

Hunger stalks US campuses

Johanna Proust
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The iconic pictures of life on American college campuses notwithstanding, hunger is a prevalent and growing problem among US students.

This year the Houston Food Bank will be offering 250 “Food Scholarships,” providing 50-60 pounds of food to San Jacinto College students who qualify. The problem of hunger on campuses is little reported but widely felt. Financially hard-pressed students around the country—well aware that without a degree their chances of employment are drastically lower—are routinely missing meals in order to stay in school.

Since the 2008 economic crash, states have accelerated the de-funding of public education. Forty-seven out of 50 states have cut aid to colleges, with state spending on higher education nationwide down an average of 20 percent. These cuts have resulted in skyrocketing tuition.

The average cost of tuition and fees at US colleges and universities more than doubled between 1970 and 2013—but public university tuition has almost quadrupled. Pell Grants, the federal program for low-income students, covered 67 percent of the average cost of attendance in 1975. As of 2012, it covered only 27 percent, and is lower yet today.

The net effect of these state and federal budget cuts has been to transfer the burden of higher education from government onto the backs of students and their families.

This cost-shift has meant the ballooning of student loan debt, now amounting to over \$1.35 trillion, and large numbers of students scrimping to cover daily necessities.

Nate Smith-Tyge, co-founder of the national College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), emphasized that rising tuition has meant students and their families are foregoing food. “I’ve seen a family of four or five trying to live on \$1,000 a month,” he told the *Toledo Blade*. He pointed to the growth of food pantries on campuses and stated that they have grown from 35 in 2010 to over 267 today.

In 2012 the National Survey of Student Engagement in 2012 reported 60 percent of students were worried about affording regular expenses, with just under one-third unable to buy necessary academic materials due to the cost. Three years later, the 2015 survey states that the financial stress for

students has not diminished, but worsened.

Smith-Tyge is also the current food bank director of one of the first on-campus food pantries (opening in 1993) at Michigan State University. He stated that more than 4,000 students and family members are provided with food at his campus during the academic year. Students in Michigan can receive food assistance from on campus food pantries at Eastern Michigan University, University of Michigan (campuses in Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Flint), Saginaw Valley State University, Western Michigan University, Wayne State University, Grand Valley State University, Finlandia University, and Delta College.

Michigan has more on-campus food pantries than most states, which Smith-Tyge says is a direct result of the state’s economy: “The economic pressure we experienced acutely in the state led to a lot of the programs.” The hardship was compounded by cuts in 2011 that limited access to food assistance programs to those college students who worked a minimum of 20 hours per week. Thirty thousand students in the state were stripped of their food stamps under the changes.

Additionally, student dormitories and campus food services have been almost entirely outsourced to for-profit vendors driving up costs substantially. Smith-Tyge notes that for commuting students meal plans are incredibly expensive. For example, at Eastern Michigan University, the cheapest add-on meal plan option, just eight meals a week, is \$2,275 per semester. That money is due up front, which is hard to swing on a college student budget. “It’s not really accessible for a lot of people,” points out Smith-Tyge.

Clare Cady, director and co-founder of CUFBA, described the growing trend of food insecurity as a serious challenge across the US. “A lot of them [food insecure college students] are working full time and still struggling,” she told the Indiana Public Media’s Chad Bouchard. “And some of them are supporting families and a lot of them don’t have parental support financially.”

Food insecurity is commonly defined as the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire such foods in socially acceptable ways (as opposed to “dumpster diving,” etc.).

“Our food pantry is absolutely something that our students need,” said Virginia Speight, the associate vice president of student affairs and director of residence life at University of Toledo told the *Blade*.

According to “Hungry to Learn,” a December 2015 report by Wisconsin’s HOPE Lab, half of all community college students are struggling with food and/or housing insecurity. Forty-three percent said they couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals, which clearly affects cognitive abilities. Fully 20 percent were classified as “hungry,” the authors found after surveying over 4,000 students nationally.

A 2014 survey at the University of California showed that more than one-quarter of the student population had skipped meals “somewhat often” or “very often” to save money.

Two in five (40 percent) of 274,000 students at the City University of New York have reported experiencing food insecurity within the last year.

Students find that after paying their tuition, they have no resources left to live on. Goldrick-Rab, the University of Wisconsin professor of education policy and poverty associated with HOPE Lab, noted in “Hungry to Learn” that federal student aid guidelines assume “zero living expenses” when a student is living at home. This scenario is especially far from reality for low-income families.

Kayla Neff, a 19-year-old Spanish and computer science student at Central Michigan University who qualified for food assistance before Michigan cut the program, said she and her father shared about \$150 a month in grocery money from the program. “Students should be focusing on their education, not whether or not they’ll be able to eat dinner or whether they can manage to find a job and balance it on top of their studies,” said Neff in an email interview with MLive.

According to a 2014 report, Feeding America found that nearly half of its client households with an adult college student (49.3 percent) had been forced to choose between expenses for educational purposes or food, and that 21 percent had faced this predicament every month for the preceding 12 months.

Even students at Ivy League universities are struggling to afford food, revealed a *Rolling Stone* expose last December. A smartphone app called Swipes, created by two Columbia University sophomores, allows students to give meals from their meal plan to other students. “Swipes has been downloaded over 900 times since its September launch,” co-founder Helson Taveras told *RollingStone*, “Some students actually use it, essentially, for almost every meal, so there’s a core group of students who really are dependent on this working.”

The overall growth of poverty and prevalence of low-wage jobs combined with skyrocketing education costs are forcing

many students to abandon their education in the middle of their curriculum. A 2009 report by Public Agenda, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization, stated that more than half of college students who dropped out of school did so because they needed to work in order to make money. The report also found that more than a third said that re-enrolling would not be possible even if they received a grant that would cover the cost of their tuition and textbooks.

Not only is food insecurity a serious issue confronting students throughout the country, but so is homelessness. In other words, students are not just worrying about their next meal, but also finding a place to sleep. “We have students receiving full aid, but then sleeping in somebody’s car because they could not afford to pay rent,” said UC Davis Chancellor Linda Katehi in a report to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The HOPE Lab report showed 13 percent of community college students facing homelessness. Results from the City University of New York indicate that 42 percent of students (100,000 people) are housing insecure, including 29 percent of students who stated they do not have enough money to pay rent.

In 2014, more than 56,000 college students on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) application form identified themselves as homeless. But these numbers only account for those who provide “proof” of homelessness to federal authorities.

Student hunger is just one component of the growing face of hunger across America. According to the nonprofit network of food banks Feeding America, one in six Americans face hunger, and more than 46 million depend on the food pantries to meet basic nutritional needs. Compounding this dire crisis is the fact that more than one million people are expected to lose food stamp benefits in the US during the course of 2016 as a result of bipartisan agreements to reimpose three-month limits on some recipients.

A recent survey published on the journal *EducationWeek* noted that three out of four public school teachers said their students regularly come to school hungry and 93 percent of responding teachers said they worry about the long-term effects of hunger on children’s education.



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