. Still, school officials believe there are many more students who could benefit but don’t ask for help because of the stigma associated with doing so.

“Many students are embarrassed and ashamed to use the food pantry,” said Shirley Fan-Chan, who started the pantry in 2013 and oversees it as director of a university office that also assists students coping with homelessness, poverty, and domestic violence.

To protect students’ privacy, the UMass Boston pantry is run in a discreet, low-traffic area of the Campus Center, and students pick up their food in staggered appointments. Staff say they try to make students feel welcome and comfortable.

“We ask about how their classes are going, how their kids are, how’s work,” said Alli Greenberg, a 24-year-old



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A UMass Boston student, who declined to be identified, held a bag of food preselected for her.

senior who works at the pantry. “A lot of times they’ll stay and eat a slice of pizza and talk to us.”

UMass Boston senior Neshel Willis receives student aid and works on campus and her family gets \$30 a month in food stamps. But she has to help care for her 16-year-old sister and her 45-year-old mother, who has lupus and cannot work.

“I just do the best I can, but this has been a big help for us,” said Willis, while picking up her weekly allotment of food, which is estimated to be enough to feed an individual for about a week and a half.

College students can face unique barriers trying to get help off campus. For example, some don’t work enough hours to qualify for food stamps or they are ineligible because they are still considered dependents of their parents, Fan-Chan said.

For some students, it means they put a higher priority on paying bills necessary to stay in school ahead of eating regularly, a choice that highlights how strongly they believe that a college education will lead to a better life.

Dennis said she took a semester off last year and worked as a cashier in a convenience store. That experience motivated her to go back to school.

“I don’t want to be doing the kind of work I’d have to do without a degree,” she said.

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