

College students get hungry, too

There's no doubt in Alicia Gabourie's mind — the Fleming College students who come to the student association's food bank really need the help. "These aren't the ones you see in the pub all the time," says the student association president. "Some of them are shaking from lack of food. It's sad."

If you remember your post-secondary days as a big party with a few classes thrown in, financed by government grants and a summer job, well, things have changed. The generosity of the old Ontario Student Assistance Program, as many in the 70s and 80s knew it, has long disappeared, with tighter rules for fewer grants and ever-higher amounts of loans in its place.

If you're going to live away from home, it's never been possible to finance college with a summer job alone, and this past summer made even a seasonal job unattainable. With freshly unemployed adults snapping up summer jobs in 2009, unprecedented numbers of students couldn't find work at all, let alone in their chosen field.

When students come to college, especially this past year, they're often short of money to start with, and have to make tough financial decisions. "Our dollars get tied up in rent and books. If you have to shave somewhere, it's easier to reduce your food budget," says Gabourie.

The Fleming food bank has been around for about 10 years now, with student services operating it for the first five years, and the student-run association taking it over after that. Students phone in their requests ahead of time, and come any time the office is open, from 9:00 to 4:00 on weekdays, to pick up a few days' worth of food, packed in a reusable bag by one of the association's employees.

The food bank is available all year around. Students are asked to limit visits to twice a month, but if there's a real emergency, no one is turned away. Gabourie estimates the food bank serves from 30 to 50 people every month.

"We have a lot of thankful students," she says. "If they can't concentrate because they're hungry, that affects their academics." The most popular items are canned fruit and vegetables, soup and canned beans; meat is less popular on a campus with a high percentage of vegetarians. As further evidence that it's only students in true need using the food bank, Gabourie points to boxes of cereals and sugary cookies. "That stuff stays on the shelves," she notes. "There's no abuse."

With two food banks open to the public in Lindsay, why do students need an on-campus facility? In a word, says the student association president: accessibility. "They're here every day, and most of them don't have their own cars."

The student association funds the operation of the food bank, with support from the two major staff unions on campus. Spaghetti dinners, from which a dollar per meal goes to the food bank, also help.

But the crucial source of support is Kawartha Lakes Food Source, from which the student association picks up much of its supply of non-perishable food every month. "Without them, I'm not sure how we would have operated," says Gabourie.

Nancy Payne chairs the Kawartha Lakes Food Source's communications and public education committee. If you're interested in donating to KLFS or becoming a volunteer, call 324-0707.