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Food security as a basic need: College students need greater support from institutional administration

Matthew J. Landry, PhD, RDN, FAND, FAHA^a , Mateja R. Savoie-Roskos, PhD, MPH, RDN, FAND^b , Virginia Gray, PhD, RDN^c, Georgianna Mann, PhD^d , Zubaida Qamar, PhD, RDN^e, Rebecca L. Hagedorn-Hatfield, PhD, RDN^f , Cara L. Cuite, PhD^g, Emily Heying, PhD, RD, LD^h, Lanae B. Hood, PhDⁱ  and Kendra OoNorasak, MS, RD, LD^j

^aDepartment of Population Health and Disease Prevention, Program in Public Health, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, California, USA; ^bDepartment of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Sciences, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, USA; ^cDepartment of Family and Consumer Sciences, California State University Long Beach, Long Beach, California, USA; ^dDepartment of Nutrition and Hospitality Management, University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi, USA; ^eDepartment of Family, Interiors, Nutrition and Apparel, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, USA; ^fDepartment of Nutrition, Health and Human Performance, Meredith College, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA; ^gDepartment of Human Ecology, School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA; ^hDepartment of Nutrition, College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University, Saint Joseph, Minnesota, USA; ⁱLocal Environmental Agriculture Project, Virginia Fresh Match, Roanoke, Virginia, USA; ^jDepartment of Dietetics and Human Nutrition, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA

ABSTRACT

Food insecurity among college students has become a growing concern, with reports documenting its prevalence for over a decade. As the demographics of university and college students change, with more first-generation, nontraditional, and minority students, the risk of food insecurity is heightened. This viewpoint contends that food security is an essential basic need among college students, and when left unmet, it significantly impacts their well-being, resulting in an increased risk of poor academic performance or departure from higher education before degree completion. To combat this issue, universities and colleges must develop and sustain food security initiatives and programs, with administrators playing a critical role. We highlight key areas in which institutional administration can take actionable steps to dedicate the necessary support and resources to proposed and ongoing programs, foster an equitable campus culture, and be advocates for policies at the state and federal level that promote students' food security.

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Food security as an essential basic need among a changing college student demographic

Reports of food insecurity on college campuses have been documented for over a decade¹; but some college and university administrators continue to believe their students are not impacted. Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods necessary to lead a healthy lifestyle.² Although rates vary depending on the characteristics of the university and students, recent estimates suggest that 1 in 3 college students is food insecure which is significantly higher than the U.S. national average rate of about 1 in 10.^{3,4} As food insecurity experts, and as college educators, we have seen first-hand the negative impact of limited food security on student health, well-being, and academic performance.⁵⁻⁷

Reliable access to nutritious and sufficient food is not the only problem students face.⁸ Many students also experience a lack of resources and financial stability to fulfill basic needs including safe, secure, and adequate housing (to sleep, study, cook, and shower); healthcare to promote sustained

mental and physical well-being; affordable transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and emergency needs.⁹ Some students use credit cards or loans to buy food or make “ends meet” and sell possessions, such as textbooks, to afford basic needs.¹⁰ All of this can result in the burden of debt that persists even after receiving a college degree, thus continuing the cycle of financial instability. Further, as food insecurity and unmet basic needs increase the likelihood of departure from higher education before degree completion, many face college debt without a college degree.¹¹

The demographics of college students have changed over the years with more students today who are first-generation, parents or caregivers, nontraditional in age, and/or who identify as being part of minority groups.¹² The risk of food insecurity is often heightened at many institutions for non-traditional and first-generation students as student support services often target traditional students.^{12,13} This leaves many nontraditional students feeling relatively unsupported by their institution and lacking a sense of belonging in a campus culture not designed to support their success.¹⁴ It is

imperative that universities equitably provide additional resources and services for students who are first-generation, nontraditional, and from lower-income backgrounds.^{15–17} As educators, we view the September 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health^{18,19} as an opportunity to remind higher education administrators that they must prioritize the health and wellbeing of students, starting with ensuring that initiatives and programs and resources exist to support students' basic needs, including food security.

What can college administrators do

Campuses across the country have implemented a wide range of initiatives and programs to improve food security such as food pantries, campus gardens, farmer's markets, meal share or voucher programs, mobile food applications, campus food gleaning, food recovery efforts, and meal deliveries, among others.^{1,12,20} These initiatives and programs, often student-led, have helped ease some of the symptoms of food insecurity among college students.²⁰ However, the success and sustainability of these campus initiatives and programs have been found to rely heavily on the support and engagement from administrators.²¹ One of the biggest roles administrators can play is in securing and allocating financial support for the establishment or continuation of existing food security programs. As key stewards in the university philanthropic activities, administrators can consider advocating for the funding of food security initiatives and programs through the support of philanthropy from donors including alumni, local businesses, and foundations. Administrators can highlight the tangible impact donor contributions can have on the wellbeing of students experiencing food insecurity. While financial support is crucial, university administrators can also ensure necessary non-monetary resources (e.g., staffing, building space) are available to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of food security initiatives and programs. Without institutional support and buy-in from campus administration, initiatives and programs often face significant barriers in providing adequate reliable assistance to students.

Ongoing programs must be rigorously evaluated to identify initiatives and programs that are most effective and deserving of tailoring, expanding, or replicating. An important consideration is evaluating these initiatives and programs to ensure that they are reaching and supporting all students equitably.²² New initiatives and programs can be developed after administrators regularly and consistently engage with and listen to their campus community to identify unique challenges, at-risk populations, and situations at their respective institutions.¹² Higher education administrators must encourage an open dialog with faculty, staff, and students to increase awareness of available initiatives and programs and to destigmatize their use.²³ Whether it involves implementing new programs, revising existing policies, or allocating additional resources to support specific needs, the responsiveness of administrators to the received feedback shows their commitment to creating change within the campus environment. To ensure effective follow-up action,

administrators can use a model to delineate areas through which a university could address the root causes of food insecurity.²⁴

Every institution should develop a plan appropriate for its campus context (e.g., urban vs rural, residential vs commuter) to best support students' academic success, retention, and overall well-being.^{24,25} Much of our understanding of the prevalence of food insecurity at a particular institution comes from convenience samples of students that often are not reflective of the student body.^{3,12,26} With administrators' support, questions about food insecurity could be added to an annual university evaluation or university research survey that is distributed to all students at an institution. This could potentially increase response rate and provide a better understanding of students' needs.

With a better understanding of hunger at their institution and what are their students' needs for support, administrators will be able to develop a targeted action plan for a more robust institutional response. Students' voices must be a part of the solution process to ensure the buy-in of the campus community. Administrators, especially those tasked with diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership roles, can play a key part in ensuring that developed plans equitably support all students, including nontraditional and first-generation students. Universities within a particular area, state, or region that have similar attributes may even work collaboratively on efforts to address food insecurity. Exemplary examples of university system-wide plans that outline a holistic and preventative approach to addressing basic needs insecurities, including food security, are the California State University and University of California systems.^{27,28} An important component of this plan must be continuous evaluation, and a dissemination process to transparently report progress toward goals.

An emerging approach by many campuses is the creation of a center for basic needs.^{16,17,29} These centers serve as comprehensive, one-stop resource hubs, offering a range of services aimed at addressing food insecurity, housing instability, healthcare access, and other critical basic needs. To address food insecurity specifically, a center may house a food pantry or collaborate with local organizations for food recovery efforts. Campus food pantries are not just a place for students to receive food assistance; instead, they should also provide information on other services, and assistance available to students. The creation of such a center on campus requires the establishment of a culture of food security, nutrition equity, and assurance of basic needs involving the entire campus community.²⁵ Administrators often have the greatest capability to bring together key stakeholders from across campus departments and offices and aid in the implementation of bold, innovative ideas.

Colleges must also be innovative in addressing both short-term solutions and long-term structural changes that *prevent* food insecurity moving forward. Administrators are in the best position to lead efforts addressing systemic issues. For instance, administrators can conduct a comprehensive review of campus food access policies. This could include ensuring that campus dining services schedules align and accommodate students' schedules, guaranteeing that if

students have Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits that they are redeemable at on-campus retail and grocery stores, and eliminating requirements for purchasing an on-campus meal plan or considering ways to reduce the cost of their meal plans. Additionally, recognizing that food security is just one facet of a student's basic needs, often intertwined with other basic needs insecurities, administrators, particularly college presidents, might also extend their efforts to address broader systemic issues related to economic justice. This could involve initiatives to enhance education affordability by curbing tuition increases, minimizing mandatory fees, and fostering ample opportunities for on-campus employment at a living wage.

Administrators as advocates for food security policy

Policy changes at the federal and state level should be prioritized following the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health to aid in preventing hunger among college students.³⁰ There has been increased proposed legislation addressing college food insecurity at both the federal and state levels;^{31,32} however, few of these proposed bills have been enacted into law. Additionally, at the state level, most proposed legislation has occurred in a small number of states with a majority of states having no relevant legislation.³² This leaves significant room for improvement and advocacy, particularly by institutional administrators. Administrators can leverage their influence and connections, to actively engage with policymakers and highlight the critical issue of food insecurity on their campus.

Administrators should be knowledgeable about changes in policy at the federal and state level that may impact food security initiatives and programs on campus or within the local campus community. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the largest federal nutrition assistance program, was relaxed for college students. However, with President Biden signaling the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency this temporary expansion has ended and many students lost valuable access to food assistance.³³ Clarification of outdated student eligibility policies at the federal level could reduce confusion and varying implementation at state and local levels.^{34,35} States and localities can also develop clear policies and trainings to ensure messaging is consistent about ways to support food insecure students with SNAP benefits.²² For example, Assembly Bill 396 in California, passed in 2021, requires California's State University and Community College system to certify employment and training programs on campuses, so that students in these programs are exempt from the student eligibility rule.³⁶

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are serving a new college demographic who is at greater risk for food insecurity. While there is no easy solution that ensures students have their basic needs, like food security, met greater support from institutional

administration is the common theme. We propose the following recommendations for institutional administration:

Dedicate the Necessary Support and Resources: It is essential for institutional administration to prioritize and allocate the necessary resources for sustainable initiatives and programs that aim to improve food security on campus.

Foster a Nurturing and Equitable Campus Culture: Building a campus culture that promotes food security, nutrition equity, and assurance of basic needs must be a collective effort. Institutional leaders must actively listen to the needs of the campus community, translate those insights into actionable plans, and ensure those plans are rigorously evaluated.

Advocate for Funding and Policies at the Federal and State Levels: Institutional administration should advocate for funding at both federal and state levels to sustain and expand campus-based food security and basic needs programs and be champions of expanding financial aid and scholarships for students most at risk.

By implementing the above recommendations, higher education leaders can play a powerful role in ensuring that students' food security needs are met, and thus provide every student an opportunity to succeed.²⁵

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ORCID

Matthew J. Landry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2285-7702>

Mateja R. Savoie-Roskos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7740-5223>

Georgianna Mann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9653-7050>

Rebecca L. Hagedorn-Hatfield  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5046-4757>

Lanae B. Hood  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0163-5521>

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