

Virginia Tech Food Share Cabinet Toolkit

*The Official Guide to Launching
a Food Share Cabinet*

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Introduction

Food share cabinets are open, distributed resources that academic or administrative units can host to support Virginia Tech food access and security. In contrast to the longer-term support provided by the Market of Virginia Tech, food share cabinets aim to support students with short-term, on-campus food access needs, for any reason. Cabinets focus on providing easy-to-make food and grab-and-go snacks.

In 2021, The Market of Virginia Tech collaborated with various campus partners to launch a pilot “Pocket Pantries” program (eventually called “Mini-Markets”), which received bi-weekly restocking and check-ins from The Market’s staff. Since then, interest has grown across campus in what are now called ‘Food Share Cabinets.’ The Market has also shifted to Open Market Hours, offering unlimited non-perishable support to any student. This growth—while important and exciting for meeting VT’s food access needs—requires a shared responsibility mode to sustainably support all cabinets given Market staffing and resource limitations. Now, campus partners manage their own Food Share Cabinets with support and guidance from the VT Food Share Coalition, which includes VT Food Access Initiatives as a partner.

Learn about food security at Virginia Tech, food access efforts, and more at foodaccess.vt.edu

Introduction Continued

At the core of efforts to expand food access at Virginia Tech is the unwavering belief that food is a fundamental human right. The greater coalition of individuals and organizations working toward food access upholds the values of respect, dignity, and access for all, ensuring that every student has the resources they need to thrive.

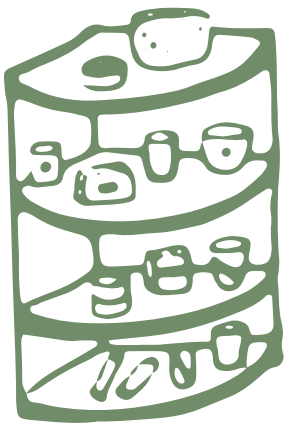
This toolkit reflects these values and provides a roadmap for partners to create and sustain food share cabinets that uphold principles of respect, dignity, and access for all. It aims to assist both new and existing partners in creating and maintaining their own food share cabinets.

Key Food Share Cabinet Principles

- Dignity and sharing are paramount.
- Students deserves to access food without stigma or shame.
- Cabinets should be welcoming and accessible, promoting an environment where students feel respected and valued.
- By engaging with campus partners to manage their own cabinets, the Food Share Coalition aims to foster a sense of community ownership and collaboration, reinforcing shared commitments to food access and justice.
- Please see page 15 for specific strategies for promoting dignity through your cabinet approach.

Why host a food share cabinet?

- Food share cabinets support students' short-term food access needs and, accordingly, their wellbeing and academic performance.
- Food share cabinets are adaptable and dynamic; they don't require large equipment to store shelf-stable foods and are customizable to fit the needs of your space.
- Food share cabinets increase accessibility by offering food resources on campus directly. Accessing The Market of Virginia Tech and other off campus resources may be difficult for some students experiencing food insecurity while on campus.
- The smaller scale of food share cabinets can help make food access more approachable to students.



Food security looks different for everyone. Food share cabinets are one of the many ways we hope to meet people where they are, supporting short-term needs as they arise.

Launching a food share cabinet

STEP 1

Connect with the Virginia Tech Food Share Coalition

- Access helpful resources like this toolkit.
- Network with people who host or support food share cabinets.
- Visit other food share cabinets to view and learn from their approach.
- Get involved in and support broader VT Food Access Initiatives.
- As a member of this network, your food share cabinet will be included as a location on the food access resource map hosted on the VT Food Access Initiatives website.



Launching a food share cabinet

STEP 2

Assemble a team

- Identify a point of contact for your food share cabinet. This could be a faculty or staff member or a student in a stable role connected to the host unit that can respond to turnover (e.g., part-time employee, student organization leader, student advisory council member).
- Plan on a small team of people to help make food share cabinet decisions and share the workload; however, someone should be the main point of contact and lead for the cabinet.
- Reach out to important stakeholders in your building, such as other units, leadership, and custodians to let them know you're launching a cabinet.



Launching a food share cabinet

STEP 3

Identify and set up your food share cabinet

- Select a cabinet. You can use a spare cabinet or shelving already in your unit or purchase one second hand through, for example:
 - VT Surplus Property
 - The YMCA Thrift Store.
- Locate your food share cabinet in your main office, an empty hallway nook, a lobby area –anywhere that works for your space and is accessible to students. Establish the food share cabinet in an accessible path.
- Consider placing the food share cabinet in a quieter location that is open to all but can still support privacy and discretion. Some students may feel shame and experience stigma when accessing food.
- Use the sign template in Appendix A to clearly identify your cabinet and its guidelines.
- Include clear signage pointing to the food share cabinet inside your building/unit.

Launching a food share cabinet

STEP 4

Stock your food share cabinet

- Stocking guidelines:
 - Factory-sealed, non-perishable foods (e.g., canned goods, pasta, granola bars, dried fruit, nuts, grains, cereal, shelf-stable milk, tea)
 - Shelf-stable produce (e.g., apples, bananas, winter squash, onions, citrus)
 - Sealed toiletries and personal items
 - Please note: cabinets CANNOT accept any perishable goods that require refrigeration, prepared foods, or foods with opened packaging.

Food share cabinets are a distributed approach to food access, requiring their hosts to maintain them. The Market of Virginia Tech is unable to continually maintain your food share cabinet due to staffing and resource limitations, but it may be able to provide initial stocking support as resources allow.

Launching a food share cabinet

STEP 5

Announce your food share cabinet

- Send a launch announcement to encourage people to both use and directly share food to your cabinet see below for a sample launch email (see Appendix B for this sample launch email and other communication strategies on p. 14).

Hello All,

There is a new resource open to all students with shelf-stable snacks and food at [Insert location], called the [insert any specific unit name] food share cabinet! Food share cabinets are open to all students, and we encourage you to come by regardless of need. Take what you need, and share when you can. Our goal is to share the best of what we have and help all Hokies with food access, so they can focus on their studies. To access our food share cabinet, [insert directions and any information about building/area hours].

Please contribute to our cabinet using the following guidelines:

- Factory-sealed, non-perishable foods (e.g., canned goods, pasta, granola bars, flours, dried fruit, nuts, grains, cereal, shelf-stable milk, tea)
- Shelf-stable produce (e.g., apples, bananas, winter squash, onions, citrus, fruit)
- Sealed toiletries and personal items

Please Note: the Cabinet CANNOT accept any perishable goods that require refrigeration, prepared foods, or foods with opened packaging.

If you have questions or are having difficulty finding the cabinet, please reach out to (insert contact information), and we will do our best to help.

Warm Regards,

The food share cabinet team at [insert location].

How to keep your cabinet stocked

First and foremost, encourage people to share food directly to the cabinet using the restock email template in [Appendix C](#). Other strategies include:

Building Boxes

Building boxes can allow you to passively collect food in a more highly trafficked and visible area than where your food share cabinet is located. Place a labeled box including food contribution guidelines at an entrance or other key location in your building/unit, either temporarily or permanently. You may wish to add information about box locations and purpose to the restock email in [Appendix C](#).

Food Drives

Occasionally, you may want to host food drives with student and philanthropic organizations relevant to your unit and/or in collaboration with other food share cabinets or The Market of Virginia Tech. Be sure to communicate food contribution guidelines and request those that are most popular at your cabinet.

How to keep your cabinet stocked

Financial Contributions

In addition to direct food contributions, you may opt to accept informal financial contributions for your cabinet.

- Plan on accepting cash contributions only.
- Identify a responsible party who will accept, securely store, and track contributions (e.g., staff administrative assistant or business manager).
- Determine a periodic shopping schedule and adhere to acceptable food contribution guidelines.
- Larger cabinet gifts to specific academic and administrative units should occur in coordination with the VT Food Share Coalition, which can provide guidance on VT Advancement support for Food Access Initiatives.

Maintaining your food share cabinet

Maintenance is crucial for the success of your food share cabinet and your patrons' safety.

General Maintenance

Your food share cabinet requires maintenance weekly or even more frequently, depending on how heavily it is used. Implement a plan for weekly or more frequent maintenance within your team:

- Remove and properly dispose of inappropriate items and any past prime, shelf-stable produce.
- Regularly organize cabinet materials and wipe down shelves. Plan on a once per semester deep clean.
- Baskets, boxes, and small labels can help organize contributions by type
- Consider keeping an inventory of shelved items and use it to inform contribution requests in your restocking emails.
- Track your weekly cabinet maintenance, including who completed the maintenance and when.
- Decide if your cabinet will operate through summer and winter breaks or not. Post a sign and send an email to suspend contributions and use, or simply reduce stocking and weekly maintenance during these time periods.

Maintaining your food share cabinet

Safety and Proper Use

- There are no extensive federal regulations around use-by or sell-by dates for food donation programs, with the **sole exception of baby formula**. Items can be used past their use-by and sell-by dates. Expiration dates, however, are regulated and items should not be used past their expiration date.
- If you have a surplus of items that are unwanted and/or will soon expire, communicate with the VT Food Share Coalition and/or the Market of Virginia Tech to share that food with others.
- You may sometimes have items that need to be removed from the shelves, because they are unsafe for consumers. Remove items with mold growth or broken seals or that otherwise do not meet the stocking criteria immediately. **Additionally, dented or bulging cans should be removed.**

Maintaining your food share cabinet

Unallowable Items

Your food share cabinet should never stock items containing alcohol, nicotine or tobacco, prescription medications, or illicit/illegal substances. (Sealed over-the-counter medications and sealed toiletries are acceptable.) Additionally, do not stock perishable or refrigerated items.



Communication

In addition to the provided email and sign templates, aim to reach students and share the opportunity for contributions to the cabinet in a variety of ways.

Ways to spread the word

- Ask your unit's communications manager to announce the launch.
- Send internal emails to your unit and add slides to digital screens.
- Ask instructors who teach in your unit/in the building to announce the food share cabinet in their courses and share information on broader food access initiatives.
- Place physical posters around the building announcing the food share cabinet and add guiding signs to steer students in the right direction.
- When students visit your department or building for recruiting events, orientations, welcome sessions, or other activities, show them the food share cabinet and explain that it is open to all, regardless of need.

Promoting dignity and reducing stigma

Aim to promote dignity with a sharing ethos and reduce stigma and inequities with your food share cabinet. General tips include:

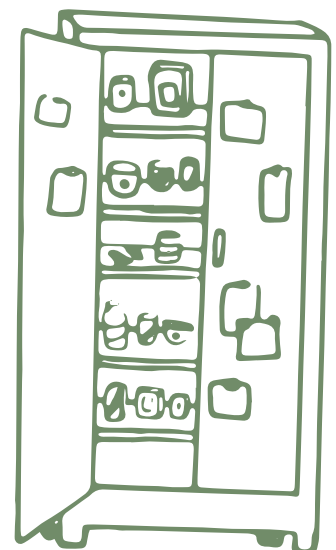
- Consider privacy of the location.
- Make the food share cabinet an inviting space. Consider decorating the space with quotes, other avenues for support, student artwork, lighting, etc.
- Continually clarify that the food share cabinet is open to everyone regardless of need.
- Observe the kinds of foods that go quickly and students seem to enjoy, so you can identify those as a priority restocking need.
- While stocking items with a lower nutritional value is great for ample choice and an enjoyable treat, try to prioritize high quality foods with greater nutritional value.
- While sharing otherwise unwanted food is a welcome way to reduce waste, also remember to share the best of what you have!

Promoting dignity and reducing stigma

Language

- Show support for students experiencing food insecurity to take food from the food share cabinet when they need to and share to it when they can.
- Use words like “sharing” and “contributions” to describe food and financial support for the cabinet.
- When possible, avoid words that imply charity, such as “give” or “donate.”
- Avoid terms that explain the food share cabinet as serving the “needy,” with a food secure “us” serving a food insecure “them.”

Food share cabinets are open, distributed resources that academic or administrative units can host to support Virginia Tech food access and security.



Promoting dignity and reducing stigma

Promote Related Resources

The provided sign template includes a QR code for VT Food Access Initiatives. Additionally, feel free to include information about other resources that students experiencing food insecurity might appreciate, like links to campus mental health resources, articles that teach people how to apply for SNAP benefits, and additional food security resources, such as:

Dean of Students/Emergency Grants:

<https://dos.vt.edu/basicneeds.html>

Campus Mental Health

<https://well-being.vt.edu/mental.html>

How to Apply for SNAP Benefits:

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>

How to Apply for WIC Benefits:

<https://www.dss.virginia.gov/benefit/wic.cgi>

New River Valley Food Security Directory:

https://cfnrvt.org/wp-content/uploads/Spring-2024-NRV-Food-Assistance-Directory_web.pdf

Acknowledgments

Honors College

Honors College students Jasmine Ferdinand, James Hensley, and Hailey Lakey authored the original version of this toolkit in the spring 2024 UH 4504: Food Justice Design Challenge course, taught by Dr. Rachael Budowle and mentored by Isabelle Largen, Assistant Director for Food Access Initiatives at Virginia Tech.

Summer Student Interns

Brenna Demko and Bree Williams, summer interns supported by the Honors College and Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation, helped to revise this toolkit in partnership with Isabelle Largen and Dr. Rachael Budowle.

Pocket Pantries/Mini-Market Pilot Partners

Many thanks to Kara Lattimer, Tonisha Montgomery, Kurt Hoffman, Nina Ha, Kate D'Intino, Phoebe Pyles, and Lauren Varboncoeur for their work with the pilot Mini-Markets and their time providing valuable information to help develop the toolkit.

University of Wyoming

The students, staff, and faculty members at The University of Wyoming who created a model food share cabinet toolkit that informed this version.

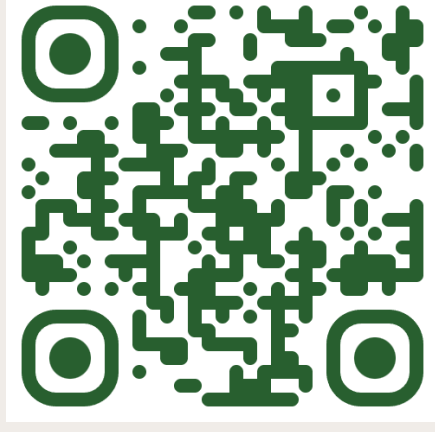
Enter Cabinet/Building name here

This food share cabinet is open to all students, with no sign-up or check-in necessary. Please help yourself!

Faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to share the best of what they have with an emphasis on healthy, easy-prep meal and snacks. Please share only non-perishable, factory sealed items or shelf stable produce.

For additional Support:

Please visit foodaccess.vt.edu to learn more about other food resources available for students. The Market of Virginia Tech currently offers walk-in hours with no screening for additional non-perishable food support.



Contact: Enter contact information here.

Appendix B: Food Share Cabinet Launch Email Template

To: Faculty/staff listservs in your unit/student organizations

Subject: Food Share Cabinet Launching at [insert location]

Body:

Hello All,

There is a new resource open to all students with shelf-stable snacks and food at [Insert location], called the [insert any specific unit name] food share cabinet! Food share cabinets are open to all students, and we encourage you to come by regardless of need. Take what you need, and share when you can. Our goal is to share the best of what we have and help all Hokies with food access, so they can focus on their studies.

Please contribute to our cabinet using the following guidelines:

- Factory-sealed, non-perishable foods (e.g., canned goods, mac & cheese, ramen noodles, pasta, granola bars, flours, dried fruit, nuts, grains, cereal, shelf-stable milk, tea, jam, sauce, spices)
- Shelf-stable produce (e.g., apples, bananas, winter squash, onions, citrus, fruit)
- Sealed toiletries and personal hygiene items
- Please note: the Cabinet CANNOT accept any perishable goods that require refrigeration, prepared foods, or foods with opened packaging.

To Access the Food Share Cabinet

Once you enter [insert building], [insert directions to location]. The cabinet is open [insert building/office hours].

If you have questions or are having difficulty finding the cabinet, please reach out to (insert contact information), and we will do our best to help.

Warm Regards,

The food share cabinet team at [insert location].

P.S. Food Share Cabinets are part of broader VT Food Access Initiatives but differ from the Market at Virginia Tech, located at 801 University City Boulevard, which has protein, dairy products, fruits & vegetables, and non-perishable food items to support students with longer-term food access needs. The Market provides these resources during open market hours and more frequently on a first-come, first-served basis. Learn more or at: foodaccess.vt.edu

Appendix C: Food Share Cabinet Restock Email Template

To: Faculty/staff listservs in your unit/student organizations

Subject: Food Share Cabinet at (insert location) Needs Contributions

Body:

Hello All,

It is time to restock the food share cabinet at (insert location). If you are able, please bring food to share at (insert location). Thank you for supporting food access at Virginia Tech.

Guidelines for Contributions

Factory-sealed, non-perishable foods (e.g., canned goods, mac & cheese, ramen noodles, pasta, granola bars, flours, dried fruit, nuts, grains, cereal, shelf-stable milk, tea, jam, sauce, spices)

Shelf-stable produce (e.g., apples, bananas, winter squash, onions, citrus, fruit)

Sealed toiletries and personal hygiene items

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