FOOD INSECURITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

Ending Hunger on Our Nation’s Campuses

Twenty years ago, a graduate school classmate confided that she used the refunds from undergraduate and graduate school loans to feed her kids. “Pat” was in her 40s and about $100,000 in debt. Since her end goal was to be a middle or high school English teacher, Pat knew that she would spend the rest of her life paying off those loans. Ironically, Pat’s situation to even qualify for multiple loans, and then have loan refunds to cover basic needs, could be seen as ideal compared to today’s college students, especially those who have yet to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Only in recent years has food insecurity among college students become a nationally discussed issue. Most of today’s college students—from community college to doctoral students—are working multiple jobs and/or have families, and do not have financial help from parents. Since a college education is still seen as the gateway to the middle class, many students have to choose between food and educational expenses.

In 1993, Michigan State University (MSU) students noticed that food insecurity was a problem on their campus and founded the Student Food Bank, the nation’s first campus-based food pantry. In 2007, MSU and Oregon State University collaborated to address college food insecurity nationwide and founded the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) to “focus on alleviating food insecurity, hunger, and poverty among college and university students in the United States.” Since CUFBA founding, the number of campus-based food pantries has exploded. Currently, there are almost 300 CUFBA member institutions, at least a third of which are members of AASCU. Additionally, some state systems are forming their own coalitions. In January 2016, California hosted its second annual California Higher Education Food Summit (CHEFS), a conference for community college students, California State University students, and University of California students to network, educate and connect about topics surrounding food insecurity and social justice. Arkansas currently has eight campuses across the state with food pantries, including three in the University of Arkansas system. Further, there are other campuses with food pantries and/or farms that are not members of CUFBA or part of a state-wide coalition, such as the We Over Me Farm at Paul Quinn College, a private Historically Black College in Texas.

While the evidence is clear that hundreds of campuses have made a concerted effort to tackle food insecurity, more work is needed. In Hungry to Learn: Addressing Food & Housing Insecurity among Undergraduates, a study lead by Sara Goldrick-Rab, professor of education policy and sociology at the University of Wisconsin, it is noted that at least half of all community college students are struggling with food insecurity. Many of those students will eventually transition to four-year institutions and need even more help, since the price tag at a four-year institution can be significantly higher.

As Barmak Nassirian, AASCU’s director of federal relations and policy analysis noted to The Baltimore Sun, “People come to us with complicated lives . . . college student poverty reflects the lingering impact of the recession and the fact that more low-income students are attending college.” Luckily, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and private funders such as Kellogg, Kroger and Walmart offer grants to organizations to start or sustain food pantries. In time, many more students (and their parents) will ask our nation’s colleges and universities how they handle food insecurity, with the expectation that this is a critical challenge that must be addressed.

Sources:
- College and University Food Bank Alliance.
- California Higher Education Food Summit.
- We Over Me Farm. Paul Quinn College.
- “As College Student Poverty Grows, So Do Food Pantries”, The Baltimore Sun, March 12, 2016.

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