

Poverty Is Largely Invisible Among College Students

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The first time I met an undergraduate who hadn't eaten in two days, I was stunned. The first time I spent the afternoon with a homeless college junior, I cried for most of the night. Now, after a decade of research on food and housing insecurity among college students, I'm just numb.

I teach at an urban public university—a “Research 1,” top-of-the-Carnegie-rankings institution. I'm not one of Philadelphia's school teachers; I'm a professor with just one class to teach each term and a big research budget. But those trappings of prestige no longer shield me from the realities of poverty in our city, and more importantly, they don't help my students.

Since 2008, my team's research on how students finance college has revealed that the main barrier to degree completion isn't tuition; it's having a place to sleep and enough food to eat. The best estimates suggest that food insecurity affects as many as 1 in 2 college students—much higher than the rate in the general population. Just as many struggle with housing insecurity, and a significant number (14 percent at community colleges) are homeless.

This is a largely invisible problem. Stereotypes of Ramen-noodle diets and couch-surfing partiers prevent us from seeing it. They trick us into thinking that food insecurity is a rite of passage, that hunger and even homelessness among our students is normal. But it is time to admit that we have a serious problem in higher education.

Some campuses have begun implementing small reforms to address food insecurity. The College and University Food Bank Alliance has more than 525 members from coast to coast, with food pantries housed at community colleges and universities, public and private. This is a stunning increase, since in 2012 there were just over 10. That provides emergency assistance to the students who are lucky enough to know about them, though what they actually stock varies. Sometimes there are fresh fruits and vegetables, but usually there are cans and bags, some bread, and the occasional bottle of shampoo or body wash.

In some cases, colleges are moving beyond food pantries. Just over two dozen schools operate a program known as Swipe Out Hunger, which reallocates unused dollars on meal plans to students who need them. Homegrown efforts such as Single Stop are helping students apply for SNAP, and some institutions are beginning to accept EBT on campus. In Houston, the local food bank is offering “food scholarships” to community college students, proactively providing groceries rather than waiting for emergencies to occur. There are food recovery networks, nutrition programs, and educational activities like Challah for Hunger, where students gather to break bread and learn about poverty. These efforts are entry points to systemic change, and they make it possible to envision a time in which the National School Lunch Program operates on all campuses, providing breakfast and lunch to every student who needs it.

But when it comes to housing, things don't look so good. When colleges and universities think about housing, they see dollar signs to be gained from residence halls catering to wealthy and international students, rather than opportunities to facilitate affordable living. Given massive state disinvestment

throughout the country, it is hard to blame the public institutions. But it means that a growing number of students are being left out in the cold.

Students who struggle to pay rent are at risk of eviction, like so many other low-income adults around the country. Those who seek out shelters find the same overcrowded and sometimes dangerous conditions that have long plagued those temporary accommodations, and students often miss out on beds because the lines form while they are still in class. Even young people who grew up in public housing can lose their housing when they enroll in college if their local housing authority deprioritizes full-time undergraduates.

The financial aid system contributes to these problems. Consider a 23-year-old adult living on the streets, estranged from two middle-class parents because he is queer. Under federal law, his parents' income is used to determine his financial aid, even though he lacks access to those resources. His only hope of disregarding their income and qualifying for more support is to endure a "special circumstances" process that requires documentation verifying that he is homeless, which can be challenging if he was not homeless in high school and is not in the shelter system. In 2015-16, nearly 32,000 college students completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) verification process and were officially deemed homeless for financial aid purposes. However, more than 150,000 students indicated that they were homeless on an initial filtering question, but could not complete the necessary documentation process.

The oversight of the very real housing and food needs of undergraduates is hypocritical given the intense pressure we place on people today to complete college degrees. It is very difficult to complete anything—whether it is a vocational training program for a welding certificate, an associate's degree in nursing, or an engineering program—without first having your basic needs met.

I am trying, in my own way, to do what I can. Last year, I created the FAST Fund to provide students with cash, quickly, when it is needed. And I added a statement to my syllabus that will remain there indefinitely:

Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact the CARE Team in the Dean of Students Office for support. Furthermore, please notify me if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable me to provide any other resources that I may possess.

It is but a start, meant to help establish a culture of care in my classroom, one that I hope can be transmitted and reflected throughout the university. We can and must go further. Every college and university must help its students connect to every public benefits program for which they are eligible. That support, coupled with emergency cash assistance, can help shield students from hunger and help them keep a roof over their heads. Colleges should also pursue external partnerships with local food banks, housing authorities, and homeless shelters. And most of all, higher education has a responsibility to tackle poverty among its students in a data-driven way that acknowledges that students without resources do not lack talent, drive, or intellect. They simply need access to the same sorts of supports that students from families with money enjoy every day.

Talk about social mobility is all the rage in higher education right now. But let's get real: College is a great route out of poverty, but for that path to work students must escape the conditions of poverty long enough to complete their degrees.