



**Public Testimony on Hunger in Higher Education
Submitted to the National Commission on Hunger**

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OVERVIEW

For the past several years, we have conducted research on hunger affecting college students across the nation, and we thank you for the opportunity to share what we have learned. Our goal is to provide useful information about food insecurity among undergraduates and offer potential policy solutions to help alleviate this problem.

We urge the National Commission on Hunger to align hunger policies with educational policies, in order to ensure that individuals from low-income and economically vulnerable backgrounds have a fair shot at mastering college-level material and securing college credentials. In particular, we recommend the following actions:

1. **Align SNAP eligibility for college students with need-based financial aid eligibility.** A college education is an effective way to reduce hunger and reliance on social benefits, promoting gainful employment. Financial aid is the primary mechanism used to help economically disadvantaged people access college yet most college students with financial need are excluded from receiving SNAP benefits that would help them complete college credentials.¹ Complex SNAP-eligibility rules for college students, including those tied to work requirements, reduce participation and increase administrative costs. These rules are short-sighted—allowing students to use both financial aid and SNAP to pay for college will likely help them complete degrees more often and faster. Simplifying the requirements, allowing college enrollment to count towards the work requirement, and using collaborative data sharing agreements to identify students who meet SNAP income eligibility thresholds will increase program efficacy.
2. **Allow SNAP applicants to file for benefits electronically.** For SNAP-eligible college students, allowing them to file for benefits online saves time and money. Furthermore, it helps colleges institute support systems that directly assist students in the benefits application process. E-filing encourages eligible college students to take-up benefits.
3. **Institute a Postsecondary National School Lunch Program.** Students who rely on the existing National School Lunch Program throughout their elementary and secondary school years continue to need this support in college. College costs outstrip available financial aid, and in order to cover the price of attendance we find that students skip meals. As one staff advisor at a college food pantry explained, “[Students] don’t stop being poor because they go to college.”²
4. **Support research efforts regarding hunger in higher education.** Studies of specific institutions indicate that college students are at a greater risk of food insecurity than the general public, but no nationally representative study exists. Practitioners are working to respond to students’ needs, but effective policy response requires additional information.

BACKGROUND

Today, three-quarters of college students are considered “non-traditional.”³ For example, nearly half attend community colleges, almost always commuting to class rather than residing on campus. One in three is a parent, juggling childcare responsibilities with class assignments. Approximately three-quarters of students work for pay while attending college including a significant minority of full-time workers who struggle to find enough time in the day. For these students, college is one competing responsibility among many. Given the growing cost of college, many of these students are experiencing significant material hardship, including food insecurity. Studies at colleges across the U.S. and abroad suggest that students are at an increased risk of food insecurity when compared to the general population.⁴ Eligibility for safety net programs, including the National School Lunch Program, that so many of these students rely on during k-12 education abruptly end when they reach college, even though financial needs remain and a postsecondary education is increasingly a prerequisite for a basic standard of living.

These college students are pursuing the American Dream, aiming for a well-paying job and a host of other non-monetary benefits associated with a college education including better health and happiness.⁵ Shifting economic realities indicate that over 60% percent of jobs now require some college education, but there are not enough people with college degrees to meet this growing demand. By 2018, the U.S. is predicted to need an additional 3 million individuals with an associate’s degree or higher and another 4.7 million with postsecondary certificates.⁶ This demand, along with a desire to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, led President Obama to encourage all Americans to “get more than a high school diploma” and focus the national education agenda on improving college completion rates.⁷

Enough students start college to meet these goals, but not enough finish. Among first-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor’s degree, 59% graduate within six years while 29% of students seeking an associate’s degree obtain one within three years. These completion rates mask significant variation by economic background. Just 14% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile had completed a bachelor’s or higher degree within eight years of high school graduation compared to 29% of those from middle socioeconomic families and 60% of students from the highest socioeconomic quartile.⁸ By one estimate, students from high-income families are six times more likely to graduate from college than those from low-income families.⁹ Moreover, these gaps persist even after controlling for prior academic achievement; a high-achieving low-income student has about the same chance of earning a bachelor’s degree as a moderate-achieving high-income student.¹⁰

When asked why they drop out of college, the majority of students indicate that they did so for financial reasons. “When choosing between a degree and going to work, paying rent, buying groceries or supporting family members, many students are forced to drop out.”¹¹ The price of college has been rising faster than inflation, faster than medical care costs, and faster than need-based financial aid.¹² The result is increased unmet need for students from low- and moderate-income families. The Pell Grant, our nations flagship program to help low-income students cover college costs was created in the early 1970s. At that time, it covered nearly 80% of the total cost to attend a public four-year college whereas today, it covers just 30%. Today, after all grant aid is taken into account, a dependent student from a family in the lowest income quartile (i.e., \$21,000 median annual earnings) would have to devote 59% of her family’s total income to attend a public four-year college for one year or 40% to attend a public two-year college. For independent students over age 24 in the bottom income quartile, they would have to devote over

100% of their total income to college costs in order to attend a two- or four-year public college after all grant aid is taken into account. In order to attend a single year of community college, dependent low-income students have to come up with \$8,300 to fill their unmet need gap.¹³ Thus, most low-income students can no longer work their way through college using savings from summer or part-time jobs nor attend college without going into debt.

College is simply unaffordable for many families. In a longitudinal study of 3,000 low-income college students conducted by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, nearly 90% of students we surveyed in their first semester of college indicated that they were upset or worried that they did not have enough money to pay for the things they needed in order to attend college. Fifteen percent went without required books because they could not afford them and 19% did without a computer. In addition to school expenses, 78% stated that they were having difficulty paying their bills. To help make ends meet, one in four students reduced utility usage, postponed medical or dental care, or put off paying bills. Half cut back or stopped driving and 40% increased the amount of time spent working or borrowed money, including using credit cards more. About one in four students were caught off guard by these financial challenges, indicating that they were “having more problems affording college than expected.”

HUNGER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Nationally, about half of all Pell recipients are from families living below the poverty line, and many of these students come to college to escape the material hardships they have long lived with. In the Wisconsin HOPE Lab study of Pell-grantees described above, one in four students reported that as children, at least sometimes there “wasn’t enough to eat at home.” During their first semester of college, 71% reported that they changed their food shopping or eating habits due to a lack of funds. Twenty-seven percent of our students indicated that in the past month, they did not have enough money to buy food, ate less than they felt they should, or cut the size of their meals because there was not enough money. When asked if they ever went without eating for an entire day because they lacked enough money for food, seven percent of students said yes.¹⁴ Of course, students need not be hungry all the time in order to be food insecure. When an individual has to make tradeoffs between food and other essential living expenses, such as paying for housing or medical expenses, it is also a sign of food insecurity.

Ours is not the first study to identify food insecurity among undergraduates, but the topic has received scant attention from researchers and policymakers.¹⁵ At the University of Hawaii, for example, 21% of students alter their food intake due to resource limitations and an additional 24% are anxious about their food supply.¹⁶ A 2011 survey conducted at the City University of New York (CUNY) by public health researchers Nicholas Freudenberg and his colleagues found that almost 40 percent of students in that urban system were suffering from food insecurity. They wrote:

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.¹⁷

Those who work directly with students, thankfully, notice these problems. The College and University Food Bank Alliance, co-founded by student affairs professionals Clare Cady and Nate Smyth-Tyge, now supports 200 food banks on college campuses across the nation.¹⁸ Feeding America reports that one in ten of its 45.5 million clients are college students.¹⁹ Organizations such as Single Stop USA and the Working Families Success Network are helping community colleges develop these services, responding to calls for help like this one from CUNY chancellor Matthew Goldstein:

One of the saddest moments that I have experienced recently occurred at a Council of Presidents meeting when some presidents indicated to me and other members of the chancellery that more and more students appearing on their campuses are hungry. They have not had breakfast or may have missed a meal the night before. In light of the difficult economic times facing very low income students, I have asked the Office of Student Affairs to develop ... programs to focus on issues of hunger, nutrition and homelessness.²⁰

At New York University, professors are writing about the “big squeeze” placed on their students because of high college costs. A recent report quotes a third year undergraduate:

I live on \$2-5 dollars a day. That means two meals a day, and incredibly unhealthy food. I'm hungry all the time. Being so hungry while you're trying to work two jobs to pay your rent and still keep up with your coursework is practically impossible—and more common than you would ever think at a university like this.²¹

The problem is that when a student has not eaten, they have difficulty learning. Madeline Pumariega, now chancellor of the Florida University System, said that when she was president of Miami Dade College's Wolfson campus, “When a student is hungry, he does not feel safe, and it is hard to help him synthesize class material. We have to meet students' basic needs in order for them to fully concentrate on assimilating the information in a class in a way that they can apply it, learn, and take it forward.”²² She is right. Several studies of elementary and secondary school students show an inverse relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement.²³ Similarly, a study using data from two community colleges in Maryland found that 56% of students in the sample were food insecure and food insecure students were 22% less likely to report a 3.5-4.0 GPA rather than a 2.0-2.49 GPA.²⁴

When we interview students, they tell us it is difficult to concentrate in class because of hunger pangs. For example, a woman said that if she had more money she “would not be looking at other peoples' faces when they're eating...I can't focus, can't be myself...going to school is a waste of time for me.” Others described what it was like to watch other students eat in the school cafeteria when they could not afford to dine there. Lack of food is more than a distraction. Hunger reduces the ability of some students to make much of the opportunity to attend college. Students who spent their childhoods worrying about food continue to have those worries during college. A key difference is that critical social safety programs like the free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch school program was available to them during high school; there is no such program for them in college.

POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

Align SNAP eligibility for college students with need-based financial aid eligibility.

In the traditional model of public benefits eligibility determination, each agency investigates a household's circumstances, often duplicating information and wasting resources. Today, more and more public benefits agencies are working together to share information that lightens the applicants' burden, lowers the cost of eligibility determination, and strengthens program integrity.²⁵ We encourage these agencies to further expand the range of partner organizations they work with to include colleges and the Department of Education. Each year, college students are required to fill out a 130-item form called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in order to receive financial aid. The FAFSA collects information like income and family size to determine financial aid eligibility. This form includes the information necessary to determine SNAP eligibility and a partnership between the Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Agriculture could reduce the need for a separate SNAP application. This type of partnership could be based on the extant model that allows students to automatically fill in part of their FAFSA form with tax data collected by the Internal Revenue Service. In theory, students could indicate that they would like to use their FAFSA information to automatically apply for SNAP and other public benefits.

This type of data sharing approach would allow the U.S. Department of Agriculture to retain control over the exact eligibility criteria, but another option is to implement a "deemed eligibility" criteria or "categorical eligibility" option for college students. For example, the FAFSA already identifies the neediest college students and awards them a maximum Pell Grant. The U.S. Department of Agriculture could use Pell grant status, for example, to automatically deem students eligible for some level of SNAP benefits. Several public benefits programs enact similar deemed eligibility partnerships and SNAP already allows for categorical eligibility.²⁶ Again, research indicates that categorical eligibility increases participation, lowers administrative costs and reduces error rates.²⁷ Of course, a careful analysis of costs would need to be conducted in order to meet budget neutrality requirements.

For these proposed linkages between the FAFSA and SNAP to work, current regulation dictating SNAP-eligibility for college students would need to be simplified and limited to information currently collected on the FAFSA (e.g., income, family size, marital status, dependent children). Currently, most college students are not eligible for SNAP benefits, but they may be able to qualify if they work at least 20 hours per week, take part in a federal work-study program, have children, or participate in other safety net programs.²⁸ The American public has long supported the notion of working your way through college, but tying SNAP-eligibility to work requirements is administratively burdensome and likely undermining efforts to promote college completion. Work records are not readily available and thus, are expensive to verify. Rules that require applicants to present documents to establish eligibility act as "speed bumps" that can delay or prevent the completion of applications." Instead, policymakers should consider verification of eligibility that relies on data matches alone.²⁹

Furthermore, a large body of rigorous research indicates that working while in college lowers academic achievement and inhibits course credit completion.³⁰ Students working 20 or more hours per week are more likely to dropout of college and among those who manage to graduate, working extends their time to degree and thus, increases college costs.³¹ Because attending college already requires a great deal of time and effort, the 20+ hour per week work requirement

in order to qualify for SNAP benefits is particularly burdensome and hinders longer-term educational and economic goals.

Currently, if a student participates in a work-study program, they do not have to work 20 or more hours per week to qualify for SNAP, which is better for academic achievement.³² The problem is that Federal Work Study (FWS) positions are very limited; just 4 percent of undergraduates access this program.³³ Moreover, work-study positions do not necessarily go to the neediest students. Unlike the Pell grant, which is allocated to students, FWS is allocated to colleges in a lump sum, and while all Pell Grantees fit the same criteria, each college has discretion over the distribution of FWS funds. For example, schools can “target funds using factors other than degree of need, as long as beneficiaries are financially eligible.”³⁴ Furthermore, the amount of FWS funds that a particular college receives is primarily based on previous allocation amounts, dating back over thirty years, rather than the amount of current student need. Because these earlier allocation formulas favor colleges with higher costs of attendance that have lower proportions of needy students, FWS awards are more likely to go to less economically disadvantaged students. Thus, the work-study requirement enables a very small number of students to benefit from SNAP and is not a good indicator of financial need.

Three in four undergraduates work while in college, including the majority of Pell Grant recipients, but many still report material hardship including food insecurity.³⁵ Moreover, those who are food insecure are more likely to work than their food secure peers. According to one study, the typical food insecure college student works 18 hours per week although some work over 40 hours per week. Employed students are nearly twice as likely to report experiences with food insecurity, indicating that work and financial aid are not enough to meet the financial demands of attending college.³⁶ The current SNAP-eligibility work requirement for college students is administratively burdensome, does little to distinguish the effort of college students, and undermines college completion. Investing in college students, by offering them the food assistance that they need to do well in school, has immense long-term potential, as it will likely reduce future dependency on the social safety net.³⁷

Allow SNAP applicants to file for benefits electronically

Research from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab indicates that just 14% of students in our study were receiving food stamps.³⁸ The small percentage of SNAP beneficiaries is the result of two primary factors: low take-up among eligible students and SNAP eligibility restrictions for college students. Implementation of “21st century” public benefits reforms has the potential to minimize both of these issues.³⁹ Take-up rates improve when burdensome steps to obtain benefits are removed. In this case, electronic SNAP applications would save potential beneficiaries time and money, save administrative costs, and reduce eligibility errors.⁴⁰

Single Stop USA is a national non-profit organization that operates in eight states to help college students obtain public benefits.⁴¹ Over a 1.5-year period, Single Stop helped more than 3,500 students obtain SNAP benefits worth over \$9 million dollars.⁴² Single Stop counselors help students receive these benefits online via e-file and through traditional paper applications that must be turned in at a local office, depending on the site location.

When we spoke with counselors who worked in states that accepted SNAP e-file applications, they explained that a student could stop by their on-campus office in-between classes and file the online application. In this model, the benefits counselor, often a trained social worker is able to help students understand the benefits process and answer any questions they

might have. Moreover, students indicated that e-filing from a college campus office made applying for public benefits feel like receiving any other college campus service, such as tutoring or academic counseling. This model likely encourages more students to apply for benefits and may help low-income students feel less stigmatized on college campuses.

The benefits application process is very different for those who live in states without an e-file option. Instead of stopping by a student services center on campus, students have to make their way to the local benefits office, often relying on time-consuming public transportation, only to wait in line upon arrival. Students might have to take off work or even miss class to make the trip. While some public benefits workers are familiar with the additional set of rules governing SNAP eligibility for college students, others have very limited experience in working with this population, which may further delay or complicate the application. Students are left to be their own self-advocates in a system that they may not be familiar with or spend additional time seeking out support resources.⁴³

An electronic filing option is likely to improve take-up rates for the general population, but is particularly beneficial for college students who are familiar with on-line application processes. Moreover, given the additional set of regulations dictating college students' SNAP eligibility, the error reduction obtained through online applications forms is also especially beneficial for this population. Of course, security and privacy concerns must be addressed in an online model, but several states have successfully transitioned to online processes and can serve as models.⁴⁴

Institute a Postsecondary National School Lunch Program

Several of the colleges we visited while studying hunger in higher education reported that they provide a limited number of cafeteria food vouchers to help hungry students get something to eat. Moreover, individual faculty and staff members report helping students obtain food on an individual basis.

Wick Sloane, professor of English at Bunker Hill Community College, provided us with an update from Boston toward the end of 2013. At his campus, there is a food pantry and a national organization called Single Stop USA helps students sign up for food stamps.

Last Friday, a student who said he was homeless asked me how he could register for classes without an address. "Have you had anything to eat today?" I asked. This is a question many colleagues ask all the time. He had not. I gave him money to go to the cafeteria, and I told him to buy two sandwiches. I know students will often not take as much food as they need. This student brought me one of the two sandwiches. I gave that back to him. Another who had told me, "I guess you could tell that I haven't eaten since yesterday," took only some juice. With encouragement, she accepted a hot dog, which she ate, and three sandwiches that she said she would take home to her children.⁴⁵

After years of watching students struggle on his campus, Sloane has written repeatedly to the U.S. Department of Education with this request:

One peanut butter sandwich per school day for each of the nine million students on a Pell Grant. How many of these are the same students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school? No one knows and no one is counting. How many are from households on food stamps? No one's asking, either. Why not, then, 45 million peanut butter sandwiches at colleges each week? Until we come up with a better idea.⁴⁶

The provision of free or reduced-priced meals to hungry students is beyond the reach of most colleges, but innovative partnerships between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and colleges to provide on-campus food assistance may be possible.⁴⁷ Students already identified as “needy” through the financial aid system (e.g., Pell grant awardees) could be deemed eligible for such services to cut down on administrative costs. The National School Lunch Program provides precedent for this type of “direct certification” approach and research indicates that it increases participation, lowers administrative costs, and reduces error in who receives benefits.⁴⁸ Furthermore, even students with support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) report going hungry while on campus due to a lack of approved food vendors and restrictions related to the purchase of hot meals. Students we interviewed expressed feelings of alienation when their SNAP benefits were not welcome at the campus cafeteria. A waiver that allows college students to use their SNAP benefits at on-campus cafeterias would eliminate this problem.

Support research efforts regarding hunger in higher education

Local studies indicate that hunger in higher education is a significant problem and may be undermining efforts to promote college completion. Yet, the national scope of this problem is unknown. National studies of college students do not include survey questions on food insecurity and national studies of food insecurity do not include information on students’ academic outcomes. How should policymakers respond to hunger in higher education? How many colleges and universities are encountering food insecurity among their students? How does food insecurity affect college degree completion? We need better data in order to answer these critical questions and inform public policy. To start to address this problem, we have requested that the National Center for Education Statistics include standardized food insecurity questions on future surveys such as the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The social safety net is a great anti-poverty tool. Evidence indicates that the SNAP program reduces the likelihood of being food insecure by 30%.⁵⁰ Another great anti-poverty tool is a college education. Those with a college degree enjoy higher wages and fringe benefits, are more likely to be employed, and are less likely to depend on the social safety net.⁵¹ We urge the commission to better allow these two great anti-poverty tools to work together. Investing in college students is a long-term strategy, but the potential pay-off is great. If we can reduce hunger, we can help more students reach their education goals so that fewer people in the next generation will need to rely on the social safety net and can instead, rely on their educational credentials to provide for their family and community.⁵²

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