Fighting Food Insecurity on Campus

Christopher Nellum looks at what we can do about the problem, which has grown significantly in the years since the Great Recession.

College and university administrators and leaders around the country increasingly are realizing that undergraduate students are among the millions of Americans who experience food insecurity, or a lack of resources to obtain nutritional food.

The numbers are striking. Feeding America, a national nonprofit network of food banks that provides food assistance to 46.5 million individuals and 15.5 million households, estimates that nearly half (49.3 percent) of its clients in college must choose between educational expenses (i.e., tuition, books and supplies, rent) and food annually, and that 21 percent did so for a full 12 months.

While we lack national data on all college students, these data provide insight on the extent of the problem.

Many college students who experience food insecurity struggle to reach milestones such as year-to-year persistence and certificate or degree completion and need additional institutional support to continue their studies.

In response, some of the country’s largest systems of higher education have conducted or are planning studies to better understand food insecurity and poverty among its students:

- The City University of New York found that about two in five (40 percent) of its 274,000 students experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months; notably those numbers were higher among students who worked at least 20 hours per week and for Black and Latino students (2010).
- The University of California (UC) found that roughly one in four (25 percent) of the approximately 150,000 undergraduate students at the nine campuses skipped meals to save money (2014). UC President Janet Napolitano recently allocated $75,000 to each campus to improve food security efforts.
- The California State University (CSU), the largest four-year public university system in the country, earlier this year funded a $100,000 research project that will assess the number of undergraduates across all 23 CSU campuses who experience food insecurity. The system serves about 390,000 undergraduates, many of whom are low income and students of color.

To suggest that an undergraduate student is unable to access nutritional food likely conjures up our own memories of occasionally eating ramen noodles for
dinner before studying at the library or joining friends at a party. The profile of college students today, however, is much different than that of undergraduates from previous generations.

More of today’s college students are non-traditional: they tend to be older, first generation, from lower-income and communities of color, and attend community colleges. Growing numbers of undergraduates are also post-traditional students who juggle family responsibilities and part- or full-time work while they pursue a college-level certification or degree. These students also face other circumstances that make paying for a college education more challenging, including a decade of state retrenchment from funding public higher education and a significant rise in the cost of tuition, coupled with a general increase in the cost of goods and services.

In addition to shifting student demographics and decreased state funding, another sign of the changing times is the growth in the number of campus-based food pantries that are members of the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA). The Alliance provides support, training and resources to the almost 200 food banks and pantries that primarily serve college students across the nation.

The rise in food pantries at colleges and universities seems appropriate since the increased presence of post-traditional students on college campuses...
also means that our notions of postsecondary opportunity, access and equity should be interrogated and expanded to be inclusive of these students and their needs. Ensuring college affordability broadly is essential so that low-income and students of color have access to affordable, quality options for an undergraduate degree, won’t be inequitably saddled with debt, and once enrolled, do not have to choose between pursuing that education and meeting basic needs.

The upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) presents an opportunity to rethink not only issues related to college financing and affordability, but financial aid and its ability to adequately cover cost of living expenses. The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee hearing held earlier this month is early evidence that college affordability will be an issue at the center of HEA debates.

While food insecurity issues might not be central to HEA reauthorization hearings, postsecondary leaders, researchers and policymakers can take this opportunity to consider how to improve institutional responses to food insecurity and our understanding of the students who make decisions between food and educational expenses, and how to advocate for making college affordable for post-traditional students.

A few key areas to consider:

**Share resources and best practices.** The College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) is the leading organization committed to supporting existing and emerging campus food banks. On its site are a number of links to resources, ranging from intake interview guidelines to new client forms, as well as links to many campus food bank websites around the country. Campus professionals interested in learning about how to start a food bank or for best practices should contact CUFBA for more information.

**Document and understand the problem.** One option given the upcoming Technical Review Panel meeting for the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) is to explore the possibility of adding questions about food insecurity to the student interview. The goal of NPSAS is to examine how students and families pay for college, and knowing the characteristics of students who experience food insecurity is key to understanding the role and limits of financial aid. Feeding America’s Hunger in America survey instrument, which includes two questions on food insecurity, can serve as a guide for developing relevant survey items.

**Incentivize states to invest in postsecondary education.** State spending on public postsecondary education during the Great Recession has declined, which has driven institutions to shift the cost of education to students and families. This trend has been discussed as one explanation for why institutions have progressively responded by establishing food banks for students. There are many policy proposals on the table, but we cannot have a conversation about college affordability without considering higher education funding and how to incentivize states to reinvest in colleges and universities.
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