


Half of College Students Are Food Insecure. Are Universities Doing Enough to Help Them?

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As more students search for their next meal, there's increasing demand for programs that go beyond the food pantry.

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Students at the University of California–Berkeley build salads with organic vegetables at Crossroads dining commons.

(Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Nearly half of America's college students can't afford their next meal. On many campuses, these students—who are getting by on donated meal swipes and sometimes living out of their cars—also face another barrier to food security: The people in power don't believe them.

"So many folks want to deny that this is a problem," says Ruben Canedo, who heads the food insecurity efforts at the University of California–Berkeley. "They don't consider the college population a population that is struggling with their food and housing."

Despite its prevalence, food insecurity on college campuses has largely been a hidden problem; colleges of all kinds have stigmatized or overlooked the needs of low-income students, who make up a fast-growing portion of the nation's student body. One Oregon State University student says she was getting all her groceries from the Dollar Tree this week. Another asked a case manager at the University of California–Davis for help during finals, saying she'd be living in her car this summer.

While hundreds of universities have opened food pantries since 2009, food insecurity made it into the national conversation much more recently. A reckoning that began with student activism has now led to policy changes, due in part to national attention from lawmakers—and an increasing demand for programs that go beyond establishing food pantries for hungry students.

In December of 2018, the United States Government Accountability Office called on Congress to make changes that would help more college students get benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Then just this month, a groundbreaking study from the non-profit research organization the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice confirmed what many universities had found from their own surveys: Forty-five percent of college students say they have experienced food insecurity in the last month, meaning they often skipped meals or couldn't afford to buy food when their groceries ran out.

Although many colleges already have food banks or basic needs centers, campus food insecurity is getting worse. "It's escalating as we start seeing higher prices for tuition, higher prices for housing, and changing demographics," says Leslie Kemp, director of Aggie Compass, the basic needs center at UC–Davis.

"We have right now the lowest purchasing power of financial aid for students, while having some of the highest costs of living across the country," Canedo says. "The financial equation is broken."

Since the GAO report came out, many leaders of programs addressing food insecurity say they have noticed renewed action on the issue. "This attention is very, very helpful," Kemp says. "It's bringing credibility to a problem that we've always had. It's getting around

themyth that all college students eat ramen and all college students are broke."

The University of California–Irvine's student government declared a campus emergency over food security this month, setting aside \$400,000 in one-time funds that will go toward hiring a case manager devoted to helping students with food or housing emergencies, the *Los Angeles Times* [reports](#). At the University of Kentucky, a student group led a hunger strike in March to demand better resources for food insecurity. And in an email to the entire campus community last month, Oregon State University President Edward Ray wrote, "The crisis of food deprivation at Oregon State must end."

Program directors fighting food insecurity across the country applaud these gestures—and point to examples of real change that resulted from them. For example, Oregon State's faculty senate passed a resolution this year to include a section on every class syllabus that encourages students to reach out and get help from essential resources and that links to the Human Services Resource Center, according to [Nicole Hindes](#), the center's assistant director. "We know this is a national problem, but there are so many [administrators] across the country that think their campus is somehow special," she says. "When administrators aren't listening, I think student activism is absolutely the place where that has to happen. It's important for us to listen to our students and believe them."*

At UC schools, administrators have opened and coordinated basic needs centers on all nine campuses, according to Canedo. These centers help students apply to CalFresh (California's version of SNAP), negotiate their financial aid, and connect with case managers who can find them food and housing; some also offer free groceries. In 2018, 47 percent of respondents in the state-wide [undergraduate survey](#) said they had "low" or "very low" food security.

In addition to more colleges opening needs centers, another solution to the problem could be informing students about SNAP, a federal program that gives low-income Americans money for groceries every month. Despite high demand, the program is underused on college campuses: Of the 3.3 million students who were eligible for the program in 2016, less than half said they participated, according to the 2018 GAO [report](#).

Many of the basic needs directors would also like to see SNAP expanded. Most undocumented students can't get SNAP; others may not quite meet the income threshold. On top of that, the eligibility rules are "archaic," Hindes says. Generally, college students only qualify if they have a work-study job—but work-study funding hasn't kept up with need at the federal level. At OSU, Hindes says, more than half the students are eligible for work-study, but there's only enough funding for about 500. That makes it much harder for them to get SNAP. The alternative is working at least 20 hours a week, which [research has shown](#) can harm a student's focus and academic performance.

This is why UC–Davis now employs a county CalFresh representative to help students with their applications and conduct in-person interviews, which improve an applicant's chance at being approved. At other schools in the state, representatives make one visit per quarter.

But on many campuses, students default to the food pantry—often the most visible and most used food insecurity program. Even so, research shows many people avoid food pantries because of a persistent stigma. "It takes a great amount of courage to walk in the door," says Andrea Gutierrez, who oversees UC–Irvine's FRESH Basic Needs Hub.

Often, food pantries are inaccessible even when there's interest in using them. At the University of Missouri, students sometimes have trouble walking or biking to the food pantry, according to Tiger Pantry's director, Mathew Swan. When they do make it through the door, they have to fill out an order and wait for volunteers to hand them their groceries. "One of the biggest challenges is accessibility," he says.

Gutierrez and her staff have worked to make their food pantry feel accessible and open. The walls are a vibrant orange, the staff plays music so waiting in line isn't awkward, and there's a community kitchen where students can warm up their food. Most importantly, the center doesn't require students to prove need. "Many people call us a mini grocery store, and that was very intentional for us," she says. "We wanted to make sure that the shopping experience in a pantry would be similar to the shopping experience in a grocery store, to give dignity to our students who are showing up and asking for help."

Even the best campus food pantry is still an emergency response—most rely on donations or one-time student government funding—so many campuses are trying to fill the gaps with other solutions. UC–Davis opened its basic needs center last year, which combines all its services at one home base. Students can also download a new app that notifies them when leftover food from official catered events is available, a service that's been rolled out at several campuses across the country.

Overall, Canedo says, awareness of the issue is growing: When Berkeley's food pantry opened in 2014, it served 500 students a year. Now, it serves 5,000. Instead of one building and many disparate services, the campus now has a center where students can connect with a case manager for help on food and housing.

And yet, Canedo says, he still encounters critics who think he's prioritizing college students' hunger over others. They often ask, why are college students so important? "We're not doing this to establish a hierarchy of human value," he says. "College students are not more worthy or important than any other person. What we're saying is the better we support our college students, the better we're going to have professionals out in the community, taking care of the community."

***Update—June 17th, 2019:** *This article has been updated to better reflect the content in OSU's class syllabus.*