

Topic: Food Insecurity Among College Students

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Title: Hidden Struggles with Food Insecurity on College Campuses

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One morning, four years ago, I opened the Washington Post and read a surprising article in the local section: “More college students battle hunger as education and living costs rise”.¹ One of the universities featured in the article was the University of Maryland College Park (UMD), the flagship campus of the University of Maryland System. Later that fall I would join the faculty at the UMD School of Public Health. The article mentioned that UMD College Park soon would be opening a campus food pantry, sponsored by UMD Dining Services and the UMD Health Center to address student hunger. I made it a point as soon as I arrived on campus to get involved.

Access to a college education is a national priority, seen as a key to financial security, and improved health, and well-being. However, the rising cost of college tuition, fees, and room and board coupled with state disinvestment in public higher education, a decrease in need-based aid, and stagnation in wages, have strained financial resources for many American families who struggle to support a child’s college education²⁻⁵. Given these financial challenges, it is not surprising that food insecurity is increasingly on the minds of university administrators, who report hearing anecdotes of students struggling to pay for food and other essentials, skipping meals, and adopting unhealthy diets for economic reasons⁶⁻⁹.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as “limited or uncertain availability of and ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe food due to a lack of money or other resources”.¹⁰ Thus food insecurity is linked to economic disparities. More is known about the prevalence of food insecurity among the general population than the college student population. USDA conducts annual food security surveys of U.S. households. Current estimates of household food insecurity in the United States is 11.8 % and 10.4% for Maryland.¹¹ Previous research has documented a myriad of negative physical and mental health consequences of food insecurity among adults including decreased nutrient intake, increased mental health problems and depression, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, poor sleep, and lower self-rated health.^{12, 13} In addition, food insecurity, hunger, or food insufficiency has been associated with lower academic achievement, behavioral and attention problems, and adverse psychosocial development among school-aged and teenage students.¹⁴⁻²⁰

During my first 2 years as an Assistant Professor at UMD I volunteered at the new Campus Pantry and advised pantry leaders on data collection to help them better understand their clients. In addition, I developed and conducted a food insecurity survey to estimate the prevalence of food insecurity among UMD undergraduates and to examine the association between food insecurity, demographic characteristics, potential financial risk factors, and self-reported physical and mental health and academic performance. Using USDA’s food security assessment instrument, I found that 15% percent of UMD undergraduates surveyed were food insecure and

an additional 16% were at risk for food insecurity.²¹ These rates were higher than Maryland as a whole. This also meant that only 69% of students surveyed were *food secure*. Students who were African-American, other race/ethnicity, receiving multiple forms financial aid, or dealing with housing problems were more likely to be food insecure or at risk for food insecurity.²¹ For example African American students were 4 times more likely to be at risk or food insecure than white students, adjusting for age, gender, and family income. Food secure students were less likely to report common symptoms of depression than at-risk or food insecure students.²¹

The results from my study fit a pattern of food insecurity among college students across the U.S. In 2017 I also published a systematic review of literature sources on food insecurity among college students. My co-authors and I found that average levels of food insecurity documented in peer-reviewed papers was 33% (range: 14% - 59%).²² Among the gray literature, the average prevalence of food insecurity was 36% (range: 12% - 56%).²² Across the studies we reviewed, student food insecurity was associated with lower overall self-reported health, poorer eating behaviors (low fruit and veggies), lower GPA, difficulty concentrating in class, and higher rates of withdrawing from a class or the institution.²²

My UMD study and review of the literature demonstrate that food insecurity affects college students' physical and mental health and academic achievement. So what can we do? First we need to raise the profile of this hidden problem to university officials and policy makers who may be receptive given the national focus on rising tuition costs and common goals to close achievement gaps in higher education. I shared the results from my study on UMD College Park undergraduates with UMD administration officials. They said the food insecurity rates were eye opening and leant their support for a larger study that was conducted by the University of Maryland Counseling Center Research Unit last year. Their results confirmed my earlier findings. As a result, a \$900,000 fundraising campaign has been launched to move the Campus Pantry to a much larger space, and possibly to add a teaching kitchen and space for one-on-one counseling. In addition, UMD Dining Services, in partnership with the UMD Student Government Association, recently launched an Emergency Meal Fund to subsidize a total of 166 "swipe" cards to cover the cost of 10 meals in any of the university's three dining halls for students in crisis during the 2018-2019 academic year.²³ While these efforts are laudable, they do not address the root causes of food insecurity for college students. Comprehensive programs such as the Basic Needs Initiatives being implemented on the campuses of the University of California and California State University systems are the models to follow. The Basic Needs Initiative takes a holistic and coordinated approach to developing lasting programs and strategies at the individual and public policy levels that support students who are experiencing food and housing insecurity.²⁴ Their focus is on students' well-being both inside and outside the classroom, from housing and food security to mental health with the goal of improving academic outcomes.²⁴

In summary, food insecurity among college students is an important public health concern that might have implications for academic performance, retention, and graduation rates. Universities that measure food insecurity among their own students will be better positioned to advocate for policy changes at state and federal levels regarding college affordability and student financial assistance.

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