

# Expanding the National School Lunch Program to Higher Education

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In the early 20th century, communities and philanthropists came together to provide lunch to hungry school children. Some recognized that children couldn't learn as well when they were hungry and others felt a moral imperative to meet this basic need. Decades later, the federal government joined in these efforts and launched the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).<sup>1</sup> Since its inception, the NSLP has reduced the incidence of malnutrition, boosted intake of protein, fiber, and other nutrients for children, and increased educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> In 2015 more than 30 million children received lunch every day, in about 100,000 schools and other institutions across the country.<sup>3</sup>

In today's economy the continuation of education beyond high school is common and increasingly necessary for a well-paying job. But many of the nation's undergraduates are struggling to concentrate on their education due to hunger. Over 200 food pantries are operating on college and university campuses and staff and faculty are reaching into their own pockets to provide lunch money to struggling students. Federal support to address this problem may improve academic achievement among undergraduates, as it has among schoolchildren, boosting degree completion rates.<sup>4</sup> We therefore propose expanding the NSLP to higher education.

## The New Demographics of American Higher Education

Three in four undergraduates defy traditional stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> Just 13% live on college campuses, and nearly half attend community colleges. One in four students is a parent, juggling childcare responsibilities with class assignments. About 75% work for pay while in school, including a

significant number of full-time workers. The number of students qualified for the federal Pell Grant—a proxy for low-income status—grew from about 6 million in 2007-2008 to about 8.5 million in 2013-14. This is unsurprising given that participation in the NSLP grew by 3.7 million students during that time.<sup>6</sup> With more than one in five children living in poverty, college-going rates at a national high, and the price of higher education continuing to rise, food insecurity among undergraduates is probably more common than ever.<sup>7</sup>

But eligibility for the federally funded food safety net on which many schoolchildren rely (including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, the National School Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program), ends abruptly for most when they enter college. Though students' financial needs remain while pursuing a postsecondary education—which is increasingly a prerequisite for a basic standard of living—food assistance becomes very difficult to access. This may be why undergraduates are at greater risk of food insecurity compared to the general population.<sup>8</sup>

Insufficient attention to the nutritional needs of undergraduates could contribute to the inadequate production of college-educated labor. Over 60% percent of jobs now require some college education, but there are not enough people with college degrees to meet this growing demand. By 2018, the U.S. is predicted to need an additional 3 million individuals with an associate's degree or higher and another 4.7 million with postsecondary certificates.<sup>9</sup> This demand, along with a desire to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, led President Obama to encourage all Americans to “get more than a high school diploma” and focus the national education agenda on improving college completion rates.<sup>10</sup>

Enough students start college to meet these goals, but not enough finish. Among first-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree, 59% graduate within six years while 29% of students seeking an associate's degree obtain one within three years. These completion rates mask significant variation by economic background. Just 14% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile had completed a bachelor's or higher degree within eight years of high school graduation compared to 29% of those from middle socioeconomic families and 60% of students from the highest socioeconomic quartile.<sup>11</sup> By one estimate, students from high-income families are six times more likely to graduate from college than those from low-income families.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, these gaps persist even after controlling for prior academic achievement.<sup>13</sup>

Lack of resources is at the root of this problem.<sup>14</sup> The price of college is rising faster than inflation, faster than healthcare costs, and faster than need-based financial aid.<sup>15</sup> The Pell Grant, the flagship federal program, does not buy what it used to. When it was created, the grant paid for roughly 80% of the total cost to attend a public four-year college or university, including tuition, fees, and living costs. Today it covers barely one-third.<sup>16</sup> As a result, students from low- and moderate-income families have a great deal of unmet financial need.

This means that after all grants and scholarships are accounted for, a dependent student from a family in the lowest income quartile (i.e., \$21,000 median annual earnings) has to devote 59% of her family's total income to attend a public four-year college for one year, or 40% to attend a public two-year college. The situation for independent students is even worse. On average, independent students over age 24 in the bottom income quartile must pay more than 100% of their annual income

in order to attend a two- or four-year public college. Given these numbers, is it any surprise that so many people feel college is simply unaffordable?

## Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Nationally, about half of all Pell recipients are from families living below the federal poverty line. Many of these students come to college to escape the material hardship they have long endured.<sup>17</sup> Yet food security is not examined on any national surveys of undergraduates—so there is limited information about the extent to which undergraduates struggle to find enough food to eat.<sup>18</sup>

In 2015, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab partnered with the Healthy Minds Study at the University of Michigan, the Association of Community College Trustees, and Single Stop, to administer a survey at 10 community colleges in seven states. More than 4,000 students completed a standardized assessment of food security.<sup>19</sup> It revealed that half of all respondents (52%) were at least marginally food insecure over the past 30 days.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, 13% were marginally secure, indicating anxiety over their food supply, 19% had a low level of security marked by reductions in the quality or variety of their diet, and 21% indicated a very low level of food security—or hunger.<sup>21</sup> The most prevalent challenge facing community college students appears to be their ability to eat balanced meals, which research suggests may affect their cognitive functioning.<sup>22</sup> In addition, 39% of students said that the food they bought didn't last and they did not have sufficient money to purchase more. Twenty-eight percent cut the size of their meals or skipped meals at least once, and 22% did so on at least three days in the last 30 days. More than one in four respondents (26%) ate less than they felt they should, and 22% said that they had gone hungry due to lack of money.

This problem isn't limited to community colleges. In 2008 the HOPE Lab surveyed more than 2,000 Pell Grant recipients attending 42 public colleges and universities across Wisconsin, and found that during their first semester of college, 71% reported that they had changed their food shopping or eating habits due to a lack of funds. Twenty-seven percent of students indicated that in the past month, they did not have enough money to buy food, ate less than they felt they should, or cut the size of their meals because there was not enough money. When asked if they ever went without eating for an entire day because they lacked enough money for food, seven percent of students said yes.<sup>23</sup> In 2015 the HOPE Lab went into the field again with a survey of about 1,100 low- and middle-income undergraduates at eight four-year and two two-year colleges in Wisconsin.<sup>24</sup> Most students—61 percent—experienced food insecurity at some point during the academic year. Forty-seven percent said that they were unable to afford a balanced diet. Almost as many students reported that the food they purchased didn't last or that they cut the size of meals or skipped meals altogether. Each of these experiences was reported by 42% of students surveyed. And 37% reported that because of financial constraints they ate less than they thought they should.

There are likely consequences to these circumstances. Several studies of elementary and secondary school students show an inverse relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a study using data from two community colleges in Maryland found that food insecure students were 22% less likely than food secure students to have high grades.<sup>26</sup>

As Madeline Pumariega, chancellor of the Florida University System, puts it, “When a student is hungry, he does not feel safe, and it is hard to help him synthesize class material. We have to meet

students' basic needs in order for them to fully concentrate on assimilating the information in a class in a way that they can apply it, learn, and take it forward."<sup>27</sup>

## Beyond SNAP

When undergraduates need assistance affording food, colleges and universities often refer them to SNAP. While in theory SNAP could support them, in practice the help it provides is quite limited.<sup>28</sup> An analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 2012 revealed that just 27% of undergraduates who are likely eligible for SNAP actually participate in the program.<sup>29</sup> Eligibility issues aside, SNAP take-up rates among undergraduates are quite low.

Further limiting the impact of SNAP, most low-income college students are ineligible. In order to qualify students must work at least 20 hours per week, take part in the Federal Work Study (FWS) program, have children, or participate in other safety net programs.<sup>30</sup> It can be very difficult for undergraduates, especially those without children, to meet these criteria. Consider the FWS program. It is underfunded and misallocated, such that only 1 in 10 Pell recipients at public colleges or universities receive any support. Moreover, apart from FWS, Pell recipients may struggle to secure and maintain 20 hours per week of employment due to increasingly common labor practices that require flexibility and availability incompatible with the demands of students' class schedules.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, working long hours while in college is counterproductive, reducing academic achievement and inhibiting course completion.<sup>32</sup> Students working 20 or more hours per week are more likely to drop out of college. And among those who manage to graduate, working extends their time to degree and thus, increases their college costs.<sup>33</sup>

Even so, students who are food insecure are more likely to work than their food secure peers. According to one study, the typical food insecure college student works 18 hours per week. Employed students are nearly twice as likely to report experiences with food insecurity, indicating that work and financial aid are not enough to meet the financial demands of attending college.<sup>34</sup>

SNAP also has limited utility for undergraduates because it is rarely accepted on college campuses where students spend their time. Qualified retailers must meet stringent requirements on the types and quantities of staple foods such as meats, dairy and vegetables they sell, and also be equipped with challenging sales hardware. While Oregon State University just became one of the first universities in the country to accept SNAP, additional proposed changes to rules for retailers may make it very difficult for other schools to follow suit.<sup>35</sup>

In the meantime, campuses are opening food banks and food pantries. The College and University Food Bank Alliance, co-founded by student affairs professionals Clare Cady and Nate Smyth-Tyge, now supports over 200 food banks on college campuses across the nation.<sup>36</sup> Feeding America reports that one in ten of its 45.5 million clients are college students.<sup>37</sup> Organizations such as Single Stop and the Working Families Success Network are also expanding to help colleges develop these services to meet students' needs, in the absence of a clear and cohesive food safety net.

## Expand the National School Lunch Program

Given the growing crisis of food insecurity in higher education, the National School Lunch Program should be expanded to include colleges and universities in order to promote college completion. This would require modifying the authorizing legislation to redefine “school” and extend program participation to include adults.<sup>38</sup>

Under current NSLP rules, students may receive free or reduced price lunches if their family income is below 185 percent of the annual income poverty level guideline established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and updated annually by the Census Bureau (currently \$21,756 for a family of four).<sup>39</sup> Pell Grant eligibility requirements map onto this standard. For example, the median adjusted gross income among Pell recipients in the public sector is just under \$17,000 per year, and 85% have incomes below 200% of the poverty line.<sup>40</sup> Students already identified as qualified via the financial aid system (e.g., Pell grant awardees) could be deemed eligible for the program to cut down on administrative costs. The NSLP provides precedent for this “direct certification” approach and research indicates that it increases participation, lowers administrative costs, and reduces error in who receives benefits.<sup>41</sup> It might also be wise to consider exercising the Community Eligibility Option, introduced in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, at high-poverty community colleges. Fully 25% of community colleges are predominantly poor, with nearly three in four students receiving the Pell Grant.<sup>42</sup>

Expanding the NSLP to all public and private not-for-profit colleges and universities, and students of all ages, would provide food assistance to approximately 7 million Pell recipients—increasing the NSLP total program size by about one-quarter (in 2015, there were 30.5 million children participating).<sup>43</sup> As in elementary and secondary schools, broad expansion might facilitate creative delivery models so that campuses can effectively serve both on and off-campus students while also reducing stigma.

Program expansion should build on existing efforts. Some colleges are already taking steps to implement a school lunch-type program on their campus. For example, Bunker Hill Community College is working with its cafeteria vendor to buy a basic lunch (sandwich, fruit, and milk) at wholesale rather than retail prices, and distributing those lunches to students in need. Other colleges provide a limited number of food vouchers (with a particular dollar value) to help hungry students get something to eat in the school cafeteria. More often faculty and staff members report taking it upon themselves to help students obtain food on an individual basis.

Program expansion could proceed in stages, perhaps starting with public two-year college students, in selected states, or with selected populations. A gradual rollout based on pilot or demonstration projects could be used to iron out implementation challenges and assess impacts. We recommended splitting pilot projects between two approaches to distribution. One approach ought to provide money for lunches directly to colleges and require that they provide free or reduced priced lunches to Pell recipients on their campuses, much as the existing NSLP program does. The other approach should provide a campus based food voucher directly to students. Vouchers could be distributed through existing campus ID or expense card systems. Under a lunch voucher system, monies could be distributed to students either in lump sums once per semester, or on a more periodic basis—perhaps once per month or biweekly. If vouchers are provided directly to students, requirements for institutions to provide low-cost healthy options would also be needed. Both efforts should be

rigorously evaluated, with attention paid to impacts on nutritional outcomes as well as academic progress.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture should work with the U.S. Department of Education to plot the expansion. And any expansion must include provisions for state matching, to ensure that new federal money does not displace existing state level investments in public higher education. A rough estimate based on current program costs is that the costs of full program expansion would total around \$4 billion per year.<sup>44</sup>

Investing in college students by offering them the food assistance they need to do well in school has immense long-term potential. It will likely improve college attainment and reduce future dependency on the social safety net.<sup>45</sup> Congress is currently considering legislation to reauthorize child nutrition programs, including the NSLP. This is an optimal time to reshape this program to include undergraduates. These students have proven to be good investments by surviving poverty and graduating high school. Additional support can help ensure that they successfully complete college and become competitive in today's labor market, improving their odds of economic stability for the long-term.

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