



Loryn DeFalco, Laura Durham, Jessica Havens, and Olivia Waldron

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Food Insecurity on College Campuses

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), established in 1964, provides a monthly stipend to families in poverty for purchasing nutritious food, while reducing food insecurity and hunger. This is accomplished by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthy diet and nutritional information in a way that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence (*Food and Nutrition Service* 2017). However, the program’s impact is limited in its ability to provide services for individuals enrolled in college due to guidelines that restrict college students from applying and receiving these benefits.

Scope of the Problem

Since 1982 the average family income has increased by 147%, more than inflation but lagging significantly behind the huge increase in college costs. College costs have been rising roughly at a rate of 7% per year for decades. Since 1985, the overall consumer price index has risen 115% while the college education inflation rate has risen nearly 500% (Odland 2012). Student loans tend to hide the problems that rising college costs create in the long run, and deferment will delay them, but food insecurity is a problem which actively impacts college students throughout their educational careers. After all financial aid is accounted for, many low-income students still have thousands of dollars of unmet need, even those attending low-cost institutions (Lower-Basch and Lee 2014). As a result, many students will have to make the choice of either dropping out of college or getting a job that may interfere with their attendance and success in class as a means of supporting themselves. Many students struggle to balance paying rent, utilities and buying food. When managing these priorities, food often becomes viewed as the most dispensable of these costs (Bahrampour 2014).

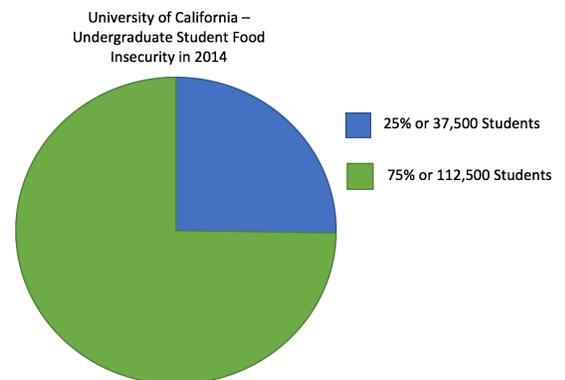
As such, many college students have low food security. There are various definitions of low food security. One definition explains low food security as the reduced quality, variety, or desirability of a diet. There is little or no indication of reduced food intake for this definition. Additionally, very low food security can be seen as reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. Both of these definitions were formerly known as ‘food insecurity.’ Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food (*US Department of Agriculture*, 2017). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that nearly 14.5 percent (12.6 million) of U.S. households are food

insecure (Bahrampour 2014); 7.8 million were households with children (Feeding America 2014).

Feeding America, a national nonprofit network of food banks estimates that nearly half (49.3%) of their clients in college must choose between educational expenses and food. When living on a college campus, living expenses can range from housing payments, to buying light-bulbs for a desk lamp. Having to choose between two living necessities for a good educational experience is familiar to many students. A striking 21 percent had to make this choice between two general living necessities for a full 12 months (ACE 2015). Many of these students

struggle to remain enrolled and often need additional institution support. Their struggle to remain enrolled often comes

from the statistic that nationally, 16.6 percent of students come from, or are living in households that are in poverty. In New York State alone, 13.8 percent of students come from or are living in households that are in poverty (*United States Census Bureau*, 2017). The chain of poverty from parent household to child in college is evident across the nation, and serves a vicious cycle as students are unable to access the supplemental programs which would allow for the chain to be broken. Studies from the University of California system, home to 150,000 undergraduate students in 2014, show that 25 percent of



students had skipped meals “somewhat often,” or “very often,” for financial reasons. A similar study from the City University of New York estimates that over 40 percent of their 274,000 students had experienced food insecurity during the prior year of 2013. At Western Oregon University, a rural, mid-sized school, 59% of the student body was estimated to experience food insecurity. These three previous studies show that food insecurity is an issue across different types of campuses serving different student populations. (Tomar n.d.).

In the fall of 2017, 22.3 million students attended college in the United States (U.S. Department of Education).

According to the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, from 2014-2016, there were 7,819,000 houses that were identified as food insecure in New York State (*United States Department of Agriculture* 2017). With 891,630 full time college students in New York across 258 colleges and universities, the depth of the problem expands as students move out of a low-food-security household, into a low-food-security college space. The problem has expanded as students are no longer identifying with a parent’s income or living situation, who may meet the criteria for accessing SNAP, but being a student makes it much harder to gain access to SNAP benefits. Nationally, 10.6 percent of students in school come from, or are living in, food insecure households. In New York State, 6.8 percent of students in school come from or are living in, food insecure households (*United States Census Bureau* 2017). With 22.3 million college students enrolled nationally in the fall of 2017, the percentage would then represent that roughly 2.3 million students are food insecure while attending college. In New York State, the current number of students enrolled in college (SUNY, Private or CUNY) is approximately one-million students. When calculating the 6.8 percent of students in New York State who are living in food insecure households into a numerical number of students, the percentage translates to

roughly 68,000 students that are food insecure on college campuses right now. These staggering statistics show just how

widespread the issue of lack of food security and lack of access to what is supposed to be an obtainable and welfare-ensuring program is creating nationwide, as well as in New York.

Lack of food security in college is not only detrimental to the health of low-income students, it also has a negative

impact on their educational experience. It is hard to concentrate in class when hungry or worrying about financial obstacles. Whether due to nutritional deficits or the stress and distraction of dealing with financial hardship, food insecurity can compromise a student’s ability to perform well in their classes (Dubick, Mathews, and Cady 2016, 21).

SNAP Policy

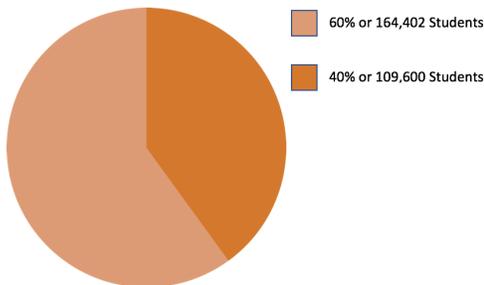
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a national nutritional program that seeks to provide support for the country’s low-wage working families, low income seniors, and people with disabilities living on fixed income (CBPP). In the 2017 fiscal year, the federal government, which pays for the entirety of SNAP benefits, spent over 63 billion dollars on the program. The federal government then splits the cost of administering SNAP with state governments, which amounts to about an additional 5 billion dollars (USDA: FNS). States operate SNAP under the federal guidelines, but each state has some flexibility to adjust their limits.



In New York State, those who are eligible for SNAP must have an annual gross income of less than \$26,556 for a household of three with no earned income, less than \$36,900 for a household of three with an earned income, and less than \$40,836 for a household of three with an elderly or disabled member. These numbers increase as the number of household members increases (ODTA). Currently, about 3 million New York residents, 15% of the state population, are utilizing SNAP (CBPP).

After an individual applies and qualifies for SNAP, monthly benefits are given to them through an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. This EBT card acts as a special debit card that can be used for most food products. SNAP benefits on the EBT card cannot be used for “any non-food item, such as pet foods, soaps, paper products, and household supplies, grooming items, toothpaste, and cosmetics, alcoholic beverages and tobacco, vitamins and medicines, any food that will be eaten in the store, or hot foods” (USDA: FNS). The average monthly SNAP benefits for all households across

City University of New York – Undergraduate Student Food Insecurity in 2013



the United States is \$254 per month but this number fluctuates depending on the size of the home. The maximum allotment for a household size of one person is \$192 a month, \$504 a month for a household of 3, \$760 a month for a household of 5, and \$1,153 for a household of 8. After the household exceeds 8 members, \$144 is allotted for each additional person (ODTA 2017).

SNAP & College Students

While the general public faces the eligibility requirements described above, college students have additional restrictions for to be eligible for SNAP benefits. These eligibility standards were designed so that non-traditional college students could qualify. Non-traditional college students are college students that meet one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attending college part-time; works full time; is financially independent; has dependents other than spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma (Pelletier 2010). This policy had attempted to aid these types of students, but as a result SNAP benefits exclude most traditional college student. The majority of able-bodied students between the age of 18 through 49 are not eligible for SNAP benefits (USDA 2016). In order for a college student to qualify for SNAP, they must either have age or disability status, be a parent or caregiver, be employed at least 20 hours per week or receive work-study funds, receive TANF benefits, or be enrolled in certain programs aimed at employment to be eligible for SNAP (Lower-Basch 2017). It become even more difficult for traditional college students to meet eligibility requirements when factoring in college roommates and mandatory meal plans. (Lower-Basch 2017).

SNAP eligibility on college campuses was designed to aid non-traditional students who need assistance. However, there is a large and growing number of traditional students who are in need of the same assistance. In a 2015 HOPE labs, a research organization out of Wisconsin, conducted a study found that, only 20 percent of students who had low or very low food security received SNAP (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Brunjes Colo 2016). Therefore, even when students are considered food insecure they are unable to qualify for necessary assistance because of stringent requirements. The only way for a traditional college student to qualify for SNAP benefits is to work 20 hours a week. Even though SNAP requires students to work 20 hours a week to qualify for benefits, colleges and professors recommend or even mandate that students only work 10 to 15 hours a week (Fang 2013).

College students have always had a history of working regardless of age, family responsibilities, type of college they attend, or income (Davis 2012). While colleges recommend that students work no more than 15 hours a week, there has been a growing number of college students have begun

working more hours while in college. Lindsay Descano, managing Director at Citigroup believes that more students are working through college because, “having come of age during the Great Recession of 2008, many of today’s students have experienced a financial wake-up call” (Fang 2013). Also, parents have been contributing less toward their children’s education in recent years. In 2010 parents paid 37 percent of their children’s tuition on average and in 2013 they only paid 27% (SallieMae 2017). A decrease in parental financial contribution coupled with the rising cost of tuition has forced students to work more hours to cover costs.

The United States Census Bureau estimated that in 2011, 72% of the 19.7 million undergraduate students worked. From that 72% of students employed, 20% were working full time, 35 hours or more per week. Even among the students who worked less than full time, approximately 25% worked over 20 hours a week (Davis 2012). The number traditional students working less than 20 hours a week has actually declined during the past decade, while the number of students working between 20 and 34 hours per week has increased (Citigroup 2013). Therefore, a large portion of students are eligible for SNAP benefits by working 20 hours a week. Yet, research has shown that a majority of students on college campuses are not utilizing SNAP benefits (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Brunjes Colo 2016).

Model Programs and Policy

Recently, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo drafted a plan in his 2018 State of the State Report to require food pantries or an alternative “stigma-free” program to address food insecurity on all State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) campuses. This initiative is part of Cuomo’s No Student Goes Hungry Program and would allocate a million dollars total to SUNY and CUNY campuses to take this step, however, the program is still awaiting approval from the state legislature (Lobosco 2018). Several New York campuses have already partnered with local food banks to establish food pantries on campus. Locally, for example, Hudson Valley Community College and Schenectady County Community College both utilize food pantries on their campuses and the University of Albany has partnered with the St. Vincent de Paul Church food pantry (Bump 2016). In addition, the University of Albany uses the Swipe Out Hunger Program, which allows students to donate unused meal swipes/credits to campus students in need. However, these are only short-term solutions and do little to address the barriers that prevent college students from receiving SNAP benefits. Other states are successfully participating in the growing

effort of combating food insecurity. New York can look to these efforts for ways to tackle food insecurity, especially college students.



California:

The state of California has applied policies and programs that make SNAP a more feasible food assistance option for college students. First, under Assembly Bill No. 1930, Californian college students have an easier time applying for CalFresh, or California's version of SNAP benefits. This bill mandates that the California Department of Social Services compile a list of state or local career training programs that exempt students from complying with SNAP work requirements (Western Center on Law and Poverty 2016). Now, any California student receiving Cal Grant A or B, enrolled in a qualifying program (e.g. Education Opportunity Program), or who is eligible for federal work study is eligible for CalFresh (CalFresh Clinic at Berkeley n.d.). Furthermore, California schools are going beyond the basic food pantry model to assist students in applying for CalFresh. Qualification requirements of SNAP/CalFresh are lengthy and difficult to maneuver which makes applying for these benefits challenging for students. Humboldt State University's food pantry, Oh SNAP!, connects students in need of food assistance with volunteers who are educated on the requirements and eligibility standards of CalFresh. UC Berkeley has adopted a similar approach by establishing CalFresh clinics to assist students in the application process. The clinic assists about 25 students a month and has earned a CalFresh application approval rate of 80% (Kell 2017). California Assembly Bill No. 1747, put into effect in 2016, makes it possible for college food services, such as on-campus grocery stores and restaurants to accept CalFresh as payment. The bill works in conjunction with California's Restaurant Meals Program. The Restaurant Meals Program was established in 1978 to target disabled and elderly individuals, and expanded in 1996 to include homeless SNAP recipients. This program provides hot, prepared meals to a vulnerable population who are unable to cook either because they do not have the means to cook or cannot physically do so (Hodges 2012). Now, under Assembly Bill No. 1747, restaurants across the state are encouraged to accept CalFresh benefits. In California counties that have implemented Restaurant Meals Program (RMP), both public and private colleges/universities are now able to apply to become a participating CalFresh vendor (Western Center on Law and Poverty 2016). RMP is

completely "state run, state contracted, and state administered," therefore, a limited number of states participate in the program and New York is not one of them (qtd. in Nestle 2011). RMP has been successfully applied on several college campuses in California in their food stores/marts, however, the policy has not been applied to college dining halls and cafeterias due to restrictions on the types of stores and food services approved under the Restaurant Meals Program (New 2016). Other states and particularly, a proposal issued by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, have pioneered programs that can be implemented in college cafeterias/dining halls.

Wisconsin:

Last year, Wisconsin HOPE Lab, a major player in the fight against student hunger, issued a publication proposing a plan to get campus dining halls and cafeterias participating in the effort to end student hunger. The organization recommends that the National School Lunch Program rework their legislation to apply to adults attending post-secondary schools such as training schools, community colleges, and universities. Currently, the federally funded National School Lunch Program (NSLP) feeds over 30 million students across primary and secondary schools nationwide for little or no cost to the student (USDA Food Nutrition Service 2017). Students are eligible for NSLP assistance "if their family income is below 185 percent of the annual income poverty level" or, in other words, \$21,756 for a four-person household. Post-Secondary students receiving financial assistance through the Pell Grant already



meet this eligibility requirement. If the NSLP were to expand the program by a quarter and redefine its parameters to include colleges, the program could alleviate potential food insecurity among 7 million Pell Grant recipients (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Brunjes Colo 2016). The HOPE Lab recommends a "gradual rollout" of the expanded program and a series of steps that states can take to begin implementing a version of NSLP in post-secondary schools. Starting with public two-year institutions, the first step is a pilot program developed by both the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Education. Furthermore, the organization recommends two approaches be explored within the pilot programs. One approach, much like NSLP, would require

institutions to administer assistance to Pell Grant recipients through money allocated directly to colleges. The second approach would instead directly provide students, rather than their institutions, with campus-based food vouchers that are issued through campus IDs or meal cards. To expand and implement NSLP programs in colleges, the HOPE Lab estimates a cost of around four billion a year nationwide (Goldrick-Rab et. al. 2016). Bunker Hill Community College has taken steps to implement a version of the HOPE Lab's pilot program.

Massachusetts:

Modeled much like the Wisconsin HOPE Lab pilot program, Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, MA has implemented the One Solid Meal (OSM) Pilot Program on their campus. OSM Program provides students with a twenty-five dollar voucher per week that is applied to a meal card to be used at any food service site on campus. Spring semester of 2016 the program accepted thirty students and all but one of the thirty students successfully completed the semester. Due to the effectiveness of the OSM Program, the college expanded it to include an extra twenty-five students in Fall 2017 (Bunker Hill Community College 2016). Currently, funding for the pilot program comes from private donors such as the Boston Foundation and Kresge. The expansion of the program this year and future success relies on continued donations, and hopefully, government support one day soon (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Hernandez 2017).

What New York Can Do

New York's efforts to combat food insecurity on college campuses through food pantries and stigma-free programs are good first steps, but additional assistance is needed. In California, there are many policy and program initiatives that increase access to SNAP but also promote education and knowledge of CalFresh among college students. Staff members have been dedicated to pantries to help students become aware of how to utilize and obtain SNAP benefits. This education-based approach would be a feasible addition to New York's food pantry initiative and could serve as a stepping stone to making SNAP more accessible among student populations.

Furthermore, California's college campuses are accepting CalFresh/SNAP in their grocery stores. This initiative is made possible by California's Restaurant Meal Program (RMP), which New York currently does not have. Therefore, to promote the acceptance of SNAP in New York college and university food stores, the state would need to implement policies modeled after California's RMP. Implementing the RMP is a feasible step for NYS, as it does not require any new legislation at the federal or state level. States simply apply through the USDA and provide a plan

that details how they plan to monitor the program and identify participation. Once the application is approved restaurants in the state can apply to participate (OC Food Access 2016).

Nationwide, it is nearly impossible to get SNAP accepted in college dining halls and cafeterias. So, food vouchers, such as the ones being distributed at Bunker Hill Community College, are a viable program option for New York in order to overcome these barriers. This initiative would require New York State, as well as college campuses, to be on board with expanding access to SNAP for students. As colleges recognize their food insecure population, this becomes a necessary next step in promoting food security in higher education.

On a national level, expanding the National School Lunch Program to include colleges/universities is an initiative that New York could support in order to help the students who are going hungry. As the Wisconsin HOPE Lab stated, this effort could potentially benefit seven million Pell Grant recipients. As of 2016, over 470,000 New York students are receiving Pell Grants, therefore, this effort could greatly impact New York students in need of food assistance (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

Food insecurity is a growing threat to the safety and wellbeing of New York State residents, especially those in college. Policy changes and innovative programs, such as the ones highlighted above, are vital steps in combating this issue.



**FEED THE
HUNGRY
STUDENT**

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Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide research-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

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Loryn Defalco, Laura Durham, Jessica Havens, and Olivia Waldron

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