University of Florida students speak out about food insecurity

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14 December 2016

A recent report from CNN provides details on the appearance of food pantries on college campuses across the United States. While they state that there is no official count of the actual number at this time, there exists a College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) that currently has 411 members.

The University of Florida has been home to a student food pantry, called "Field & Fork," for a little more than one year. According to their web site, the pantry "supports students, faculty, and staff who need a little extra help finding healthy food for themselves and their families." The pantry is only one part of a larger program that seeks to create "awareness about food insecurity and sustainable food practices and [education] on how to make balanced food choices."

Field & Fork is currently open four days a week for a total of 20 hours and is operated by volunteers. Many of the items, such as nonperishable goods, come from donations, but the pantry also makes available fresh produce from the university's garden and farm community.

Several of the students using the pantry agreed to speak to the WSWS about their economic situation and why they rely on the pantry to supplement their food expenses.

Franco, an undergraduate studying electrical engineering, said that he visits the pantry once every two weeks and has been doing so for nearly one year. He said that he tries to be moderate and not take a lot because he thinks others probably need the help more, but that he does need some extra help because he lives off of student loans and still finds himself unable to keep up with his expenses.

"I try to make my loans last through the end of the semester," Franco said, "but they definitely do not cover everything." He reported that he does at times feel stressed about his financial situation, but he tries to manage as best he can and tries to avoid taking out more loan money than he needs to. "I want my financial burden to be less when I do graduate."

When asked why he thought that food insecurity is such a big issue today, Franco replied that for students it is mostly due to the high tuition cost. "I don't like that universities overcharge for tuition. Students are burdened with debt, and in some fields it can take 20 to 30 years to repay student loans. Young people can't explore and enjoy life when they are in their prime years."

Leda, another undergraduate who is studying photography, stated that she also has been coming to the pantry every other week and has been doing so since the pantry opened last year. She works part-time on campus, earning minimum wage, in order to pay her bills, since her scholarships and grants only cover tuition. She explained that she has a general awareness about her financial insecurity but still manages to take the necessary steps to stay afloat.

When discussing the causes of economic hardships, Leda spoke about gentrification happening in major cities being a sign of growing inequality. "People that historically lived in prime locations where they had lots of resources are now being forced to move to areas where there are less," she said. "They can't get nutritious food like they used to be able to."

Alex, an undergraduate premed student, and his wife, Mona, just discovered the pantry last week and were just visiting for the second time when they stopped to speak. Alex said that he is able to do a little part-time work at a hospital in a neighboring county but that he rarely has the opportunity to go during the school semesters because he is so busy. He said that the pantry is a lifesaver because both he and Mona have had

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difficulty finding part-time work in Gainesville, where the University of Florida is located.

"Even with my availability wide open," Mona related, "I still have not been able to find work here. It is so hard in college towns like this because there is so much competition with students." When asked whether financial distress affects his ability to focus on his schoolwork, Alex replied, "It is definitely number one. It is there in my mind all of the time, and sometimes it affects my ability to study, perhaps even subconsciously."

CUFBA, according to their web site, states that food insecurity is a large issue on college campuses and can prevent students from being successful, but they do not acknowledge this as part of the larger economic crisis and therefore do not offer any solutions beyond promoting education as "the key to getting out of poverty."

Student loan debt surpassed $1 trillion in 2012, and in 2014 it was reported that seven million Americans are in default on their student loans. The WSWS reported that the ability of young people under the age of 30 today to earn more than their parents at the same age has declined dramatically in real terms since the 1970s. This situation is not unique to the United States—the WSWS reported in October that increasing levels of poverty and inequality in the United Kingdom are particularly pronounced among young people and students.

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