

# College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States

Over the last decade, multiple studies of food insecurity among college students have found rates from 20% to more than 50%, considerably higher than the 12% rate for the entire US population.

Reasons for higher rates of food insecurity among college students include a growing population of low-income college students, high college costs and insufficient financial aid, more financial hardship among many low- and moderate-income families, a weak labor market for part-time workers, declining per capita college resources, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) policies that specifically exclude many college students from participation.

This essay reviews the causes and consequences of food insecurity on campus, explores reasons for the low SNAP participation rate, and describes how campuses have responded to food insecurity. It summarizes federal, state, and local changes in SNAP policies that can facilitate college student participation and retention and suggests strategies for more robust and effective university responses to food insecurity, including SNAP enrollment campaigns, a stronger role for campus food services, and a redefinition of the goals and purposes of campus food pantries. (*Am J Public Health*. 2019;109:1652–1658. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2019.305332)

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See also the *AJPH* Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program section, pp. 1631–1677.

Over the last decade, multiple studies of food insecurity among college students have found rates ranging from 20% to more than 50%, depending on the population studied, sampling methods, and measures used to define food insecurity.<sup>1–4</sup> These rates are considerably higher than the 12% food insecurity rate that US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported for the general US population in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of 2018, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on food insecurity among US college students. The GAO estimated that although approximately 7.3 million US college students had household incomes below the level that qualifies them for eligibility for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly known as Food Stamps), only 2.26 million (31%) were actually enrolled in SNAP.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, a recent survey of more than 86 000 students at 123 colleges and universities found that just 20% of food-insecure college students received SNAP.<sup>1</sup> These rates are far lower than the 85% participation rate for SNAP-eligible individuals in the general US population in 2016.<sup>7</sup> What accounts for the high levels of food insecurity among college students and why are so few students enrolled in SNAP, the nation's largest food benefit and poverty reduction program?

To answer these questions and suggest solutions, we summarize evidence from recent literature reviews and multicampus studies

of college food insecurity,<sup>1–4</sup> public and media reports on campus food insecurity,<sup>8,9</sup> our own experience studying and addressing food insecurity for 10 years at multiple universities, and our participation in national coalitions that seek to reduce college food insecurity.

Consistent with the GAO report,<sup>6</sup> we demonstrate that college students are a new population at risk for food insecurity, joining other demographic groups such as single-parent households, those living in poverty, recent immigrants, low-wage workers, and older people. By analyzing the social, political, and economic forces that have put college students at risk for food insecurity, we hope to inform efforts to ensure that SNAP and other responses to food insecurity address the changing face of hunger and food insecurity in the United States.

## WHY ARE SO MANY COLLEGE STUDENTS FOOD INSECURE?

Five trends explain the rise of food insecurity among college students; together, these

constitute the “new economics of college,” which we argue is the fundamental cause of high college food insecurity.

First, a much higher proportion of college students face financial challenges today than in the past. By 2016, 39% of college students were from households with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty line, an increase from 28% in 1996.<sup>6</sup> In the past, traditional college students enrolled in college full-time immediately after high school, depended on parents for financial support, and worked part-time or not at all during the school year. Now, such students account for less than a third of college enrollment.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, about half of all undergraduate students were financially independent from their parents. One third attended public 2-year colleges, also known as community colleges. More than a fifth had dependent children themselves, and 14% were single parents. A quarter worked full-time. Overall, 71% of college students had at least 1 of the characteristics of “nontraditional” students,<sup>6</sup> showing that the more diverse populations that

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have entered college in higher numbers have now become the new collegiate norm.

Second, college has become more expensive. Between 1989 and 2016, the price for a 4-year degree doubled, even after inflation.<sup>10</sup> Between the 2005–2006 and 2015–2016 school years, prices for undergraduate education at public institutions rose 34% and at private nonprofit institutions by 26%, after adjustment for inflation. Living expenses—including rent, food, transportation, books, and supplies—are also rising rapidly. Although the calculation of a student's financial need includes estimated living expenses, those estimates are often unrealistic and financial aid is rarely sufficient to cover them.<sup>11</sup>

Third, as the proportion of students from low-income households has increased, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant, the main federal subsidy for low-income undergraduate students, has declined. When the program started in 1972, Pell Grants covered more than four fifths of the cost of attending the average 4-year public university. Now Pell Grants cover less than one third of the costs. The original Pell Grant covered all costs of the typical community college; today it covers about 60%.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the growth of federal Pell funding has not kept pace with the rise in the number of recipients, and out-of-pocket college costs have risen dramatically.

Fourth, it is now harder to pay for college by working. The value of the minimum wage has declined substantially, and college students are competing in a labor market where people are often underemployed and wages are low. Coupled with rising college prices, students must work nearly full-time to afford

full-time community college.<sup>11</sup> To avoid paying for benefits, today's employers, including universities, often divide full-time hours across multiple part-time workers, contributing to the growing number of students working several jobs to make ends meet. This can be especially hard because employees with class schedules (and often child care schedules) may find employers reluctant to offer the flexibility they need. When shifts change, students must adjust too, even if it means missing class. Students, then, are often forced to choose between work and school, which can lead to lost wages or lower grades.<sup>11</sup>

The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program was supposed to help students work on campus rather than off, but the program is significantly underfunded and poorly allocated, resulting in insufficient resources for community college students. When students are fortunate enough to have FWS support, they often receive too little pay to make that their only job.

Finally, today's public colleges have less money to put toward supporting students and providing affordable food and housing. State funding for higher education has decreased by 25% per student over the last 30 years, and states have cut \$9 billion from higher education in the last 10 years alone. In public universities, budget cuts have led to significant reductions in student services.<sup>11</sup>

## WHY ARE SO FEW STUDENTS ENROLLED IN SNAP?

SNAP is widely regarded as the nation's first—and most important—line of defense against hunger. Had SNAP kept pace

with changing collegiate demographics and economies, the problem of rising college food insecurity might have been prevented or contained.

Why are so few seemingly eligible college students receiving SNAP? The answer lies in the program's rules and an explicit intention to keep college students from using the program. In 1980, responding to complaints that college students from middle-income and wealthy families were qualifying for the program by establishing independent households, and to what the *New York Times* described as the appearance “that food stamps were fueling the iconoclastic culture and radical politics of the nation's youth,” Congress declared that full-time students, defined as students attending classes at least half-time, were ineligible for food stamps unless they were working 20 hours a week or more or qualified for 1 of several possible exemptions. Four fifths of the 250 000 students then in the program lost their benefits.<sup>12</sup>

Students can be included on their parents' SNAP grants only if the family shops and eats as a single unit and students eat at least half their meals at home, a rule that may not fit the schedules of commuter students, who may sleep at home but study, work, and socialize elsewhere. Moreover, the GAO report notes that “Most students we identified as not receiving SNAP were financially independent and could likely apply for SNAP as their own household; dependent students who are potentially eligible can only receive SNAP as part of their parents' household.”<sup>6(p18)</sup>

Unless they have children, part-time students are considered “able-bodied adults without dependents” and subject to the stringent work requirements

introduced with the 1996 Welfare Reform. Able-bodied adults without dependents are eligible for only 3 months of SNAP benefits out of every 36 months unless they are working 20 hours a week or more or are engaged in a recognized SNAP Employment and Training Program.<sup>13</sup> For students with and without dependents, the 20-hours-per-week rule creates many challenges, in part because it is often difficult to obtain 20 hours from a single employer and because work interferes with academics.

Even though the rules do allow some full-time students to receive SNAP, they are written in a confusing manner that leads many to mistakenly conclude that students simply are not eligible<sup>14,15</sup> (see the box on page 1654). The main message sent by the USDA and many intermediaries, including colleges, is that most college students are not eligible for SNAP. A search for “college students” on the USDA Food and Nutrition Service SNAP Web page finds the statement that “Most able-bodied students ages 18 through 49 who are enrolled in college or other institutions of higher education at least half time are not eligible for SNAP benefits.” The site then lists 6 categories of “exemptions,” 1 of which has 5 subcategories.<sup>15</sup> Students who persist beyond the initial rebuff must assess their situations considering these categories. Thus, it is no surprise that many eligible students do not know they are eligible. The GAO study found that both students and college officials expressed confusion and uncertainty about the student eligibility rules.<sup>6</sup>

Even when students believe they are eligible for SNAP, stigma and the daunting process of application and enrollment may deter them from applying.<sup>16</sup>

## EXEMPTIONS FOR SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) QUALIFICATIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS: UNITED STATES, 2019

Students who meet the income and assets limits, immigration status requirements, and household qualifications, and are enrolled in college at least half-time may qualify for SNAP through any ONE of these criteria:

- Are responsible for a dependent child younger than 6 years
- Are responsible for a dependent child between the ages of 6 and 12 years for whom they have trouble securing child care
- Work at least 20 hours per week in paid employment
- Receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance or services
- Are aged 17 years or younger or aged 50 years or older
- Are single parents enrolled full-time and responsible for a dependent child aged 12 years or younger
- Participate in a state or federally funded work study program
- Participate in an on-the-job training program
- Are in school through a state or federally approved employment and training program
- Are unable to work for health reasons

Source: Welton<sup>14</sup> and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.<sup>15</sup>

And even when they apply, misunderstanding of the application by students or errors on the part of caseworkers may result in denial of students who are actually eligible.<sup>17</sup>

Because students receiving FWS are exempt from work requirements, in theory, FWS-eligible community college students facing a shortfall of funds for food should be able to obtain SNAP. In practice, however, only a fraction of students eligible for FWS actually have it, and many thus miss this exemption. In this way, SNAP rules restrict rather than enable food-insecure students' access to food.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, a problem created by a significant policy success—expanded enrollment of low-income students in college—was followed by the failure of federal policy to address 2 other trends: rising college costs and reduced financial assistance. These changes have led to growing food insecurity for college students, an example of a social problem exacerbated by policy-induced obstacles. The situation was further aggravated by a policy fix for

an ideologically constructed problem: deterring “undeserving” college students from enrolling in the food stamp program. That this stereotype is increasingly false as the new economics of college unfolds has not altered the policy debate. In 1980, and still today, the portrayal of food-insecure college students as undeserving of help fits into a wider conservative discourse that seeks to separate the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor and then stigmatize the latter.<sup>18</sup>

### WHY DOES COLLEGE FOOD INSECURITY MATTER?

For some observers, concern about college food insecurity is much ado about nothing. If some college students occasionally run short of food money, choose to go to a movie instead of buying food, or regularly fill up on ramen noodles, what's the harm? As James Bovard, a libertarian newspaper columnist, asks, did those students reporting food

insecurity “oversleep and miss breakfast?” He observes that “redefining hunger as abstaining from second servings makes for a push-button crisis.” He concludes “a national goal of ‘no college kid hungry’ would bloat more students at a time when obesity wreaks more havoc than a few missed meals. In the long run, obliterating individuals' responsibility for feeding themselves is the worst possible dietary outcome.”<sup>19</sup>

More broadly, a national discourse that demonizes the poor, recent immigrants, and people of color and discourages public investments that buffer the adverse consequences of growing income inequality<sup>20</sup> reinforces skepticism at the idea that college students might be struggling with food insecurity.

Despite political criticism of SNAP, public health evidence suggests that food insecurity contributes to adverse outcomes for college students. First, it worsens several health conditions. Gundersen and Ziliak's recent review of food insecurity and health<sup>21</sup> found that in adult

populations, food insecurity was associated with diabetes, obesity, depression, decreased nutrient intakes, and poor self-rated health status. They conclude that a “compelling picture of food insecurity's association with negative health outcomes has emerged based on a wide array of data sets and empirical methods.”<sup>21</sup>(pp1835–1836) Food insecurity contributes to obesity, especially for females, by encouraging consumption of lower-cost, calorie-dense food.<sup>22</sup> Although the causal relationship between food insecurity and health is clear for many adverse outcomes, for others, data are lacking or the relationships may be reciprocal. Depression, for example, can be both a cause and consequence of food insecurity.<sup>21</sup>

Second, food insecurity appears to be associated with negative academic outcomes, a primary concern for universities. Several studies have found that food-insecure students are more likely to have low grade point averages, delayed graduation, or higher dropout rates than their food-secure peers.<sup>2,23,24</sup> Other studies show that food-insecure students report higher levels of stress—itsself a barrier to academic success.<sup>25</sup> Because most of these studies are observational and represent a single point in time, the direction of causal pathways as well as the strength of the association in different student populations require further elucidation.

Given the reciprocal relationships between education and health, reducing food insecurity may have a synergistic impact on both health and educational outcomes. College completion is a powerful predictor of longevity, lifetime health, healthier behaviors, income, and life satisfaction.<sup>26</sup> The precautionary

principle, a basic public health value, suggests that in the face of compelling but uncertain evidence, health professionals should take action. This would seem to justify acting to reduce food insecurity on college campuses on the basis of the strong evidence of the health benefits of a college degree<sup>27</sup> and emerging albeit not yet definitive indications that food-insecure students are less healthy and less likely to complete college than their food-secure peers.

Further consideration of the most appropriate methods for assessing campus food insecurity is warranted. Some investigators using data from the Current Population Survey, which is based on household data rather than student surveys, have identified lower levels of food insecurity.<sup>28</sup> However, as the GAO noted,<sup>6</sup> college students may not be well captured in those surveys, especially if it is their parents doing the reporting, the students meet the SNAP definition of independence, or (for students with unstable housing) they lack an established household with which to share food. The consistency of results across campus studies in different settings, time periods, and using different methodologies suggests that the findings on the magnitude of food insecurity and its impact on academic success and well-being warrant policy attention. Finally, the lifetime health, economic, and social benefits of college<sup>27</sup> justify public investment in programs that increase the attainment of degrees, including by ensuring that investments in financial aid are not undermined by shortfalls that leave students without enough to eat.

## HOW DO CAMPUSES RESPOND TO FOOD INSECURITY?

In response to the growing recognition that many college students are food insecure, universities have launched a variety of interventions. The most common responses include creation of campus food pantries, meal vouchers for free meals in campus cafeterias, emergency assistance funds, and programs of outreach and information to assist students to obtain public benefits and community resources, including SNAP. Less common are garden programs, community-supported agriculture, farmers market-based food boxes, and projects associated with the diversion of food waste.

### Food Pantries

Food pantries are spaces on campus where students can pick up free food to prepare and consume. A 2016 scan of student emergency aid provisions in higher education by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) found that 45% of the 706 responding institutions, and 55% of public 2- and 4-year colleges, had food pantries.<sup>29</sup> They were the second most common form of emergency assistance in public colleges, after emergency loans, and their numbers have grown rapidly.<sup>29,30</sup>

Pantries are appealing to both administrators and student groups seeking to respond to hunger. They are relatively easy and inexpensive to establish; 79% of the food pantries reported in the NASPA scan had annual budgets of less than \$10 000.<sup>29</sup> They have high visibility and symbolic resonance, allowing the institution to assert its responsiveness. They provide multiple avenues for students, staff, and faculty to get

involved: raising funds, securing donations, volunteering time. In the NASPA survey, food pantries were far more likely than any other form of emergency aid to rely upon campus fundraisers or funds allocated by a student government.<sup>29</sup> Food pantries are also magnets for outside donations. They impose a limited administrative burden, and they can expand or shrink with need. In many communities, a local food bank can make food available at deeply discounted prices.

### Meal Vouchers

Meal vouchers provide students with free or subsidized meals in campus cafeterias. Vouchers are funded by the college itself, donated by campus food vendors, or given by other students through 1 of several “swipe-card” programs in which students donate unused meal-plan meals to other students. The national organization Swipe Out Hunger now partners with 50 campuses and reports having supplied 1.7 million meals since its creation.<sup>31</sup> Arrangements differ substantially across campuses, but participation by the food service vendor is necessary.

Some colleges also make free food available to students via an app that identifies campus meetings that offer refreshments or by establishing a central location where leftover refreshments can be distributed. Like food pantries, meal donation programs provide only immediate and temporary relief. Recognizing this limitation, Swipe Out Hunger has crafted and promoted state legislation to encourage campuses to increase student access to SNAP and other public benefits.<sup>31</sup>

### Emergency Funds

Emergency funds offer cash assistance or loans to help students prevent utilities cutoffs, pay for rent or emergency health care, and sometimes to purchase food or transportation. The goal is to address life circumstances that threaten to interrupt progress toward a degree. In the NASPA study, emergency loans were the most common form of emergency aid, typically offered to tide a student over while waiting for promised financial aid, but many institutions now also offer direct grants.<sup>29</sup> Other studies confirm the importance of emergency loans.<sup>17</sup> Both Wisconsin and Minnesota now provide state support for college emergency loan grants.<sup>32</sup>

### Access to Benefits

Access to benefits, programs to educate students and college staff about SNAP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other public programs constitute another way in which campuses can assist students in need. Programs such as Single Stop and The Benefits Bank screen students for a wide array of public assistance and help them to apply, as well as assist them in the preparation of tax returns. Since Single Stop USA began its education program in 2009, primarily on community college campuses, it has helped 269 272 students obtain \$548 million in benefits and tax refunds.<sup>33</sup> An evaluation of Single Stop’s Community College Initiative by the Rand Corporation found that Single Stop use was associated with increased college persistence, defined as attempting more credits, earning more credits, and reenrolling for the next semester.<sup>34</sup>

**TABLE 1—Overview of Proposed Changes in Policy and Institutional Practices to Increase College Student Enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Reduce Campus Food Insecurity: United States, 2018–2019**

	SNAP-Specific Changes	Other Changes
Federal		
Longer term	<p>Eliminate college student exemption for those who otherwise meet SNAP eligibility requirements.</p> <p>Align SNAP and Federal Work-Study and other financial aid eligibility requirements to reduce application and enrollment burden on colleges and students.</p>	<p>Create law and federal funding to provide subsidy for healthy affordable food on college campuses.</p> <p>Allocate funding for hunger-free campuses in Higher Education Reauthorization Act.</p> <p>Expand school lunch and breakfast programs from public schools to public universities.</p>
Shorter term	<p>Define college study as “training” or “work” for purpose of SNAP eligibility for full- and part-time students.</p> <p>Reduce work requirement for SNAP eligibility from 20 h per week to 15 h per week.</p> <p>Provide federal incentives for states and localities to move to electronic application and processing of SNAP benefits, to enable more time-pressed and technologically savvy college students to enroll.</p> <p>Support SNAP demonstration projects on college campuses that increase access to healthy food.</p>	<p>Increase Federal Work-Study funding to better meet needs and make more students eligible for SNAP.</p> <p>Encourage universities to distribute Federal Work-Study grants to maximize enrollment of eligible recipients in SNAP.</p>
State and local	<p>Designate community college enrollment as meeting the employment and training requirements for SNAP,<sup>a</sup> using regulation rather than legislation as permitted by a federal law, the Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006.</p> <p>Plan state- or municipal-wide SNAP education and enrollment campaigns that denormalize stigma and promote enrollment of eligible individuals.</p>	<p>Increase state funding for work-study</p> <p>Contribute state or local funding to hunger-free campus acts.<sup>b</sup></p> <p>Encourage on-campus restaurants and cafeterias to accept CalFresh (SNAP in California) benefits and to provide designated funds for on-campus food pantries.<sup>c</sup></p> <p>Provide state support for emergency loans to students.<sup>d</sup></p> <p>Require each campus to ensure that at least 1 staff member is designated to help students enroll in SNAP.<sup>e</sup></p>
University	<p>Launch university-wide SNAP education and enrollment campaigns that denormalize stigma and promote enrollment of eligible students using campus e-mail, text messages, classroom announcements, listing on syllabi, and peer outreach programs.</p> <p>Assess student food insecurity at time of registration and financial aid distribution and link students with needs to services.</p> <p>Train student-services personnel to identify food-insecure students and assist them to apply for and enroll in SNAP.</p> <p>Train students and faculty to assist food-insecure students to enroll in SNAP.</p>	<p>Designate a single campus official to take responsibility for assessing and addressing food insecurity and other social needs.</p> <p>Coordinate and integrate food security programs with other basic-needs initiatives such as housing assistance and homelessness prevention, emergency assistance, child care, and mental health services.</p> <p>Distribute College Work Study strategically to increase the number of students who achieve SNAP eligibility through participation in state or federal work study. Even a single hour each week of Work Study qualifies students for an exemption to the blanket ineligibility, but colleges have typically not distributed these very limited Work Study resources widely.</p> <p>Make food pantries hubs for connecting food-insecure students to the multiple services they need.</p> <p>Require university food service vendors to contribute to reducing food insecurity.</p> <p>Bring Single Stop or The Benefits Bank to campus to provide comprehensive benefits screening for students.</p> <p>Engage faculty, student-services staff, and student leadership and peer programs in active campaigns to destigmatize food assistance and promote participation.</p>

<sup>a</sup>Massachusetts and Pennsylvania already do this.

<sup>b</sup>California does this.

<sup>c</sup>California has done this.

<sup>d</sup>Wisconsin and Minnesota do this.

<sup>e</sup>California and New Jersey provide financial incentives for colleges to do this.

Other campuses have partnered with The Benefits Bank to use online screening software to conduct comprehensive screening and assistance, with similar findings of positive impact on academic progress toward a degree.<sup>35</sup> California and New Jersey have passed legislation—originally designed by Swipe Out Hunger—that provides incentives for campuses to ensure that at least 1 staff member is designated to help students enroll in SNAP.<sup>32</sup>

Campus responses to student food insecurity include both top-down and bottom-up actions—and some hybrid models. Students have led most of the meal donation projects and have encouraged campus food service providers to enable such donations. Students at Spellman and Morehouse Colleges in Atlanta, Georgia, for example, recently staged a successful hunger strike to persuade college administration and the vendor Aramark to permit donations of meal-plan swipes.<sup>36</sup> The City University of New York organized a Campus Food Security Advocate Program that trained and deployed undergraduate students to conduct outreach and raise awareness of food insecurity on 2 campuses.<sup>37</sup> The students then organized food justice clubs that continue the work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recent attention to college food insecurity by policymakers, media, students, and higher education leaders has led to a robust portfolio of policy recommendations at the federal, state, local, and university levels.<sup>1,3,4,6,11,14,16,17,29–31,34,36–40</sup>

We summarize these in Table 1, identifying recommendations at each level in 2 categories. The left column shows changes that contribute to the broad policy goal of

maximizing enrollment of food-insecure college students in SNAP, and the right column shows changes in policies and institutional practices that address other influences on college food insecurity.

Overall, these recommendations suggest that government and universities have a wide menu of options they can pursue to increase the low SNAP enrollment rates of low-income, often food-insecure college students. Table 1 distinguishes between federal policy changes to increase college students' access to SNAP that seem feasible to pursue in the short run—that is, in the current political climate of conservative opposition to safety net programs—versus the longer run. Other proposed changes will require deeper changes in the federal policy climate but may be pursued now at the state and local level, setting the stage for federal action at a later date.

In our experience, most colleges and universities in the public sector are willing to embrace some of the policy and programmatic changes listed Table 1, actions that can lead to further campus mobilization and measurable progress toward raising awareness and reducing campus food insecurity. There is more work to be done to engage private nonprofit and for-profit universities, which together enroll about 1 in 4 students.

Ultimately, the recommendations summarized in Table 1 provide a starting point for a national dialogue among higher education leaders, student groups, and advocates about a comprehensive, coordinated policy agenda that, we propose, could seek to end campus food insecurity in the next 5 years. Such an ambitious but feasible goal could encourage proponents to set priorities, establish effective

alliances and partnerships, and help update SNAP for the 21st century.

The recent introduction of federal legislation to enable more low-income college students to enroll in SNAP and increase awareness of the program,<sup>40</sup> coupled with state-level action in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts<sup>32</sup> to designate all community college students as meeting SNAP training and employment requirements, show that some public officials are ready to act on this issue. They also provide an opportunity to engage college students in education and advocacy for such policy changes.

One key task is to move beyond the appealing but misguided belief that simply expanding college food pantries can end campus food insecurity. Pantries play an important role in addressing the acute, immediate needs of food-insecure students, but they do nothing to address the underlying cause: what we have labeled the “new economics of college” that make it harder for many college students to meet their basic needs. At worst, pantries relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions. Moreover, as a recent review noted, “not a single study has examined the effectiveness of food pantries at decreasing food insecurity on postsecondary education institutions.”<sup>3(p1788)</sup>

Because food pantries are often the first point of contact between food-insecure students and university resources, they can become hubs for screening and enrolling eligible students in SNAP and other public benefits, publicizing affordable meals on campus, and engaging students in organizing for food justice as well as distributing food. By considering food pantries as the starting point rather than the

totality of a comprehensive response to food insecurity, advocates of ending food insecurity among college students—and other populations—can contribute to more sustainable solutions.

To implement these changes in policy will require a broad coalition of students, faculty, public health, higher education and food justice advocates, public officials, and social justice organizations. This coalition can frame the effort to end food insecurity among college students and fulfill the promise of SNAP as an integral part of related movements for equitable access to higher education, reductions in income and wealth inequality by race/ethnicity and class, improved well-being for all college students, and a food system that can ensure food security and dietary health for all Americans. **AJPH**

## CONTRIBUTORS

N. Freudenberg and J. Poppendieck wrote the first draft, and all 3 authors reviewed and revised subsequent drafts and the final draft.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Sara Goldrick-Rab is also chief strategy officer for emergency aid at Edquity, a private company, where she is a paid consultant and holds stock. The terms of this arrangement have been reviewed and approved by the Temple University Human Participant Review Board. Edquity played no role in the preparation or review of this manuscript.

## HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

This essay is not based on human participant research and did not require institutional review board approval.

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