

BC3 effort to assist food-insecure students turns 2

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Butler County Community College student Maissa Ishler, 19, of Butler, prepares donated food for distribution at the BC3 Pioneer Pantry on Feb. 4, 2021. Ishler, a BC3 business administration student, manages semimonthly distributions as a BC3 work-study student. BC3's initiative to confront food insecurity marks its second anniversary this month.

(Butler, PA) A Butler County Community College initiative to confront food insecurity this month marks its second anniversary, not from its original snack rack, not from its subsequent cramped room behind a kitchen, but from a spacious classroom whose shelves of nutritious nonperishables help to feed a drive-up food bank that provided Thanksgiving turkeys and holiday hams last fall.

The free grab-and-go food station that debuted in February 2019 outside Karen Jack's office in the college's Student Success Center followed a report that nearly 40 percent of BC3 students who responded to a 2018 survey indicated they experienced low or very low food security.

“Not knowing where your next meal is going to be, going hungry, going to bed without having dinner,” Jack said. “If they don’t have nutritious meals on a daily basis, it starts to wear them down and it can impact the rest of their lives.”

Six months after the first students grabbed fruits, granola bars and microwavable lunches from the snack rack, the BC3 Pioneer Pantry held its grand opening two buildings away from where Jack assists low-income students as BC3’s project director of the Keystone Education Yields Success program.



Karen Jack, Butler County Community College’s project director of the Keystone Education Yields Success program, is shown Feb. 9, 2021, near a free grab-and-go food station that debuted in February 2019. BC3’s initiative to confront food insecurity marks its second anniversary this month.

Pennsylvania community colleges serve more low-income and first-time college students than any other sector of higher education, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges. Nearly half of community college students in Pennsylvania are considered very low-income, coming from families earning less than \$30,000 annually, the commission reports.

Jack is among eight BC3 employees who as volunteer members of the college’s food security team helped to establish a BC3 Pioneer Pantry that opened in August 2019 with boxes lined and bags bulged with free supplemental food.

“I just burst into tears”

The supply has been sustained by the college’s collaboration with a nonprofit organization, the contributions from businesses and community members, and the response of BC3 employees and student organizations.

In its first calendar year of 2020, the BC3 Pioneer Pantry moved its cans of fruits and vegetables, bags of beans and rice, bottles of juices and syrups, jars of jellies and sauces, and boxes of cereals and pastas, from its first home near the college’s hospitality program kitchen to a classroom across the hall in BC3’s arts and hospitality building.

It’s where Maissa Ishler hoped to work after witnessing as a volunteer the gratitude of fellow BC3 students during the distribution of Thanksgiving meals and turkeys in November and of holiday meals and hams in December, she said.

As a result of a work-study position she began in January, the 19-year-old Butler resident and BC3 business administration student now manages distributions that, for students' confidentiality and expediency, can take as few as "three minutes," she said.

In preparation for semimonthly distributions, Ishler packages and moves nonperishables from the classroom, and meats and cheeses from refrigerators and freezers in the college's hospitality program kitchen, to tables and carts waiting inside doors on the north end of the building.



A portion of the shelves of donated food stored in a classroom in Butler County Community College's arts and hospitality building is shown Feb. 4, 2021. Nonperishables from the classroom, and meats and cheeses from refrigerators and freezers in the college's hospitality program kitchen, are distributed semimonthly through BC3's Pioneer Pantry. BC3's initiative to confront food insecurity marks its second anniversary this month.

In as few as three minutes, students register, lower their box and bag of staples into a high-sided wagon, and return to their vehicle parked temporarily in a turnaround circle accessed by a sidewalk.

While all students thank her, Ishler said, some don't converse much. Some do.

"Sometimes they talk about what they are going through, the struggles that they have," Ishler said, "and how much of a difference this food has made for them. It makes me feel very privileged that I am part of that happiness in their life. I had one person who came in during January and said she struggled so much. And I just burst into tears because she was crying as well."

"It's definitely helped my family"

In experiencing food insecurity, Angela, a 28-year-old single mother of four and BC3 student, validates the findings of a 2018 internal survey of BC3 students that stated food insecurity inhibits their ability to concentrate.

"When you are hungry, it affects all the parts of your body," said Angela, who received a distribution from Ishler for herself and for her children Feb. 5. "It only makes sense that you can't concentrate. I know when I am hungry, I can't focus on anything at hand, whether it's my kids, my schoolwork, my housework. If I'm hungry, I'm not getting anything done because I can't seem to stay on task, until I get something to eat."

The chocolate turtle cheesecake “with caramel and nuts” that she topped with 10 pink candles for her daughter’s birthday in January came from the BC3 Pioneer Pantry, said Angela, who ultimately intends to pursue a doctorate degree.

“It’s absolutely awesome that BC3 has been able to get this moving to the scale that it is at in just this short amount of time,” Angela said. “There are definitely people within the college who push for these things, unknown faces and unknown people, but they are pushing for things to benefit not just the students, but the community as a whole. The cake. The amount of food they give me every month. I just hope they know it is worthwhile what they are doing. It’s definitely helped my family. And I am sure I am not the only one.”



A box of donated food is shown Feb. 4, 2021, prior to distribution from Butler County Community College’s Pioneer Pantry. In as few as three minutes, students who visit the pantry register, lower their box and bag of staples into a high-sided wagon, and return to their vehicle parked temporarily in a turnaround circle accessed by a sidewalk. BC3’s initiative to confront food insecurity marks its second anniversary this month.

Food contributed to the BC3 Pioneer Pantry through the college’s registration with the Alliance for Nonprofit Resources, Butler, joins that from collection boxes placed in buildings across BC3’s main campus, and from fraternal organizations, supermarkets, specialty food stores, bake shops and the college’s Pioneer Café.

“The community recognizes us as the community’s college,” Jack said. “When the students know they can get food, it just takes a weight off of them.”

“Being Pioneer proud”

The BC3 Education Foundation in 2020 received nearly \$4,000 in financial gifts designated to the BC3 Pioneer Pantry, which helped to feed an average of 54 individuals in the 11 of 12 months it was open in 2020, said Dr. Josh Novak, BC3’s dean of student development.

Pauline Goettler, a finance office assistant, is among college employees whose 2021 financial gifts will aid a BC3 Pioneer Pantry that benefits students whose food security, she said, may have been affected by COVID-19.

“Every year I choose a group within the college to direct my donation toward,” Goettler said. “I was trying to decide this year who had the greatest need. I think the pandemic added to a lot of students’ needs. And I thought if we can help a student with that basic need of food, that would be such a fantastic thing. The very basic thing is, it’s food.”

COVID-19 “really drew the campus community together,” Jack said, adding that a BC3 faculty member in August donated about 25 bags of groceries. “It just inspired people to give.”

“It really works,” Goettler said, “with being Pioneer proud.”

The two-year anniversary of BC3’s initiative to confront food insecurity, Ishler said, shows “that we are here. We’re not just a college. We are here to help people.”

BC3 students from Butler County who meet guidelines established by the state Department of Agriculture’s Emergency Food Assistance Program can be eligible to receive food distributed by the Alliance for Nonprofit Resources from the BC3 Pioneer Pantry.

All BC3 students, faculty or staff, regardless of income or county of residence, can receive food collected through drives, drop boxes or purchased with financial gifts during scheduled BC3 Pioneer Pantry distributions, or at any time at the grab-and-go food station. Many of BC3’s additional locations also offer free snack racks.

The Alliance for Nonprofit Resources is a management company that provides services to organizations, nonprofits, businesses and governmental entities.

KEYS, a program among Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges and the Department of Human Services, provides assistance and services to students receiving Temporary Aid for Needy Families benefits and-or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits.