Food Insecurity at Urban Universities

Perspectives During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Coalition of Urban Serving Universities

Association of Public & Land-grant Universities

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU)

The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities is a president led organization committed to enhancing urban university engagement to increase prosperity and opportunity in our nation's cities and to tackling key urban challenges. The Coalition includes (40) public urban research universities representing all U.S. geographic regions across 25 states. Annually, member campuses enroll over 1 million undergraduate and graduate students. The USU agenda focuses on creating a competitive workforce, strengthening student success, building strong communities, and improving the health of a diverse population. The Coalition of Urban Universities has partnered with the APLU to establish an Office of Urban Initiatives, housed at APLU, to jointly lead an urban agenda for the nation's public universities.

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of 244 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, member campuses enroll 5.0 million undergraduates and 1.3 million graduate students, award 1.3 million degrees, employ 1.3 million faculty and staff, and conduct $49.2 billion in university-based research.

Contributors

Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities have begun to recognize food insecurity as a need many students face, and the body of research concerning the experience of food insecurity on campuses is steadily increasing. However, insight into food insecurity from the perspective of students who experience it first-hand, and from faculty and staff who support students, is less frequently elevated in the literature. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many universities think more critically about the impact that lack of access to reliable and consistent food, housing, health care, and other basic needs has on their students' ability to succeed academically. Thus, a multi-stakeholder description of food insecurity on college campuses is desperately needed in the midst of a global pandemic that fundamentally impacted access to resources, finances, and health.

In 2020, national protests and awareness-building around racial injustice also prompted many universities to more deeply consider the impact of systemic racism on their students and the families from which they come. While many institutions took an active role in addressing racism internally—through bias trainings, reconciliation groups, and comprehensive policy reviews—few have explored the societal and systemic factors that influence access to food and other basic needs in their communities.

Problem

Far too many Americans wonder whether their financial resources will be enough to provide them with healthy meals for themselves and their families. In 2019, over 35 million people in the United States lived in households that were identified as food insecure.[1] Feeding America estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate those numbers drastically, predicting that 50 million people may have been food insecure in 2020.[2]

Racial and ethnic disparities among food insecure households were evident even in the early days of the pandemic. According to a study by Northwestern University, Black and Latinx households reported experiencing food insecurity at higher rates than white households (41% and 37%, respectively; compared to 23%) between April and June 2020. In terms of low-income disparities in food access, national data shows that neighborhoods with high percentages of low-income residents are often located in food deserts, meaning residents must travel further than their middle income and higher income peers to access grocery stores and other sources of fresh foods.[3]

Unfortunately, college students struggle with food insecurity, too. According to the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 41% of college students (at two- and four-year institutions) experienced food insecurity within the preceding month.[4] Recent food pantry users in a Feeding America study reported several challenges or barriers to achieving their educational goals that intersect with food insecurity, including: finances, mental health and lack of focus, time constraints due to work, and family care responsibilities.[5] To mitigate the gap in food access, universities have begun to offer on-campus food resources, including food pantries, which primarily offer non-perishable food items free of cost. Only recently have public universities begun to investigate the impact of food insecurity on students' academic lives, and more research in this area is needed.

Purpose

This report describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity, as experienced by students at a small set of urban universities from March through December 2020. Although not meant to be a comprehensive description of the transition from on-campus to remote learning nor of the direct impact of COVID-19 on university operations, this project was designed to provide a snapshot of what food insecurity is, as well as what it looks like on urban campuses and among their stakeholders, using qualitative methods. As a result of this exploratory project, we present two

conceptual frameworks for understanding: a) the interconnected nature of basic needs, academic performance, and the student experience; and b) aspects of institutional culture that promote food insecurity as an institutional priority.

This report focuses on six guiding questions:

- How do students at urban universities experience food insecurity?
- What approaches do universities use to mitigate food insecurity on their campuses and in their communities?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed food insecurity efforts at universities?
- How does food insecurity impact student success?
- What relationship exists between systemic racism and food insecurity among students?
- What future directions or innovations should be explored to address basic needs?

Why Urban Universities?

Situating this exploratory project in the context of urban areas across the country is logical. Cities have been the epicenter of the pandemic, struggling with the weight of overcrowded hospitals, strained resources, and high rates of infection and death. At the same time, urban universities—and often their academic health centers—are on the front line, addressing critical needs, and educating community members. Urban universities are a part of the urban ecosystem, one that has long been ripe for innovation and problem-solving.

In fact, even prior to the pandemic, urban universities had been innovating to address food insecurity, demonstrating that they can innovate and adapt quickly to meet basic needs in their communities. USU's Collaborative Opportunity Grant (COG)-funded pilot projects at the University at Albany, University of Toledo, and University of Washington-Tacoma, in which they formed non-traditional partnerships with non-educational organizations or partners to address food security on campus and in their urban communities. These projects can serve as models for replication by other institutions seeking to address food insecurity in a community-engaged manner.

In response to a state mandate to address food insecurity at all public universities, and to address a strikingly large number of students, faculty and staff who were food insecure, **UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY** opened its Purple Pantry in 2019 to serve the university and urban community. Adopting a regional approach, the Pantry and its local food bank and community pantries provided over 50,000 meals in Year 1.

The **UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO** piloted and scaled a food waste reduction effort by partnering with their food service provider to recover unused food from on campus catered events, and redistribute them to students in need. By implementing a meal alert system, the university encouraged students to opt in to receive notifications of free, safely packaged meals available for pick up. The goal was to save 6000 pounds. of food from being wasted, however, the project exceeded 12,000 pounds. of recovered food by the end of the pilot.

The **UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON-TACOMA** launched a student-led research project to determine cultural and ethnic diet needs of students on campus. Partnering with the local food bank, the project identified the impact of cultural food availability and students' and community members' sense of belonging and inclusion. As a result, the university and the food bank now stock food, hygiene products and other items that reflect the multi-ethnic and multicultural nature of the urban community that uses them.

Definitions

- **Basic Needs**— Fundamental resources needed for human survival, including food, water, and shelter. More recent definitions include access to health care and transportation.

- **Food Insecurity**—"A household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food."[6]

- **Housing Insecurity**—"Encompasses a number of challenges, such as having trouble paying rent, overcrowding, moving frequently, staying with relatives, or spending the bulk of household income on housing."[7]

- **Minoritized Students**—We use this term, rather than underrepresented minority student, to refer to Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and other students of color who, although they may not be in the numerical minority on campus, have been marginalized and have less power than those in the majority.

- **Institutional (or systemic) Racism**—The macro-level policies and practices within and across institutions or societies that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favor or disadvantage a racial group.[8, 9]

Participants and Methodology

Universities

A total of five universities were invited to participate in this exploratory project to represent urban universities addressing food insecurity in unique ways across the country. In addition to the COG grantees (University at Albany, University of Toledo, and University of Washington-Tacoma), Morgan State University and University of New Orleans agreed to participate. As an HBCU, Morgan State University has a student body that is predominantly Black, allowing them to focus acutely on the intersection between race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Situated in the South, the University of New Orleans is located in a city and region whose historical context was rife with segregation that still has ramifications today.

	Morgan State University	University at Albany	University of New Orleans	University of Toledo	University of Washington-Tacoma
Location	Baltimore, MD	Albany, NY	New Orleans, LA	Toledo, OH	Tacoma, WA
Institution Type	4- year Public, HBCU, urban	4- year Public, Urban	4- year Public, Urban	4- year Public, Urban	4- year Public, Urban
Undergraduate enrollment	6,461	13,286	6,713	15,568	4,588
% of students of color*	93%	49%	46%	21%	55%
# of students receiving Pell Grant	3,427	5,722	2,552	4,800	2,014
% of students receiving Pell Grant	53%	44%	38%	31%	44%

* American Indian/Alaskan, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or other, & two or more races

All data reflect undergraduate students from https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=University+of+New+Orleans&s=all&id=159939.

Data collection

Eleven university leaders from participating universities met virtually in the Fall of 2020 to co-create project questions for use in interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Through a collaborative exercise, they created a question pool that identified potential questions for each of three stakeholder groups: students, faculty, and staff. Universities were able to choose which questions they wanted to ask their stakeholders from the pool. Examples of these questions appear in the Appendix.

Due to the constraints of this project, we did not require collecting race/ethnicity or Pell Grant status data of participants. Each university obtained permission to proceed with data collection through their Institutional Review Board. Because we sought to understand the experiences of stakeholders, qualitative data collection was considered a priority and the basis of this project. Institutions were allowed to choose focus groups, interviews, or mixed-method surveys as data collection methods. A total of 296 students, faculty and staff participated across five institutions.

Findings

Student experience

There are several dimensions that impact how students encounter, experience, and express food insecurity. The framework at right shows the interconnected nature of four dimensions, as evidenced in the data collected for this project. The *Behavior* domain describes ways that students act or react in response to periods of food insecurity. Student experiences navigating time restrictions due to off-campus employment on which they depend for income are described in *Work and Finances*. The *Belonging* domain articulates the social and emotional constraints associated with being labeled "food insecure" on campus. Finally, *Other Basic Needs* highlights the interconnected nature of food insecurity with other basic needs insecurities.

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It is critical to stress that these domains co-exist within academic and societal contexts. Minoritized students (low-income, students of color, first-generation), as well as adult learners, come to the university often after surmounting incredible barriers to entry. Food insecurity, then, is often embedded in the conceptualization of what it means to be a college student. One student summarized this point clearly: "There are [societal] forces to make sure we stay in a state of poverty. College is one of the places where students want to break out of that. When we're in college, we don't have a home to go back to or parents who are paying for it. We have work-study,

a second job, and then school on top of that. It becomes much harder to get through school when you have responsibilities. College ideally could be focusing on school and academics. But it's not the case."

BEHAVIORS

It was clear from participant responses that food insecurity is not perceived as a permanent state, but rather as an experience that is exacerbated at certain times by certain causal factors. Students try to mitigate their food insecurity in many ways, which are often observed by the staff who have the closest relationships with students, such as advisors and student affairs staff. Students improvise, go without, or cut back on other necessities to address their food insecurity.

According to one university, 89% of students surveyed are eating less than they should because they lack sufficient food or money. In addition to reducing food intake, students also indicated that their meal choices often have low nutritional value, with 67% of students reporting that they cannot afford to eat balanced meals either occasionally or often. Students indicted that, prior to the pandemic, they took advantage of food resources on campus, such as a food pantry or the free food or meals served as a part of student affairs-sponsored events.

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> of students surveyed at one university are eating less than they should because they lack sufficient food or money.

University staff and faculty were asked what behaviors students exhibit that suggest food insecurity. Staff and faculty (primarily student affairs and academic advising professionals) indicated that there are covert and overt signs that a student is struggling. Overt signs include frequent use of the food pantry or a student explicitly mentioning skipping or reducing meals, although this appears to be dependent on the student's relationship with a specific staff member. Covert signs are behaviors or conversational signals not related to food that imply that a student may be experiencing food or other basic needs insecurities. Examples include utilizing university resources such as a clothing closet or requesting emergency aid for acute financial distress (e.g., funds to replace a laptop that was stolen).

Participants indicated there are academic consequences related to food insecurity. Students reported that they are able to focus on their academic work, and they have more mental clarity when they have access to healthy food. Additionally, one student mentioned that when they experience food insecurity, they spend a significant amount of time searching for and accessing other food options, while navigating an unreliable public transportation system, all of which curtails the amount of available study time. Faculty and advisors mentioned behaviors, such as frequently skipping classes and declining grades or academic performance, that signal the student may be in a crisis. While some faculty specifically mentioned frequent discomfort with asking their students about their personal circumstances or uncertainty as to what role they should play, other faculty said they did make referrals to student services for students who exhibited stressors.

WORK AND FINANCES

Across project participants the strains of balancing work and financial responsibilities with food access and academic work were evident. Nationally, 43% of full-time undergraduate students work while enrolled, almost one-third of whom work more than 20 hours a week. Seventy-one percent of part-time students work more than 20 hours a week, the majority of whom work more than 35 hours each week.[10] Students need to work to pay tuition, meet family responsibilities, and buy food. However, universities are still designed for the college student of yesterday: enrolled full time, financially dependent on their parents, with no significant responsibilities of their own. As a result, students who must work often have to contend with unfriendly policies and structures that do not take into consideration student availability. One student shared her typical schedule during one of the focus groups: "I was working 30–40 hours a week a night shifts. I worked 11 PM–7 AM

and then would go to my 9 AM class. Sometimes I'd sleep through classes because I knew I had to [be ready for] work."

This is directly related to food insecurity, as students who work must make difficult decisions in order to maintain both their academic and employment status. According to staff, "students who work full-time or part-time are more than likely to be food insecure and often neglect schoolwork to stay afloat in…their personal life." To do so, students will pick up extra shifts at work or spend more time looking for a job.

Students themselves also indicated that their financial precarity impacts their experience with food insecurity. Despite some students working up to full time, they are still forced to prioritize or negotiate where they will allocate their financial resources. One student said, "Relying on [the] food pantry meant more money could be put toward purchasing textbooks and other academic resources." This indicates students face a difficult choice between feeding themselves or preparing themselves fully for their courses.

Students use financial aid to cover the costs of housing, course materials, fees, and food. When describing when and how they access the on-campus food pantry, one student said, "I use the pantry toward the end of semester, when my refund check dries up." This points to the fluid nature of insecurity, and the fact that students exhaust all other options before using campus resources. According to one staff member, "If they are coming to us, it is because they often have nowhere else to turn."

OTHER BASIC NEEDS

Unfortunately, students are concerned not just about food insecurity but also with economic stability and academic responsibilities. Responses indicated that students often experience other basic needs crises concurrently with food insecurity, and that these needs have only been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a university staff person, "If a student is in need in one area there is a likelihood that they have needs in other areas. It is important that universities address basic needs in an interconnected way." The most frequently mentioned needs included access to transportation, housing, and health care.

Lack of transportation is also a compounding factor influencing food insecurity. Some students indicated that when they use food pantries on campus, they are limited to what they can feasibly carry on public transportation, because they lack a car. Additionally, the pandemic has complicated public transportation access; some students are uncomfortable using public transportation because they cannot maintain social distance, while decreased service times and routes often make public transportation to campus untenable. As a result, some students have been further isolated from food resources on campus and in their cities, until they are able to ride in a friend's car, or they must resort to using a ridesharing app, which can be costly.

Staff mentioned signals of housing insecurity as an indicator of potential food insecurity. An academic advisor at one university mentioned that when she hears of students "couch surfing" (sleeping on various friends' couches because they do not have a permanent place to stay), she makes a referral to student affairs to follow up with the student and inquire about both housing and food needs. Another staff member mentioned the necessity of prioritizing the multiple basic needs students have. In their perspective, "Students will focus on paying for housing, to [the point] where they'll have nothing left over to buy groceries." Securing housing is extremely critical in urban environments, where the cost of living is high.

Overarching concerns about access to health care, including mental health services, were paramount among student responses. These responses also provided insight into the relationship of these needs to food access. One student with a chronic health condition worried that her inability to access healthy food consistently would impact her health. At the beginning of the pandemic, when her resources were extremely limited and stress was highest, she saw a steady decline in her condition. Distinct but related to mental health concerns is the concept of belonging. Students' sense of belonging, or lack thereof, is inextricably tied to their feelings of food-insecurity-related isolation, as well as anxiety and depression resulting from the pandemic.

BELONGING

In the context of this report, we refer "belonging" as the perception that one is welcomed, respected, and able to succeed, and that their experiences with food insecurity matter to others on campus (faculty, staff, and other students). How a university recognizes and highlights students' non-academic needs appears to have some impact on whether students feel they can and should utilize university resources. Adding to the complexity of a sense of belonging are factors outside of the university's control that have an impact on student belonging, including experiences with food insecurity prior to enrolling in college and perceptions of general pantry usage. Students in this project reflected both appreciatively and critically about the impact these efforts to combat food insecurity had on their sense of belonging.

Students, staff, and faculty across all five universities elevated the impact of shame and stigma on food resource usage. Students feared being labeled as a pantry-user, which brings with it an indicator that they are different than their peers. "Students believe that if they obtain food from the pantry they will be labeled as 'poor' by fellow students. As a result, they choose to avoid this service." In other cases, students felt they should not use food resources because there were other students on campus whose situation was more dire, and that those are the students who should be using the food resources. In observing potential pantry users, a staff member determined that this tendency to compare "sometimes becomes an additional barrier. They feel embarrassed. They feel like, 'I don't belong here, I shouldn't utilize this resource.'"

Even when students become comfortable enough to use campus food resources, they may be discouraged by what they find (or do not find) in the pantry. Some students complained that the food at pantries was occasionally of low quality, especially if the pantry is stocked primarily through donations. Not wanting to appear ungrateful for the food, students either take the food and re-donate it or, in some cases, reduce usage of the pantry altogether, and try to access food elsewhere. Even in their time of need, maintaining a sense of dignity was important to them. Additionally, students were disappointed that the pantries often lack foods that reflect their cultural or religious needs and preferences. One student exemplified the emphasis on American or Western-style dietary preferences with the following simple but poignant question: "Why does the pantry have Italian salad dressing, but not soy sauce?" What universities stock and why is an important topic for leaders to consider, especially if they seek to promote a sense of belonging and inclusivity among users.

> *Why does the pantry have Italian salad dressing, but not soy sauce?*

Institutional culture

Institutional culture influences the student experience in college. As seen in the figure above, three aspects of institutional culture can be tied directly to food insecurity as experienced by students. *Policies and Structures* refers to the operating procedures that govern institutional structures and outcomes in ways that present barriers to bridging the food insecurity gap. *Awareness and Accessibility* describes how knowledgeable a university's student, faculty, and staff are about food insecurity among its stakeholders and whether resources provided are perceived to be accessible. *Inclusivity* describes whether and how university culture is perceived as recognizing, respecting, and being responsive to the needs of stakeholders of various identities.
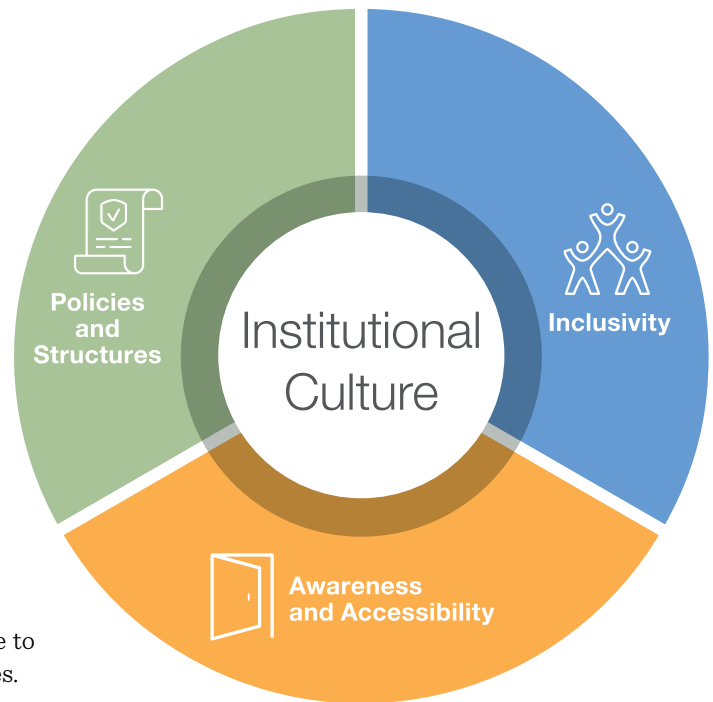
POLICIES AND STRUCTURES

Staff mentioned that a university emphasis on awarding scholarships and other aid based on academic achievement only (merit-based aid) may prevent more funds from reaching students who have demonstrated financial need (need-based aid). Additionally, while some universities have a departmental budget line dedicated to their pantries and food resource efforts, not every university does. Participants questioned the sustainability of running a pantry primarily based on sporadic donations.

A crucial first step to understanding food insecurity on college campuses is determining who is food insecure. In the planning phase of this project, university leaders indicated that some of their peer universities do not have a mechanism for collecting this information from their students; this was echoed by staff and faculty respondents who indicated fears that asking such questions could result in a violation of Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines. Some institutions collect data through various surveys to try to determine the prevalence of food insecurity, but comprehensive institution-level data on food insecurity prevalence is minimal. However, at least two universities in this project reported having policies that help track markers of food insecurity via identification cards. To access the pantry on those campuses, users must scan their university ID card, which then allows the pantry staff to track who is using the pantry and how often. Although using the pantry does not mean one is food insecure, it is a marker to use when, as described above, other covert signs of basic-needs crises are present. This has provided some useful data to administrators, including the finding that staff and faculty use the pantry, as well as students, further demystifying who may be food insecure.

Unfortunately, there are examples of university policies that inhibit student access to food when they need it most. Staff respondent said it is imperative that institutions ensure that financial holds on student accounts do not prevent students from accessing food resources. Policies that prevent students from using their ID cards, which are necessary to access dining halls and food pantries, should be revisited.

AWARENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY

Urban universities have a strong history of partnering with other organizations and leaders in the urban ecosystem. After the pandemic hit, universities turned to partners, new and old, to help mitigate food access barriers for campus stakeholders. Securing off-site pick-up of pre-bagged pantry items at local organizations, partnering with community banks to fund meal provision, and food drives in partnership with local churches are just a few examples of what participating universities accomplished in the first months following the pandemic-induced campus depopulation.

Although university staff overseeing campus food resources work tirelessly to provide access for students, it is clear that not all students are aware of or willing to use the pantries. Despite social media campaigns, visible signage, and email communications, student participants reported that many of their peers are not aware of the opportunities. Further exacerbating this is the fact that some faculty are not aware of the resources, and therefore miss an opportunity to inform their students.

Participants concluded that some faculty at their institutions may be wary of asking students about sensitive personal situations, including their ability to access food. However, this has the unintended consequence of perpetuating food insecurity because it prevents faculty from realizing just how dire the need is among some students. Rather than promoting a culture where faculty eschew personal information about students, universities would benefit from promoting a culture where faculty understand the context from which their students come and how that context affects their academic performance.

Some students indicated that knowing about and accessing food and other basic needs resources is dependent on relationships with faculty and staff who serve as guides/navigators. One student reported "I've always had an ally in [the] administration to help me find the things I need. Most students don't have that ally and don't know who to talk to." Some staff perceive that students are uncomfortable explaining and sharing their situation with others, which in turn limits how much university leaders know about students' food insecurity. To combat this discomfort, several staff suggested taking a holistic approach to assessing needs that includes identifying patterns in academic, housing, and financial stressors in students, and considering whether food insecurity may also be a factor.

Participating universities had several places where food was made available to those in need. Examples of services included:

- **Pantry**—non-perishable food items and hygiene products.
- **Resource center**—nutrition education and cooking demonstrations.
- **Grab and Go**—small snack items available in student affairs offices.
- **Pop-up pantry**—temporary and/or mobile location with limited food items.
- **Meal alert system**—packaged food recovered from catered events.

Prior to the pandemic, administrators believed these resources were accessible to students, faculty, and staff. However, some students wanted food options available outside of business hours.

As noted above, the pandemic has decreased transportation options for many students who are also food insecure. In response to the sudden depopulation of campuses in the Spring, university administrators made structural changes to ensure that food was still available for students despite campus closures. A few examples include a food delivery service, drive-through or curbside pickup, and socially distanced food collection.

INCLUSIVITY

Even when universities are proactive about providing multiple food resources on campus, they still must consider whether all feel welcomed to these resources. In the Student Experience domain above, we referred to this as belonging; in the domain of institutional culture, we refer to this as inclusivity. *Inclusivity* means how the decisions made by university leaders positively impact students' choice to use campus food resources. Respondents in this project raised several points to consider when assessing whether an institution's culture is inclusive, especially for minoritized stakeholders.

Several universities mentioned providing pantry users with large, pre-packaged bags of food and supplies. While this approach is helpful in maintaining social distance, some staff wondered whether this approach was feasible for pantry users with physical disabilities.

One student highlighted concerns about limited gender options included on intake forms required for pantry access. "They only allow you to choose male or female, which negates the identify of many students, who really would benefit from using [the pantry]." A staff member at another university also highlighted the way product labeling and signage can be exclusionary to LGBTQ and gender fluid students. "We can just call them hygiene products, we don't have to label them feminine." Inclusivity requires recognizing how multiple aspects of students' identities can impact food access on campus.

By Summer 2020, one university relocated their food pantry to the police department on campus, a location that facilitated social distancing because of pre-exiting plexiglass barriers between the front desk and the general public. However, university leaders did not consider the impact that locating resources in a police office, given ongoing strain between communities/individuals of color and law enforcement, particularly in the context of the George Floyd murder. One student mentioned that neither she (a person of color), nor many of the students of color that she knew, have used the pantry since its location relocation.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Universities have taken great strides to address hunger on college campuses; however, more discreet and innovative food campaigns and initiatives are still needed to increase outreach. More in-depth, qualitative research on the experience of students with food insecurity is needed to complement the emerging quantitative research in this area.

This project focused most acutely on food insecurity among students, but participants made clear that food insecurity among faculty and staff, particularly low-wage staff, is an emerging issue that is becoming more severe as a result of the pandemic. Universities must also enhance opportunities for students to increase their nutrition knowledge and food preparation skills.

Although a question around systemic and institutional racism was required in this project, very few students, faculty, and staff responded with answers that explicitly linked these two. Some staff mentioned ongoing unequal access to resources among communities of color compared to white communities, a gap that is only expanding. Many students come from neighborhoods that lack reliable sources of health care, affordable housing, and healthy food. When they returned to these neighborhoods once the pandemic hit, these students were once again forced to confront food insecurity close to home. This appears to be a blind spot for university leaders and perhaps even for students themselves, who do not make a connection between systemic racism and food insecurity.

Participants provided a wealth of ideas on future innovations to meet basic needs, including:

- **New models of financial aid**—including food scholarships and vouchers for childcare.
- **Care coordinator models**—in which an assigned staff member works to help students meet their non-academic needs.
- **Campus gardens**—scaling up on-campus food production (often from existing gardens) to provide an educational resource and a direct food source for the community.
- **New and unusual partnerships**—working closely with grocery stores, local farmers, and others.

Finally, advocacy and policy change are important for sustained systemic change. Financial aid reform, increased funding for low-income programs, increased eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women Infants and Children (WIC) benefits are three targeted policy changes that participants said would have a monumental effect in improving the experience of students and urban stakeholders with food insecurity.

The Call to Action below serves as a summary of the project findings. Given everything we have learned from students, faculty, and staff about food insecurity on urban campuses, we challenge our member universities, and others who are serious about tackling food insecurity, to embrace this call and to work collaboratively with their communities to address and mitigate the impact of food insecurity on university stakeholders.

Call to Action

Based on our analysis, we have identified nine targeted actions university leaders can take to combat hunger on campus and their surrounding communities:

1 **Spread The Word.**
Increase awareness about food insecurity on campus.

2 **Call Out Systemic Inequities.**
Recognize the historical and societal root causes of food insecurity and other basic needs crises.

3 **Personalize the Problem.**
Demystify who the "typical" food insecure person is.

4 **Create a Culture of Care.**
Promote the expectation that faculty, students, and staff can play a role in addressing food insecurity.

5 **Assess For Student Success.**
Collect data on food insecurity and other basic needs; articulate the impact on students' academic outcomes.

6 **Collaborate with the Community.**
Engage partners in the urban ecosystem and adopt approaches that incorporate community impact.

7 **Think Beyond The Pantry.**
Consider additional sustainable approaches to address food insecurity (e.g., nutrition and food preparation education).

8 **Integrate with Other Basic Needs.**
Consider new ways to meet basic needs with university policies and structures such as financial aid, on-campus work, and wrap-around services

9 **Advocate for Change.**
Collaborate internally and externally with local, regional, and national stakeholders to propose state and federal policy change to address hunger on college campuses.

Sample Questions

- How has your access to basic needs (e.g. food, housing, transportation, childcare) changed since the pandemic started?

- What barriers are there/or might be for students to access food resources on campus?

- What gaps do you see in the food resources services we provide? What are we not addressing that you think is critical to address?

- If you have used the food pantry, how has that helped you focus on your academic work?

- What new food or other basic needs services could be offered that would help you succeed academically?

- Do you see a connection between institutional racism and your relationship/understanding of food insecurity? What is the impact of that identified connection?

- How might our food resource locations and services be more inclusive and welcoming?

- How might we expand offerings to be inclusive of other basic needs that are often linked to food insecurity (e.g. housing, childcare, transportation)?

- How are we addressing the impact of institutional racism as it relates to food insecurity?

Endnotes

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