

Putting a Price on Nutrition:
The Viability of a Universal Menu Program
for the San Antonio Food Bank

Submitted to:
Eric Cooper, Executive Director
Paco Velez, Director of Services
San Antonio Food Bank
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Presented by:
Micah B. Schwartz
Congressional Hunger Fellow
San Antonio Food Bank

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Introduction

Purpose and Application

The San Antonio Food Bank (SAFB) asked me to study the viability of a Universal Menu for all of the Food Bank's congregate feeding sites (CFS's). The following study is a report of my findings.

Before we proceed, let me first establish the terms of this study. A "congregate feeding site" is an agency of the SAFB that provides cooked meals to its clients. This can include "soup kitchens," Kids Café's, senior homes, and any other site that serves food insecure communities. "Collaborative purchasing" is any attempt by an umbrella organization (e.g. a food bank) to cut costs via economies of scale by purchasing products in bulk for its affiliate organizations. A "Universal Menu" is a schedule of meals, designed by a food bank, with products provided by the food bank, and which outlines the meals to be served within an agency over the course of a week or month.

The leadership of the San Antonio Food Bank hypothesized that operating a Universal Menu for its congregate feeding sites could 1) cut costs for the CFS's, allowing them to provide more meals to needy clients, 2) ensure efficient distribution of the food bank's warehouse of goods, and 3) raise the nutritional value of the meals provided by the CFS's. I conducted the following study in order to determine:

1. The cost-saving ability of the Universal Menu Program. More specifically, the costs that congregate feeding sites currently incur in serving meals to their clients and the Universal Menu's ability to reduce these costs;
2. The viability of SAFB operation of a Universal Menu. In particular, the menu's ability to sync with the SAFB Food Fund (food endowment) and the Food Bank's

current food collection and distribution patterns, as well as the menu's ability to maintain a high nutritional standard for CFS's.

The data, conclusions, and recommendations that follow are my attempt to make these determinations for the San Antonio Food Bank. While the data is specific to the SAFB, the methodology and discussion points involved could apply to any organization that is considering the operation of a Universal Menu.

Chapter 2

Methodology and Resources

In order to achieve the three objectives stated in the introduction, I broke the study into five separate steps. They proceeded as follows:

- I. Surveying the Agencies – establishing the congregate feeding sites current costs
- II. Building a Universal Menu – determining the ability of one menu to serve the variant nutritional needs of the clients of the San Antonio Food Bank’s congregate feeding sites
- III. The Worst Case Scenario – determining the cost of running a Universal Menu without the San Antonio Food Bank’s store of donated product
- IV. The Value of Collaborative Purchasing – obtaining bulk-rate prices for Universal Menu items
- V. Putting a Price on Nutritional Standards – calculating the value of a Universal Menu to San Antonio’s food insecure communities and exploring areas for cost-savings
- VI. The Road Ahead – determining future points of consideration concerning implementation and development of the Universal Menu Program

I. Surveying the Agencies – establishing the congregate feeding sites current costs

The first step toward determining the viability of a Universal Menu for the San Antonio Food Bank is to determine the current costs congregate feeding sites incur in providing meals to their clients. To this end, and with the help of fellow Congressional Hunger Fellow Philip Colvin, I sent a survey to all of the SAFB’s 42 congregate feeding sites and followed these surveys with phone interviews. These surveys asked CFS’s to list their

sources of funding and food donation, the number of meals they serve per month, the type of meals they typically serve, the type of food they're clients prefer, and other data that provided the basis for statistical and anecdotal analysis. Of these 42 CFS's, 30 agencies, including eight Kid's Café's, provided reliable data. I combined this data with the SAFB's financial data (i.e. the poundage and shared maintenance fees for each CFS), to develop a complete financial portrait of the agencies that would participate in a Universal Menu enterprise. The SAFB's Kids Café Manager, Elizabeth Lutri, and Accounting Clerk, Ami Medina, supplied the financial data for this section of the study. With this data in hand, I could compare the CFS's current meal-provision costs with the cost of participating in the Universal Menu program.

II. Building a Universal Menu – determining the ability of one menu to serve the variant nutritional needs of the clients of the San Antonio Food Bank's congregate feeding sites

With the help of the SAFB's Nutrition Education Coordinators, Kate Biss and Luz Myriam Neira, I built a one-week Sample Universal Menu. As discussed at length in Chapter 6, this menu reflects several different interests and fits within various dietary guidelines. It consists of products typically available from the Food Bank and those products specifically requested by congregate feedings sites.

The Sample Universal Menu can be found in Appendix 1.

III. The Worst Case Scenario – determining the cost of running a Universal Menu without the San Antonio Food Bank’s store of donated product

As stated above, the Sample Universal Menu was designed to reflect the San Antonio Food Bank’s typical store of donated food product. Using a menu with this design would allow the Food Bank to include its donated product in a Universal Menu Program, keeping costs low for the Food Bank and its agencies.

However, using a typical week’s store of donated product would not provide a helpful baseline for comparing the CFS’s current costs to the costs of a Universal Menu Program. To understand why, consider those weeks in which the SAFB’s food pantries place particular strain on the Food Bank’s donated food store. In these weeks, little donated food product would be left for use in the Universal Menu Program. In order to provide a Universal Menu in these weeks, the Food Bank would have to purchase most of the menu’s items from food-service providers. Clearly, for these weeks, the cost of running a Universal Menu Program on a “typical week” would not apply. Therefore, to provide a baseline for comparison, I have calculated the cost of running a Universal Menu Program in the Worst Case Scenario: a week in which no donated product sat available for use. Therefore, the costs provided later in this report represent the cost of administering a Universal Menu *solely on purchased product*.

IV. The Value of Collaborative Purchasing – obtaining bulk-rate prices for Universal Menu items

I worked with the SAFB’s Product Donations Manager, Charles Dennis, to determine the cheapest rate for the food products in the Sample Universal Menu. We enlisted the help

of the Food Group, a reliable food-service provider and friend of the Food Bank's. The Food Group provided us with the truck-load rate for food-service size items. The truck-load rate represents a high volume – low cost rate that would ensure minimal deliveries of the products needed while still leaving sufficient space in the warehouse for other purposes.

The Food Group's rates can be found in the data provided in Appendix 6.

V. Putting a Price on Nutritional Standards – calculating the value of a Universal Menu to San Antonio's food insecure communities and exploring areas for cost-savings

After obtaining bulk-rate prices for those items on the Sample Universal Menu, I was finally able to calculate the cost to each agency of serving a Universal Menu. Operating a Universal Menu Program incurs operating costs for the San Antonio Food Bank. The Food Bank needs to build a menu, ensure its compliance with USDA regulations, purchase food product, and organize, store, and distribute it. For the purpose of this study, I estimated the administrative costs of running a Universal Menu as 10% of the total cost for the purchased food product. This cost was factored into the charge for each agency to participate in the Universal Menu Program.

The data that this section of the study yielded can be found in Appendixes 4 and 5. This data allows us not only to determine the ability of a Universal Menu to cut costs for CFS's, but it also allows us to put a price on high nutritional standards. Knowing this cost opens a slew of questions that the San Antonio Food Bank should consider before beginning a Universal Menu Program. Many of these questions are posed in Chapter 10.

VI. The Road Ahead – determining future points of consideration for implementation and development of the Universal Menu Program

If the San Antonio Food Bank decides to implement a Universal Menu for its congregate feeding sites, it needs to have a plan of execution. In this last section of the study, I attempt to chart a road map for instituting such a plan. This road map come in the form of questions the Food Bank should consider before moving towards implementation of the Universal Menu Program.

Before it can chart this path, it needs to answer several questions concerning the program's implementation and development. These questions, as listed in Chapter 9, will provide the basis for discussion

Chapter 3

The Validity of the Data

The San Antonio Food Bank keeps accurate records on the food poundage obtained from the Food Bank by all of the SAFB's congregate feeding sites. The SAFB also keeps record of the Shared Maintenance Fees (SMF) paid by each agency. However, the Food Bank does not keep record of 1) the number of meals each CFS serves, or 2) the amount of money CFS's spend on food purchased *outside* of the Food Bank. In order to determine this data, I circulated surveys to all of the San Antonio Food Bank's congregate feeding sites. I also followed these surveys with phone interviews of most of the CFS's food service administrators. Nonetheless, some inaccuracy remains latent in the data. The following sources of inaccuracy lie embedded in the reporting structure, and thus it is impossible to know with certainty the accuracy of the data:

1. The Snack Exception

Several of the CFS's serve not only meals but also snacks served in between the meals. Because the Universal Menu does not include provision for snacks, I did not include snacks as part of an agency's total number of meals served per month. In the survey, agencies reported the amount of money they spent on providing cooked meals *and* snacks to clients. Many of them were unable to break this total cost down into money spent on meals and money spent on snacks. I accounted for this by subtracting from the total cost of meals and snacks an estimate of the cost of snacks. That estimate came by computing the following formula:

$$\text{Cost of snacks} = \frac{\text{number of snacks}}{\text{number of snacks and meals}} \times \text{total cost of snacks and meals}$$

$$\text{Cost of meals} = \text{total cost of snacks and meals} - \text{cost of snacks}$$

This formula assumes that the cost of an individual snack is commensurate with the cost of an individual meal. Of course, this may not be the case. Thus, the data may be skewed for those CFS's that provide both meals and snacks.

2. The Pantry Exception

Several of the CFS's serve not only as dining centers but also as food pantries. Of those funds used to purchase food outside of the Food Bank, some of these CFS's surveyed were unable to determine which funds went toward pantry purchases and which went toward dining services. Where applicable, with the help of the relevant agencies, we tried to make this determination, and derived the cost of product purchased outside the SAFB from this estimate. This estimate may err on one side of the other, thus also skewing the data.

3. Record-Keeping and Reporting Errors

Many of the CFS's are small businesses run with little support. As a result, some of them keep only minimal record of the number of meals they serve and the amount of money they spend on meal provision. Thus, some of the agencies may have made errors when recording or reporting their data.

In addition to the exceptions listed above, the opportunity for human error always exists in a study of this kind. However, because all of the forms of error listed above could have erred either towards over-stating or under-stating the number of meals/cost of meal provision, I believe the errors made during data collection cancel themselves out. Thus, I provide the data that follows in this report with confidence in its validity.

Chapter 4

Agencies' Current Costs

The first step I took in this study was to determine the congregate feeding sites' current costs for meal provision. A full synopsis of these costs can be found in Appendix 3. In summary, the 30 agencies represented in the study serve meals at the following costs:

Total meals served per month:	93,840
Cost of Shared Maintenance Fees:	\$7,628
Cost of food from other providers:	\$30,653
Total cost of meals:	\$38,282
Average cost per meal:	\$0.41

Surprisingly, the larger agencies (as defined by number of meals served) are not necessarily the larger consumers of the Food Bank's products. Not surprisingly, on average, the larger the CFS, the lower the cost per meal. This would imply that the larger agencies are already capitalizing on the lower costs available to bulk purchasers.

The agencies spend \$30,653 a month, or over \$1,000 per day, on purchasing food from food-service providers. Thus, the opportunity for the SAFB to step into the role of collaborative purchaser certainly exists. Whether doing so would cut costs for the CFS's will be detailed in Chapter 7.

Despite the agencies high payment to food-service providers, perhaps the most striking aspect of this data is the relatively low costs that CFS's currently spend per meal. Except for a few outliers, nearly every agency provides meals at less than a dollar per meal. St. Vincent DePaul Dining Room spends only \$4,854 a month on 18,900 meals, at a cost of \$0.26 per meal. The Boys and Girls Clubs of San Antonio and the Kids Cafés in particular seem to have an aptitude for keeping costs low. For example, the Boys and

Girls Club of San Antonio - West Commerce Branch reports spending only \$0.02 per meal. Trying to understand how they are able to do so certainly raises a lot of questions.

I'll address these questions in Chapter 9.

Chapter 5

The Sample Universal Menu

At the heart of this study is the design and application of a Sample Universal Menu. In this chapter, I explain the many factors that contributed to the menu's design, general descriptions of the menu, the versatility of the menu, and the menu's potential uses. The Sample Universal Menu can be found in Appendix 1.

I. Factors Contributing to the Menu's Design

The Sample Universal Menu is a one-week, 21-meal schedule intended for use by all of the San Antonio Food Bank's congregate feeding sites. I designed the menu to fit between established parameters and to reflect several, often competing, interests.

First, the Sample Universal Menu abides by several dietary regulations and guidelines. It accords with the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) requirements, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) senior nutrition guidelines, and the United States Department of Health and Human Services (USHHS) general nutrition recommendations. Therefore, it can be used to serve those agencies that must operate within nutrition guidelines dictated by the USDA.

Second, the Sample Universal Menu dovetails with the SAFB's typical stock of food products. I built the Sample Universal Menu to serve the SAFB's agencies for the week of December 13, 2004. Therefore, the SAFB's "Shopping List," or list of stored product, for this week would superimpose neatly over the Sample Universal Menu. In this sense, the Sample Universal Menu is not a prototypical menu, but instead an actual menu designed for a snapshot of the Food Bank's warehouse in mid-December 2004.

Third, I built the Sample Universal Menu to reflect the SAFB's Food Fund, or its endowment of purchased food products. This reflection would allow for ease of implementation should the Food Bank choose to institute a Universal Menu Program, as the SAFB would already have a store of products ready for inclusion in the Universal Menu.

Fourth, the Sample Universal Menu represents the food products requested by the congregate feeding sites, as listed in the agency surveys. It reflects the Southwest Texas food culture and the delicacies desired by the CFS's clients.

Lastly, the Universal Menu is a cost effective menu. It offers a variety of food options, but also repeats many items, allowing further for bulk purchasing. It includes a few expensive items—i.e. salmon—but consists primarily of commonplace, inexpensive food products. It is also a simple menu—it doesn't include gourmet recipes, fancy condiments, or any other superfluous products that would drive up the cost of the menu.

Of course, many of these interests are in opposition. Aside from the USDA nutrition requirements, the Sample Universal Menu does not adhere perfectly to any one of them. However, to the extent possible, it does represent a delicate balance between all of these competing interests.

II. General Descriptions of the Menu

The Sample Universal Menu outlines the items and portions for agencies to serve for each of 21 meals. While the menu delineates the items for each meal, it does not provide recipes. Therefore, the CFS's are free to serve the items in any recipe they see fit. The menu also does not include condiments or sauces, except for when they are an integral

part of the meal. The menu does, however, include a list of recommended condiments that CFS's could choose to obtain from the Food Bank (e.g. syrup for pancakes).

III. Versatility of the Menu

Each meal contains a protein dish, a glass of milk, a serving of bread, and at least one serving of a fruit and/or a vegetable. Not only is each sitting nutritionally balanced, but the schedule of meals is balanced on two other planes as well—by meal and by day. This pattern ensures the versatility of the menu. For example, if a CFS only serves lunches in a given week, it can do so assured that it's maintaining nutritional integrity because the menu is balanced by meal (in *rows* across the menu). On the other hand, if a CFS only serves meals on Tuesdays and Fridays, it can also be assured of its nutritional standards because the menu is balanced by day (in *columns* across the menu). Regardless of participation pattern, the CFS can participate in the Universal Menu program with confidence in the nutritional value of their product.

IV. Potential Uses for the Menu

The Sample Universal Menu has been written in accordance with the dietary guidelines for all age groups and genders, including those populations at risk. Therefore, all of the congregate feeding sites could use this menu, regardless of the age or gender of their clients.

In addition, while the menu has been built for only one week, it could be used for an entire month. Congregate feeding sites would simply have to start the menu over again on Sunday morning.

Chapter 6

Agencies' Costs with the Universal Menu

With the Sample Universal Menu and its constituent food items and portions in hand, I computed the costs to agencies for participating in the Universal Menu program. As I noted in Chapter 3, the cost of products represented in the data that follows comes from the Food Group, a food-service provider, which supplied us with truck-load rates of food-service size items.

In Appendix 4, one can find a statistical overview of the cost of implementing a Universal Menu for one month. This spreadsheet outlines the cost of food product and the resulting cost per meal for each congregate feeding site, as well as total costs for all of the CFS's. I have also calculated the number of units and cases of each product necessary to provide the CFS's with one month's worth of participation in the program. This spreadsheet, located in Appendix 6, also lists the total cost of each food item and the cost per item for each CFS. Lastly, in Appendix 5, one can find a complete Universal Menu financial synopsis for each CFS. This spreadsheet documents 1) the cost of participation, 2) the savings that participation affords, 3) the savings as a percentage of costs without the Universal Menu, and 3) the number of additional meals that can be provided each month with these savings.

After reviewing this data, it's easy to see that utilizing the Sample Universal Menu would be an expensive endeavor for the Food Bank's congregate feeding sites. In summary, participation in the Universal Menu program would incur the following costs for congregate feeding sites:

Total meals served per month:	93,840
Total cost of food product:	\$99,638
Total cost of SAFB service:	\$9,963
Total cost of participation:	\$109,602
Average cost per meal:	\$1.17

In relation to the CFS's current costs, these figures represent a net increase in costs to CFS's for participation in the Universal Menu program. In total, the CFS's would have to spend **\$61,356** in additional costs in order to use the Universal Menu. This would require an average increase of **\$0.76** per meal. In other words, the Universal Menu Program would nearly *triple* costs for the SAFB's congregate feeding sites. This burden would result in a net loss of meals served by the SAFB's congregate feeding sites.

The congregate feeding sites would not share these costs evenly. Per pound, collaborative purchasing does cut costs. So some of the smaller CFS's would benefit from the Universal Menu. For example, use of the menu would drive costs down for the United Black and Brown Fund from \$2.04 to \$1.27 per meal. On the other hand, the SAFB's larger agencies, which serve thousands of meals a month, and therefore already benefit from bulk purchasing, would shoulder a large financial burden for participation in the program. The San Antonio for Christ feeding site, for example, would see their costs rise from \$0.11 to \$1.18 per meal.

The data yields another interesting conclusion. Despite use of a standardized Universal Menu, the costs per meal per agency vary widely. The Sample Universal Menu would be most cost efficient for the Comal Family Violence Shelter, which would pay only \$1.05 per meal. It would be least cost efficient for the ConAgra Los Ninos Kids Café, which would pay \$1.97 per meal. This variation results primarily from the fact that

different CFS's serve a different pattern of meals. Dinners and lunches cost more than breakfasts. Therefore, those CFS's that serve a disproportionate amount of these meals incur a high cost per meal.

But there is another factor in play. The Universal Menu cuts costs because it allows the Food Bank to purchase food items in large, food-service size quantities. For the purposes of this study, I assumed that the Food Bank would not go through the trouble of breaking up units or cases, but would instead provide only full units and full cases of product to CFS's. For example, cases of tuna cans come in a denomination of six cans. In the event that a CFS needed only five cans of tuna, the Food Bank would not go through the process of removing and re-apportioning that sixth can. Instead, the CFS would have to absorb this extra can and its costs. Most of the CFS's would have some extra units at the end of the month. The larger CFS's, with high volume and high expenditures, could absorb the cost of this waste with only minimal effect on the CFS's cost per meal. The smaller CFS's, however, which serve lower volume at lower total cost, could not as easily absorb the cost of this waste. This is one reason why the smaller CFS's have a higher cost per meal with the Sample Universal Menu.

I recognize that there appears to be a paradox in the conclusions drawn above. I stated that, with a Universal Menu, the smaller CFS's would pay more per meal than the larger CFS's. However, I also concluded that the smaller CFS's stand to benefit most from participation in the menu. How can it be both? The smaller CFS's would in fact pay more per meal than the larger CFS's, but *in comparison to their current costs*, the smaller CFS's would save more per meal than the larger CFS's.

Regardless, the Sample Universal Menu appears to yield a disastrous outcome. It would in fact ensure a high nutritional standard for all of the Food Bank's CFS's. But, in the Worst Case Scenario used for the purposes of this study, it does so at a drastic increase in price, and one that would lead to a net decrease in meals served by the CFS's. Nonetheless, I think many of these circumstances can be mitigated, and in a way that makes the Universal Menu a viable option for both the San Antonio Food Bank and its congregate feeding sites. I will discuss these mitigating circumstances in the following chapter.

Chapter 7

Analysis of the Costs of the Universal Menu

The Sample Universal Menu would increase costs for the San Antonio Food Bank's congregate feeding sites. The CFS's average cost per meal with the menu—\$1.17—is low, but higher than most agencies' current cost per meal. This relatively high price results from two major factors that drive up the cost of the Sample Universal Menu—the price of broad application and the price of nutrition. I will discuss these two factors in this chapter. I will also address several means for revising the menu and keeping costs low for congregate feeding sites.

I. Major Factors Contributing to the Sample Universal Menu's High Cost

The Price of Broad Application

Members of most all demographics, including young children and the elderly, can use the Sample Universal Menu. It is one menu for all of San Antonio's low-income individuals. This versatility ensures its applicability to all congregate feeding sites and allows these CFS's to serve it to most all of their clientele. Building and supplying one menu keeps administration costs low for the Food Bank, which keeps costs down for the congregate feeding sites. However, this broad applicability does come at a cost. The clientele of the CFS's represent a broad spectrum of low-income individuals—women and men; children, adults, and seniors; pregnant mothers. In order to serve all of these clients, the menu has to include all of the items needed by all the cohorts represented. This results in

a swollen menu. In other words, in some cases it imposes nutritional standards on a particular cohort that need not apply.

Let me use an example. The USDA recommends three glasses of milk a day for children. It only recommends two glasses of milk a day for adults. In order for the menu to serve both of these populations, it must include three glasses of milk per day, or a glass of milk with every meal. This means an extra glass of milk for adults. Over the course of a month, these extra glasses of milk add up, creating higher costs for congregate feeding sites. These superfluous costs, which result from the menu's broad application, are one of the factors driving costs up for the Universal Menu Program.

The Price of Nutrition

The Sample Universal Menu's high nutritional standard is another factor driving up its costs. Nutrition costs money. The higher the standard, the higher the cost. It's that simple.

In order to abide by the USDA's dietary guidelines and funding requirements, the Sample Universal Menu reaches a high standard of nutrition. By this I mean that it 1) covers the full spectrum of necessary vitamins, minerals, and proteins, 2) consists of a wide variety of food items, and 3) consists of quality, nutrient-rich products. Each one of these characteristics drives up the menu's costs in its own way.

First, the menu provides a full array of vitamins, minerals, and proteins. Each meal consists of a protein dish, a glass of milk, a serving of bread, and at least one serving of fruit and/or vegetable. Breads and grains are inexpensive, but dairy, protein, fruits, and vegetables come at a high cost. The Sample Universal Menu could keep cost

low by serving more pasta and less meat. But this wouldn't provide clients with the protein they need. To ensure that the menu abides by USDA dietary guidelines, the Sample Universal Menu requires the purchase of high-cost products like meats and cheeses. This drives up the cost of the menu.

Second, the menu covers a wide variety of food items. Not only does every meal consist of either a fruit or a vegetable, but these fruits and vegetables come in many different forms: carrots, green beans, peas, corn, peaches, and pineapples. Purchasing all of these items increases costs by lowering the volume for any one item. For example, if the menu served only carrots, then the Food Bank could order carrots at a high volume. By purchasing both carrots and green beans at a lower volume, the rate for each item increases, increasing the overall cost of the menu.

Third, the menu consists of quality, high-nutrient foods. In many cases, this high-nutrient quality increases costs. For example, in order to comply with USDA guidelines, each meal on the menu needs a serving of bread. The menu could have served white bread in order to reach this requirement. However, in order to pack a nutritional punch, it includes whole wheat bread. As every food shopper knows, whole wheat bread costs more than white bread. This rule applies to bulk purchases as well. Examples like the white bread - whole wheat bread decision can be found throughout the menu. In most cases, I opted for the more nutrient-dense products. This decision increased the cost of the Sample Universal Menu.

As these three factors demonstrate, maintaining nutritional integrity greatly increases the cost of the Sample Universal Menu. Indeed, the Sample Universal Menu reaches a nutritional standard met by very few Americans, including the wealthiest and

most health-conscious of Americans. This standard comes at a price. And this price raises many questions about the viability of the Universal Menu program, questions that I'll discuss in Chapter 9. In the mean time, there are several means by which the San Antonio Food Bank could work to combat this high cost. I'll discuss these in the following section.

II. Potential Means for Cutting the High Cost of the Sample Universal Menu

There are several ways to limit the costs of the Universal Menu Program. Some address the factors outlined above, others reveal latent channels for cost savings, and still others conceive of the program's design in new ways. I'll discuss all of these in turn.

Use Donated Goods

The most obvious way to keep costs down is to use the Food Bank's donated product. After all, the Food Bank exists first and foremost to distribute food items donated to the poor, and a large store of food awaits use by projects just like this one. It's difficult to calculate the cost savings afforded by using the Food Bank's goods because different types and quantities of food sit in the warehouse at different times. This is why I used the Worst Case Scenario for this study. Nonetheless, a few examples prove the immense cost-saving capability of the SAFB's store of donated product.

Using the Sample Universal Menu would require the SAFB's congregate feeding sites to serve 93,840 glasses of milk per month. That's a lot of milk. Purchasing it by the gallon would cost a total of \$11,260 per month. On the other hand, the SAFB has experienced a surplus of dry and shelf-stable milk during the winter of 2004-2005. These

products come free of charge from the USDA. If the Food Bank chose to insert these items into the menu, it would do so at zero cost, saving the congregate feeding sites \$12,386 (\$1,126 of which is SAFB service charge). This change alone would drop the CFS's cost per meal from \$1.17 to \$1.03, a cost savings of \$0.14 per meal, or 12% of the total cost of the menu.

Likewise, the Sample Universal Menu requires 3,315 loaves of whole wheat bread, purchased at a cost of \$0.65 a loaf. But the Food Bank has plenty of bread. It comes by the truck-load every day from manufacturers and vendors like Mrs. Baird's and H.E.B. Allowing this bread to be used by the Universal Menu Program could cut the total cost of the menu by upwards of \$2,369.

Cost-saving opportunities like these two exist throughout the Sample Universal Menu. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the menu was designed to sync with the SAFB's store of donated product. Twenty-three of the menu's 35 products are items regularly available in the warehouse. Tapping these resources would cut the cost of the menu by over 50%. Worst Case Scenario weeks in the warehouse do occur, and the Food Bank would have to prepare and adapt to these scenarios. However, in general, the Food Bank's donated product represents a viable source of food items for the Universal Menu. Using it on a weekly basis would cut the Universal Menu Program's costs dramatically.

Lower the Menu's Nutritional Standard

This is a delicate and controversial—but efficient—means for cutting the menu's costs. I will consider some of the ethical questions involved in the next chapter. Until then, I'd

like to explore the ways in which limiting the menu's nutritional value could lower costs for congregate feeding sites.

1. Decrease the Menu's Quality

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Sample Universal Menu provides high quality food items. In many cases it contains items of a higher quality than those typically consumed by America's most food secure individuals. The Food Bank could lower the costs to CFS's by dropping the menu's nutritional quality to a lower, yet still reasonable, standard.

To use the bread example again, the truck-load rate of whole wheat bread is \$0.65 a loaf. White bread is less nutritious than whole wheat bread, but white is also only \$0.50 a loaf. Therefore, by switching from whole wheat to white bread, the Food Bank could save CFS's a total of \$546 a month. This may seem like a small price to pay for higher quality, but examples like this one exist throughout the Sample Universal Menu. If the Food Bank took this same comb through the rest of the menu, it would find several cost-saving opportunities that inflict only minimal damage to the menu's high nutritional standard.

2. Limit the Menu's Nutritional Variety

The Sample Universal Menu provides a diverse array of food items. This variety ensures provision of the full spectrum of necessary minerals and vitamins. The Food Bank could, however, cut costs by limiting the menu's variety. For example, the Food Bank could remove corn from the menu and replace it with another vegetable already in the menu,

such as carrots. The financial impact of this change would be minimal because the Food Bank would still only require a truck-load's worth of carrots. However, as participation in the program increased, the Food Bank might be able to move up to the three-truck-load rate for carrots, lowering the cost of the menu.

Limit the Menu's "Variety for Variety's Sake"

In some instances, the Sample Universal Menu includes a variety of food products not for the sake of providing the full spectrum of nutrients, but simply for the sake of keeping the menu fresh and interesting. We'll call this the menu's "variety for variety's sake." This includes variety by taste, by consistency, even by color. These interests are all legitimate; nobody wants to eat the same meal every day, regardless of its nutritional value.

Nonetheless, this "variety for variety's sake" does come at a price. For example, the Food Bank could replace the Sample Universal Menu's peas with broccoli. Peas and broccoli provide mostly the same nutrients. The menu includes both for the sake of variety. If the menu dropped peas and replaced servings of peas with more broccoli, it could purchase a higher volume of broccoli. As with the carrots and corn example above, the cost savings afforded by this change are minimal. But as participation in the menu increases, economies of scale present themselves, and the Food Bank can capitalize on these cost saving opportunities. Therefore, limiting the menu's "variety for variety sake" is a means by which the Food Bank can reduce the Sample Universal Menu's costs.

Make the Menu Less Specific

The Sample Universal Menu is very specific. It states not only what type of food (e.g. poultry) should be served during a given meal, but exactly which food items (e.g. chicken). This specificity ensures the menu's high nutritional value. At the same time, it limits the menu's efficiency. By mandating specific food items, it limits the Food Bank's ability to inject into the menu those items it holds in surplus.

For example, imagine the SAFB received from H.E.B. a truck-load of canned chicken free of charge. Chicken appears only once on the Sample Universal Menu, so this shipment could only be used to supply one meal. The rest of the truck-load would have to sit in the Food Bank's warehouse, occupying space, preventing the Food Bank from seeking further donations from H.E.B. If, however, the Sample Universal Menu stated not "chicken" for one meal and "turkey" for another, but simply "poultry" for both, then the Food Bank could inject this entire shipment of canned chicken into the system. This would open up space in the warehouse, allowing the Food Bank to seek further donations, which would lead to cost savings in other areas of the Universal Menu.

Specificity limits efficiency, and efficiency cuts costs. If the Food Bank made the Universal Menu less specific, it could likely reduce the menu's costs.

Work the Back Channels

After building the Sample Universal Menu, I contacted the Food Group to obtain the price of the items on the menu. At this time, the Food Group informed me of many "Hot Buys," or items reduced in price for one reason or another. In some cases these Hot Buys

included items already on the menu. But knowing these Hot Buys before I made the menu would have allowed me to go further in filling the menu with reduced-price items.

I'll use an example. The Sample Universal Menu includes one serving of tomatoes and four servings of carrots per week. For the week I built this menu—the week of December 13, 2004—tomatoes were a Food Group Hot Buy item. As a result, tomatoes cost only \$13.78 a case. Carrots, on the other hand, cost \$16.85 a case. If I replaced all four servings of carrots with a serving of tomatoes, the menu would drop in cost by \$662.

Some may argue that replacing carrots with tomatoes weakens the nutritional integrity of the Sample Universal Menu, but that is a consideration for the following chapter. There can be no doubt, however, that contacting Food Group before I made the menu, and incorporating its Hot Buys into the menu, would have cut the menu's costs. Therefore, one way to reduce costs on the Universal Menu Program is to “work the back channels.” The Product Donations Manager and Nutritionist could work in concert to ensure that the menu included an ample supply of Hot Buy, or otherwise low-cost, items. This effort would result in a net decrease in the menu's cost.

Make the Menu More Flexible

If the Food Bank gave the congregate feeding sites some flexibility in how they served the menu, this could result in cost savings for the program. For example, the Food Bank could clear Friday of all food items and could allow CFS's to use their discretion in providing meals for this day. A CFS could then choose to make Friday “leftover day,” and could use the leftovers accumulated over the week to provide meals on this day.

Another agency may choose to use those food items donated directly to the CFS for all meals on Fridays. Regardless, the money saved by no longer providing food items on Fridays would lower the Universal Menu Program's costs significantly. This form of flexibility, and others like it, could lower costs for the CFS's.

Use One Menu for a Full Month

The Sample Universal Menu was built for one week. It could, however, be used for an entire month. Because of its variety, a full month of the menu would not be overly boring for clients. A year's worth of the menu, maybe, but a month should be endurable. Using a one-week menu for an entire month would cut the administrative costs involved in developing a new menu for every week. Furthermore, it would allow the Food Bank to purchase even greater bulk, continuing to lower the menu's costs.

Collaborate with Other Food Banks in the Region

The San Antonio Food Bank could work with other Food Banks in South Texas to serve similar menus to their respective congregate feeding sites. This collaboration would increase the purchasing power of all participating food banks, driving the cost of product down. This would in turn make the menu even more efficient, lowering the cost of the Universal Menu Program.

All of this is just the beginning. The means for lowering the Universal Menu Program's costs are seemingly infinite. The more the Food Bank learns how to best operate the menu, the more ways it would find to limit the program's costs. In my

opinion, the cost of the Sample Universal Menu should not serve as a reason to jettison the Universal Menu project. There are, however, other considerations that need to be made before moving forward. I will consider these questions in Chapter 10.

Chapter 8

Conclusions and Recommendations

As I first discussed in the introduction, the purpose of this study was to determine the cost-saving ability and the viability of a Universal Menu Program. The conclusions of this study are mixed. As the data conclusively proves, the Sample Universal Menu does not cut costs for the congregate feeding sites. However, based on all the potential cost-cutting measures detailed in Chapter 8, I am confident that a Universal Menu Program could ultimately lower costs for the Food Bank and its CFS's.

As to the second charge of this study—to determine the Universal Menu Program's viability—I conclude that a Universal Menu Program is indeed a feasible and viable option for the Food Bank. The Food Bank could serve the menu at low cost, with limited strain on the Food Bank's resources, at a high nutritional standard, all while improving the efficiency of the Food Bank's collection and distribution operations.

For this reason, I recommend that the San Antonio Food Bank continue to develop a plan of implementation for the Universal Menu Program. In this effort, I recommend that the Food Bank consider all of the questions posed in the following chapter. Once it has answered these questions, I believe the Food Bank will be in a sound position to begin full implementation of the program.

Chapter 9

Future Considerations

As with any study, this study opened more questions for consideration than it answered. In order to give the Food Bank guidance in its future deliberations, I'll pose some of these questions in this chapter.

To begin with though, I'd like to revisit three of the preconceived notions relating to the Universal Menu Program. I think the Food Bank's leadership needs to reconsider some of these notions before moving forward. Regardless of what conclusions they draw from them, they need to keep these conclusions in mind as they develop the program.

I. Preconceived Notions Relating to the Universal Menu Program

The SAFB should consider these questions in order to get to the heart of the assumptions that underlie the Universal Menu Project:

1. Is the System Broke?

Because this study demonstrated the CFS's low meal-provision costs, one has to wonder whether the system is broke in the first place. After all, if the system isn't broke, than the Food Bank shouldn't go through the trouble of trying to fix it. Even if the system is broke, it may be broke in ways that the Universal Menu Program doesn't address.

2. Do Cost-Savings Mean More Meals for Needy Clients?

The primary purpose of the Universal Menu project is to keep costs down for congregate feeding sites. The San Antonio Food Bank aims to do so with the expectation that CFS's

will use these savings to serve more low-income individuals. But is this in fact the reality? Even with extra cash in hand, are the CFS's structured in such a way that would allow them to serve more clients? Would the CFS's see the cost-savings simply as cause to do less local fundraising and fewer food drives? Whether directly or indirectly, would this project move the Food Bank closer to its stated goal of ending hunger in San Antonio?

3. How Would the Program Affect the Food Bank's Relationship with its Agencies?

Currently, the CFS's serve hungry families and the SAFB provides these agencies with the resources to do so. The agencies have to follow basic regulations mandated by the Food Bank, but in general, they retain prerogative in how they serve meals. The Universal Menu Program alters this relationship. The program would erect a system by which the Food Bank would make meal-provision decisions for the CFS's. In my opinion, it changes the CFS's role from membership agency to SAFB affiliate. This change in relationship, or even the CFS's perception of a change in relationship, may have damaging consequences. The Food Bank should give this issue full consideration.



Below are questions the San Antonio Food Bank should consider before making a final decision to implement the Universal Menu Program. I have broken these questions into four separate categories. Where appropriate, and where my experience on this study can serve as a guide, I'll try to shed some light onto possible answers to these questions.

I. Administering the Universal Menu Program

1. How will the Food Bank allocate staff to administer the program?
 - a. Administering the program will require time from the Product Donations Manager and the Nutritionist. It will also require a Compliance Officer to ensure that the menu complies with USDA guidelines and funding requirements.
 - b. Is the Food Bank prepared to fund these operations?
2. Will it in fact cost the Food Bank 10% of product cost in order to administer the program?
 - a. The Food Bank may want to conduct a study to determine a fixable cost for administering the program. If it proved to be below the 10% figure used for this study, this would prove a sure source for lowering the menu's costs.
 - b. Does the SAFB want to use this program as a source of revenue for the Food Bank or does it seek only to cover the program's costs?
 - c. Would the Food Bank consider breaking up cases if doing so could cut costs? What affect would this and related labor have on the cost of the program?
3. How would the Second Servings Program integrate with the Universal Menu Program?

The CFS's reliance on Second Servings partially explains the CFS's current low costs. Integrating the cost-saving abilities of Second Servings with the Universal Menu Program poses a challenge. If possible, I would recommend the Food Bank collect and store the Second Servings products at the Food Bank. It could then inject these products into the current week's menu.
4. What affect would this program have on the SAFB's ability to provide goods to food pantries? Would the program drain the warehouse's store of products, leaving little for the SAFB's food pantries?

II. Implementing and Developing the Program

1. How would the Food Bank ensure participation by the congregate feeding sites?

The SAFB might not want to make participation compulsory. At the same time, the Food Bank needs high participation if it hopes to find economies of scale in its collaborative purchasing efforts.
2. How would the Food Bank charge for participation in the program? By product cost? Per meal?

Because of the different meals and quantities served, this study yielded varying costs per meal for the CFS's. If the Food Bank charged by meal, would it charge a blanket rate per meal or a different rate for each CFS?

3. What measures would the SAFB employ to ensure the menus reflect the interests of the CFS's? What means would the CFS's have for providing feedback on the program to the Food Bank?

III. Cost-Saving Measures: Which to Employ and to What Degree

1. If the Food Bank uses its donated product, how would it mesh these products with the Food Fund for use in the Universal Menu Program?
 - a. In many cases, the Food Bank may have the product it needs for the menu in its donated store. However, if it doesn't have enough of this product, it would have to supplement the store with purchased product. In these circumstances, how would the Food Bank decide which agencies receive donated product and which receive purchased product? Would this determination mean that different agencies paid a different price for the same good?
 - b. Not all of the SAFB's agencies can receive USDA products. What if one of the menu's items could be supplied by the Food Bank's USDA rations? I suspect the Food Bank would choose to give the USDA product to the eligible agencies, but would then have to supply the other agencies with purchased product. Would the eligible and non-eligible CFS share the financial burden for this purchased product?
2. How should the Food Bank balance the competing interests of cost-savings and nutritional value?
 - a. How nutrient-rich should the menu's items be?
 - b. How much nutritional variety should the menu include?
 - c. How specific should the SAFB make the menu? Should it include just food types, or specific items, or even specific recipes?
 - d. How much money is the SAFB willing to spend in order to provide the menu with "variety for variety's sake?"
3. Will the Food Bank provide a different menu for different populations among the CFS's clientele (e.g. a menu for young children and a menu for the elderly)? Would it, upon request, provide different menus for different agencies?

IV. Integration with Congregate Feeding Sites Current Operations

1. How are CFS's currently providing meals at such a low cost?
2. How would the program affect the CFS's relationship with their other food providers and donators? Could the program have the net effect of actually decreasing the flow of money to San Antonio's anti-hunger efforts?

3. How would Kids Café's participate in the program? Would they pay the full cost per meal for the menu, or would the SAFB place the Kids Café's on a separate payment plan?
4. How much prerogative should the CFS's have in administering the program? Could they choose to order only some of the products from the menu?

The study was able to answer some of the financial questions that determine the viability of a Universal Menu Program. But many questions still remain. I would advise the San Antonio Food Bank to work through the questions posed above. First and foremost, the Food Bank needs to gain a better understanding of 1) how congregate feeding sites currently keep their costs so low, 2) the Food Bank's administrative costs for operating a Universal Menu Program, and 3) how the Food Bank will balance nutritional and financial interests.

Once it has answered these questions, the San Antonio Food Bank will be well prepared to implement a Universal Menu Program. In so doing, they will take a giant step toward eradicating hunger in the San Antonio area.