

Understanding How to Combat Food Insecurity Among College Students

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Every day, more and more Americans are having to face the harsh conditions of food insecurity. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity can be defined as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.c.; see also n.d.a.). In simpler terms, this means that people suffer from food insecurity when they find themselves in short supply of healthy foods when needed, and/or when they are not able to access food in a dignified manner.

Ironically, one common misconception that “food secure” people often make – those who have “access, at all times, to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.c.) – is in thinking that the food secure status of their country is, for the most part, homogeneous. This mindset is disheartening because, historically, food insecure populations vary greatly within the same country. For example, in 18th century France, peasant class Parisians were well known for having very low food security, while elites were known for throwing extravagant parties and using their taxpayers’ money recklessly. (Recall Marie Antoinette’s famous saying, “Let them eat cake!”) Whether writing about historical France or present-day America, the concept regarding food quality and quantity is intuitively obvious to most people. That is, wealthy people, in any society, will be afforded the opportunity to eat better and have more food choices, while poorer people are expected to make do with the foods they can afford. Something that is less apparent though, is that populations of food insecure people can exist across and in between the traditional lines of poor-versus-affluent. These groups have not been traditionally recognized and often co-exist in mixed income populations. Yet, the level of hunger among this population has grown rapidly, and traditional resources for hunger in America do not easily reach these people. A good example of this populace is college students studying in the United States.

College students are often seen as “not-quite adults” that should not have full rights and capabilities, because more often than not adults fear that students will abuse the privileges afforded to them. In many ways, they are viewed as children who will have their needs met by parents or school, without the need for interventions or training. This creates a harsh wake-up call for those people who are in college because, when they are reintroduced into the “real-world”, they feel as if they are being flooded with needs and situations that they have never been prepared for. With this in mind, this paper focuses on food insecurity within the U.S. collegiate population, since it is essential to understanding the high and ever-increasing numbers of students who face this circumstance – and for comprehending why earlier efforts at intervention to combat this problem have failed. I propose that the affected college student population was significantly under-reported in prior studies that include “adult group” populations of the food insecure, possibly due to: 1) college students being ‘away’ at college, 2) certain college campuses not being sampled due to biased investigator selection, and 3) the cost of attending college today being astronomically higher than it was 30 years ago. I also argue that the number of food insecure college students has grown exponentially since the 1970s and is still grossly underreported, undermanaged, and will continue to burgeon without a “hands-on” approach.

The importance of offering real assistance while this problem persists cannot be overstated. Additionally, obtaining accurate numbers of the college students who qualify as food insecure on college campuses can improve the impact of any interventions being planned to combat this issue. Hopefully, this paper will document the need to protect future access to nutritional resources for vulnerable individuals – who may be paying tuition but cannot afford their grocery bills – among this notoriously mobile, young population.

Historical Perspective and Literature Review

To accurately evaluate problems like hunger and food insecurity, it was clear early on that shared descriptive jargon and definitions for food insecurity needed to be developed. It is therefore important to clarify critical differences in how the lack of enough food has been described and categorized by others. The differences that arise from use of the words “hunger” and “food insecurity” present problems when evaluating data collected from historical studies, and additionally can create biased data when used interchangeably in surveys that are being conducted in the present. Using “hunger” as a measure for food insecurity in surveys risks unreliable results due to the fact that the term “hunger” should be treated as a “feeling” or an “emotional state” with a variety of symptoms (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.c.). For instance, regardless of whether or not one may be

suffering from food insecurity, psychological studies have shown that it is possible for a person to make themselves feel hunger by imagining the details of their favorite foods. Conversely, one could relieve that newfound hunger by refocusing their energy on a difficult exercise regimen or on their upcoming trip to Disneyland. In this manner, the argument could be made that the feeling of hunger is fluid. If a surveyor were to administer a poll attempting to gauge food insecurity within a collegiate population, the measure of “hunger” alone would not be considered reliable, simply because food secure people often find themselves feeling hungry as well. Therefore, it is important for those who want to measure food insecurity to be able to make one clear distinction between the term “hunger” and food insecurity; the latter term is a state of being, which has concrete identifiers. This means that when someone becomes food insecure, simply obtaining food and eating it to temporarily relieve their hunger will not fix all of the underlying issues that co-exist to generate food insecurity for them.

The First Studies on Food Insecurity

Around 40 years ago, when food insecurity was first becoming a globally recognized issue that policymakers wanted to address, stringent investigative rules were developed for researchers so that different food insecure populations could be accurately studied. From early research came the World Food Conference’s 1974 working definition of food security. Back then, the conference was forced to define food security through the lens of “food supply” in which it assured “the availability and price stability of basic foodstuffs at the international and national level[s]” (Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006). This definition centered on the “[a]vailability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006).

In 1983, analysts who worked for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) developed concepts for food insecurity based upon the World Food Conference’s original “supply” definition and, in return, the FAO added the important aspect of “demand” to their own working definition of food security. Their expanded definition was later able to propel the discussion in the right direction towards food insecurity for future years to come. Their definition set a goal to “ensur[e] that all people at all times ha[d] both physical and economic access to the basic food they need[ed]” (quoted in Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006). Ultimately, though, one of the best definitions that has been developed in order to understand food insecurity was (and for some, still is) the definition the World Food Summit generated in 1996. The Summit’s “definition reinforces the multidimensional nature of food [in]security, and includes food access, availability, food use, and stability” (Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006). The Summit’s

work on food insecurity has enabled policymakers to invoke change on the international, as well as national scale within underprivileged communities. Additionally, since human rights issues have been fought for worldwide, the “right to food” has been included: “the formal adoption of the ‘Right to Adequate Food’ [has] marked a milestone achievement [for the] World Food Summit” and its delegation (Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006).

More recent data gauging food insecurity within the United States suggests that there is an unanticipated and growing population of food insecure people within the country’s borders. A large population of these people are American college students. Interestingly (and unfortunately), these pockets of food insecurity are, for the most part, unique to this nation due to differences in the ways that U.S. higher education is funded. In European and other countries around the world, generous public support and/or much lower tuition costs (as exhibited in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Japan) creates a different economic landscape for college students. Hidden within a U.S. population of presumably stable, well-fed adults with numerous resources, food insecurity is remains prevalent.

Food Insecurity in American Households

Food insecurity among American households is quite common. However, the word “household” raises some concerns when trying to measure who is indeed food insecure in different households across the United States. For example, a household supposedly consists of “those who dwell under the same roof,” but a household can also be “a social unit composed of those living together in the same dwelling.” In the same light, a “household” can be composed of “the people in a...group that are living together in one house” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). From these definitions, we can glean that there is no longer a traditional sense of what comprises a “normal” household. Instead, the word now has numerous possible connotations and the abstract meaning of the word can be considered fluid due to the unfixed numerical values involved in its meaning. For example, a child who periodically stays with a relative due to her mother’s chronic medical care, changes the household’s headcount (and therefore its needs) from week to week. This is inherently problematic because:

in most households, the majority of food consumed by household members is purchased - either from supermarkets or grocery stores - to be prepared and eaten at home, or from cafeterias, restaurants, or vending machines, to be eaten outside [of] the home. The amount of money that a household spends on food, therefore, provides insight into how adequately the household is meeting its food needs. When a household reduces spending below some minimum level because of constrained resources, various aspects of food insecurity, such as disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake, may result (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2016).

A key point to remember is that when a member of a specific household spends money at the grocery store, this amount is ultimately seen as “an indirect indicator of [household] food consumption” (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2016). Why is this? Essentially, a person who goes to the grocery store cannot be assumed to only stop in to buy food. Another common factor often encountered when attempting to evaluate household food consumption is that the “money spent” measure downplays the amount of food consumed in households that collect food from “in-kind” programs, such as the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program. “Food spending also understates food consumption in households that acquire a substantial part of their food supply through gathering, hunting, or fishing, as well as in households that obtain groceries from friends or relatives or eat more at friends’ or relatives’ homes than they provide to friends or relatives,” write Coleman-Jenson et al. (2016). Finally, food consumption and food type varies widely depending on what geographical area one lives within in the United States.

Overall, food-secure households tend to spend more money on food than food-insecure households. As a point of reference, in 2015 it was found that “the typical U.S. household spent \$50.00 per person each week [on] food” (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2016). At first, \$50 for groceries (per person, each week) may sound reasonable. But let’s factor in those people who live by themselves. When you consider someone who may be working a job of 40 plus hours a week, going to school full time, and involved with various philanthropic efforts, \$50 a week spent on food may not leave enough to pay outstanding bills, especially without someone else to share that cost. Let us focus on another example: Two college students (who are notoriously known for being poor) both manage to have a job and decide to get an apartment off-campus, near where they attend school. Many people would assume that two renters paying their shared “household” expenses would be able to spend \$50 per person, each week, on food. However, research does not support these figures for two people (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2016). College students, including adults who are just out of college, often find themselves low on money. Almost any job they are likely to obtain will be at the bottom of the pay scale. Also, job security is low and workers are anxious to move on for a better offer. Having said all of this, these two renters don’t seem so secure anymore. So what happens when one member of the household is laid off from their job? All of the household expenditures will fall upon the other member of the “household”, adequate food may be even harder to obtain for the two, and they risk becoming homeless.

Clearly, it is important to identify which types of households are most susceptible to food insecurity, then study their national proportions. The USDA mentions that “the prevalence of food insecurity var[ies] considerably among household types, [and the] rates of food insecurity in 2015 were [found to be] higher than the national average (at 12.7 percent) for the following groups: all households

with children ([at] 16.6 percent), households with children headed by a single man/woman ([ranging from] 22.4 percent - 30.3 percent), men/women living alone ([ranging from] 14.0 percent - 14.7 percent), black non-Hispanic households ([at] 21.5 percent), and Hispanic households ([at] 19.1 percent)” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.b.). Although the USDA’s findings of those who are food insecure within the United States seem complete, one integral group has been left out of the conversation thus far: the homeless population. It is important to discuss the homeless and their food patterns because those who we do not identify as being traditionally “homeless” can fly under the radar when considering the issues surrounding food insecurity. As a result, effective solutions to solving the problem of food insecurity often come up short. For example, more than 47,000 students identified themselves nationally as homeless on their financial aid applications in 2010, yet, “this number is undoubtedly low” (Uhlenkamp, 2015). Whether this means that homeless students are unclear about choosing this designation on their financial aid applications, or are unwilling to designate themselves as such, is not known. But it does mean that a college student who has temporarily found a “home” within a college dorm will not have their food security accurately assessed by a proper governmental body, because these students are not included in USDA surveys.

Food Insecurity and the Individual

Long before the 1974 World Food Conference, the common phrase used to refer to deprivation of any type (e.g., food, shelter, clothing), was simply called “poverty”. It was treated as a collective “problem” and addressed in a variety of short-term ways. However, in 1964 U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared that his administration was launching a “War on Poverty”. At the time, the federal poverty rate was defined as “the affordability of food for an [idealized] family of three...with no adjustments except for inflation” (Matthews, 2014). Without counting any factors that worsen or alleviate the basic needs for food, shelter and/or clothing, the “official” poverty level did not change much from 19 percent in 1964 to near 16 percent in 2014. However, many researchers feel that the “Supplemental Poverty Measure” is a more valid reflection of a family’s level of poverty because it includes “noncash benefits such as public housing, Medicaid, SNAP benefits...work expenses...income supports...[and money spent] on basic necessities [such as] food, shelter, clothing, and utilities” (Matthews, 2014). These benefits are converted into a cash-equivalent value to calculate their effect upon a family’s raw poverty score and demonstrate improvement (a drop in the poverty score) as a result of these interventions. The “supplemental” value reflects the success of all interventions upon Americans living in poverty. This value was listed as 26 percent in 1967 and had dropped to 16 percent

in 2012. It was actually down to 12.5 percent in 2007, before the Great Recession of 2008-09 (Matthews, 2014). Johnson did initiate several programs, and his “war” persisted through the efforts of another two or more presidents. The largest programs he started were the Medicare and Medicaid programs, as well as a major expansion of Social Security. The income and medical coverage produced a real increase in spendable income, especially for the elderly, to pay for food, clothing, and utilities. He also initiated a number of jobs programs and the largest bill for federal assistance to education ever sponsored, including “Head Start” (Matthews, 2014). Today, however, better tools have been developed in order to determine the different types of deprivations that are occurring within the United States, as well as how they should be addressed. For those who suffer from food insecurity, for instance, being able to identify the “symptoms” of this issue long before it takes full effect is key.

As stated before, someone is food insecure when they have “limited or uncertain availability [to] nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.c.). So what does this mean for someone who has enough money to acquire any foods they wish to eat, but instead this person chooses to continually eat junk food due to various other stressors in their life? In this instance, we could be speaking about the typical American trial lawyer, who works up to 80 hours per week and has very little time within their schedule to prepare healthy and safe foods for themselves. Would we then consider this person to be food insecure? The answer: no. The qualifying condition is not that this person cannot find food available at a reasonable price; rather, that they do not have enough time to eat foods that would help them sustain a healthy lifestyle.

Finally, the obvious “symptoms” people face when suffering from food insecurity in America are:

[when a member or members of a household are] worried their food will run out before they [receive] money to buy more, [when] the food [these members of the household] bought just did not last - and they did not have enough money to get more, [when household members] could not afford to eat balanced meals, or they had to] cut the size of their meals - or skip meals because there was not enough money for food [for the household], [when household members] had eaten less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food, [and when] they lost weight because they did not have enough money for food (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.c.).

These “symptoms” are the harbingers of encroaching food insecurity, a time frame when intervention could make a profound and positive difference in the course of a person’s nutritional distress.

Methods, Tools, and Limitations on Research into Food Security

Food insecurity on the whole is under-recognized, overlooked, unreported, and inadequately addressed. This is true among some U.S. groups more than others. One populace that seems to be particularly vulnerable to this deficit is American college students. The individuals who are affected by this issue are difficult to track and count accurately for several reasons: 1) they are notoriously mobile and “unavailable” for traditional tracking; 2) college students do not “self-report” and college administrations have not taken the initiative to track these students; 3) there are many college students who are technically homeless, whether or not they consider themselves to be so (at least episodically); and 4) most college administrators have been sluggish to respond to this issue, making it seem of lesser importance.

Meaningful intervention will require defining a new evolving demographic of American college students. This begs the question: What makes new college students different from before? For starters, 40 years ago the typical route to college started at 18 years old, fresh out of high school, and people could expect to finish their studies at college within a compact (albeit hard) four years of undergraduate study. Secondly, the cost to attend college then was expectedly modest, with individual efforts to finance their journey through university made possible (in many cases) with summer jobs and applying for financial aid. Also, very low-interest government loans to college students were universally available. In spite of expectations, of entering high school freshmen in 1970, only approximately 32 percent actually received a bachelor’s degree in four years (Snyder, 1993).

Today, these typical college stereotypes do not hold true. For instance, there is no longer any type of “typical” college student. “Colleges are [now] enrolling more low-income students than ever before...Yet the nation's overall college graduation rate has remained low. Only 59 percent of students who began as freshmen at a four-year college in the fall of 2006 received their diplomas within six years” (Guo, 2014). This statistic obviously implies that the lives of college students across the United States have been greatly impacted by the rapid increases in college costs at private and public universities. For example, when Nixon was in office, the average tuition for a private, nonprofit, four-year university was \$1,832.00. In 2013, the average tuition at a private school was more than \$31,000 (Tomar, 2017). These cost hikes change the possibilities for where a potential new student may live, what or whether they may eat, how long it takes them to complete and attain a degree, and how much of a burden they place on fellow students for food, temporary shelter, and other necessities.

Mechanisms of Creating Food Insecurity Among Current College Students

It remains critically important to understand the mechanisms creating food insecurity among college students. We can first attempt this task by taking a closer look into federal and state funding of higher education institutions:

States and the federal government have long provided substantial funding for higher education, but changes in recent years have resulted in their contributions being more equal than at any [other] time in...the previous two decades. Historically, states have provided a far greater amount of assistance to postsecondary institutions and students; 65 percent more than the federal government on average from 1987 to 2012. But this difference narrowed dramatically in recent years, particularly since the Great Recession, as state spending declined and federal investments grew sharply, largely driven by increases in the Pell Grant program, a need-based financial aid program that is the biggest component of federal higher education spending...[Overall] the federal government mainly provides financial assistance to individual students and specific research projects, while state funds primarily pay for the general operations of public institutions” (PEW Charitable Trusts, 2015).

For a more specific look into the funding of federal higher education across the United States, examine the Pell Grant program. These grants are “distributed based on a calculation of student's’ financial needs, [and they] ranged from \$1,177.00 in North Dakota per FTE [full time equivalent] undergraduate to \$3,401.00 in Arizona, compared to the national average of \$2,078.00” (PEW Charitable Trusts, 2015). With so little being given out in terms of financial aid for schooling, it seems like a miracle that so many low-income students are attempting to obtain a college education. In fact, many of these students (traditional and non-traditional) are having a hard time staying in school because they are not able to meet the financial and social requirements expected of a college student.

Stigmas and The Social Survival Process of Current College Students

“So,” (one might ask), “why are the barriers that have kept food insecurity among college students so prevalent?” The world “thinks it’s kind of funny that [American college students are forced to] trash-pick furniture, fashion silverware from old screwdrivers, and accept \$10.00 checks to be the subject of questionable science department experiments,” writes David A. Tomar (2017). But should having a student suffer from food insecurity really be viewed as a college “experience” that all students are expected to go through while at university? This viewpoint could be understandable considering that traditionally, financial struggle has been viewed by some as “just one of those character-building realities of college life” (Tomar, 2017). However, from a human rights perspective, we cannot accept and brand this issue as “just” a consequence of someone’s student status or even poor money management skills. To do so, in fact, would mean we should categorize this issue as some type of heinous societal hazing that goes way beyond any small prank that a sorority or fraternity could commit.

Although it's true that food insecurity on college campuses is not a new problem, the issue has never truly been recognized as a significant enough trend to be addressed by college administrations – that is, until now. Before the current decade, generation after generation of college students anxiously awaited the day when they could break free of their parents' restrictions, only to arrive at college and discover, a few months in, that freedom isn't always fun. Eating in "all you can eat" dining halls gets old after a while, (even if the food truly is "all you can eat"), and the hunt for more nutritious, fresh food begins. Several questions arise upon entering the debate about college students' food insecurity: Are college students really prisoners of their own silence or reluctance to tell someone they may be suffering from this issue? Is there anyone students are instructed to contact, say, at orientation, when one could be suffering from food insecurity or homelessness on a college campus? Further, would a faculty or staff member at any given university even know how to help remedy this issue? Hunger is already difficult enough to spot without an actual food insecure person telling you the signs to look for. But when you add in the fact that hunger "has no universal profile...This often [even] hinders [a student's peers] from accepting the seriousness of the problem" (Brown, 2013). Many people often "expect hunger to manifest as emaciated stoicism, listlessness, or fidgety desperation, thereby making it easy to detect. But students who don't want their professors or peers to know that meals aren't consistently accessible to them can easily conceal their reality" (Brown, 2013).

Another reality that college administrators need to face is that if we place all of the duty on a hungry student to self-identify as food insecure, we are ensuring that the needs of this population will go unaddressed. Some students are reluctant to confide in their peers for fear of stigma and being ostracized. Such was the case for Columbia College Chicago student Aaron James Flowers, who told his campus' student-run newspaper that his friends stopped inviting him to events when they discovered his situation and began "treating him like a bum" (Brown, 2013). When someone's supposed "peers" treat them like this, affected students might ask themselves if attending college is really necessary, or even the way to a better future:

If food insecurity is already a troubling indicator of our nation's wealth distribution failures, it's even greater impact on college campuses suggests there is no escaping a life at the bottom of this distribution scheme. Students who struggle to eat will struggle to focus, struggle to compete academically, and struggle to graduate. Consequently, these same students may struggle to land suitable employment, repay loans, and in general, transcend the conditions that college was meant to cure...Tuition rates have accelerated in an unconscionable way... (Tomar, 2017).

And notably, the federal and private loans that are available result in an insurmountable amount of debt that accrues for the neediest students, who subsequently become food insecure adults tragically working to meet loan payments (Tomar, 2017).

Interventions

The Meal Plan Mess

American college students struggling to obtain nutritious foods are hampered by the less-than-stellar quality of nutritional education they receive in high school – that is, if it’s even offered. This circumstance contributes to a student feeling overwhelmed when searching for inexpensive food choices, often becoming food insecure down the road. In other words, more often than not, the food that will offer someone the most “bang for their buck” will be the least nutritious. Yet, “those who struggle to procure food must make undesirable...decisions” regarding quality and nutritional value of what they’re able to find (Tomar, 2017). This is inherently problematic because food insecurity is positively associated with obesity. Food decisions motivated by urgent and ongoing need disguise themselves as late night IHOP and Steak-N-Shake runs, and a student’s continuing dependence on large cases of ramen noodles from Costco. In fact, a study in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that – in a sample of more than 4,000 women – food insecurity was a statistically significant predictor of “overweight status”. The study also found that mildly food insecure participants were a full 30 percent more likely to be overweight than their food secure counterparts (Tomar, 2017). So, how do these standard college eating patterns affect the current nutritional standards at university-sponsored campus events? Wick Sloan, an English professor at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, says that when he first arrived on campus, he was always told that “we should never miss a chance to give [the] students food” (Carapezza, 2017). Sloan states that later on he realized how foolish he had been in thinking all students wanted to eat was more pizza and junk food, and that it was protein that they were after (Carapezza, 2017).

Despite this discouraging (yet historically vast) misinterpretation of students’ needs by faculty members, food insecure students have been able to supplement their food supply and quality in a variety of different ways. One significant way is by having students obtain a meal plan at their university. Traditionally, (and fortunately for those who use them), “meal plans at colleges are convenient. A student’s food costs are wrapped into each semester’s tuition bill, allowing them to focus on academics and college activities rather than finding money for each meal...[Additionally, most of these meal plans come with the] ability to swipe a card to qualify for a meal, [and] many dining plans offer points to be

used for additional food expenses, whether in a dining hall, a campus fast food establishment, or a convenience store” (Landes, 2015). The downside to this simple “no-brainer” choice is that “meal plans are expensive, and most students don’t take full advantage of them,” so they waste money (Landes, 2015). This is why it is so important for prospective students to pay full attention when choosing a meal plan at their future university. Making sure to choose the meal plan that best fits one’s eating habits could end up saving that person hundreds of dollars. That is why a student] choosing a meal plan should attempt to choose a plan that matches their eating habits. If a student has never been one to eat breakfast, a three-meal-plan-per-day selection will most likely end up being a waste of money. Realistically, if a person has never been a breakfast eater, they won’t magically become one overnight just because they are spending the money to be one. Another fact worth stating is that most colleges know a student probably won’t eat every meal provided on their plan. In order to take full advantage of the meal plan, students must eat every meal and use every point – “and that’s not a realistic expectation” (Landes, 2015).

Alternative Food Options

If an already food insecure student can’t afford the luxury of having an on campus-meal-plan, another option for that particular student is to cook to save money. Unfortunately, there are a lot of colleges and universities that don’t allow dorms to have kitchens or cooking facilities. Even more annoying is that many of those same dorms have regulations against students having any type of cooking appliances within individual rooms. But the underlying reason for a student cooking their own meals is to save money. If that student prefers, they might be able to choose a lower-volume meal plan; this has the potential to reduce the day-to-day burden of meal prep on the student’s longer or more difficult days.

Of course, students need grocery money in order to cook at home to save funds. Many students have insufficient funds for adequate food intake, thanks to increasing prices associated with college:

Tuition is a large expense and the most obvious cost associated with higher education, but there are also other expenses associated with college. On average, four-year public colleges charge in-state students \$7,605 per year for tuition and fees and out-of-state students \$11,990. In addition, there are the expenses of room and board, which can vary greatly depending on the plans offered by the institution and whether or not students live on or off campus. There are also the expenses of books and supplies, personal expenses, and transportation expenses either for commuting to campus or going home to visit on breaks. Add up these average expenses and you get \$11,804 per year for in-state students and \$16,189 for out-of-state students. If students’ homes and families are very far from their college these expenses can be even greater.

Depending on one's major, the expenses for books and equipment can also be greater (Cunningham & Johnson, 2011).

In short, for many college students, the choice between buying a book or putting food on the table is “eternally present” (Cunningham & Johnson, 2011).

Food Pantries on College Campuses

One system to alleviate student burdens is the campus food pantry¹ on colleges and universities across the nation. These campus food pantries (although not always the most stable of institutions) benefit students in a variety of different ways. Oftentimes, a student who cannot collect SNAP benefits or support from other government-funded programs will turn to a pantry in their time of need. As a matter of fact, the number of food pantries on college campuses has been exploding over the past decade. Membership for the College and University Food Bank Alliance has quadrupled in the past two years, leaving its official member count at 398 schools and universities (Lobosco, 2016; see also College and University Food Bank Alliance n.d.a., n.d.b.).

In an effort to help the students, these campus-based pantries are “focused on alleviating food insecurity, hunger, and poverty among college and university students in the United States” (Cady et al., 2013). Often, the students that use these pantries are lower-income students who frequently fly under the radar when someone tries to identify another as food insecure. In this, a parallel can be drawn as to where food pantries on college campuses are actually located, because much like the hunger problem on campus, food pantries themselves are not quite out in the open. For example, Montclair State University’s “food pantry is tucked away down a maze of hallways in [their] student center,” “a windowless room with fluorescent lights”; suffice it to say, this room isn’t exactly easy to find, “but those who need it are finding it” (Lobosco, 2016). The pantries’ locations do not deter visitors or detract from the products they carry. In most instances, items such as bread, cereal, milk, spaghetti, canned vegetables, as well as personal items like shampoo and soap can be found at these pantries.

Before anyone thinks that campus food pantries alone represent the solution for food insecurity on college campuses, we must consider the operational flaws of this model. For instance, although

¹ It is important to note “that [any] food bank/pantry, is part of the emergency food system, which provides short-term food relief for those experiencing food insecurity” (Cunningham & Johnson, 2011). However, there are definitional differences to mention: “[A] food pantry is a place that distributes emergency food directly to households; it is distinct from a food bank, which is a larger facility that distributes food to pantries” (Cunningham & Johnson, 2011). (However, for the purpose of ease throughout the rest of this paper, the terms “food bank” and “food pantry” will be used interchangeably).

“student compassion has actually been the greatest weapon against hunger on many campuses” (Tomar, 2017), it is still worth noting that many college students are still in a “learning phase” themselves. Most pantry staff members are volunteers. That means that when their lives as students become complicated by finals, class papers, projects, relationship troubles, or illness, their volunteer hours are the first to get dropped. For food banks that are staffed only by students (and many of them are), there may be times when no one is able to help staff the pantry. As a result, those in need suffer because of the inevitable stressors that may be going on in a volunteer’s life. Food pantries can thus be staffed at odd hours that are not always conducive to a food insecure student’s needs and schedule, and the initial problems still persist.

Another hurdle for students to overcome is their belief that “people talk”. “The goal of student food banks is to ensure that students in need can access groceries without fear of embarrassment or unwanted interaction with their fellow students” (Tomar, 2017). However, how is a barely-functioning food pantry supposed to ensure that classmates do not reveal that peers had visited the food pantry earlier? Privacy should be of the utmost importance in these types of settings, and although there are many food banks that make their workers sign a document that is akin to a non-disclosure agreement as, there is no way to fully ensure that volunteers and others will not speak about who has visited that location.

Technology: The Way of the Future?

It is for these reasons that further solutions into how to solve food insecurity among collegiate populations needs to be explored. That’s why Ben Makansi and Viv Ramakrishnan with the Columbia College Student Council (CCSC) at Columbia University, for instance, created the app called “Swipes” in September of 2015. At Columbia, students use their IDs to “swipe” for meals at any of the three, buffet-style dining halls. Students may purchase meal plans with a maximum of 21 swipes per week, with unused swipes expiring at the end of each week. The intended purpose for the student-developed “Swipes” app is to “match students who need a dining hall meal with students who have extra” (Miller, 2016). Emma Miller (2015) explains:

The way the app works is fairly straightforward: Anyone with a columbia.edu email address can sign up for it, either as a “Swiper” or a “Receiver”. When a Receiver needs a meal, they enter the time they’d like to eat and the dining hall, and a notification is sent out to all Swipers currently in that dining hall. If no Swipers are available in the hall, a broader notification is sent out to Swipers available on campus. When a Swiper and a Receiver match, each receives a photo of the other, as well as any note the Receiver might have included (‘I’m wearing a blue shirt and khakis,’ for example). Then the Swiper goes to swipe the Receiver into the dining hall.

In a sense, using technology to combat food insecurity on college campuses is not a new idea. In fact, at Oregon State University the “Meal Bux Program” (which ironically worked much like a regular meal plan) required students to fill out an application evaluating their financial aid, income, and expenses. If they qualified, they were awarded up to \$250 each academic term, which was credited to their student identification cards and could be used at campus food establishments” (Cunningham & Johnson, 2011). The reason, however, that the student-developed app “Swipes” is a better solution to fighting food insecurity on college campuses is because it allows those who are suffering from this circumstance to confront their struggles head-on. This means that their struggles with food insecurity are no longer a dirty secret that college administrations keep – and will continually sweep under the rug. An app like “Swipes,” compared to the “Meal Bux Program,” creates a sense of community for those who are a part of the student body. It allows the opportunity for those students who are privileged enough not to suffer from food insecurity to learn about the struggles that others are currently going through.

Compiling Accurate Data

The issue that still remains is that we cannot attempt to fight food insecurity on college campuses (let alone anywhere else) if accurate data is not being collected on who is actually food insecure within the United States. An important survey to consider is a report from the Campaign for a Healthy CUNY, which examined food insecurity among college students in the summer and fall of 2010.

Two groups of CUNY undergraduate students were recruited to respond to a survey about food insecurity over the past 12 months. Different methods were used for soliciting the participation of each group. The first group was labeled as the CUNY Representative Sample, and the survey was administered via the Internet and by telephone to a sample of 1,086 undergraduates. (A total of 6,883 students were randomly invited to respond.) The second group, called the CUNY Targeted Sample, consisted of 1,114 students who were asked the same survey questions as the first group. (36) However, the second round was administered by trained CUNY students who distributed the surveys in person on campuses with the highest rates of students receiving public assistance; while that sample wasn’t representative of all CUNY students, it allowed researchers to compare higher need sites. To assess food insecurity, researchers asked four questions about food experiences in the past 12 months: How often did you worry that you would not have enough money for food? How often did you cut or skip a meal because you didn’t have enough money to buy food? How often were you unable to eat balanced or

nutritious meals because of a lack of money? How often did you go hungry because of a lack of money?

The findings were as follows:

[Researchers] defined a student as —food insecure if they answered — often or —sometimes to two or more of these four questions. Overall, 39.2 percent of CUNY students in [this] sample, about two in five, reported that they experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months. About twice as many students reported that they often or sometimes worried that they would not have enough money for food (45.1 percent) as reported that they often or sometimes went hungry because of a lack of money (22.7 percent), suggesting that the highest level of food insecurity (hunger) is less common than lower levels. In addition, 19.1 percent of respondents reported that they knew of other CUNY students, not including themselves, who had food or hunger problems including lack, limited or uncertain availability of food in the last year. This suggests that many CUNY students are unaware of the extent of the problem of food insecurity among their peers. Some populations of CUNY students [were found to have] significantly higher rates of food insecurity than others. For example, Black and Latino students were about 1.5 times more likely to report food insecurity than White and Asian students. Students reporting household incomes of less than \$20,000 a year (about 26 percent of all CUNY undergraduates) were more than twice as likely to report food insecurity as those with household incomes of more than \$50,000 a year. Students who support themselves financially were 1.6 times as likely to report food insecurity as those not supporting themselves. Students working more than 20 hours per week had a higher rate of food insecurity than those who did not work. Despite the prevalence of food insecurity among CUNY students, few reported using food assistance services and programs. The survey found that: Only 7.2 percent of students reported using the services of a food pantry or other food assistance program in the last 12 months. Only 6.4 percent of students reported currently receiving food stamps (i.e., SNAP benefits) even though 18 percent thought they were eligible and 16.6 percent had previously applied for this benefit. Among students currently receiving food stamps, 63 percent reported food insecurity, suggesting that for almost two-thirds of the recipients, food stamps were not sufficient [enough] to provide food security. The data presented here suggest that many CUNY students experience food insecurity and that existing programs are not adequately addressing the problem of food insecurity (Landes, 2015).

While this was a rare study into food insecurity among college students, it still had many limitations. For example, it's possible the sample population was biased. That is, students that face the problems being addressed in this study are the ones choosing to respond to it. This could then mean that the results of this study are an overestimation of the true prevalence of food insecurity on CUNY campuses. On the other hand, though, the opposite of this is also possible. This could be due to the fact that students who may be facing food insecurity, are also facing other insecurities and as a result, they are unable to respond to a survey such as this (Landes, 2015).

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is my hope that this paper has been fruitful in providing a clearer picture into the severity of food insecurity on college campuses. It is obvious from the data presented here that there is still a long

way to go in terms of fighting food insecurity on college campuses, and some of the next steps that all colleges and universities can (and should) take in order to combat this problem will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

For starters, college administrations need to do a better job of addressing the root causes of food insecurity on college campuses. College administrators should no longer be allowed to stand by and turn a blind-eye while a student pays \$200 for a textbook that could, in turn, be used for feeding themselves at night. Sitting back and ignoring this issue as if it is not big deal implies that college faculty and staff are okay with the circumstances many of their students face. In addition to this, it is time to address the urban dimensions of food insecurity. “Non-traditional” students are in the majority at many colleges and universities now. This means that it is up to all colleges and universities to develop a more conducive learning environment for the students they have accepted. Knowing these things and still assuming that a student in their late 20s hasn't matured enough to not eat junk food 24/7 is an unfair and unhelpful approach. Likewise, being able to address the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding food insecurity are imperative for resolving this issue. If a student has to keep up appearances with their so-called “friends” about having the latest technology, for instance, and their professor encourages this behavior (by requiring expensive software updates to keep up with class, for instance), then nothing will get resolved. Understanding and helping to prioritize students’ needs is a huge element that is missing in college life overall. Professors and/or university support staff should be more diligent in helping their students find alternatives that will allow them to save money on college expenses.

Secondly, high schools across the nation need to be encouraged to better prepare students to be secure in both food and finances when they are preparing to go away to college. To see how this can be done, refer to the typical high school “personal finance” class. Students should be held accountable for understanding what is happening in this class and not just seen taking the class for the “easy A” they will inevitably be granted. Teachers need to prepare proper assessments in order to find out if their students are actually understanding the type of information being relayed – and if a student does not understand the material being presented to them, it falls on the teacher to make sure the student gets something out of this class. For instance, teachers should start using real world examples of how the material being presented to the students in this class will actually be beneficial in real life. Additionally, in “family and consumer science” (FACS) classes, long-standing traditional gender roles for boys and girls need to be eliminated. Boys and girls often go into FACS classes with very different expectations; in many schools, female students are still expected to learn cooking skills, while boys may not learn nutritional skills and information vital for reducing food insecurity.

Third, colleges need to “up their game” in terms of the resources provided to their students. It should be the aim of all college and university financial aid offices to have at least one counselor on staff set aside for the sole purpose of orienting new students to campus resources for food and identifying needs and resources. There should be a counselor dedicated to learning how to help a student pick out a meal plan that will work for them, and this counselor should be in charge of pointing a student who self-identifies on the “Free Application for Federal Student Aid” (FAFSA) as food insecure in the way of the school’s meal sharing group. (The case could even be made that this particular counselor should be the one in charge of a group such as this). Likewise, there should also be a sole financial aid officer in charge of helping students apply for school, state, and federal food resources. In other words, there should be a person tasked with helping students apply to SNAP and WIC programs, if applicable. Food pantries by themselves will not stop food insecurity on college campuses. This reality is something that many college administrators do not want to face. Do not misunderstand what is being said here, though; food pantries are a good start when it comes to fighting food insecurity on college campuses. However, it is apparent that more can be done. If possible, colleges should look into starting systems such as community gardens at their schools. This type of system can not only be implemented in the form of a college club, but as a community space, as well. Some of the food that is raised in the garden could be used in the food pantry.

Fourth, there are many limitations to studying food insecurity on such a vast scale. The first, and most disturbing of these limitations, is that there are simply too many definitions for the term “food insecurity” floating around out there. There are many different entities around the globe that have decided to define the term in their own words, and this creates a disconnect when trying to figure out what food insecurity truly is, and by extension, who truly suffers from it. In addition to this, for those entities that have decided to use the USDA’s definition of food insecurity (because this definition seems to be the most extensive and globally applicable), it is obvious that these other institutions have not taken the time to explore all of the definitions of food insecurity the USDA has produced. (Which is in and of itself is problematic, because one could argue the USDA has created too many of those, as well). Overall, though, it needs to be addressed that until we have one universal definition for food insecurity that everyone agrees on – globally – we cannot fully try and combat this issue in any type of sphere. Another issue that is worth revisiting, is the debate between food insecurity and hunger. As stated previously, “hunger” should not be used as a measure in studies that are attempting to measure food insecurity within a certain population. However, this should not always be the case; if further studies on food insecurity are carried out and they have the proper variables set out from the beginning of the study

(which in turn yield accurate data sets), hunger should then be introduced into later studies on food insecurity to see just how vast food insecurity spans within a population. Also, if we introduce hunger into these studies, there is a better chance of us knowing what we can do in order to solve this problem.

Lastly, another major issue that needs to be addressed – that coincidentally goes hand in hand with food insecurity on college campuses – is student homelessness. There is a significant amount of research that supports the fact that those who are food insecure while in college, are either housing insecure already or are very close to being so. Evidence suggests that these issues are intricately related and require careful, mutual attention. This suggests that there is a bigger issue underlying food insecurity on college campuses; if we truly want to assess what is causing this issue, all possible factors and solutions need to be explored.

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