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Student Hunger: Addressing Food Insecurity Among Community College Students in Washington State

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On average, more than half of community college students in the United States struggle with food insecurity, which is significant considering that community colleges enroll nearly half of the student population that begins college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Food insecurity occurs when one experiences uncertain availability or limited access to adequate foods (Fincher et al., 2018). Community college students' health, well-being, and academic success are at a greater risk than students at four-year institutions, especially considering the diverse demographic of community college students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017).

As the impacts of food insecurity are being recognized as a national health issue within higher education, many institutions have established food pantries on campus as an effort to support students struggling with food insecurity. Food pantries are a crucial first step that can provide immediate relief to students in need. Yet, it is also critical for community colleges to have other services in conjunction with traditional pantries to provide more than just non-perishable foods, as well as give students the knowledge and skills that can serve as protective factors against food insecurity in the long run. This research brief will examine how five community colleges within Washington State operate their food pantries, as well as other resources or services that further support students at risk of food insecurity.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BACKGROUND

HISTORY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The development of two-year institutions or community colleges is considered a twentieth-century phenomenon where the demand for access to higher education swiftly grew and enrollment quickly expanded in the early 1900s (Cohen et al., 2014). Community colleges were primarily created to provide vocational education at the lower level of higher education's stratified system; the main focus of two-year institutions when they first emerged was to prepare students for the middle-class workforce in response to market pressure from educational consumers, local community interests, and an industrialized economy (Labaree, 2017). The value of education after secondary school gradually grew when the President's Commission on Higher Education was established in 1947 by President Truman, which articulated the United States' priorities to improve college access and equity, as well as expand the role of community colleges (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Now, in addition to vocational education, community colleges also provide students developmental education, continuing education, four-year degree programs, or the opportunity to transfer to a four-year school (Cohen et al., 2014). President Clinton's Call to Action for American Education emphasized the idea that community colleges are important by making the thirteenth and fourteenth years of education as universal as a high school diploma (Clinton, 1998). President Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative, which cited the need for an educated nation by setting a goal to graduate an additional five million community college students (Obama, 2009). Additionally, the focus on community colleges during the Obama administration advanced the visibility, appreciation, and validation of community colleges' role in supporting students' success within higher education - and beyond (Hornak et al., 2018).

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Compared to other sectors of higher education, the average cost of attending community colleges continues to be the lowest, which affords access to postsecondary education to many students, especially for low-income individuals who attend in their local communities (AACC, 2020). As a low-cost, easy-access institutional tier, community colleges take on the unique role of being the "jack-of-all-trades" by trying to offer something for everyone; thus, everyone can potentially be a student (Cohen et al., 2014; Levinson, 2005). Number and variety are the most distinctive features of community college students. The growth in student enrollment numbers

increased dramatically from just over "two million by 1970, four million by 1980, nearly six million [by 2000], and over 7.5 million by 2010" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 53; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In terms of variety in comparison to four-year institutions, a higher proportion of community college students are a non-traditional age (older than 25), have lower levels of academic preparedness, and tend to reflect the ethnic composition of the local community surrounding the institution. Racial and ethnic minority students make up a significant percentage of community college populations, but this varies across states depending on the minority population. According to the Department of Education, the data reveal that Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately enrolled in the two-year sector (Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges serve a large proportion of first-generation and low-income students, and these institutions also play a role in educating international students and undocumented students (Cohen et al., 2014). With low tuition, minimal entrance requirements, and ease of access, community colleges are able to provide something for all students to succeed regardless of their background, level of academic preparedness, or intervening life responsibilities.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Food insecurity is a growing problem among college students in the United States. The issue occurs when one experiences "limited access or uncertain availability of nutritional, healthy, and safe foods" (Fincher et al., 2018, p. 51) and cannot acquire such foods "in a socially acceptable manner" (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017, p. 3). If students are struggling with chronic hunger or don't have their basic physiological needs met (Maslow & Lewis, 1987), they are forced to negotiate their academic success, psychological health, and physical well-being as they're working towards degree completion (Bruening et al. 2018; Maroto et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2018; Wood & Harris, 2018). While food insecurity has an impact on students at both two-year and four-year institutions, community college students face a greater risk (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017); 25% of community college students struggle with very low food security in comparison to 20% of students at four-year schools (Dubick et al., 2016). Other studies estimate that over 50% of community college students are food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017), which is likely considering that community colleges enroll nearly half of the student population that begins college in the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Additionally, the issue of food insecurity tends to be more prevalent among students of color who are a significant percentage of community

college students.

According to Goldrick-Rab (2016), food insecurity is affecting so many students today because the “new economics” of higher education has increased the tuition cost of community colleges. In recent decades, community colleges have experienced declines in state revenue, higher tuition, and increased enrollment (D’Amico et al., 2012), making higher education too expensive, especially for low-income students even with the assistance of financial aid (Abad, 2018). Policies and social safety nets that are supposed to mitigate against poverty are weaker now than in the past, and employment does not generate enough steady income to allow students to sufficiently cover the cost of college (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Additionally, the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated the issue of food insecurity by causing a reduction in agricultural production and efficient distribution, as well as delaying transportation (Kulkarni et al., 2020). With the rising cost of postsecondary education paired with a looming financial crisis, global economic recession, and current pandemic (Roubini & Rosa, 2018), it is a crucial time for researchers and practitioners to focus on how two-year institutions can support historically marginalized students and respond to economic maelstrom, especially when community colleges often see a significant increase in enrollment during recessionary times (D’Amico et al., 2012).

INCREASED RISK OF FOOD SECURITY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Studies consistently reveal that college students experience higher rates of food insecurity compared to nonstudent households (Bruening et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018), with community college students facing a greater risk of being food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). As a high-risk population for food insecurity, college students have been observed to be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to various factors: a change or loss of current employment, a change in living arrangement, unqualification for federal food assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), ineligibility to receive federal stimulus check, and/or low food literacy related to their ability to effectively purchase and prepare meals (Owens et al., 2020). Since February 2020, unemployment in the United States has increased from 3.5% to 11.1% in June 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020), causing a government response that expanded food assistance programs, released stimulus checks up to \$1200, and increased unemployment benefits (Owens et al., 2020).

However, college students are disproportionately impacted because they often are not eligible to receive immediate assistance from these federal and state programs. For example, students can’t receive SNAP benefits if they are unable to work 20 hours a week (due to loss of employment) and many didn’t receive a stimulus check of their own if their parents’ tax returns claimed them as dependents (Owens et al., 2020). Therefore, even though nonstudent households have experienced a similar elevated risk for food security (Bauer, 2020; Wolfson & Leung, 2020), this unique set of factors may have increased the risk of food insecurity among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are two-year institutions in Washington State supporting students at risk of food insecurity?
2. Beyond food pantries, what protective factors can two-year institutions give students to mitigate the risk of food insecurity?

RESEARCH APPROACH

To begin this research, I reviewed the Washington State Community and Technical Colleges Field Guides from 2018-2020 to examine the complete list of community colleges located in Washington State, as well as the specific Points of Interest for each two-year institution. Among the 34 community colleges, I identified five institutions that mentioned basic needs, food security, or a food pantry in their Points of Interest, which led me to identify the following institutions: Cascadia College, Clark College, South Seattle College, Tacoma Community College, and Walla Walla Community College. I searched the websites of these five community colleges to find evidence that a campus food pantry exists, as well as discover what other basic needs initiatives are in place beyond a traditional pantry that can better support students at risk of food insecurity.

CASCADIA COLLEGE

- Established in 1994
- Enrollment Headcount (2018-2019): 5,032
- Full Time Equivalent Students (2018-2019): 2,749
- Need-Based Financial Aid in Eligible Program: 17%
- Students Who Work: 57%
- Race and Ethnicity:
 - Black or African American: 5%
 - Asian or Asian American: 22%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 16%
 - Native American: 3%
 - Pacific Islander: 1%
 - Other Race, Multiracial: 2%
 - White/Caucasian: 64%

Source: 2020 Field Guide by State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

*Students may be counted in more than one race. Percentages calculated on reported value, so may not add up to 100%.



Cascadia College is a small public community college located in Bothell, Washington on a campus shared with the University of Washington, Bothell. Founded in 1994, Cascadia College is the newest community college addition in the state. In 2018, the institution opened the Kodiak Cave which serves as an emergency food resource center after a campus survey revealed that 43% of students worry about running out of food before they have enough money to purchase more and 44% of respondents were food insecure in the recent month (K. Jones, personal communication, July 8, 2020). The Kodiak Cave, strives to end campus hunger by allowing students to select food that best meets their needs, but it is also more than just a food pantry; it provides educational opportunities to students by sharing information about nutrition, healthy recipes, and budgeting when shopping (Cascadia College, 2018). Cascadia students can visit frequently for snack items, but they're limited to one full shopping trip three times an academic quarter. While the Kodiak Cave is financially supported by Cascadia student fees, public donations help ensure that this resource remains open and is properly stocked.

CLARK COLLEGE

- Established in 1933
- Enrollment Headcount (2018-2019): 21, 913
- Full Time Equivalent Students (2018-2019): 8,045
- Need-Based Financial Aid in Eligible Program: 38%
- Students Who Work: 45%
- Race and Ethnicity:
 - Black or African American: 5%
 - Asian or Asian American: 8%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 15%
 - Native American: 3%
 - Pacific Islander: 2%
 - Other Race, Multiracial: 3%
 - White/Caucasian: 76%

Source: 2020 Field Guide by State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

*Students may be counted in more than one race. Percentages calculated on reported value, so may not add up to 100%.



Located in Vancouver, Washington, **Clark College** is a large public community college that has one main campus with three satellite locations distributed throughout Clark County. Founded in 1933 as a junior college, today Clark College is the largest higher education institution in southwest Washington and offers a span of educational opportunities ranging from professional certification to four-year degrees. The institution believes that basic needs are basic rights. The campus upholds the motto “money shouldn’t stop your education” (State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2020). In 2017, Clark College established the Penguin Pantry on the main campus, which has become an important resource since 43% of its students are low-income and 23% of its students have dependent children (Clark College, n.d.). In 2018, Clark College’s campus-wide surveys revealed that 33% of students reported being food or housing insecure (Clark College, n.d.).The Penguin Pantry strives to reduce campus hunger by providing a safe, comfortable location for students to get free food, hygiene products, and school supplies. The pantry is open to all Clark students, where they can help themselves to three snacks and

one beverage each day, six grocery items a week, and as many toiletries and school supplies as they need. In addition to this, the pantry makes an effort to connect students with additional resources such as counseling, public benefits, and community food banks. Clark College's Penguin Pantry is an agency partner of the Clark County Food Bank, as well as a member of the College/University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) (Clark College, n.d.). With goals to continue expanding the campus pantry, Clark College opened the Snack Shack, which is open the only day the Penguin Pantry is closed (Fachiol, 2019).

before having money to purchase more and 44% said they couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). When SSC recognized the realities of food insecurity among its students, the institution's Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and Student Life Department teamed up to create a campus food pantry to provide free food and tolietry items in order to help students struggling with food insecurity (South Seattle College, n.d.). The campus pantry receives partial funding from Student Service and Activity Fees along with donations from community sponsors. Within its first full year of operation from 2017-2018, over 1,500 students were served by the pantry, which allows them to properly focus on their studies instead of their hunger (State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2019). All enrolled students at SSC can access the pantry once per week and select a limited number of categorized, non-perishable items. Sometimes stationed at the food pantry are members from the United Way Benefit Hub that help eligible students sign up for SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), as well as connect students to additional housing, food, and financial resources both on and off campus. The Benefit Hub also has emergency funds that can be granted once per academic quarter to help students pay for unforeseen expenses that put students at risk of dropping out, and these funds can provide immediate relief to food insecure students struggling to make ends meet (South Seattle College, n.d.).

SOUTH SEATTLE COLLEGE

- Established in 1970
- Enrollment Headcount (2018-2019): 13,920
- Full Time Equivalent Students (2018-2019): 5,234
- Need-Based Financial Aid in Eligible Program: 27%
- Students Who Work: 64%
- Race and Ethnicity:
 - Black or African American: 15%
 - Asian or Asian American: 19%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 9%
 - Native American: 3%
 - Pacific Islander: 2%
 - Other Race, Multiracial: 8%
 - White/Caucasian: 52%

Source: 2020 Field Guide by State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

*Students may be counted in more than one race. Percentages calculated on reported value, so may not add up to 100%.



**South Seattle
Community College**

South Seattle College (SSC) is a public open-access community college located in West Seattle, Washington. This institution is one of three colleges that make up the Seattle Colleges District. Founded in 1970, SSC was officially designated as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) in 2011 (South Seattle College, n.d.). Studies revealed that 40% of students at SSC experienced food insecurity within the last 30 days. More specifically, 46% reported being worried about running out of food

TACOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

- Established in 1965
- Enrollment Headcount (2018-2019): 12,192
- Full Time Equivalent Students (2018-2019): 6,182
- Need-Based Financial Aid in Eligible Program: 35%
- Students Who Work: 53%
- Race and Ethnicity:
 - Black or African American: 15%
 - Asian or Asian American: 17%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 13%
 - Native American: 4%
 - Pacific Islander 3%
 - White/Caucasian: 65%

Source: 2020 Field Guide by State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

*Students may be counted in more than one race. Percentages calculated on reported value, so may not add up to 100%



Walla Walla
Community College

Founded in 1965, **Tacoma Community College (TCC)** is a public two-year institution located in Tacoma, Washington with satellite operations in two locations. TCC's Max & Margi Harned Titan Food Pantry was started by two students for a class project, but officially developed into a permanent resource when their TCC student survey revealed that 40% reported skipping meals to stretch their financial resources and 74% said that hunger or lack of food had an impact on their educational studies (Sailor, 2018; Tacoma Community College, n.d.). Established in 2018, the pantry is opened to all TCC students to get food for the day or for home, and also provides resource referrals to community services that can further help students struggling with food insecurity. Each year, the pantry is estimated to provide between 2,000-3,000 unduplicated students with food (Tacoma Community College, n.d.). In addition to the traditional pantry, the Nourish Mobile Food Bank is a full-service food bank on wheels stationed on TCC's campus once a week, providing food beyond the pantry's non-perishable items such as fresh produce.

As a public two-year institution, **Walla Walla Community College (WWCC)** was founded in 1967 and has significantly grown across four campus sites even though its main campus is located in Walla Walla, Washington. WWCC's main campus houses the Warrior Resources Food Pantry, which strives to help students meet their basic needs by providing students with short-term food supplies, educating students on how to best manage resources available to them, and connecting students to campus and community resources (WWCC, n.d.).

A WWCC survey in 2017 indicated that 67% of its students experienced food insecurity, but only 39% knew that a food pantry existed on campus even though all current students are welcomed to use the pantry (WWCC Communications Committee, 2018). Since September 2017, WWCC's campus pantry has distributed over 7,500 pounds of food to over 330 students (State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2020). Recently in 2019, WWCC's TRiO Student Support Services opened a food closet in student spaces in both the Clarkston and Walla Walla campus locations where students can anonymously take snacks (TRiO Student Support Services, 2020). Additionally, WWCC has the Basic Food Employment & Training (BRE&T) program which offers employment readiness opportunities to students who are eligible SNAP recipients who are not already participating in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (WWCC, n.d.) More specifically, BRE&T provides education and job skill training, assistance with job searching, and support services that can help pay for child care.

WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

- Established in 1967
- Enrollment Headcount (2018-2019): 9,237
- Full Time Equivalent Students (2018-2019): 4,574
- Need-Based Financial Aid in Eligible Program: 55%
- Students Who Work: 44%
- Race and Ethnicity:
 - Black or African American: 3%
 - Asian or Asian American: 3%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 27%
 - Native American: 3%
 - Pacific Islander 1%
 - Other Race, Multiracial: 1%
 - White/Caucasian: 67%

Source: 2020 Field Guide by State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

*Students may be counted in more than one race. Percentages calculated on reported value, so may not add up to 100%.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering how significant the issue of food insecurity is among community college students, it was insightful to examine how two-year institutions in Washington have implemented campus food pantries as an effort to support students at risk of food insecurity. However, while food pantries may address students' hunger and immediate needs, they are a temporary bandage on a greater health issue. While food pantries are a crucial resource that can have a significant impact on the lives

of those in need, there needs to be additional services in conjunction to the pantries that are focused on giving students the knowledge and skill that can serve as protective factors against food insecurity in the future.

In addition to the campus food pantry, I discovered other resources and services in place at various two-year institutions in Washington state. At Cascadia College, students can gain knowledge about basic budgeting, nutrition, and healthy recipes. At Clark College, hygiene and school supplies are provided at the pantry in addition to food. At South Seattle College, students can apply for emergency grants or use the BenefitHub to get assistance applying for SNAP benefits. At Tacoma Community College, there's a mobile food bank that provides students access to more fresh, healthier foods. Lastly, Walla Walla Community College offers BRE&T, which can assist with job searching, skill training, or child care services.

In addition to these resources and services, some small changes that are simple to implement and would be the following:

- Place a microwave in accessible locations for students to heat up food (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019).
- Make snacks available in areas that students frequently hang out to allow students to get food without drawing attention to themselves (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019).
- Use technology or social media to notify students when there is free food events or food resources on campus (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019).
- Raise awareness and educate community colleges about basic needs insecurity, what it means for students, and how to recognize potential warning signs. Since food insecure students often already feel invisible or prefer to avoid stigma, it would be effective to proactively outreach to students in a caring way.
- Assemble a task force of front line professionals who collectively craft strategies that are practical in a local context (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).
- Place a "basic needs security statement" on each syllabus, which will help educate faculty and help students become made aware of existing services on campus (Berman, 2017). An example provided by Goldrick-Rab (2017) states that "Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. Furthermore,

please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable [them] to provide any resources that [they] may possess."

- Provide professional development opportunities and training for faculty, staff, and administrators to be able to identify signs of students struggling with food insecurity and basic needs, be aware of local and governmental resources that students may be eligible to apply, and to be more confident referring students to appropriate resources (Vasquez et al., 2019).
- Conduct more research on food insecurity and its impact on community college students.

Ultimately, while institutions work towards expanding their food pantries and implementing innovative practices in an effort to address food insecurity, it would be helpful for more research to be done on the experiences of community college students struggling with food insecurity, as a way to explore the voices of an invisible population that continues to silently struggle.

CONCLUSION

With the negative impacts of food insecurity on students' academic success, psychosocial health, and physical well-being, it's important for higher education institutions to focus more efforts on helping students meet their basic functional needs as they work towards degree completion and navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Because community colleges enroll nearly half of the student population that begins college in the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), it becomes more crucial for practitioners to first focus their efforts on supporting basic needs initiatives at community colleges, especially when this population of students typically face additional barriers in comparison to traditional students at four-year institutions. Recognizing the impacts of food insecurity on college students, as well as establishing a campus food pantry, are important initial steps towards providing adequate support to students at risk. Yet, additional research, creative initiatives, and cross campus collaboration among faculty, staff, and administrators are also necessary components required to implement solutions that can provide students with more protection against food insecurity in the long-run.

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