

SSLO's Addressing Food Insecurities

By Veronica Acevedo Avila

In my role as SSLO and AUO coordinator, I've been meeting with staff and faculty from non-instructional divisions and departments to assist them in the process of entering their information into TracDat. You would think this would be mundane work, yet I've found myself fascinated with the stories they tell me. Prior to becoming a Reading Instructor, I worked as a counselor at De Anza for over a decade and I am familiar with many of the benefits Student Services provide the college. But I never imagined how necessary these services are to overall student success. While I met with many staff and faculty from Students Services, Occupational Training Institute (OTI) left an indelible mark. OTI prepares low-income students for jobs through educational and vocational training in order to be gainfully employed upon completion of the program. Many of the students are parents on state aid while others may have been laid off from jobs.

A few months ago I met with OTI supervisor Dan Dishno. He spoke to me about the various SSLOs his team had created, assessed, and critiqued. Dan emphasized how one particular SSLO changed to meet students' most basic need of food. He provided me with detailed information about their entire SSLO process. I learned that the OTI staff provides



many services, such as resume preparation, transportation services, childcare, counseling, health insurance, domestic violence intervention, housing assistance, to name of few. When someone uses OTI's services, the staff provides an orientation followed by additional counseling services on an as-needed basis. They work hard to ensure that each OTI student knows the various services they offer and how they can best use these services. For instance, if a student is in need of childcare, OTI will provide information about options to ensure that students get the child care coverage they need to attend classes.

As much as Dan and the OTI staff would like to think that all affiliated students know about every service they offer, they knew this wasn't the case. So his team conducted a survey to find out which OTI services students knew versus which ones they needed to better advertise. The SSLO assessment survey results showed that the majority of students didn't know about food and shelter services. But more importantly, the team found out the true extent to which this service was needed because students reported

that they were coming to class hungry. These individuals didn't have the money to buy food for themselves nor their families.

The SSLO assessment survey results helped identify food insecurity issues amongst students and OTI took action. OTI's Sabrina Stewart and West Valley's Community Services staff began discussions and the food pantry idea soon came to fruition. "Their wonderful staff, Tricia Uyeda and Debbie Witt, have been fantastic to work with. We also have great delivery guys. Being able to supply our low income families with supplemental food [when they have limited] food has been a blessing," states Dan Dishno, OTI's supervisor. When OTI decided to start this food pantry they made certain that every OTI student would be informed about the service. Parents and children began using this pantry. OTI is currently working on their SSLO enhancement, which means they will assess the food pantry program to ensure that no one goes to class on an empty stomach due to lack of funds.



Some years back I visited the Second Harvest Food Bank and was shocked to learn that roughly one in ten people living in Santa Clara County do not have enough food. Second Harvest serves over 250,000 people per year. This is symptomatic of food insecurity, which is defined by the USDA as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods

or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." OTI's assessment results made sense; many of our students come to school hungry because they can't afford to buy food. It also makes sense when we consider the high cost of living in the Silicon Valley. It is indeed one of the top twenty most expensive counties in the nation as reported by Matt Woolsey in Forbes magazine (Jan. 2008). OTI students exemplify Santa Clara County's economically marginalized population.

I've used various books in my classes, yet a strong narrative profoundly affects my students most. I understand this because a personal story has power to transfix and transform readers and leaves a lasting impression. Dan's narrative was a force. OTI students are *my* students and *my* students are your students. When I'm in the classroom, I'm not thinking about whether my students are hungry. I'm thinking about what I'm going to teach them that day, that week, and that quarter. But I've had a

change of perspective, and I've suddenly realized that we are a village, and it requires equal input from both instruction and non-instructional support to help our students succeed.