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## COVID's impact on college student hunger

Submitted by Rachel Sumekh on July 1, 2021 - 3:00am

As higher education adjusts to its “new normal,” it must be prepared for today’s students, many of whom have been left exhausted by this last year. While they showed us just how resilient they can be, we know their basic needs were threatened as their learning and living environments abruptly changed in the face of a global pandemic.

A student’s sense of basic needs security is critical to their success -- and as students get ready to return to their campuses, colleges and universities can play a central role in making them not only feel welcomed, but supported as they earn their degrees. Here are five realities about student hunger for campus leaders keep front of mind this fall.

### **1. College food insecurity has always been an issue -- but the pandemic has exacerbated it in stunning ways.**

We’re all familiar with the phrase “starving student” as if it’s some rite of passage, but the romanticization of student food insecurity is preventing us from seeing it as a crisis that deserves a systemic solution. Since the pandemic started, 38 percent of students have regularly missed meals because they’re less hungry or stressed, according to the recent [Student Voice survey on student health](#) <sup>[1]</sup> conducted by College Pulse for *Inside Higher Ed*, with support from Kaplan.

Not only are students not being nourished properly to focus on school, but it’s affecting their ability to graduate. A shocking 36 percent of students know someone who has dropped out due to food insecurity during the pandemic, according to [Chegg research](#) <sup>[2]</sup> conducted in November 2020. We know that if students’ basic needs are met, they’re more likely to perform well, feel physically and mentally better, and feel part of the campus community.

### **2. Effectively addressing students’ basic needs requires campuswide efforts.**

Due to stigma and poor marketing, it’s not easy for students to find accessible food resources on campus. In the best-case scenario, institutions have a basic needs coordinator whose sole purpose is to help students access food, housing and other basic needs -- but knowing such a coordinator exists relies too heavily on word of mouth.

By inviting multiple offices, faculty and student organizations to be part of the basic needs conversation, campuses can reach even more students. Within the network of my organization, Swipe Out Hunger, [88 percent of campuses](#) <sup>[3]</sup> involve student leaders in managing food security programs, and 60 percent of campuses involve faculty/staff members. By inviting more stakeholders to the table, a wider range of students will be made aware of and will be able to access resources available to them.

### **3. Stigma interferes with students’ ability to access resources, but campus leaders can help remove this barrier.**

When students have to step out and self-identify as food insecure to access resources, they’re less likely to access and ultimately use the resource. That’s why it’s so critical to create food security programs that are designed to destigmatize the experience of hunger. Asking for help shouldn’t make one feel vulnerable.

Colleges and universities have made significant strides over the past few years, moving away from the campus pantries that are not only difficult to track down but also located in the dark basement of the student affairs office. Swipe Out Hunger’s programs allow [72 percent of meals to be directly transferred to students’ ID cards](#) <sup>[3]</sup> -- enabling them, as one student put it, “to socialize with my friends on campus without being embarrassed that I can’t buy any food on campus.” By eliminating stigmatizing barriers, students can more freely access the food they need to thrive.

### **4. Many campuses are taking action on hunger, but it doesn’t always prevent hunger.**

We must look upstream to truly prevent student food insecurity. That's why we need thoughtful legislation that can sustainably address student hunger, like the [Hunger Free Campus Bill](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.

This bill has already sent more than \$70 million to public colleges and universities that are addressing student hunger on campus. These funds are used to provide SNAP enrollment opportunities, start meal donation programs or strengthen existing campus food security programs like pantries. First passed in California in 2017, and then in New Jersey, Maryland and just recently Minnesota, this bill has incentivized campuses to support students' basic needs.

Other states -- including Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington -- have all introduced this legislation to demonstrate to their students that they are seen and supported in each of their great states.

## **5. When someone's food security has stabilized, their mental health, sense of campus inclusion and finances improve.**

It isn't just about dismantling the "starving student" stereotype: the fact is, when a student feels nourished, it has a ripple effect on so many other aspects of their lives. Of students who accessed Swipe Out Hunger's programs, [63 percent of meal donation recipients](#) <sup>[3]</sup> felt less stress and anxiety about where to get their next meal, 61 percent felt their college was more supportive of students like them and more than half said they were able to make ends meet and stretch their money.

When a student has the ability and access to switch out the ramen noodle cup for a warm, nourishing meal, it provides more than just healthier calories: it reinforces for students that their campus, and higher education as a whole, was made for students exactly like them.

As colleges and universities re-envision what their campus community looks like this fall semester, we are presented with an incredible opportunity to provide for students in a way like never before. On behalf of the one in three students who will experience food insecurity this year, we are urging colleges across the nation to seize this opportunity and elevate their response to basic needs insecurity beyond a food pantry shelf.

Now is our moment to leverage the lessons learned from being adaptive over this last year and center the immediate needs of students by building an educational experience that not only leads to a degree, but to stronger and healthier students.

**Section:**  
[Student Voice](#) <sup>[5]</sup>  
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### **Links**

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/27/how-manage-covid-impacts-student-health-habits>

[2] <https://www.chegg.org/covid-19-food-insecurity-2020>

[3] <https://www.swipehunger.org/2021impact>

[4]

[https://www.swipehunger.org/hungerfree/#:~:text=HUNGER%20FREE%20CAMPUS%20BILL%20WHAT%20IS%20THE%20HUNGER,it%20has%20customized%](https://www.swipehunger.org/hungerfree/#:~:text=HUNGER%20FREE%20CAMPUS%20BILL%20WHAT%20IS%20THE%20HUNGER,it%20has%20customized%20)

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/student-voice>