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Ending Hunger in America: Hunger on College Campuses

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for your commitment to highlighting and taking bold action to end hunger in America—including on college campuses. The opportunity to speak today is a bright sign of progress, and a true honor.

My name is Sara Goldrick-Rab, and I'm the founder and president of The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. I'm also Professor of Sociology and Medicine at Temple University. Founded at Temple in 2018, The Hope Center is transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications. We view students as humans and lifelong learners whose college educations will improve their communities and the nation. **Our primary expertise is in basic needs security, including food security, among college students.**

The evidence is clear: addressing students' basic needs is required for ensuring their success in college.¹ In addition, while these hearings are focused on ending hunger, many students facing food insecurity are also in need of safe, secure, and adequate housing—to sleep, to study, to cook, and to shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation to learn and get to class; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs. Without these basic needs met, students struggle to learn, achieve, and graduate. They fall deeply into debt, often leaving college without degrees needed to repay it.

This problem wastes talent and moves our country backwards. We must address the root causes driving food insecurity on campus and beyond. This goes far beyond the high price of college and failures of the financial aid system; it includes the paucity of living wage jobs, the extraordinary levels of wealth inequality and the racial wealth gap, and the systemic flaws in the so-called safety net.²

Having been deeply engaged in this work for more than 20 years, I assure you that basic needs insecurity in higher education, particularly food insecurity and hunger, is real, pervasive, and something that we can absolutely solve with the right combination of political will and strategic investment.

KEY FACTS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Hope Center was the first to collect data on college food insecurity across the nation at a time when it was hardly recognized. The #RealCollege Survey, which we created in 2015, is the nation's largest annual assessment of students' basic needs that provides a detailed assessment of the problem by institution, and often by state. The survey has been completed by more than 550,000 students at 530 colleges and universities in all 50 states. We assess food insecurity using the validated 18-item instrument developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is especially appropriate because an estimated 1 in 5 students has a child and the instrument takes their needs into account.³

Our most recent survey, fielded in the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, included responses from nearly 200,000 students attending 202 colleges and universities in 42 states. Consistent with prior surveys, we found that 1-in-3 students experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey;

¹ Broton, K. & Cady, C. (2020). *Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Wolfson, J. et al. (2021). The effect of food insecurity during college on graduation and type of degree attained: evidence from a nationally representative longitudinal survey. *Public Health Nutrition*, DOI: [10.1017/S1368980021003104](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003104)

² Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2012). U.S. adult food security survey module: Three-stage design, with screeners.

1-in-3 students who struggled to learn because they could not access or afford balanced meals; because they were worried about whether food would run out before they could buy more; because they were experiencing hunger. As with so much across our economy and our education system, we detect profound inequities:

- Students at community and technical colleges are 10 percentage points more likely to experience food insecurity compared to their peers at four-year institutions. Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities and those attending Tribal Colleges and Universities experience food insecurity at much higher rates than students at Predominately White Institutions.
- Compared to non-Hispanic white (28%) students, rates of food insecurity are much higher among African Americans (47%), Hispanic or Latinx students (40%), Indigenous and Native (51%), and multi-racial (40%) students.
- Pell Grant recipients (44%) experience higher rates of food insecurity than their counterparts (27%).
- Students with children (47%) experience higher rates of food insecurity when compared to non-parenting students (31%).
- Older students, including those over 25 years old (40%), experience significantly higher rates of food insecurity than younger students aged 18 to 20 (26%).
- Rates of food insecurity are also much higher among LGBTQ students, veterans, former foster youth, and students who pursuing higher education after exiting the criminal (in)justice system.⁴

This problem cannot simply be attributed to the pandemic and the current economic crisis. Our pre-pandemic surveys found persistent, and sometimes higher, rates of food insecurity in the five years leading up to 2020.⁵ This is because higher education and safety net policies have failed to address the new economics of college and evolve with the students they are meant to serve. Stagnant incomes, declining state support for higher education, the rise in college prices that affect all but the top earners, and a threadbare social safety net have all made a college degree less attainable and students more likely to face trouble affording all of the costs associated with attending school. The pandemic-induced recession and economic uncertainty exacerbated these trends and dynamics, but it did not create them.

Public benefit programs like SNAP are a critical tool to help reduce hardship among students. Yet these programs contain unnecessary restrictions that limit students' ability to access the very benefits that would reduce hunger and help them succeed.⁶ Our 2021 survey showed that only 1 in 5 students facing food insecurity utilized SNAP benefits, largely due to restrictions on who can access them and the difficulty in applying.⁷ Even students deemed eligible for SNAP or other supports are blocked by complex bureaucracies and administrative burdens.⁸ As a result, according to a 2019 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), 57% of students who are likely food insecure and eligible for SNAP do not receive it.⁹ While Congress and the Biden administration should be commended for temporarily expanding

⁴ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). *#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During The Ongoing Pandemic*. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RCReport2021.pdf>. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2020). *Tribal Colleges and Universities: #RealCollege Survey Report*. <https://hope4college.com/tribal-colleges-and-universities-realcollege-survey-report/>

⁵ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2020). *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity*. <https://hope4college.com/realcollege-2020-five-years-of-evidence-on-basic-needs-insecurity/>

⁶ Center for Law and Social Policy. (2021). *Frequently Asked Questions About SNAP and Students*. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/frequently-asked-questions-about-snap-and-students>

⁷ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). *#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During The Ongoing Pandemic*. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RCReport2021.pdf>

⁸ Herd P, and Moynihan D. (2018). *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means*. Russell Sage Foundation.

⁹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2019). *Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits*, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-95>

student eligibility for SNAP, and expanding benefits during the public health emergency and beyond, there is much more to do to align benefits with the needs of today's students.

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION IS ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

In the absence of significant federal leadership, and with modest state support, over the last five years many colleges and universities and their off-campus partners have taken it upon themselves to go beyond food pantries in addressing food insecurity. This is important because while campus food pantries help draw attention to the problem, they are not effective in reducing food insecurity.¹⁰

Centralizing access to public benefits, emergency aid, case management services, and a food pantry in one location is a particularly promising approach.¹¹ Evaluations of the model used by Single Stop USA, and results of a randomized controlled trial evaluating Amarillo College's Advocacy and Resource Center, are revealing. With their basic needs addressed, students have substantially greater likelihoods of success in college.¹²

Nonprofits can assist: on 10 community and technical college campuses throughout Seattle, the United Way of King County operates Benefits Hubs with the support of AmeriCorps VISTAs.¹³ RISE, a California-based nonprofit, utilizes a peer-to-peer modeled approach via Student Navigator Networks, in which students help their peers locate information and apply for public benefits.¹⁴ This year the California legislature passed AB132, providing \$30M to community colleges and requiring them to establish basic needs centers. Many California four-year colleges and universities already have these centers, thanks in part to the state's 2017 Hunger-Free Campus legislation (today's testimony from Ruben Canedo will address this). Hawaii is also funding programs that incorporate support for applying for SNAP benefits with other supports like tuition assistance and reimbursement for educational materials, transportation benefits, and more.¹⁵

Recognizing that the National School Lunch Program abruptly ends when a student finishes high school, some colleges and universities provide free meals on campus. Compton College in Los Angeles partners with Everytable to provide daily free meals to students as well as free home meal delivery.¹⁶ In 2019, following a student hunger strike, the University of Kentucky partnered with Aramark to open the ONE Community Café. The café serves to-go meals for \$1 and in its first year fed about 24,000 students.¹⁷ White Mountains Community College in New Hampshire recently began providing daily breakfast and

¹⁰ Poppendieck, J. (1999). *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. Penguin Books.

¹¹ Price, D. & Umaña, P. (2021). *One Stop Center Models: A Guide to Centralizing Students' Basic Needs Supports*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://hope4college.com/one-stop-center-models-a-guide-to-centralizing-students-basic-needs-supports/>

¹² What Works Clearinghouse, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. (November 2020). Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative. Retrieved from <https://whatworks.ed.gov>; Goldrick-Rab, S., Clark, K., Baker-Smith, C. & Witherspoon, C. (Forthcoming). *Supporting the Whole Community College Student: The Impact of Nudging for Basic Needs Security*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

¹³ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice & DVP – Praxis. (2020) *Cross-Sectoral Benefits Hubs: An Innovative Approach to Supporting College Students' Basic Needs*. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UWKC_BenefitsHubReport_FINAL_12.01.2020.pdf

¹⁴ RISE Basic Needs Advocacy and Direct Support: <https://risefree.org/basic-needs-advocacy-direct-support/>

¹⁵ Hawai'i Nutrition Education and Training (HINET), <http://hinethawaii.org/>

¹⁶ For more, see: <http://www.compton.edu/adminandoperations/campuspolice/Documents/student-emails/042120-Free-Food-Options.pdf>

¹⁷ Momeyer, S. 2020. UK's \$1 per meal cafe continues on almost a year after student hunger protests. *Kentucky Kernel*. http://www.kykernel.com/lifestyle/uks-1-per-meal-cafe-continues-on-almost-a-year-after-student-hunger-protests/article_a92d15f4-4066-11ea-a0ff-1b22bf0e7d14.html

lunch and one dinner per week to all enrolled students.¹⁸ This month, Ozarks Technical and Community College in Missouri announced that it will expand its successful free breakfast program to all of its campuses.¹⁹ The Swipe Out Hunger program, whose CEO Rachel Sumekh is testifying today, offers a swipe donation program that also helps students eat on campus. Students at Spelman College and Morehouse College led a 2017 hunger strike in order to bring that program to campus.²⁰ It appears the effort is warranted: The Hope Center’s rigorous evaluation of a meal voucher program at Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts found that it boosted credit attainment, likely improved students’ well-being, and reduced the severity of food insecurity.²¹

Emergency cash aid is another promising approach to addressing food insecurity in a way that centers students’ dignity and choice. The latest #RealCollege survey found that “having more or better food to eat” was one of the top five most-cited uses of emergency grant aid funds, including by 6 in 10 two-year college students.²² In partnership with the American Federation of Teachers, the nonprofit Believe in Students operates a FAST Fund program engaging faculty to distribute emergency aid in a compassionate and rapid manner to students across the nation.²³ Compton College, Dallas College, the San Diego Community College District, Western Governors University, and many others offer fast and easy access to emergency funds using an app called *Edquity*.²⁴ Among the more than 97,000 students at 18 institutions who have applied for emergency aid using that app, an estimated 44% were food insecure. An initial evaluation suggests that students who received \$250 in support via *Edquity* were twice as likely to graduate.²⁵ Given Congressional support for the Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF), campuses have an opportunity to use federal emergency aid funds to prevent students from going hungry or leaving school because they cannot afford food or other necessities. Moreover, several states including Wisconsin, Minnesota, California, and Washington offer state funding for student emergency aid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These initial actions by colleges and universities, and a handful of states, are a good start but far from sufficient to address a problem that affects at least five million college students. At a time when education beyond high school is more essential than ever to family stability and community health, federal higher education and public benefit programs must be designed, funded, and implemented to ensure that food insecurity is not an obstacle.

(1) LEVERAGE FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID

Americans care about what we count and count what we care about. Until recently, no one systematically assessed food insecurity among students and the problem flew under the radar. The federal

¹⁸ For more, see: <https://www.wmcc.edu/wmcc-launches-free-meals-program-for-students/>

¹⁹ Riley, C. (Sept. 3, 2021). “Free breakfast program expands to all campuses at Ozarks Technical Community College.” *Springfield News-Leader*. <https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/education/2021/09/03/ozarks-technical-community-college-etc-expands-free-eagle-breakfast-program/8165907002/>

²⁰ Hill, Selena. (2017). “Spelman President Vows to Feed Hungry Students Following Hunger Strike.” *Black Enterprise*. <https://www.blackenterprise.com/spelman-hungry-students-hunger-strike/?test=prebid>

²¹ Broton, K., Goldrick-Rab, S., and Mohebbi, M. (2020). *Fueling success: An experimental evaluation of a community college meal voucher program*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BunkerHill_Report.pdf

²² The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021)

²³ Disclosure: I founded and serve on the board of Believe in Students, see www.believeinstudents.org

²⁴ Disclosure: My research contributed to the development of the *Edquity* app and I am *Edquity*’s Chief Strategy Officer, as a paid consultant and stockholder.

²⁵ Anderson, D.M. (2021). *Edquity grantees cross the finish line at Compton College*. <https://www.edquity.co/compton-college-edquity>

government has tremendous leverage through Title IV federal financial aid programs to require institutions to document and address food insecurity. At minimum, institutions should be required to regularly assess and report levels of basic needs insecurity (both food and housing) among their students. Colleges that receive GI Bill and Veterans Benefits should be required to report and have a plan to address food and basic needs insecurity for veterans and servicemembers.²⁶

Congress must also ensure that colleges receive sufficient appropriations to address food insecurity. Most current funding is allocated by aggregating part-time students into full-time equivalents (FTE), which greatly reduces support for the ~6 million part-time college students, many of whom have children and are at greater risk of food insecurity. It is far more effective and equitable for federal and state policymakers to distribute funds based on total headcount rather than FTE.²⁷

(2) EXPAND SNAP BENEFITS AND THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Joint action by agencies including the USDA, the Department of Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services is required to expand and align programs to address food insecurity for students. During the pandemic, Congress took the necessary step of temporarily expanding SNAP eligibility for students with a \$0 Expected Family Contribution and those eligible for work study. In addition, we commend the Biden Administration and the USDA for revising and updating the Thrifty Food Plan which will expand SNAP benefits by nearly 25 percent from pre-pandemic levels.²⁸ It is now time to go further. Congress should pass, and the Biden Administration should sign, the Student Food Security Act, which would permanently expand eligibility for SNAP to students eligible for work study or those with a \$0 Expected Family Contribution and provide grants to institutions that serve high numbers of low-income students and students of color to identify and reduce food insecurity. In addition, the Enhanced Access to SNAP Act (EATS) Act would include attending an institution of higher education as a form of SNAP qualification, similar to work.

Congress should also expand the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to students in higher education. The NSLP is a program that has been successful in reducing malnutrition and expanding health and academic well-being.²⁹ It is only logical, given the pervasiveness of food insecurity in higher education, to expand the program to college students who have already demonstrated financial need.

(3) MAKE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR EMERGENCY AID PERMANENT

Through the three rounds of HEERF funding, Congress has allocated billions of dollars in direct emergency grants to students coping with the financial and health fallout from the ongoing pandemic. Critically, emergency grants are available to students who cannot complete the FAFSA and they can be

²⁶ In our experience, community colleges and regional four-year institutions are much more likely to voluntarily collect and report these data; colleges with high-research activity and low admissions rates, and for-profit colleges, are less likely to collect and report data and should be required to do so in order to receive federal aid.

²⁷ Welton, C., Goldrick-Rab, S., and Carlson, A. (2020). *Resourcing the Part-Time Student: Rethinking the Use of FTEs in Higher Education Budgets*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/RealCollege_PolicyBrief_HCvFTE.pdf

²⁸ Butcher, K. (2021). *The new Thrifty Food Plan re-evaluates a 50-plus-year-old design and low-income kids will benefit*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-new-thrifty-food-plan-re-evaluates-a-50-plus-year-old-design-and-low-income-kids-will-benefit/>

²⁹ Goldrick-Rab, S., Broton, K., Colo, E. (2016). *Expanding the National School Lunch Program to Higher Education*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://hope4college.com/expanding-the-national-school-lunch-program-to-higher-education/>

disbursed quickly, filling in where standard Title IV financial aid falls short.³⁰ This support will be needed well beyond the pandemic, as students continue to endure economic volatility, the effects of climate change, and so much more. Congress should work to make the emergency aid a permanent fixture of federal higher education policy, drawing on groundwork laid by The Emergency Grant Aid for College Students Act. Funds could be allocated to institutions that report high levels of basic needs insecurity among students and increased during regional or national economic downturns. Administrative support must be provided to help institutions establish and scale their infrastructure for this work to ensure funds are distributed quickly and without hassle.

(4) PROVIDE INCENTIVES AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS FOOD DESERTS AND FOOD PRICES

Campus food insecurity is also a function of the availability of nutritious food, as well as high food prices imposed upon students. For example, in North Philadelphia—the neighborhood around my institution, Temple University and the home to many Community College of Philadelphia students—30% of residents are food insecure.³¹ Meanwhile, most grocery stores in the city are clustered in higher-income neighborhoods, leading to food deserts in the exact areas where many #RealCollege students live, study, and work. Congress should provide incentive funds for both institutions of higher education and the communities in which they reside to address food deserts and expand the availability of nutritious, low-cost food to students at all campuses. Believe in Students is working with area organizations in Philadelphia to offer a low or no-cost off-campus food option.³²

Finally, we must hold institutions accountable for prioritizing affordability, student health, and academic success when setting meal prices for campus dining, particularly when negotiating with private food service providers. Colleges and universities should be required to submit regular information regarding campus food prices and how they compare to food prices locally, regionally, and nationally.

CONCLUSION

Federal higher education and public benefit systems are behind the times. Students are dropping out of college not for lack of talent but for lack of food. We are eating our seed corn. This is the legacy of a lack of public investment, rising prices, dramatic increases in inequality, and above all, a basic misunderstanding of who students are and what they need to succeed.

I thank this committee for its leadership and willingness to hold this series of roundtables on how to combat and end hunger across the country, and for a particular willingness to shine a light on the very real problem of campus hunger and food insecurity. I also thank #RealCollege students, who have known about this crisis for a long time and been ignored. Their actions and advocacy are why we are finally here today. Now is our time to make the investments necessary to end this absurd problem once and for all.

³⁰ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2020). *Guide to Emergency Aid Distribution*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://hope4college.com/guide-to-emergency-grant-aid-distribution/>

³¹ Feeding America. (n.d.). Food Insecurity in Philadelphia County.

³² Sweitzer-Lamme, M. “Gathering with Dignity.” *The Philadelphia Citizen*. <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/gather-food-hall-temple/>