



Public Testimony on Hunger in Higher Education

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My name is Brooke Evans. I am a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studying Philosophy. I am a disabled, first-generation, working-class and FAFSA-independent McNair Scholar. From 2010 to 2015, I was homeless and I did not know where my next meal was coming from. For the last year, I have been working tirelessly to raise awareness of food insecurity within higher education and support my peers who are going hungry.

My goal in this testimony is to provide a personal and student perspective on food insecurity in higher education, to address potentially troublesome perspectives on college hunger, to raise important questions, and to support the data and suggestions provided in the testimony by Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Katharine M. Broton of the Wisconsin HOPE Lab.

Background

My relationship with food, or lack thereof, is a deeply personal one. I can remember my first demerit in elementary school for taking an unopened box of Hi-C juice from the garbage. I was trying to pack this juice in my backpack to have later at home. I was a recipient of free and reduced price lunch. In the late 1990's and early 2000's, our lunch tickets were either blue or red: blue for normal-kid lunch, red for poor-kid lunch, red tickets in one line, blue tickets in another. There was some unwritten rule that kids with red tickets sat together, and kids with blue tickets sat together with kids with cold lunch. Cold lunch was the coolest. It meant you had food at home, and that somebody loved you enough to pack it for you.

I have known for all my life that I had less than my peers around me, though I am still so privileged to be here in America. What I didn't realize was how difficult it was for my mother, a single-working parent of three without an education or family support, to access food. She was able to receive canned cream of mushroom soup and boxed rice or noodles from our local food pantry. We didn't eat fresh food. Back then, 2-liter bottles of soda were 79 cents at our local gas station. To earn money, my brothers and I did yard work, cleaned homes, and cared for our elderly neighbors. With our change, often in quarters or dimes, we could afford a bottle of Mountain Dew. I remember being so excited for Sunday School that I hardly slept on Saturday nights – Sunday School meant coffee hour afterward, and coffee hour meant cookie hour. I began stuffing my pockets with cookies from church hoping to save them for later. I was a child that would eat until I threw up. My fear of not knowing when I would see food again drove me to excess in most occasions.

Here began the start of my childhood metabolic syndrome. This would follow me into adulthood. This fear of food insecurity would be the impetus to my binge-eating disorder, a problem I still battle today.

Hunger is one of the most basic and primal needs we have. My food insecurity was an unceasing pain flowing from an unmet need. This most primitive kind of fear followed me for 23 years and follows me still. Imagine fearing for basic needs in an environment of higher education. We embark on programs in institutions of higher education to escape cycles of desperation and meager survival, to bring about greater professional aspirations. This cultivation of multiple identities inside and outside the classroom – fearing for basic needs outside the classroom to

fostering ambition and achievement like my food secure peers inside the classroom – contributes to a psychological phenomenon called “impostor syndrome.”

Without a home and without meals, I felt like an impostor amongst my brilliant peers. I was shamefully worrying about food, and shamefully staring at the clock to make it out of class in time to get in line for the local shelter when I should have been giving my undivided attention to the lecturer.

Food To Survive vs. Food To Thrive

I want to distinguish between two kinds of food: 1) food to survive, and 2) food to thrive. Food to thrive can be understood as that which satisfies the dietary recommendations provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The food I had as a child was exclusively food to survive. Even calling what I consumed “food” is a stretch for many. I have been surviving off of beef- and chicken-ramen noodles for twenty-three years. This not food you feed a developing mind, this is not nourishment—this is merely filler. Ramen noodle soup was a trick to quiet my stomach for the time being. I was a child, and my stomach didn’t know better. I didn’t know I needed better, that all children do. If a diet of ramen noodle soup and canned cream of mushroom soup for seventeen years seems inappropriate, lacking, or harmful to a child – why do we expect it be suitable enough for three, four, or five years for our young adults pursuing higher education?

When reading comments by the public on articles about food insecurity in higher education, I see comments like: “Entitled kids these days thinking they deserve to eat more than ramen noodle soup -- in my day, that’s all I ate.” The general sentiment is about shaming those expressing need, conveying bitterness in not wanting better for future generations, and a feeling that “it’s-not-my-responsibility.”

I want to call attention to this mentality. When we speak of an issue, we ought speak about the factors that contributed to its rise. Taking anything out of context, like food insecurity amongst college students, can be misconstrued. It’s important we take factors like college affordability into account. It’s important we take into account the near-requirement of a college degree to afford living in society – the college degree has effectively replaced the high school diploma. We ought discuss the cost of living, costs of which have skyrocketed for years – this has priced a rising population of students out of housing altogether. We ought discuss the insurmountable student loan debt that the average college student faces today upon graduation. I have about \$65,000 in student loan debt affixed to my back—and I do not yet have a degree. This mounting debt—combined with rising prices for stable housing, high requirements of my institution to excel both inside and outside the classroom, and zero access to reliable sustenance—is devastating to my physical, mental and emotional health as a college student. Just the fear of being unable to eat, of being in a chronic state of hunger for months or years at University, puts those struggling at an unjustifiable risk for long-term harmful effects.

We are pinning low-income students with an unreasonable charge – they cannot afford to eat, but they had better be as good or better than their peers to make it here or in the workforce. These

lowest-income students are the ones with the most to lose. Many of us don't have stable families to return to should we fail. It is make it or break it for us, and I believe as college students, we need to divorce ourselves from the hunger pains if we want to apply ourselves completely to school.

Basic Needs

Preparing first-generation college students for a life post-graduation includes ensuring access to basic needs. If we are expecting working-class young people to polish themselves with professionalism for a college-educated life, why are we demanding they eat diets representative of their childhood poverty? If we want young people to make good choices, albeit healthy choices, we need to provide them opportunities to learn and make those decisions. It is intuitive: should we compare a student with access to food to thrive with a student with access to food to survive? We see staggering deficiencies in the latter; effects on their overall health and well-being as well as academic performance and social development.

I was in a vicious cycle – I was donating plasma twice weekly to help pay the rent each month. Unfortunately, I was also collapsing at least once a week to do so. I didn't have access to the food I needed, and my body was taking grave notice. I was fortunate enough to have peers who would donate large tubs of macaroni and cheese and beef bouillon cubes for broth for me to make it through the week. But this wasn't their responsibility, either.

It is crucial to provide young people today with the accessibility to food in some semblance to their peers – food to thrive. College trains young adults to be professionals, improving their socioeconomic class, but demanding they do so off a diet representative of their generational poverty. This is confusing and embittering.

A Mindset That Is Not Helping

True to my academic discipline, I want to shed light on a perspective that I think is common in the United States. I want to explain why it is harmful for food insecurity within higher education.

In political philosophy, there is a distinction between brute luck and option luck. Brute luck is the summation of undeserved fortunes or misfortunes, a set of conditions with which people are seen to have no personal control or agency. Option luck is understood in this country to be the resultant of actions and decisions upon age eighteen and thereafter. When it comes to children 0-17 years, we acknowledge the inequalities that exist in society today – we seek to support and compensate for this brute luck. However, those very same children with whom we once accounted for their brute luck disadvantages or misfortunes as a result of inequality – we begin to hold them exclusively and unforgivingly 100% responsible for their lives; their circumstances, their decisions, their outcomes, *and their needs*. We hold them solely responsible for their option luck. And we, in America, pride ourselves harshly on our independence of option luck.¹

It strikes me as unreasonable that Americans hold first-generation, working-class and minority students responsible for their inability to meet their basic needs. We hold the implicit bias that

those who cannot provide for themselves are in some way lacking personally – perhaps they are criminals, perhaps they have substance abuse issues, perhaps they are not financially literate and don't make wise decisions. This is a mindset that is not helping.

Many do not readily take into account the brute luck of these individuals from their 0-17 years. We hold everyone to the same legal standards from age 18 on, but there is a body of students who did not receive opportunities in their brute luck for ambition formation, who did not receive access to explore or embrace their natural endowment, who did not experience financial stability or a safe home environment – and who did not have thrive-worthy food to eat.

We have to acknowledge that the threshold for agency in option-luck years is a direct result from the threshold provided in brute-luck years. We need to acknowledge that those students struggling to eat may very well be the same children who struggled, too. This isn't some testament to their character defects. This is a testament to chronic poverty, to the inability to address basic needs as children or adults. I think that a part of the reason there is not a plethora of research on the area of food insecurity in higher education is that we as a society didn't understand it (until recently) to be something that we had a direct hand in influencing, or a responsibility to investigate. I think it's easy to chalk up hunger amongst adults as a product of their poor choices, or their option luck. I urge you to understand why this logic is not sound. One could only be so fortunate not to experience food insecurity – perhaps you are benefitting from your undeserved fortune of brute luck. We say that food insecurity amongst college students isn't our responsibility – but yet we readily accept the benefits of an unjust society that just maybe, bent in our favor.

A change in scenery from an elementary school to a college campus is not a change in socioeconomic circumstance; a change in scenery is not a change of position in society. A hungry child is a hungry child, whether they are 12 or 21 years old.

Programs That Are Not Helping

In this country, we support young adults through higher education subsidies – we need to ensure that they have their basic needs met to embrace those subsidies.² When the basic needs of students are not met, they are apt to fail. When their basic needs are met, they are apt to succeed. It is our job to ensure we provide our students reasonable opportunity to make fruitful of their college education.

In the state of Wisconsin, FoodShare eligibility changed drastically as of April 1, 2015. There are now many students who will not qualify for benefits because they either cannot work at least 20 hours a week earning a minimum of \$145/week, or they do not qualify for a federal work-study assignment. This pertains to students at both two- and four-year institutions.

Four-year institution experience

As a student at a four-year institution, I struggled with this work requirement. I am a McNair Scholar. The McNair Scholars Program is a federally funded TRIO program designed to provide opportunities for the lowest-income students underrepresented in their fields to complete

undergraduate research and proceed to graduate school. This program's eligible students are those students who would otherwise be working full-time jobs or several part-time jobs to afford to stay afloat in college. The socioeconomic barrier keeps these students from having the time required to complete undergraduate research and to present said research at national conferences – all of which are required for a competitive application to professional school. McNair Scholars are instructed to regard their research as a job, often working 20-40 hours a week alone on their research, on top of their academic schedules. The state of Wisconsin insists that these students also work at least 20 additional hours a week for a minimum of \$145/week.

When I applied initially for FoodShare as an enrolled student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was denied because I was not working at least 20 hours a week. Luckily, I would later qualify for federal work-study in my financial aid award. However, not all my peers in the McNair program were awarded federal work-study (and in fact, only 4% of undergraduates are). So, over the course of summer 2014, I worked with the state of Wisconsin to form a precedent case number that informs all case managers that McNair Scholars satisfy the work requirement necessary to qualify for FoodShare benefits. They no longer need to work another 20 hours a week earning \$145/week minimum on top of their 20-40 hour research loads on top of their 12-18 credit academic loads. All my fellow scholars, amongst the lowest-income on our campus, were finally able to eat.

Two-year institutions

For those pursuing educational degrees or certificates in a program that is intended to be completed in two years or less, only those who are completing programs that are deemed “in demand” can qualify for FoodShare. To illustrate how problematic this exemption is, I will include the examples that are provided under Exemption 13 of the FSH 3.15.1 Student Eligibility page.³

Example 1: During an interview for FS, Jack, reports that he is a full time student at Northern Technical College for phlebotomy and plans to graduate in the next year. Since phlebotomists are in occupational demand, Jack is confident he will be able to obtain a job in his field upon graduation. Based on common knowledge that there is a shortage of trained medical professionals, the worker agrees. Jack is single and does not meet any of the other exemptions. If all other FS eligibility requirements are met, Jack would be an eligible student based on the new exemption reason.

Notice the use of proof-surrogate rhetoric for, “Based on common knowledge...” Common knowledge or common sense, as Albert Einstein would say, “... is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.” Common knowledge is not science, it is not fact, it is not proof of any kind – common knowledge is fluctuating, sometimes antiquated or media-based, relative, and perpetuates inequality. There is always someone pulling the strings and determining this “common knowledge,” and there are always those benefitting and those suffering under it.

Education eviscerates inequality. It is unacceptable that “common knowledge” is invoked as a measure of receiving food assistance in the state of Wisconsin. Is every case manager certified in “common knowledge?” Who determines “common knowledge?” What research or data has

been consulted to come to this “common knowledge?” Furthermore, phlebotomy certificates can be acquired by places of employment, and are not exclusively obtained by a certificate program. The only common knowledge here is that everyone needs to eat.

Example 2: When Carla applies for FS, she reports that she is enrolled half time at Madison Area Technical College and is taking cooking with herbs, pottery and jewelry making. Carla indicates that she does not know if she’ll attend next semester because she is unsure about her career goals. No other student exemptions are met. Carla would not be an eligible student, because the direction of Carla’s potential career is unclear. Carla is encouraged to apply again if she disenrolls from school or if she pursues courses that will lead to a job in demand.

Apart from the sexist and flaky depiction of women in education found in Example 2, this example illustrates the hierarchy problem that exists when a pathway of education crosses the need for food assistance benefits: namely, that humanities students are below STEM students by a prejudicial and unscientific discretion, completed under a guise of “common knowledge” that is not scientific or evidence-based by case managers who cannot possibly be certified in said nonsense. Again, the only common knowledge – or universal understanding – that can be found in this example is that everyone needs to eat.

Suggestions

In the data provided by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab testimony prepared by Dr. Goldrick-Rab and Katharine Broton, it is clear that students who may qualify for the federal Pell Grant, intended to serve the students most in need, do not necessarily qualify for federal work-study. Such a work-study assignment is required to qualify for FoodShare, unless a student can prove they are working 20+ hours a week. Those students who are working 20+ hours a week are less likely to graduate than their peers, and have significantly less time to study and complete extracurricular tasks pertinent to professional school post-grad. From such data and understanding of policy, we can conclude that there is a population of students in need who are unable to qualify for the program based on these requirements.

I support the suggestions provided by Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Katharine M. Broton:

1. I urge you to consider the alignment of SNAP eligibility for college students with need-based financial aid eligibility.
2. Institute a post-secondary national school lunch program
3. Support research efforts regarding hunger in higher education

Endnotes

¹ Anderson, Elizabeth S. (1999). What is the point of equality? *Ethics* 109 (2):287-337.

² Reiff, Mark R. (2014). How to Pay for Public Education. *Theory and Research in Education* 12 (1):4-52.

³ Foodshare Wisconsin Handbook, 3.15.1 Student Eligibility
http://www.emhandbooks.wisconsin.gov/fsh/policy_files/3/3-15-1.htm