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# Food Insecurity on College Campuses: A Complex Issue Requiring Multiple Interventions

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## Abstract

The prevalence and effects of food insecurity on college campuses continues to grow at a disturbing rate, negatively impacting the physical, mental, and emotional health of students across the nation. Further complicated by the fact that a variety of causes produce multiple effects, our awareness of students experiencing these concerns can arise in a variety of settings and incidents. Behavioral Intervention Teams have a unique perspective for identifying issues of food insecurity in campus populations. This paper describes the student populations most commonly facing food insecurity, common causes and effects of this epidemic, and the variety of resources being implemented on campuses to address issues of food insecurity. The article concludes with a summary of how food insecurity intersects with the work of campus BITs.

## Introduction

Financial pressures plague college students like never before. The price of tuition and textbooks has nearly tripled over the last two decades, skyrocketing at rates far higher than inflation. Student loan debt has increased disproportionately, relative to other types of long- and short-term debt, including home mortgages and consumer debt. State and federal funding for higher education continues to shrink as students wrestle with the decisions of using limited financial resources in choosing to pay for food, housing, tuition, books, and everyday living expenses. All too often, the discouragingly infinite list of expenses far exceeds available funds, with food predictably falling toward the bottom of the choices list, as though food is a luxury and not a necessity. While Behavioral Intervention Teams wrestle with the complete array of issues of distress for students, food insecurity can be overlooked as a critical concern.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a “lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life” (“Definitions of food security,” 2018, para. 1). More specifically, food insecurity refers to the “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” due to a lack of financial or other resources (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2015). College students shoulder the weight of food insecurity in numbers greater than the country’s general population. A paradox exists, as the very students who seek to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families suffer from the consequences created by the system through which they strive for self-actualization. Caught in a cycle that confines them within Maslow’s lowest level of needs, physiological needs, students find themselves unable to advance to and through safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization due to food insecurity.

This article offers a review of student populations that most frequently experience food insecurity, and provides an outlook on the causes and effects, and potential solutions and interventions helpful for Behavioral Intervention Teams to understand.

## Student Populations Most Frequently Impacted

The majority of food insecure students on college campuses come from already marginalized populations. Females experience food insecurity more often than males. Many female college students find themselves as the head of their households and as the primary breadwinners in their families while earning 74 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earn. Minority women are twice as likely to be poor, with one out of eight women in the

United States living in poverty. Women who find themselves as single parents are 5.4 times more likely to live in poverty than married couples. Native American and black women are the poorest women in the nation, with 23 percent and 21 percent, respectively, living below the poverty level (National Women’s Law Center [NWLC], 2017). Female college students, particularly those who belong to marginalized identities, represent the majority of food insecure college students vis-à-vis gender. Likewise, students in the 26–30 age range and first-generation students face food insecurity more often than traditional college-aged students and those whose parents earned a bachelor’s degree or greater. Previously incarcerated individuals and those with disabilities or medical conditions also report higher rates of food insecurity.

Minority racial and ethnic groups also suffer from greater prevalence of food insecurity. Black, Native American, and Hispanic student populations face higher proportions of food insecurity than white students. The only race/ethnicity category with a consistently lower rate of food insecurity than white students is Asian students (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018). Additionally, gay students are at a greater risk of food insecurity than heterosexual students, while bisexual students are at the highest risk. The higher rates of food insecurity among LGBTQ students is likely associated with the increased risk of family alienation and decreased financial support from family (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

Federal Pell Grant recipients and students who incur financial aid debt tend to suffer from higher levels of food insecurity. Because food insecurity correlates to general population income levels, and many students rely upon financial aid, credit cards, and student and consumer loans, the debt level accrued by these students rapidly rises, along with their inability to have consistent access to safe, healthy food (Knol, Robb, McKinley, & Wood, 2018).

The existence of disabilities among college students also impacts the level of food insecurity among this population. Students with learning, physical, mental, and emotional disabilities experience greater barriers to assistance in support services when suffering from food insecurity. Social norms, stigma, and fear of discrimination can influence a student’s reluctance to self-identify and seek aid. Physical and environmental barriers to accessibility potentially place an additional obstacle for students with disabilities who need to reach out for help. Often, students experiencing disabilities also experience higher rates of poverty, creating less economic access to food, compounding already complicated challenges in striving to obtain a college degree (Schwartz, Buliung, & Wilson, 2019).

Finally, two-year community college students are at a greater risk of food insecurity than students at four-year institutions. However, food insecurity among college students can be found at two-year or four-year, private or public institutions, among students living on campus or off campus, traditional or non-traditional students, and students with meal plans or no meal plans. National economic conditions have shifted so significantly since the dawn of the new millennium, and the higher education system has not been insulated from the impact. As you can see, the likelihood of Behavioral Intervention Teams working with students experiencing food insecurity is high and requires a greater understanding of the complexity of the issue.

### Complex Causes

The price of higher education has skyrocketed over the past four decades. From the early 1980s into the new millennium, college tuition and fees grew by 439 percent, while the consumer price index increased by only 106 percent during that same time period (Bok, 2015). The financial crash of 2008 and subsequent Great Recession sent shockwaves around the globe, impacting citizens throughout all sectors of society. Already on an upward trajectory, the financial cost of a college education soared after the economic collapse. Not only did federal and state funding of higher education plummet, but college administrators also had to take into consideration how the economy's free fall hurt students and their parents, as insolvent mortgages and retirement accounts devastated the financial stability of families across the country (McGee, 2015). Compounding the pressure of tightened budgets in higher education is the decline in high school graduates. After peaking in the 2010–2011 academic year, the numbers of traditional-aged students available to enter higher education has steadily declined (Selingo, 2016).

The combination of a diminished supply of students, along with greatly reduced federal and state appropriations, has created a situation in which colleges and universities must attempt to pass the cost of higher education on to consumers through tuition increases. However, these consumers — the students and their families — are also unable to bear the burden of mushrooming expenses associated with obtaining a college education. The financial gap between students and institutions of higher education continues to grow wider and deeper, as merit aid is typically awarded to students from upper-income families at a disproportionate rate (Selingo, 2013).

Demographic trends on college campuses are shifting to a more ethnically and racially diverse student body. Along with this new demographic come students representing families with

lower incomes than previous generations, many first-generation students, and students who possess decreased college readiness skills and academic preparation. Meanwhile, policymakers, employers, and society at large sound the drumbeat even louder for increasing the proportion of college graduates across the nation. State and national agencies frequently adopt the goal of 60 percent of Americans attaining a postsecondary degree or credential by the 2025–2030 time frame. To accomplish that goal, graduation rates of Hispanics must increase from 20 to 54 percent in a relatively short time period, while students from the most financially poor families would also have to significantly boost their graduation rates, increasing from 20 percent to 45 percent (Selingo, 2016).

On the higher education system side, the combination of the ever-growing financial chasm, the nationwide demand for a more educated citizenry and the shifting demographics of students creates a confluence of burden, dragging down those who desire to obtain a postsecondary education. Marginalized populations tend to become even more ostracized through stigma and exclusion, as many students reside under the intersection of several layers of marginalization, tightening the stranglehold of food insecurity.

For some students, there is a relationship between food insecurity and their lack of abilities in navigating life skills, such as budgeting, shopping, and food preparation, in that attending college is the first time they have lived independently. For the first time in their lives, many college students must negotiate the tasks and behaviors associated with obtaining nutritionally sound food (Knol, Robb, McKinley, & Wood, 2019). However, even students living in residence halls with access to institutional supports report comparable rates of food insecurity as students living off campus. Often, this occurs when the purchase of a meal plan is required, yet the students face financial hardships and end up choosing the minimum plan to meet the requirement (Dubick, Mathews, & Cady, 2016).

### Complex Effects

Just as numerous causes contribute to the food insecurity problem, numerous effects manifest themselves in the lives of students daily, ranging from academic, physical, emotional, and mental health issues. Research has revealed lower grade point averages (GPAs) among food-insecure students, compared to their food-secure contemporaries. Adding to the academic challenges, 55 percent of food-insecure students describe not being able to purchase required textbooks, 53 percent miss classes, and 25 percent drop at least one course. In extreme cases, the result of food insecurity forces some students to withdraw

from their universities altogether and discontinue their pursuit of a postsecondary education. Poor nutrition contributes to fatigue, trouble concentrating, and irritability, affecting students' ability to function in the classroom (Dubick et al., 2016).

College students suffering from food insecurity face an increased probability of enduring mental health issues exhibited as stress, depression, and anxiety, occurring at a rate three times higher than among their food-secure peers. Likewise, food-insecure students are at greater risk for alcoholism and eating disorders. Binge-eating, chronic illness, and decreased productivity are also additional side effects of food insecurity (Bruening, Brennhof, Van Woerden, Todd, & Laska, 2016).

Similar to the intersecting layers of marginalization and causes of food insecurity, there are also interconnecting layers of effects due to food insecurity. Often, students who experience food insecurity do not only experience fatigue or lower GPAs, but can simultaneously experience depression, chronic illnesses, and eating disorders as well. Multiple causes producing multiple effects create a problem for many students that can seem insurmountable, and require multiple interventions. Campus Behavioral Intervention Teams will find that they first must address these basic underlying needs before they are able to advance to other interventions, such as mandated assessments or disciplinary processes.

## Campus-Level Interventions

Along with the sharply increasing rate of food insecurity among college students, awareness of the issue has also increased. Students, staff, faculty, administrators, and the general public have become more informed of this issue, and many people at a variety of levels in a variety of sectors are stepping up to intervene on behalf of food-insecure students. With growing resources, Behavioral Intervention Teams and case managers must remain current on the available community and campus programs related to food insecurity, such as:

- **Food pantries.** In 2008, as the economy collapsed and the Great Recession set in, less than 10 food pantries existed on college campuses across the country. However, by 2016, that number grew to just over 350 and, as of mid-2019, more than 700 campus-based food pantries have registered as members of the College & University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), representing a 6900 percent increase in 11 years. A toolkit of resources to launch and run campus food pantries is available on the CUFBA website at <https://cufba.org/resources/>.

- **Student-created, led, or supported programs.** Enlisting the assistance of college students to support their food-insecure peers reduces the stigma attached to food insecurity by creating a welcoming, inclusive environment on campus. Existing programs that serve as models include Challah for Hunger, Swipe Out Hunger, and Donor to Diner.

On over 80 campuses around the globe, Jewish student groups gather to celebrate the tradition of baking challah together, then sell the challah and donate the profits to social justice causes such as food-insecurity programs on campuses. Information on locating or starting a chapter can be found at <https://challahforhunger.org/>. Swipe Out Hunger is a nonprofit started by college students offering solutions for food insecurity on campuses. Its primary program is "The Swipe Drive," where students can donate their extra dining hall points or swipes to their food-insecure peers. Students donate their extra meal swipes, the donated dollars are moved into a Swipe fund, and the Swipe fund is then used for meal swipes or to purchase food for the campus food pantry. Swipe Out Hunger programs are in place on more than 80 college campuses and have served over 1.7 million nutritious meals to food-insecure students. Additional information on the program, as well as how to start a campus-based Swipe Out Hunger program, can be found at [www.swipehunger.org](http://www.swipehunger.org).

Donor to Diner is a campus-tailored organization, fighting food insecurity on college campuses across the country. Rather than adopting a one size-fits-all approach, each chapter analyzes and addresses the food-insecurity needs of the specific campus population. Donor to Diner chapters are started and led by students for students, with the sponsorship and assistance of campus faculty and staff members. Colleges and universities can find information about starting a Donor to Diner chapter at [www.donortodiner.org/](http://www.donortodiner.org/).

Case managers or BIT members should have quick and easy access to food pantry resources when working with students. This should include the ability to give a student participating in a behavioral intervention meeting a quick snack, as well as longer-term support and assistance from these resources. Maintaining a list of where free meals are available every day of the week and transportation options to these locations can be a helpful tool to share with students experiencing food insecurity. When Behavioral Intervention Teams are able to pair these resource referrals alongside other services, such as financial aid advisement and mental health support, the team creates a more comprehensive and effective intervention to assist students.

## Conclusion

Food insecurity on college campuses is not an isolated issue. Many times, students experiencing food insecurity also experience other issues. Behavioral Intervention Teams are uniquely positioned to identify and address food insecurity issues on campus. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) now asks students whether they are or have been classified as homeless. If the answer is “yes,” a chain reaction of additional questions is triggered, requiring students to prove their answer. While this information is helpful, when we ask students to continuously prove their lack of resources, the grip of poverty tightens. The illusory truth effect, also known as the reiteration effect, occurs through the repetition of a statement or claim, increasing the degree of belief in that claim (Hertwig, Gigerenzer, & Hoffrage, 1997). When financial aid systems — or any other systems — continually require students to repeatedly state the depths of their poverty, they will become confident in the truth of the statement and their condition, making it increasingly difficult to convince them otherwise and help them break free from the barriers.

Negative stereotypes abound for those who find themselves facing financial struggles or living below the poverty level. Research reveals that some of those stereotypes include the misperceptions that poor people do not value education, are lazy, are substance abusers, are linguistically deficient, and are poor communicators. The dangers of creating these culture-of-poverty stereotypes include reinforcing incorrect illusory truth effects and confining already-marginalized populations within cycles that are difficult to break (Gorski, 2013). Behavioral Intervention Teams must understand these issues of food insecurity and how they can influence our understanding of incidents and student concerns. Ranging from how we talk with students about their financial situations to the objective nature of assessments of risk associated with different situations, underlying basic needs access should always be a consideration in interventions. This social justice issue requires steadfast, focused attention, so that all students have equal opportunity to complete a college education.

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