



Stories from the American Board of Family Medicine

Dr. Catherine O'Neil Leads University Clinic in Addressing Food Insecurity



ABFM Diplomate Dr. Catherine O'Neil has served as Bucknell University's campus medical director for 10 years. The Lewisburg, Pennsylvania-based liberal arts college is home to approximately 3,800 students, and a bustling campus medical clinic which sees between 60 and 100 patients each day.

Dr. Catherine O'Neil

While private liberal arts colleges have a reputation for wealthy attendees,

Bucknell's student population is becoming increasingly diverse. These shifting demographics have revealed food and hygiene product insecurity among the student body.

"Our dietician and our counselor were the first to notice," said Dr. O'Neil. "Students were purchasing the minimum meal plan to save money and help their families financially, but that minimum plan doesn't allow students to meet their nutritional needs."

In Dr. O'Neil's Self-Directed Clinical Performance Improvement (PI) submission, she indicated that the clinic's staff were provided with a newly implemented food insecurity questionnaire when seeing patients. If a student visits the campus clinic, the food insecurity questionnaire can identify them as a patient with additional needs.

The team dietician then reaches out to the student individually to schedule an appointment and offer resources. There may be additional areas of concern to address, such as food allergies, food sensitivities, or chronic medical conditions.

Students have numerous outlets for provisions on campus including self-care kits provided by the clinic, access to the campus food pantry, and information on a Pennsylvania-based services website which connects residents with local free services and food providers.

On campus, Dr. O'Neil's clinic worked with the university to improve the food pantry and stock a "self-care station" with items such as shampoo, laundry detergent, and acetaminophen. "We found those products were being depleted quickly, so we knew there was a need," she said, noting that medical staff has really enjoyed this additional push to reach students in need.

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"We have an opportunity here to connect students with resources that can really improve their well-being. I think everybody in medicine is a helper by nature, but our staff has really embraced this opportunity," Dr. O'Neil said. "It's important students have what they need to be successful."

These initiatives are part of a larger mission by Bucknell's medical clinic to make sure young people are seen and cared for, no matter what issues they may face. The clinic is taking steps to use a translator service for students who don't use English as a first language. They also have a sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) intake form to make sure staff are addressing medical needs appropriately based on orientation.

"There's a lot of change that happens from visit to visit in this age group," Dr. O'Neil said. "They're trying to figure out where they are in life and who they're going to become, so we try to stay in the moment with them."

When she was studying family medicine, Dr. O'Neil thought she would become a geriatrician. But instead, she has embraced the ever-changing world of the campus clinic.

"Every four years, we get a whole new population. It's exciting to wonder what the new needs will be. How will we address anxiety or depression?" she asked aloud. "It really is a marriage of everything I learned in family practice. I love it. I get to be the crazy aunt for four years."

Do you have a similar improvement project that your practice is working on? Log in to your MyABFM Portfolio and choose the Self-Directed Clinical Performance Improvement activity to share this work and meet your Performance Improvement requirement.



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