Food for Thought: Food Insecurity in Women attending Community Colleges

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Abstract

To investigate food insecurity in community college students, our research team developed a mixed methods study. For the first phase, we interviewed 16 Maryland community college administrators to determine which community colleges had food banks or food pantries. The second phase involved gathering in depth information from 6 community college leaders who have food pantries on their campuses, about food insecurity and student success. Phase 3 consisted of surveying 200+ community college students in Fall 2017, using a survey that measured food insecurity and student success, defined as what students must do to successfully complete their college program. For this project, student success includes two elements that can lead to completion – concentration levels and energy levels, and one traditional metric of success, grade point average (GPA). Our research validates earlier studies and highlights the particular problem areas for women students in community colleges. We found that they are more likely to be food insecure than men attending community colleges. In addition, the most food insecure students in our research were single parents and minority women. Moreover, using a Pell Grant to pay for school was a predictor of food insecurity for women in general. Finally, women over 20 were almost three times more likely to be food insecure than younger women.

Introduction

Within the last five years, food insecurity has come to the forefront as a retention issue for community college students in the United States. Research has shown over 50% of community college students reporting marginal, high, or very high levels of food insecurity, therefore, many community college students are hungry. Rates of food insecurity are highest among those community college students receiving a Pell grant (federal financial aid) and students with children, with 63% of parenting students reporting low levels of food security (Goldrick-Rab, S., Richard, J., & Hernandez. A., 2017, March). The majority of parenting students (71%) in the United States are women (Eckerson, et al., 2016).

Community Colleges in the United States

As one of the major components for the U. S. economic development engine, community colleges provide workforce training and offer a competitive edge for many states trying to entice business and industry to locate in their regions. Community colleges, as open access institutions, attract traditional aged and adult learners who often use the community college as a gateway to establishing or maintaining a middle class status. Juszkiewicz's (2016) research shows that of the community college students who started in Fall 2009, 38.2% completed a program of study within six years. Moreover, only 29% of community college students obtain an associate degree in three years.

Completion rates and income have a strong relationship with one estimate showing that students with family incomes in the top income quartile, graduate at a rate six times those in the lowest quartile. Many students who drop out of college indicate that they are doing so for financial reasons. Financial aid is not keeping pace with the rising costs of tuition and books. Based on income levels, students in the U. S. are eligible for financial aid to assist them in paying for college through a federal grant, the Pell Grant, which at one time covered most of their tuition. Today, the Pell Grant is covering approximately 60% of tuition. Women, students of color, and students between the ages of 25 and 39 are most likely to receive a Pell Grant. In addition, the majority of Pell Grant recipients (61%) at community colleges are living below the poverty threshold--$21,756 for a family of four (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017).

For many years, community college stakeholders have bemoaned low retention, completion, and graduation rates. Community colleges in the U. S. serve traditional 18 – 19 years old. In addition, they serve non-traditional students—single parents and adults returning to school to learn new skills. However, 56% of community college students are women (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Students of color are most likely to begin their college careers at community colleges. At four-year institutions, 25% of the female students are Latina or African American, however, at community colleges they comprise 33% of the female population. For many years, females have been the majority of 2-year and 4-year college students. The National Student Clearinghouse Media Center (2017) reported the largest gap ever between genders with females being 57.3% of the Fall 2017 college enrollees. The gap between female and male students is largest for African American community college students, with 63% being female (St. Rose & Hill, 2013).

Like many women in the United State, these women who are enrolled in college are also breadwinners, and heads of household, and earn 74 cents for every dollar a man makes. Making ends meet can be difficult for women. One out of eight women (16.3 million) in the U.S. lived in poverty in 2016, and minority women were twice as likely to be poor. Single parent families, headed by females, were 5.4 times more likely to live in poverty than married-couple families. Sixty percent of poor children resided within a female-headed household. Native women and Black women were the poorest in the country, with 23% and 21%, respectively living below the poverty line (National Women's Law Center, 2017).

Women in Community Colleges and Poverty

For many women attempting to raise themselves and their children out of poverty, higher education may be the answer. Throughout the nation, community colleges open their doors to all who will come, yet many poor students begin and cannot complete a program or graduate with a degree due to lack of comprehensive resources to support the whole student. The data tell the story, and yet from most of the research on student financial health or financial stability, we conclude that students are the problem when it seems obvious that the problem lies with a lack of funds on the part of our poorest students.

Women in particular are victims of our misinterpretation of data on financial instability for community college students. One often overlooked factor in need of investigation for female community college students is the impact of food insecurity, defined as an inadequate level of nutritional and safe food or the inability to obtain foods in a socially acceptable manner. In 2016, households with children headed by a single woman (31.6%) had the highest rate of food insecurity in the U. S. (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2017). Estimates of food insecurity in the U. S. indicate that those with children under the 18 and without a spouse are more likely to be food insecure than the majority of Americans.

Food Insecurity and Community College Women

Researchers have examined the paradox between food insecurity and obesity (Food Research Action Center, 2016). The paradox stems from the fact that the healthier and more nutritious foods are more expensive while cheaper foods with filler, chemicals, and low cost ingredients are cheaper and chosen more frequently by low income households (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). Further, research suggests the rise of food insecurity, particularly as related to unemployment rates. For every percentage point increase in the unemployment rate, the rate of food insecurity increases .05% (Nord, Colemen-Jensen, & Christian, 2011).

As applied to education, currently over 34 million low-cost or free meals are served in America's K–12 educational system through the National School Lunch Program; however, no such school food safety net exists for the nation's college students (Maroto, 2013). Given that no safety net exists at the postsecondary level, and that community colleges attract more minority and low-income populations, community college students are more likely to experience food insecurity (Nord, et al, 2011; Maroto, 2013). Moreover, a review of the literature revealed that one study found a relationship between food insecurity and student success. Maroto (2013) surveyed students at two community colleges and found a significant relationship between food insecurity and grade point average (GPA), energy levels, and concentration levels for community college students. Using Maroto's (2013) research as a guide, the researchers for the current study surveyed students at four community colleges in the United States and addressed the gap in the literature related to food insecurity for community college students and the effect that food insecurity has on GPA, energy levels and concentration levels.

Several studies have found differences in food insecurity for community college students based on gender. Maroto, Snelling, and Linck (2015) found male community college students were less likely to be food insecure than female students with 58% of the female students in their study being food insecure versus 53% of the males. Maroto et al. (2015) also found that 77% of the single parents were food insecure in comparison to 54% of the sample who were food insecure but not single parents. Additional research has shown that 63% of parenting students were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab, S., Richard, J., & Hernandez. A., 2017, March) and, that 55% of community college students receiving Pell Grants were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J. Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C., 2018, March). Finally, research by Wood, Harris, & Delgado (2016) has shown that multiethnic women reported the greatest exposure to food insecurity, at 1.8 times higher than other women in their study

Methodology

To investigate food insecurity in community college students, our team of researchers developed a mixed methods study. For the first phase, 16 community college administrators were interviewed to determine which community colleges had food banks or food pantries. The second phase involved gathering in depth information from six community college leaders who have food pantries on their campuses, about food insecurity and student success. Student success was defined as what students must do to complete their college program, successfully. Phase 3 consisted of surveying 200+ community college students in Fall 2017, using Maroto's (2013) modified version of the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) that measured food insecurity and student success. For this project, student success included two elements that can lead to completion – concentration levels and energy levels, and one traditional metric of success, grade point average (GPA).

Phase 1 Findings and Discussion

For the first phase of this study, qualitative data were gathered from 16 community college administrators, most of whom administered a food pantry for their institution. Data were gathered through phone interviews in Spring, 2017. The questions included the following:

Food Insecurity Study, Protocol of Questions for Phase 1
Do you have a food pantry or food bank?
What offices (within the institution) manage the food pantry?
How many people staff the food pantry?
Is the pantry staffed by volunteers, staff, or both?
What are the procedures for requesting food?
What is the source of food for the food pantry?
How are donations for food collected?
Is there an application or form to apply for the food? If yes, is there a sample available that you would be willing to send to me?
What days and hours is the food pantry open?
Any comments or further information that you would like to add?

In January and February 2017, of the community colleges in this study that were polled, 12 of 16 reported having a food bank or food pantry or food program. Since that time one community college that was polled in Phase 1, has received a grant to establish a food pantry on campus. Therefore, the information below is based on information from 12 institutions. At most community colleges, the food pantries were being managed by the Office of Student Life, Activities, or Engagement. Five colleges had partners who support the food pantries. Those partners included the Red Cross, National Council of Negro Women, Maryland Food Bank, Whole Foods, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), college and local foundations, local churches, various business organizations. For most colleges, the food banks are open during normal business hours. One college had evening hours two days a week. Of the two colleges that had VISTA grants, one operated 25 hours per week and the other operated 6.5 hours per week. Most food was collected through donations made by faculty, staff, and students on campus. Some colleges had food drives and other fundraisers. In addition, some institutions had business partners and local organizations, including churches and non-profits who support the food pantry. Most community colleges in this study required a student ID or college ID to obtain food from the pantries.

Phase 2 Findings and Discussion

Phase II of the Food Insecurity research offered in-depth interviews with community college administrators who manage or who oversee the management of food pantries on their campuses. Six food pantry representatives and administrators of community colleges were interviewed to determine their role in conducting the services of food pantry availability and forms of distribution of services to college students. Because qualitative research seeks to make sense of the impressions and considerations of persons closely associated with the study at hand, the responses to the research questions are aggregated and noted for similarities and differences as they respond to questions. The researcher then derives common coding processes to interpret those responses, ultimately narrowing down that research to common themes.
Themes from this study and the participants who responded include the following: college buy-in to food pantries on their campuses, personal and college experiences, student needs and experiences, enhancement or hindrances of the contemporary onsite programs, and preliminary evaluations. While we traveled around the state to survey community college students, we were sometimes surprised by the nature of the conversations of the college administrators.

In determining the reasons each college and its administrator was inspired to commit to a need for a food pantry on their campus, we were reminded that the situation (or need for food pantries) was a carry-over from K-12 where free and assisted lunch was a norm; also, we were reminded of the concomitant issue of homelessness for students. In rural areas of the state where wide-spread poverty prevailed, it was common that the issue was not just a local one. Student needs were also recognized by college student government and reporting to their student services personnel. Common language included the following— (we have a) "high need," "we don't ask questions about needs," "we could barely keep the food pantry stocked," "(we are) dependent on community and college faculty and staff donations," and "we have little experience managing food pantries on college campuses." One particular story stood out—our informer explained that one of their students had died. When faculty and staff came together to discuss the student's role at the college several remembered that the student was always hungry and vocal about her need of lunch money. "From that recollection, we realized that many of our students were and are at-risk academically because they were and are hungry." Their ensuing research demonstrated that since "students were struggling with food, we decided to give out food in a non-intimidating manner." Another college, realizing their overwhelming need wrote a grant for supplying foodstuffs to "retain at-risk students."

Moreover, all the food pantries we visited were just "being set up and getting started," had little or no experience in running a food pantry, had limited space for providing mostly donated food, had not designated college budgeting for the food pantry, and that most participants were amazed that such an issue occurred on their campus. They said: " I had no idea of the scope of this issue,' "it is unbelievable how many of our students, and their families are in need of nourishment and good food in their homes," "now I realize what a crisis food insecurity is on college campuses," "we were determined to make this situation resemble a safe space for our students so they felt comfortable using the service," "it had to be a spot with no stigma involved," and "we did not realize the relationship between hunger and academic risk, retention, and poor grades."

Data about student use was nonexistent, considering both the organization and late arrival of the college to the understanding that a food pantry was "desperately needed." Moreover, since students do not have to *qualify* to receive food, data are more difficult to keep. Numbers of students who come in are guessed at since there are no gatekeepers, but the contention is that "plenty of students come to the facility often, not only for themselves but also for their family." When we inquired about the college's data set for the pantries, the participants seemed reluctant to respond. Upon further questioning, we realized that their sensitivities to student needs precluded any "number counting." Furthermore, we were reminded by the respondents that "we try not to ask all kinds of questions."

Student need and use of the pantries was fairly typical—some students came in on a daily basis, some a couple times a week, some 10 times a week, and more came in during the 9-5pm period than in the evening. Because faculty and staff were cautious about requirements to use the food pantry, generally no identification or sign-in was required from the students. Average student use of the food pantry is about 20-35%. "Some of the participants of our food pantry also use other local food pantries and then donate to us what they cannot use." Maintaining student "anonymity and dignity" seemed to be the sine qua non of most of the food programs on college campuses. At some colleges, resources are so urgently needed, the administrators discovered they had to reach out to the state's food banks to provide a wider range for community donations.

Donations were made from individuals either from the college or community advocates as colleges had not, with one exception, budgeted for food pantries. One college has designated a small budget for enhancing the food pantry donations, but almost all the colleges are considering the need for more funds and services for students with food insecurities. Student services offices had little or no experience with food pantries, but they were the go-to administrative unit for organizing and maintaining the food pantries. Moreover, student services personnel seem to be the *voice* of the college food pantries, encouraging student use, emphasizing the intimacy of use (no questions asked, and providing support and safe spaces for shopping) by individuals, and the need to expand services. Financial considerations as of this date are based on contributions and donations by administration, faculty, staff, board members, and community representatives. As researchers, we observed very little evidence of coordination with local businesses, industry, or welfare agencies.

Interest in the success of the food pantries was also included in these discussions. We learned that rural colleges frame their identity on a *take care of your neighbor-type of community* concept which meant where there is a need, both the college and the community try to work together to address common issues. At separate colleges, Student Life offices are joined by Adult Education programs and community help-line programs. All the colleges emphasized their commitment to students and their being vested in and caring about students. All the participants confessed their observations were drawn not from data collection but from anecdotal phenomena.

In summary, what we learned in the qualitative phase of the study was focused primarily on participants' genuine concern and caring for their students, whom they saw as worthy of protection from the infamy of being on the dole. Although the food pantries could be primarily counted on for simple foodstuffs (number one on every list was Ramen noodles), they rarely provided fresh fruit or vegetables. What we discovered was the need for further research on ways to keep the pantries full, to devise a systematic way of collecting data without comprising anonymity, and finally, to research food insecurity over a greater area and with more community colleges. Our research reminds us that we must never forget that the "right to food is a basic human right" (Hunger Notes, n.d.).

Phase 3 Findings and Discussion

The results of the student survey phase of this study consist of data collected from four community colleges in a Mid-Atlantic state. The survey, the HFSSM, was a self-reported instrument and consisted of 27 items. Eight of those items created the concept of food insecurity for this study. In addition, for the purposes of data analysis, the measure of food insecurity was converted into a categorical variable where the responses were recoded into two categories – food insecure and food secure. In this study the researchers examined the relationship between food insecurity and student success based on three measures – concentration level, energy level, and grade point average. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents in this study were women. Of the participants in this study (n=217), 52% indicated that they were food insecure. A statistically significant relationship was found between energy level and food insecurity for the community college students who participated in this study. In addition, 22% of the respondents said that they had lost weight as a result of not having enough money to buy food, and of that 22%, the majority (68%) were women. Almost 40% of the respondents indicated that they ate less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food, and more than half (62%) of those respondents were females. Finally, 64% indicated that they were not able to eat balanced meals, and of that number, the majority were female. Of those participants who designated that they were single parents, 80% of those were female. Single parents and females of color had the highest rates of food insecurity, with 53% of the single parents in this study being the most food insecure.

Students in the U. S. are eligible for financial aid to assist them in paying for college through a federal grant, the Pell grant. The lower the income, the more funding one is likely to receive through a Pell grant. Minority women using a Pell grant to pay for school, was a predictor of food insecurity in this study. They were 3 times more likely to be food insecure than women who did not receive a Pell grant, when controlling for other variables. For women with children, average income was a predictor of food insecurity. Also, women with children who had an average income of $500 or less were 32 times more likely to be food insecure than those who did not know their income, when controlling for other variables.
For women, in general, both Pell grant and age were predictors of food insecurity. Women who received Pell grants were 2.3 times more likely to be food insecure than women who did not receive a Pell grant, when controlling for other variables. In addition, women who were over 20 were 2.8 times more likely to be food insecure than women who were 18.

Conclusion

Several studies have shown that food insecurity is an issue for community college students (Goldrick-Rab, S., Richard, J., & Hernandez. A., 2017, March; Maroto, 2013; Wood, J.L., Harris III, F., & Delgado, N.R., 2016). Our research validates those earlier studies and highlights the particular problem areas for women. This research shows that women community college students are more food insecure than men. In addition, the most food insecure students in our research were single parents and minority women. Moreover, using a Pell Grant to pay for school was a predictor of food insecurity for women in general. Finally, women over 20 were almost three times more likely to be food insecure than younger women. With these statistics in mind, it might behoove community college administrators to review support services for women students, paying particular attention to minority women and those receiving a Pell Grant. Some solutions might be expanded menus and services for food pantries, discounted meals at on-campus cafeterias, food scholarships, and emergency funds targeted for single parents and minority women.

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