

Students Shouldn't Have to Choose Between Books and Food

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Commentary

Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Clare Cady February 28, 2016

"I had a career," she told me, her eyes welling with tears. "I took care of my kids and myself, and I didn't need anyone's help ... and now, I'm here," she said, referring to Oregon State University's Human Services Resource Center, a facility for low-income students which I directed until last year. As she spoke, the floodgates opened, and I handed her a box of tissues. She told me she had not eaten and was worried about being evicted. She said she could not get a job to support her family without a degree.

Her story is representative of so many students I have met, students making unimaginable choices in pursuit of a diploma, credential, or certificate. Forced to choose between textbooks or food, groceries or graduation, they experience poverty, hunger, and homelessness. It isn't a choice students should have to make, and colleges need to do a better job of making sure it's one they don't have to.

Still, many argue that being a student is supposed to be hard. They point out that they themselves struggled and sacrificed in college, and that what we're seeing now is whiny entitlement and not a serious problem. I disagree. Many of these students are not the archetypical "poor college student," engaged in a rite of passage by spending too much on beer and living on Top Ramen. Their hands shake because they have not eaten in two days.

Hunger, the last time I checked, is not a rite of passage.

The data on [hunger among college students](#) is disturbing. A [2015 study](#) by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab found that 20 percent of community-college students surveyed were experiencing hunger. A [2011 study](#) in Oregon found that 59 percent of students at a midsize rural university were at risk of going hungry, and a [City University of New York study](#) from the same year found that 39 percent of its students were similarly at risk.

What is most striking about these numbers is that nationally only [14 percent of households](#) are in danger of going hungry. So while we do not know the direct relationship between college attendance and hunger, the question should be asked: Is being in college putting these people at risk? This should be followed by two additional questions: 1) What is wrong with higher education if college attendance contributes to poverty; and 2) What can be done about it? For many of the students I speak to, dropping out is not an option. They know that education is pivotal to improving life for themselves and their families.

To help students like these, many colleges and universities have opened food banks. My colleague Nate Smith-Tyge at Michigan State and I founded the College and University Food Bank Alliance in 2013 to support this movement. The alliance has grown to over 275 members, many of which are offering additional hunger-relief services.

While this is a good start, colleges need to build on such efforts. Hunger is a symptom of poverty, and a holistic approach is the only way to eradicate it. Those going hungry should not only get access to food on campus but should be directed toward community resources.

Oregon State, for example, has [an entire office](#) focused on connecting students to resources. The university has a

food-insecurity task force in its housing department that developed a low-cost, healthy food program in its dining centers open to all students. It also offers the Mealbox Program, an on-campus food subsidy for low-income students.

Other colleges have made their own efforts. Some partner with Single Stop, a nonprofit where I now work that connects needy people with safety-net services. These programs deliver a variety of services and supports that augment financial aid, helping students stay in school.

At Nash Community College, in North Carolina, the alumni association has created a fund to provide gift cards for groceries, and Wake Technical Community College, in the same state, offers emergency assistance funds. At least two institutions, Oregon State and Humboldt State Universities, now accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits on campus, which is significant because colleges must [overcome many hurdles](#) to be eligible for SNAP, including having a grocery store on campus.

As many colleges have realized, however, the problems for these students are not limited to hunger. Some have difficulty just finding an affordable way to get to class. Even in New York City, where public transportation is very good, students may walk miles to get to class for lack of a subway card. This issue has become so prevalent that city lawmakers are proposing free cards for CUNY students. Housing is another challenge. [A paper](#) published by the Center for Financial Security at the University of Wisconsin describes difficulties students nationally face in qualifying for Section 8 subsidized housing.

Significantly, the authors of that paper call for policy changes on local and federal levels, which is what more colleges should be doing. Imagine what it would look like if local, state, and federal policies were designed to support students, as they work to get the education and skills they need to improve their lives, rather than penalize them. We would not hear stories like [that of Donna Beegle](#), a poverty expert who herself was poor, and who was told by a caseworker that her welfare would be cut in half if she went to college. Colleges and universities can use data from assistance programs to press policy makers to change financial aid, SNAP, HUD, and other laws so they provide proper assistance and encourage persistence.

For those who argue that these actions are enabling, I say yes, they are. We are enabling people to get an education. We are enabling them to have better opportunities for themselves and their families. We are enabling them to find quality work, accrue wealth, and find economic stability.

What better way is there to use available resources than to bolster human development and therefore economic development? Systemic problems require systemic solutions, and taken in combination these actions could move us forward in improving the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Linking needy students with these resources can make it possible for them to not only imagine a better life, but to create one.

Clare Cady is a senior program officer for the national college team at Single Stop and is director of the College and University Food Bank Alliance.