



Supports for Success: Hunger and Food Insecurity Among College Students

When people are food insecure, they are forced to change their diets, their eating patterns, or their food intake because they do not have enough money for food. Mounting evidence shows that college students are far more likely to be food insecure than the general population, and initial research indicates that this negatively affects academic performance and student success.

SCOPE OF FOOD INSECURITY

A groundbreaking report released in December 2015, *Hungry to Learn*, highlights the issue of food insecurity among community college students. Through a survey of more than 4,000 students at 10 community colleges, the study estimates that 39% of all community college students had low or very low food insecurity over the past 30 days. Other surveys have shown that food insecurity rates on individual campuses can be nearly 60%. This is striking when compared to the average rate of food insecurity among all U.S. households—14%.

WHY ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HUNGER?

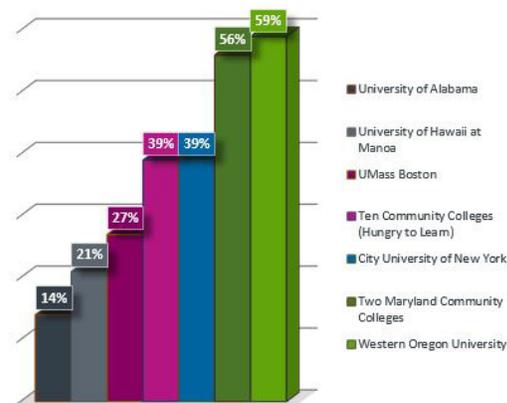
More and more colleges are reporting that their students struggle with balancing their varied obligations, in addition to worrying about having enough money to eat three meals a day. According to a recent scholarly study, college students are subject to a high number of potential risk factors for food insecurity and hunger, including increased tuition and housing costs, and the need to work at least part-time to make ends meet while receiving low wages that do not cover the actual cost of living.

Free and reduced-price school meals are available in K-12 schools, but stop abruptly for students in need when they reach college. Moreover, one of the most important programs to curtail hunger in the U.S. is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which exists as a safety net program for millions of needy individuals. While SNAP has the great potential to minimize the risk of students facing hunger, the federal government has put restrictions on student SNAP eligibility for students 18-49 who attend school half-time or more. Even among those who are eligible, lack of understanding of these complicated rules prevents many low-income students from accessing SNAP. Without a safety net, students are at increased risk for hunger.

WHY DOES STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY MATTER?

Several studies show an inverse relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement. For example, a study using data from two [community colleges in Maryland](#) found that 56% of students in the sample were food insecure. Food insecure students were more likely than food secure students to report a lower GPA (2.0-2.49) versus a higher GPA (4.5-4.0). Food insecurity may have adverse effects on students' academic performance, class attendance, and class completion, and should therefore be a factor to consider when thinking about persistence towards earning a degree. There also appears to be a connection between [food insecurity and mental health conditions](#).

Food Insecurity on College Campuses



Definitions of food insecurity vary slightly by study.



Supports for Success: Recommendations for Community Colleges

Institutions of higher education should create a tool for students to confidentially disclose their need for supportive services and assess the level of food insecurity on their campuses.

Michigan State University created a [web portal](#) for previous or current foster youth to register for supportive services. This concept could be extended to allow all students facing food insecurity and related financial stress to self-identify and request to be connected to the campus or community services they need to graduate. These services may include affordable housing, campus or community food pantries, child care assistance, and Single Stop offices, where available. Schools can also assess student need by conducting a survey to measure food insecurity.

Institutions of higher education should develop at least one sustainable intervention to address food insecurity among their college students, such as assistance with benefits access, food pantries, or affordable meal plans.

SNAP benefits are underutilized among college students. Connecting eligible students to the benefit can act as a supplementary form of financial aid. Additionally, food pantries are an important resource on campuses because of the rules that restrict many students from accessing SNAP, and because for those who do meet SNAP requirements, many still cannot cover all their food expenses throughout the whole month. Community food pantries may also have restricted access for students or may be difficult for students to get to. On-campus pantries have the potential to give low-income college students immediate relief from food insecurity during the day. Schools may also help to decrease food insecurity on their campuses by providing meal plans that are affordable for low-income students. Other innovative practices may include providing grocery gift cards or allowing students to donate unused meal points to those who need them.

Institutions of higher education should explore partnerships with local organizations to provide additional holistic supports to their students.

Community colleges can support students by partnering with local organizations to bring their services to college campuses. Nonprofits in many communities offer services that institutions do not need to duplicate. National experts, such as Single Stop, can work with colleges to evaluate students for public benefits programs so that they can leverage all existing opportunities in pursuit of their degrees.

Institutions of higher education that have an on-campus market or small grocery store should work to accept SNAP on campus.

Students who are able to secure support from SNAP should be able to use their benefits on campus, rather than skipping meals or using money that can be spent on other necessary expenses. SNAP is administered via an electronic debit card system known as EBT and can only be accessed where EBT is accepted. Accepting EBT on campuses would allow food insecure students to access meals while at school.

Institutions of higher education should provide more information to students about food resources.

Students report wanting more information on how to apply for federal food assistance programs; the locations of food pantries, food banks, and other free sources of food; and how to cook simple, cheap, and healthy meals.

Addressing Hunger with Local Support

Bunker Hill Community College: In May 2012, BHCC's Single Stop opened its first food pantry in collaboration with the Greater Boston Food Bank. The success of this pantry yielded attention from external entities, including the Boston Globe, which ran a story on the program. The story led to additional attention and donations, eventually connecting Bunker Hill to a newly formed nonprofit called Food Link. Volunteers from Food Link visit local Panera Bread restaurants and collect bread at the end of every day. This bread is then donated to the Single Stop office at BHCC, allowing students to stop in for a bagel prior to class or to take home a loaf of bread to their family. Additionally, a generous private donor allows them to provide peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for their students as well as \$25.00 grocery gift cards to students in need of emergency food assistance.

More Information

For information on creating and operating campus food pantries:

[The College and University Food Bank Alliance](#)

For information on conducting a survey to measure food insecurity:

[USDA Food Security Survey Module](#)

For information on healthier eating on a budget:

[USDA Meal Planning, Shopping, and Budgeting guidebook](#)