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Food Insecurity Prevalence on College Campuses, the Stigma Associated with Food Pantries and the Best Practices Moving Forward

Olivia Neff
DePauw University

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Pantries and the Best Practices Moving Forward

Abstract

Food insecurity among college students is three times higher than
nationally representative households (Nazmi 2018: 8). Literature estimates
between 12% and 59% of college students experience some sort of food
insecurity (Cady 2014). Food insecurity is prevalent on all types of college
campuses. However, there is limited data on food insecurity on college campuses
and the stigmas behind food insecurity. This article discusses the prevalence of
food insecurity on college campuses, the stereotypes which reproduce food
insecurity, the stigma behind pantry usage and potential solutions. The article will
highlight best practices for food pantries obtained through eight interviews with
pantries in Columbus, Ohio. Secondary data from a student-led food pantry at
Otterbein University will also be considered in this analysis. Food insecurity
needs to be considered a public health priority and continued research must
address solutions to the systemic issue of food insecurity on college campuses.

Food Insecurity Defined

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, food insecurity is defined as a

condition when persons do not have adequate resources to feed themselves, either nutritiously, or

at all (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2013). The definition implies that a

person may have access to food, but can still be food insecure based on nutritional quality. Per

Pinstrup-Andersen, food "availability does not assure access, and enough calories do not assure a healthy and nutritional diet" (Pinstrup-Andersen 2009: 5). Food safety and nutritional value need to be considered when determining food security. Similarly, the presence of a food pantry is not a sufficient guard against food insecurity.

Methodology

First, a systematic literature review was conducted using Google Scholar and JSTOR to identify articles on (1) the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses, (2) the stigma around the usage of pantries on college campuses, (3) the stereotypes that reproduce food insecurity on college campuses and (4) solutions to reducing stigma and food insecurity on college campuses. Secondly, eight interviews were collected on the best practices for food pantries, particularly at the university and college level. Finally, secondary data from surveys at Otterbein University, a small liberal arts school in central Ohio, were used to look at the prevalence of food insecurity on Otterbein's campus and the effectiveness of the Promise House, a student-led resource pantry on Otterbein's campus.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a growing issue on college campuses. Lisa Henry's interviews with college students indicate how both food secure and food insecure students explain food insecurity as faceless (Henry 2017: 9). Food insecurity is an expanding issues on college campuses because of growing economic inequality and rise in tuition. The stereotypes behind hungry college students promulgates poor eating habits, yet none of the stereotypes show students as food insecure, especially with the growing trend in an increased cost for a college education. Between 12% and 59% of college students experience some sort of food insecurity

(Cady 2012). Yvonne Vissing notes that "despite belief that hunger occurs mostly in third-world-type societies, hunger is a more significant problem in the United States than in many other nations throughout the world" (Vissing 2017: 464). By compiling data from eight studies, Nazmi and his colleagues found food insecurity in college students to be three times higher than nationally representative households (Nazmi 2018: 8). Even with the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses, the United States currently provides no direct protection against food insecurity for college students (King 2017: 13). The issue of food insecurity in the United States on college campuses are largely unnoticed by the public and should begin to be recognized as a public policy priority.

Food insecurity is germane to public policy because basic human needs are essential for academic success. Macdonald surveyed 473 students at the University of Arkansas to explore the relationship between food insecurity and educational attainment. Forty Percent of the students interviewed in his research were food insecure. The results revealed that food insecurity has a profound impact on GPA (Macdonald 2016: 18). Martinez studied a large public university in California (N=8705) and found that "among students who experienced food security, a significantly higher proportion had a cumulative A average (51%) compared to students experiencing food insecurity (30%)" (Martinez 2018: 4). Food insecurity exists and food insecurity must be addressed as it is linked to retention rates, graduation rates and student success (Cady 2014: 265).

There are many factors contributing to the increase in food insecurity among college students. First, tuition has risen an estimated 27% at public colleges and 14% at private schools, which limits the funds for students in school (Buch 2016). There has been a shift in the

traditional image of college students coming from affluent families to "students of low socioeconomic status who may have once dismissed the possibility of degree attainment" and are now giving access to postsecondary education (Bruening 2017: 1767). As a result, students of color and other marginalized student populations are disproportionately affected by the problem of food insecurity on college campuses (Buch 2016: 17). In addition, students are not asking for help because being "a broke college student struggling to get by is also perceived as normal," in some cases, the struggle is even defined as a rite of passage (Henry 2017: 11). Finally, the largest problem is the food insecurity is faceless due to its cross-cutting nature and the fact that most impoverished people hide food scarcity due to stigma and shame (Cady 2014: 265).

The perception regarding the lack of food insecurity on college campuses are perpetuated because there is an assumption that if a student can afford college, they can afford food. Many people will argue that most students have meal plans, but "meal plan enrollment alone does not appear to promote food security, as approximately 70% of food-insecure students reported having a meal plan" (El Zein 2018: 9). A meal plan could provide as little as 3 meals a week, which most certainly does not guarantee students are food insecure. Questions about the quality of food and how many meals a student receives from the meal plan need to be addressed because food insecurity also includes access to nutritional food. Research has found that "reasons for not using the food pantry were not limited to logistical ones, but also included resistance barriers, including social stigma, and self-identity" (El Zein 2018: 10). These stigmas are deeply embedded within our system of government and the neo-liberal perspectives of the United States. Loopstra and Tarasuk interviewed 371 low-income Toronto families to determine the effectiveness of food pantries. Their study "revealed that 75 percent had experienced some food

insecurity, but only 23 percent had used a food bank; for most food bank users, food insecurity is a severe and chronic problem" (Loopstra 2012: 497). There must be a consideration of why families are not utilizing food banks. Food insecurity is deeply intertwined with our system of government; therefore, structural change also needs to be well planned and well-executed.

In order for the basic needs of students to be addressed, there is an overwhelming call to research why students may not use the food pantries that are increasing across campuses in the United States and how the stereotypes of college students allow food insecurity to be reproduced. The Promise House at Otterbein University provides a unique case study on food pantries and stigma. The case study will allow for a discussion on the barriers facing food insecure students on college campuses based on existing literature and whether being discreet is possibly beneficial to food pantries on college campuses. Finally, best practices for food pantries on college campuses will be considered.

Case Study of Otterbein

The Promise House is a student-led resource pantry on Otterbein's campus that was founded by Otterbein student's in 2016. The Promise House seeks to build community and break down socioeconomic barriers to student success. Otterbein is a small liberal arts university, with a student population of 2,800, that is located in Central Ohio. The Promise House attempts to combat food scarcity on Otterbein's campus and in the greater community. Two seperate data sources were used to analyze food insecurity on Otterbein's campus: a residential survey and a survey of shoppers at the Promise House. New initiatives, like the Promise House, have become increasingly prevalent due to the increased awareness of food insecurity on college campuses and the barriers that food scarcity poses to student success.

The Promise House building is tucked away in an apartment complex on Otterbein's campus. The Promise House provides food, school supplies, toiletries, resources for impoverished students and an emergency fund for students in need. They receive the majority of their food through donations from grocery stores, community members and local restaurants. In a recent survey to residential students, 18% of the 394 students who responded to the survey were hungry at some point and did not have enough money for food. Of the 428 who answered a question about whether they visited the Promise House, 9.3% were not aware of its existence at all. Based on the research complied, the percentage of students aware of the Promise House is higher than other schools. However, it is important to note that Otterbein is smaller than most schools that were surveyed.

The Promise House has been very successful on Otterbein's campus in comparison to the research compiled on other campuses. They require students to fill out a membership form and they have no eligibility requirements to use the pantry. Since there are no requirements to utilize the Promise House, any Otterbein student may shop at the Promise House, which helps combat the stigma associated with visiting a food pantry. In addition, they require volunteers to register as members, which means the identity of food insecure students can be further protected. In 2018, there were over 900 shopping trips to the Promise House.

The Center for Community Engagement operates a community garden over the summer in an effort to provide more access to fruits and vegetables for the Promise House. The Center for Community Engagement, which maintains the operations of the Promise House, stands behind the belief of 'Civic Ecotones'. Director Melissa Gilbert describes them as "intermediary places where participants dismantle the boundaries between community and campus to create a

highly interactive environment for civic engagement and a renewed sense of collective responsibility" (Gilbert 2013). By hosting a community garden, there is a goal to foster a sense of food justice to a variety of students on campus and raise awareness on food insecurity. They have engineering students building hoop houses and biology students testing soil. They have students volunteering at the Promise House for service-learning courses and host events in the Promise House to appeal to vegans and vegetarians. By attempting to raise awareness of food justice to all different types of people on their campus, there is a sense of responsibility developed on students to understand food insecurity and the importance of civic responsibility. As a result, they hope to continue their student led food pantry and continue efforts to help students understand how food justice is interconnected and requires all community members to help.

In 2018, an anonymous survey was sent to students at Otterbein University who were members at the Promise House. The anonymous survey was conducted to evaluate personal feelings and experiences on food insecurity on Otterbein's campus. The results include the answers of 66 Promise House shoppers (n=66). Upon completion of the survey, the shopper's had the option to provide an email address to be entered to win a gift card to the Otterbein campus bookstore.

The key findings of the survey were that 36% of shoppers reported skipping meals during the day at least a moderate amount of time because they did not have enough money for food. Fifteen percent of shoppers reported losing a moderate amount of weight because they did not have enough money to purchase food. The Promise House confirmed that they can make a huge impact on food scarcity on campus by continuing to provide services to students and reduce the

stigma. When asking Otterbein students who were members at the Promise House if there is a stigma associated with the Promise House, 25% percent of students agreed or strongly agreed. The Promise House does many initiatives to normalize the food insecurity among college students, like pizza nights and spreading the word about food insecurity through their campus bike. The campus bike travels around campus giving out lemonade, coffee and other treats in an effort to spread the word about food insecurity on campus. Their efforts show that most students know about the Promise House. However, the survey shows that more needs to be done to eliminate the stigma associated with the Promise House. Further, campuses need to continue to develop new ways to eliminate the stigma associated with the usage of food pantries by being opened and creative new ideas to change the perceptions of students.

Interviews of Food Pantries

I interviewed eight different food pantries in central Ohio on the best practices for running a food pantry. They were all asked the following 7 questions:

1) What/who are your biggest sources of produce? How often do you receive produce?
2) How do you distribute excess amounts of less nutritious foods (i.e. candy, baked goods)?
3) What is your process for fresh produce in the pantry (how long do you keep it, what do you do with excess)?
4) What corporate/local relationships do you have? How are they sustained?
5) How do your eligibility requirements impact these relationships?
6) How do you spread the word about your food pantry?
7) Do you have a garden? If so, how much food do you produce from it?

The large majority of the pantries received their food from Mid-Ohio food bank, except the Promise House and Smokey Row Food Pantry. Mid-Ohio is the largest distributor of food in Ohio. It has eligibility requirements to provide food to shoppers. As a result, food pantries

receiving food must abide by their standards. The Promise House wanted to provide access to all students which means they cannot receive food from Mid-Ohio. Most of the pantries had meals during the holidays and received donations from churches and other organizations as well. They noted how they would receive lots of sweets from churches which was frustrating for some of the operators who struggled to get enough produce. Most food pantries were opened for two set days for about two to four hours at a time. 6 out of 7 food pantries had eligibility requirements, for example, 200% above the poverty line in order to receive assistance. However, many of these pantries will give food to families who do not meet eligibility requirements on their first visit. The eight food pantries that I interviewed relied heavily on word of mouth to spread information about their pantry where they often quoted how long they have been opened in support of their claims. For example, Worthington Resource Pantry explained "they have been established for ten years so word of mouth is their primary way of spreading the word about the pantry". They also relied heavily on social media, which is interesting because access to technology can be problematic for people who are food insecure. Kissane did 20 in-depth interviews with poor women in Kensington, Pennsylvania. Many of the women interviewed did not know where to go for aid from non-profits and if they did, they found out about the non-profits through their social networks. A key takeaway from my interviews is there must be initiatives to better promulgate information about food pantries, especially on college campuses. There also must be consideration for how eligibility requirements may affect students who are food insecure but parents who exceed the requirements.

Potential Barriers Behind Using a Food Pantry

Hours and Lack of Information about Pantry

Hours and lack of information about the pantry play a large role in students' ability to use the pantry. Sarah Yanniello interviewed students at Arkansas University and found that "previous studies identified negative stigma as being the most predominantly identified barrier by participants whereas this study identified physical barriers such as unawareness of pantry existence as the predominant barrier" (Yanniello 2018: 18). Schools need to ensure that information about the pantry is properly given out to the entire student body. Fong studied 53 non-food pantry users to investigate why free food assistance was not utilized. Fong notes how inconvenient times and long lines keep many Americans from utilizing pantries (Fong 2016: 90). El Zein and his colleagues examined students in their study who didn't visit the food pantry (n=584), and found that 11.8% noted that inconvenient hours of operation were a barrier. Students said "hours interfered with class schedules" and how hours were accommodating (El Zein 2018). Hours outside of class time blocks are necessary and providing weekend hours could help alleviate problems of access. Students need to know that the food pantry is willing to support and accommodate the needs of students.

Stigma

There are currently over 375 college food pantries. As a student paying for tuition, students may assume that food pantries are not for them because food insecurity is invisible on most campuses. Lisa Henry interviewed 23 food-insecure students at the University of Northern Texas on stigma and shame. She found that "most participants were quick to say that others were worse off than they were and did not want to take resources from them" (Henry 2017:11). Henry found that since students were paying for tuition, students believed they should be providing for

themselves as well (Henry 2017: 11). In addition, students "were often wary of asking for help from parents and other support networks due to overwhelming feelings of shame stemming from the inability to provide for themselves" (Henry 2017: 13). Kelley Fong and colleagues interviewed 53 families who could utilize food pantries but choose not to in order to investigate why free public food assistance was not utilized. Fong found that many households saw it as "inappropriate to utilize food pantry services given their resources, abilities, and personal situations" because households perceived the pantry as a place for someone needier than them (Fong 2017: 80). Similarly, Henry's interviewees noted they did not know how to bring up the topic of hunger and food scarcity in fear that they "may embarrass their peers who are food insecure" (Henry 2017: 11). As a result, campuses must focus on initiatives that allow all students to feel welcome at the pantry and reduce the stigma associated with using food pantries, with special consideration to creative ways to address these issues.

Best Practices for College Food Pantries

Survey the Need

Colleges and universities must survey the student population to develop an action plan that will address the needs of the student body. Claire Cady notes that "campus administration should be working to assess the number of students who are experiencing food insecurity and developing responses to meet student need" (Cady 2014: 269). Loopstra and Tarasuk interviews found that many of the families "spoke of the mismatch between the assistance food banks offered and their perceptions of their needs" and "problems of poor food quality and limited quantity have been documented in other studies that captured low-income individuals' feelings

about food banks" (Loopstra 2012: 508). The importance of understanding what your student body needs is essential for successful food pantry operation. Survey your student body on what they need as opposed to providing what you think they need. Research has found that donated food is often not appealing and limited in key nutrients (El Zein 2018: 10). Donors may allow pervasive stereotypes of what college students like to affect their donations. The notion that college students may enjoy ramen noodles and easy mac could affect the types of donations received, even though these foods have limited nutritional value. When surveying the student body, you should research hours that work for the students in need and trying to be as accommodating as possible.

Network

There must be a variety of efforts to spread the word about the pantry across campus. By raising awareness of the pantry, stigma can also be reduced. Join organizations like CUFBA. CUFBA is a college and university food bank alliance which provides tool kits on how to start a pantry and shared resources with other college food pantries. Network with your community to partner with local restaurants to help support your organization. Pantries can reach out to local food pantries to build sustainable relationships with organizations who have similar goals and donors. Word of mouth advertising is not sufficient. One of Lisa Henry's interviewees noted "making friends itself is expensive, so I don't really have a huge support network either. Just kind of isolated. It ties into poverty. Poverty isolates you" (Henry 2017: 12). With isolation comes a lack of social networks to help students find resources. A good way to target students is to send emails to Pell-Grant recipients. Make sure to provide information about the pantries at

new student orientation. You also want to work to normalize the stigma surrounding food insecurity. Many pantries provide pizza nights to spread the word about food insecurity. A great way to do this is by showing up at other campus activities and utilizing social media like Facebook and Instagram. Finally, you can send a blurb about your pantry and ask professors to add to the student services section of their syllabus.

Find Donations

If you are struggling to find produce and milk, a good idea is to utilize your local elementary school to donate any unused milk and veggies in a bin at lunch to bring back to your pantry. Another good way to receive produce is through a community garden (you could even bring in biology students and other organizations to help with maintenance). You can work with your food service to provide support and donations for the students they are serving. Some schools have managed to allow students to donate unused swipes to food insecure students.

Volunteers

Volunteers play a major role in the success of a food pantry. You must ensure they are creating a welcoming atmosphere. Dodd researched how "factors such as staff attitude and morale and the stigma attached to participation in social welfare programs impact negatively on the use of services by low-income populations" (Dodd 2016: 107). In turn, their experiences at your food pantry could affect whether they receive help in other aspects of their life later.

Reduce the Stigma

Student's on college campuses need to realize they are not alone in their experiences with food insecurity. A study in the UK found that all of their thirty four interviewees suggested that they felt a sense of embarrassment going to a food bank (Purdam 2016: 1079). A pantry can

attempt to "employ marketing strategies to "rebrand" the food pantry with input from students in need" (El Zein 2018: 10). The Promise House sought to rebrand by labelling itself as a resource pantry. El Zein believes that "rather than communicating about the food pantry as a resource for those who are in a food-shortage crisis, a food pantry can be a community resource connected with other wellness resources" (El Zein 2018: 10).

Provide Community Resources

Food pantries are a Band-Aid to larger systemic issues. By providing community resources, "issues can be addressed like economic instability and campus career services that may be able to assist with employment opportunities" (Twill 2016: 352). If you network with other college food pantries, they can help you find these resources to provide to students. Kicininski found that "long-term unemployment was found to be a contributing factor to food pantry use in this research, with 37 percent of those unemployed without a job for more than two years" (Kiciniski 2012: 68). Instead of being a band-aid to systemic issues, the essential goal should be to provide community resources such as administering information on mental health services, food stamps, job placement and SNAP benefits.

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Discussion

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There is much research to be done on food scarcity among college students and the barriers to receiving help. Bruening corroborates a lack in variation among the types of colleges reviewed, which were mainly four year institutions (Bruening 2017: 1787). There is a high prevalence of food insecurity among community colleges. She recommends studies of food insecurity "on the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of food insecurity in rural and small town postsecondary education settings, Hispanic-serving institutions, historically black

colleges and universities, community and technical colleges, and for-profit universities"
(Bruening 2017: 1787). There should be extended discussions of food insecurity based on the
type of college.

Research should also consider the study of non-profits to see if it is possible to be discreet
when providing things like food and housing. Researchers need to consider if it benefits users to
be discreet and if it is even possible to be discreet. Similarly, there is a lack of research on
whether peers running a food pantry will affect student's usage. As a college student, there are
thousands of expectations coming from media, friends and family. Many researchers have noted
that one of the leading impediments to using the food pantry are social stigma and
embarrassment (El Zein 2018). An important discussion must consider if being discreet benefits
the social stigma and embarrassment associated with food pantries. Lisa Henry argues that "food
insecurity solutions should be discreet, protect student confidentiality, and work to alleviate
stigma associated with food insecurity by raising awareness on campus" (Henry 2017: 17).
However, there is an absence of research on if a person can ever be fully discrete. Food pantries
are usually run by volunteers. Otterbein's Promise House utilizes students to help check shoppers
out. They also require volunteers to register as shoppers to reduce stigma and provide them with
ample statistical information to better serve their shoppers. How does a student-run facility deter
students in need away because of stigma and embarrassment? If students are embarrassed
because they need food, the student-run facility could play into the social stigma. More research
is needed to shed light on how volunteers shape the experiences of shoppers and if a pantry run
by peers has an effect on stigma. The alternative to staffing a pantry with student volunteers
would be to hire a staff member. However, a cost benefit analysis should consider how much it

would it cost to fully staff a pantry, especially when you could just pay for food-insecure student's meal programs. Would it be more discreet if students with the pell-grant received swipes instead of all the work that gets put into a food pantry?

Many of the authors who have researched food insecurity on college campuses call for more discrete measures, however, there must be a clarification and more research on what being discrete looks like and if it is beneficial. In addition, researchers must consider whether campuses programming is serving as a band-aid or if it's lowering the numbers of students who are food insecure. There also should be research on which initiatives work best to lower stigma and how best to spread the word about food pantries beyond using word of mouth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, food pantries on college campuses are a growing trend. There is a plethora of barriers to students who are food insecure from receiving help. It is important to recognize that food pantries are often a temporary solution to a larger systemic problem. As a result, providing resources to help student's combat food insecurity is necessary for food pantries to begin to address the issues seen across campuses in the United States. If a student lacks access to the right food, a student could be affected both academically, mentally and physically. Food security "goes beyond nutrition and is related to aspects of identity and can be a key part of family life and a sense of home" (Purdam 2016: 1083). Student's should feel like their campuses support them. They should also feel a sense of home so they can continue to pursue their education. Therefore, continued research must find innovative ways to address food insecurity. The Promise House provides an innovative step in the right direction towards combating the

issues of food security. However, no approach is perfect and all require evaluation and continued

efforts to improve. There are pragmatic ways that we can begin to address the issues surrounding

food pantries on college campuses, especially based on new research.

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