Stony Brook campus food pantry opens Wednesday
September 17, 2013 by CANDICE FERRETTE

Shelves in a basement room of one of Stony Brook University's oldest student dormitories are stacked high with boxes of Cheerios, cans of tuna and cartons of organic tomato sauce -- the new campus food pantry that opens Wednesday.

The pantry, founded and run by students, will provide food for those at Long Island's largest research university who don't have enough to eat.

The student grassroots initiative is part of a national trend, accelerated by the economic downturn, rising higher education costs and waning state and federal student aid, national experts said. At least 60 food assistance programs have been created at public colleges to help those living at or just above the poverty line.

"Our greatest fear is that we'll run out of food in the first month," said Beth McGuire, a co-founder of the SBU food pantry. "There's a misperception out there that if you're in college you are a 'have.' But there are a lot of people who are in college and are 'have nots.'"

McGuire, director of the Roth Quad campus residence halls, said there's been largely anecdotal evidence of the phenomenon known as food insecurity among the students, low-wage staffers and even some struggling instructors at Stony Brook.

Nearly 40 percent of the university's 14,500-plus undergraduates are eligible to receive Pell Grants, a federal program for low-income students. About 57 percent of full-time enrolled freshmen get need-based aid.

This year, 9,374 resident and commuter students are enrolled in the campus meal plan. Most residential students chose the least expensive plan, which costs $1,930 per semester. The priciest meal plan costs $2,871 per semester, according to data from university officials.

While schoolchildren can get free or subsidized lunch, most people ages 18 to 49 enrolled in college or other kinds of postsecondary education are not eligible for state or federal food assistance. Many grants and scholarships for the lowest-income college students only cover tuition.

"Poverty, homelessness and food insecurity -- these are key access and affordability issues in college, and this is a way to address them in a very direct way," said Nate Smith-Tyge, director of the Michigan State University Food Bank, the oldest campus food pantry in the nation.

The MSU Food Bank logs about 4,000 visits annually. Its peak was in 2008 and 2009, with more than 6,500 visits, Smith-Tyge said. "Of course it coincided with the worst part of the Great Recession," he said.

Smith-Tyge also runs the College and University Food Bank Alliance, a national coalition of about 18 food banks across the country. The group has created a website to advise other
campuses on how to set up food programs for their own students.

The organizers at Stony Brook reached out to other campuses through the network and modeled their food pantry after one at Oregon State University.

The OSU Emergency Food Pantry, which is open to the public, primarily serves students. Last year, it gave out 38,824 pounds of food to 2,583 people -- nearly 95 percent of whom were students, said Clare Cady, who manages the office where the pantry is located. In 2012-13, the office spent $4,200 on food, a relatively low cost for the help needed, Cady said.

While food assistance programs vary state to state, very few college students qualify for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, often called a food stamp program.

Many cannot qualify because they still are claimed as dependents on their parents' tax returns. But even if they aren't, the federal guidelines include specific requirements for students to work at least 20 hours a week; take part in a state or federally financed Work Study program; care for a dependent household member under the age of 6; or care for a child between the ages of 6 and 12 who is without adequate child care.

"We celebrate -- literally jump up and down -- when a student qualifies for food stamps," Cady said. SBU’s food pantry is the second such effort in recent years at a Long Island college or university. Last winter, military veterans enrolled at Farmingdale State College set up a small pantry for their fellow student veterans because of a delay in government benefits. The assistance was discontinued once the situation was resolved, a college spokeswoman said.

Casey McGloin, who co-founded the SBU food pantry with McGuire, said a nonscientific survey of students at a campus event in April showed evidence on campus of food insecurity or anxiety of not having enough to eat.

More than 65 percent of the students surveyed said they either were skipping meals or buying cheaper meals with empty calories, said McGloin, a recent public health graduate who works in the School of Health Technology and Management. The food pantry, which is available to anyone with a valid university ID card, is starting with $5,000 worth of food, paid for from a residential student fundraiser during the winter holidays last year.

McGloin said she and others are going to track the traffic into the food pantry this semester. "If they come and tell us that they need food, we'll give it to them," said McGloin, 28, of Westbury. "It is hard enough and we don't want to set up any deterrents."

At a recent session to train volunteers, Nicole Bustamante, a senior majoring in health sciences, said she knows of a fair number of students who use up their campus meal plan before the end of the semester and can't afford to buy groceries through finals. Maureen Pavone, a registered nurse at the student health center, said she volunteered to advise the group because she has seen a number of students who are skipping meals.

In recent times, as compared with a decade ago the health center hears students say they don't
know where to go for help, Pavone said. "We hear 'My father just lost his job' and that sort of thing," she said.

Diane DeSimone, 47, a history major and mother of two from Manorville, said students don't always come from the traditional mold of 18- to 24-year-olds who can rely on Mom and Dad.

"There are a lot of students who are doing it all on their own here, and Long Island is a very expensive place to live," said DeSimone, a food pantry volunteer. "I think this is a good cause and it will help many people who are just trying to get by and elevate themselves."