

URDANETA CITY UNIVERSITY INTERVENES TO SUPPORT STUDENT FOOD SECURITY

UCU Launches Student Food-Support Programme to Tackle Hunger on Campus

In response to rising concerns about student food insecurity, Urdaneta City University (UCU) has rolled out a comprehensive “Student Food-Support Programme” aimed at ensuring that no UCUian goes hungry while pursuing their studies. Grounded in the institution’s mission of accessible, inclusive education, the programme seeks to provide nutritious meals, emergency food relief, and food literacy resources to vulnerable students.

Why the Initiative Matters

Numerous studies show that students who face food insecurity — limited or uncertain access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food — are more likely to experience poorer academic outcomes, increased stress, and health issues. Recognising this, UCU’s leadership decided to embed a food-security dimension into its broader student welfare portfolio. While the university already operates community-extension and livelihood programmes, this new initiative marks a direct focus on student hunger.

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Key Features of the Programme

The Student Food-Support Programme at UCU comprises several components:

- **Campus Meal Subsidy & Food Pantry:** Qualifying students have access to discounted or free meals at the university canteen and a small on-campus food pantry offering rice, canned goods, and fresh vegetables.
- **Emergency “Hunger Relief” Voucher:** In urgent cases (e.g., when a student misses a meal due to financial shock), the programme issues vouchers redeemable at campus dining outlets or partner stalls.
- **Food Literacy & Nutrition Workshops:** In cooperation with the Centre for Community Development & Extension Services (CCDES), UCU conducts sessions on healthy eating on a budget, cooking fresh produce, and meal-planning for busy student lives.
- **Partnerships with Local Farmers / Markets:** Tapping into the university’s rural surroundings, the programme sources fresh produce from local farmers, which keeps food costs down and supports the community’s agriculture.
- **Monitoring and Student Feedback Loop:** The Office of Student Affairs annually surveys students for food-insecurity risk, tracks usage of the pantry and meal subsidy, and reports on how the programme correlates with academic retention and well-being.

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Implementation & Student Eligibility

Students apply confidentially to the Student Food-Support Programme via the Student Welfare Office. Eligibility criteria include low household income, demonstrated financial hardship, or referral from academic advisers based on food-insecurity indicators (e.g., skipping meals, inability to concentrate due to hunger). Once approved, students receive a "Food Support Card" which grants them access to subsidised meals and the food pantry. The university also reserves a small emergency fund for walk-in cases of immediate food need.

Early Impact & Feedback

During its first academic year, the programme served over 300 students. Many recipients reported reduced stress about whether they would have enough to eat, improved ability to focus in class, and fewer instances of skipping assignments due to lack of meals. One student noted:

"Having a reliable meal option means I don't worry about choosing between food and transport/home expenses."

Faculty and support staff also observed that students participating in the program appeared more engaged and less fatigued in afternoon classes.

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Challenges & Lessons Learned

- **Stigma and Outreach:** Some students were hesitant to apply because of perceived stigma; the university is working to normalise the service and frame it as a part of comprehensive student support.
- **Funding Sustainability:** Ensuring the subsidised meals and pantry are well-resourced remains an ongoing budget challenge. UCU is exploring donor partnerships, alumni contributions, and food-rescue initiatives to help sustain the effort.
- **Inventory Management & Food Waste:** To keep costs down, the pantry launches regular inventory audits and works with vendors to minimise spoilage.
- **Measuring Outcomes:** Determining the exact impact on academic performance and retention is complex; UCU is refining its data-collection tools to link food-support participation with student retention, health outcomes, and graduation rates.

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Alignment with UCU's Mission & the SDGs

The programme aligns with UCU's commitment to accessible education, social inclusion, and community-engaged scholarship. It also supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals — especially SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 4 (Quality Education). By choosing to address food insecurity proactively, UCU positions itself as an institution that understands that academic success rests not only on quality instruction but also on meeting students' basic needs.

Looking Ahead

UCU plans to expand the programme in the coming years:

- Extend meal-support hours to include evening classes and part-time students.
- Launch mobile-pantry trucks for off-campus students and those living in flight-paths or remote barangays.
- Develop peer-led cooking clubs to foster student engagement around food and nutrition.
- Collaborate with local businesses and agri-enterprises for "farm-to-student" boxes of fresh produce at subsidised rates.

Conclusion

With the Student Food-Support Programme, Urdaneta City University is taking a bold step toward ensuring that hunger does not hinder a student's right to learn. By combining targeted financial support, affordable meals, nutrition education, and community partnerships, UCU is creating a supportive campus climate in which all students — regardless of economic background — can fully participate in their academic journey.

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Recognizing that hunger and malnutrition can directly hinder academic success, Urdaneta City University (UCU) has strengthened its efforts to ensure that no student goes hungry while pursuing their education. Through a combination of financial aid, welfare services, community partnerships, and nutrition advocacy, UCU demonstrates its strong commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) — aiming to end hunger, achieve food security, and promote sustainable agriculture.

Strengthening Supply and Access to Food

UCU upholds its student-centered mission by providing broad welfare services through its Student Services portal, which emphasizes the university's readiness to support students with "whatever it is that you need." This open-access approach helps address food insecurity among learners who may struggle to meet their daily needs.

The university's Centre for Student Leadership and Development (CSLD) administers scholarships and grants that ease the financial pressures faced by students. These funding programs ensure that learners have the economic means to afford nutritious meals and other basic needs essential to maintaining their well-being.

Meanwhile, the Centre for Community Development and Extension Services (CCDES) engages in outreach programs that support indigent households and promote sustainable livelihood. These community-based efforts contribute indirectly to student food security by fostering stronger local food systems and building community resilience against hunger.

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Direct Measures Supporting Student Welfare

Although UCU’s official documentation does not explicitly reference a “campus food bank,” several programs and partnerships act as direct interventions to prevent hunger among students:

- **Financial Assistance and Cash Grants:** In October 2024, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) distributed ₱4.4 million in cash grants to 638 UCU students. These funds helped learners secure meals, transportation, and essential living expenses.
- **Nutrition Education and Advocacy:** UCU student organizations have championed awareness campaigns on community pantries and malnutrition prevention, promoting shared responsibility and social empathy among the student body.
- **Welfare and Orientation Programs:** During orientations, UCU emphasizes that every student is fully supported, reinforcing a university culture that prioritizes holistic well-being and student dignity.

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Proposed Model for a Student Food Bank/Pantry

Building on existing welfare systems, UCU's food security framework may be viewed as comprising three core pillars:

- Supply – Ensuring the steady provision of resources through scholarships, partnerships, and extension activities.
- Access – Removing barriers for students to obtain financial or nutritional support when needed.
- Support Infrastructure – Promoting advocacy, nutrition awareness, and community-based assistance programs that integrate with academic life.

Through this interconnected structure, a student facing food insecurity at UCU can seek assistance from scholarships, be referred to the Student Welfare Office, receive guidance or counselling, and participate in community pantry initiatives through CCDES — ensuring that no learner is left to face hunger alone.

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Outcomes and Impact

These interventions contribute to:

- Reducing stress and dropout risk caused by food insecurity.
- Enhancing academic performance and focus by ensuring students have regular, nutritious meals.
- Building a culture of inclusion, care, and shared responsibility within the UCU community.

Challenges and Opportunities

While UCU's existing mechanisms effectively promote food access, the creation of a formal on-campus food pantry could further strengthen the institution's efforts under SDG 2. Increased awareness, destigmatization, and dedicated data collection on student food insecurity would also help the university measure and expand the impact of its interventions.

Conclusion

Through its combined programs in welfare, financial support, and community engagement, Urdaneta City University is making significant strides toward SDG 2: Zero Hunger. By addressing both the causes and effects of student food insecurity, UCU ensures that every student has the nourishment, stability, and support needed to succeed academically and personally — embodying its mission of accessible, inclusive, and compassionate education.

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