

Best Food Forward

By Jane Hulse



The stereotype of pitiable college students living off of ramen noodles and coffee is a familiar one. Unfortunately, this low nutrition lifestyle can have long-term health consequences. One student led organization provides hope to those whose limited resources have caused them to adhere to the ramen and coffee diet.

Best Food Forward is a bulk buy-

ing club dedicated to improving food security on campus and student health by providing access to healthy produce at discounted prices. Many people would assume that with the abundance of dining halls, accessing food would be the last thing a student at The Ohio State University would need to worry about. Unfortunately, the reality is that for many students, food security is a

significant concern. According to an article by the OSU Department of Economics and a study done by the Center for the Study of Student Life, approximately 15% of students at Ohio State are affected by food insecurity. Students living off campus and students who are no longer on a meal plan can have difficulty accessing healthy food because of cost and location. The cost



Students line up to pick up their orders from Best Food Forward. Pickup locations vary to allow students in different areas of campus access.

of groceries can add to accumulating student loan debt, causing increased stress, and physically getting to a grocery store can be a nuisance when contending with a busy schedule and not necessarily having access to a car. Students often turn to easily accessible low nutrition options such as fast food and junk food in an effort to save money and time in the short term. Unfortunately, this situation is likely to result in future health issues for these food insecure students due to the long-term effects of poor diet.

The eighteen Eminence Fellows of 2019 decided they wanted to do something to combat the issue of food insecurity on campus. Each incoming class of the Eminence Fellows program is given the task of working together to create a project that gives back to the campus and local community. The class of 2019 decided to dedicate their Eminence Fellows project to improving food security for students at Ohio State.

The Eminence Fellows of 2019 knew they wanted to find an innovative solution to the problem of food insecurity on campus, but they soon realized that that was easier said than done. Corey Keyser, the president of Best Food Forward and a member of the Eminence

Fellows class of 2019, mentioned that the initial idea the Fellows tried to make work was a voucher system, in which students could get vouchers to turn in to the local grocery stores to get food more cheaply, but the details of that plan never fully formed. The other initial idea was some form of swipe donation system through the Ohio State University's Dining Services, in which students could donate unused swipes at the end of the week to subsidize students who needed access to healthy food, but that option was taken off the table when The Ohio State Undergraduate Student Government did the Swipe Out Hunger project, which was essentially the same concept.

Keyser explained that one of the big problems they had to navigate when coming up with this project was that many of the traditional solutions to food insecurity, such as food banks, are "not empowering and not healthy." There is a stigma around places like food banks that prevents the people who could benefit from the assistance offered from actually seeking it. He added that people's reluctance to go to food banks prevents food banks from being a continuous solution to the problem of food insecurity. If people are only willing to seek out food banks

when that is their only option, then nothing is really done by that system to prevent people from becoming food insecure in the first place. Food banks address the result of food insecurity, but not the cause. Because of this, the Eminence Fellows knew they had to find an empowering solution that people were willing and eager to use to replace the solutions that were only used when absolutely necessary. But food security is not just about access to food; "food security is about a healthy varied diet," said Keyser. He noted that another issue with the traditional solutions to food insecurity is the fact that the food they tend to provide isn't actually very healthy – things like fruits and vegetables can be hard to come by at a food bank.

In the 2019 Eminence Fellows' hunt for an innovative, empowering, and healthy take on food banks, the Fellows discovered food cooperatives. A food cooperative (also commonly known as food co-ops) is a system wherein consumers form a group that democratically decides how to obtain and distribute food as an alternative to grocery stores. The benefit of food co-ops, which is what attracted the Fellows to the concept, is that they can provide food in bulk while simultane-

ously cutting the cost of obtaining the food. Unfortunately, Keyser reported, food co-ops tend to “go bankrupt in seven years and take three years to start.” However, he continued, food cooperatives have the benefit of being empowering and being something people would willingly join. To make their project work, the Eminence Fellows tried to “integrate the good parts of food co-ops and food pantries,” Keyser said. And thus, Best Food Forward was born.

Best Food Forward is a bulk buying club run by students, for students. If you are living on or near campus and want to get food from Best Food Forward, the process is simple. Go to their website, bestfoodforward.org, and click the “order now” button in the upper righthand corner. This will take you to their secondary website, collectivefoods.com, where you can sign in to vote for the food you want, pre-pay for your food package, and find out when and where to pick the food up at the next bulk buying event. Once the pre-orders and votes are in online, Best Food Forward gets the food from their vendors and brings it to campus, setting up what they call a bulk buying event. The bulk buying events, which are set up similarly to a farmers’ market, are usually located at either Scott

House or Res. on 10th for the students’ convenience. These events occur approximately one day every two weeks. The benefit of participating in this club is that Best Food Forward boast both more convenient locations than distant grocery stores, and drastically lower prices than grocery stores. On average Best Food Forward saved 53% of what the cost of the food would have been at the grocery store on every buy. Club president Keyser stated that so far Best Food Forward has “moved about 20 tons of food and saved students around \$11,000.”

In addition to promoting food security by allowing students to purchase food at reduced cost, Best Food Forward provides instruction on how to cook and store the food. This is an important aspect of what they do because, as Keyser points out, it “hits the education component of food insecurity.” If people are simply unaware of how to go about preparing healthy meals for themselves, it is not surprising that they don’t end up eating healthy meals. By providing things like preparation instructions and recipes, Best Food Forward hopes to help empower people to eat and be healthier.

Keyser acknowledges, “our group is still small compared to the problem on campus.” However, the Eminence

Fellows class of 2019 are working on a few ideas that would enable them to feed even more people. One idea is the possibility of getting a freight farm, which is basically a hydroponic farm inside of the kind of container you see as the back of a semi-truck. This freight farm could provide an opportunity for education and could also be a source of produce to supplement what is obtained from the current vendors, which include the OSU student farm, local farms, and the same vendors used by the Ohio State University dining halls.

Best Food Forward is trying to grow through a combination of outreach through social media and fliers, partnering with new student organizations, and even working with specific residence halls to put on events to get new students involved. Whether you are a student at Ohio State, an Alum, or just a friend, if you live close to campus and are interested in helping Best Food Forward grow, go to their website and join to get some inexpensive and healthy food! Tell your friends to join too! Best Food Forward has the potential to do a lot of good on campus. As Keyser said, “it’s not perfect yet, we’re only feeding 250 people at most, but it’s a step in the right direction.”



Food has been prepared for students, staff, and faculty to pick up at one of the Best Food Forward distribution locations.