Practitioner Perspectives

Development as a Tool to Support Food Insecurity Interventions at Institutions of Higher Learning

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Abstract: Food insecurity is a significant problem at higher education institutions in the United States. Estimates show that a third of college students experience food insecurity. While federal interventions exist, less than half of eligible students report awareness of federal assistance programs, and lower participation rates. State interventions are rare and often do not have the resources or capacity to address student food insecurity effectively. Therefore, it is prudent for university development officials and administrators to consider enhancing on-campus interventions. This paper highlights case examples of successful uses of fundraising to bolster food insecurity interventions. Practical recommendations are provided to those in higher education on how to best utilize development as a tool to solve this issue.

Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Estimates vary for the number of food-insecure students at colleges and universities within the United States. A 2018 General Accountability Office report reviewed 31 studies on collegiate food insecurity and showed a prevalence rate range from 9% to 50%, with most studies estimating that about a third of students were food insecure (GAO, 2018). The most extensive collegiate food insecurity study, with a sample size of 167,000, estimated that 39% of student respondents were food insecure in the prior month (Baker-Smith, et al., 2021). It should be noted that there are significant challenges to accurately measuring food insecurity, given variable definitions and response bias generated from the stigmatization of the issue (GAO, 2018). However, with approximately 20 million college students in the United States, it is reasonable to assume that food insecurity impacts many.

Food insecurity can have a profound effect on student success. Food insecure students are less likely to complete their degrees and report higher mental health issues (Stebleton et al., 2020). Eighty one percent of students who report being food insecure said that lack of food harmed their academic performance (Cady et al., 2016). Additionally, food insecurity disproportionally affects first-generation students and students of color (Dedman, 2017).

Individual student actions, such as working a job or relying on loans to combat food

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insecurity, are not entirely practical, highlighting the need for more on-campus support. For example, the report *Hunger on Campus* showed that more than half of food-insecure students had paying jobs, more than half had received Pell Grants, and a quarter had received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Cady et al., 2021).

**Campus Food Insecurity Interventions**

Higher education administrators, non-profits, and student groups are increasingly working to assist food-insecure students. Interventions to help students facing food insecurity include meal plan supplements, nutrition and budgeting classes, food pantries, food drives, and emergency aid (Callahan, 2018). Campus interventions have shown to be effective in alleviating short-term food insecurity issues. More than 800 colleges and universities in the United States have an on-campus food pantry (SOH, 2021).

Federal interventions for campus food insecurity include allowing eligible college students to participate in nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP. However, there are significant barriers to awareness and stigma for federal programs. Only about half of eligible students know of federal assistance programs, and less than half of those students participate (GAO, 2018). State programs often do not include college students or make eligibility difficult, and only about a dozen states have put in place legislation to assist food-insecure college students (Laska et al., 2021).

On-campus food insecurity interventions such as food pantries are typically student-led. While they have institutional support, they often resort to fundraising and donations to support their efforts. Significant fundraising efforts can enhance the services offered to students. One university official said after receiving an unexpected $90,000 from a class gift “[the fundraising] took a ten-year plan and turned it into a ten-week plan” (EAB, 2018).

**Fundraising In Higher Education**

Fundraising is a driver of institutional advancement in colleges and universities throughout the United States. Typically, fundraising at universities is a large operation, with full-time employees dedicated to raising funds. Large universities can raise tens to hundreds of millions of dollars per year. Universities have used this fundraising to bolster resources for a wide range of activities, including but not limited to: student scholarships, building renovations, extracurricular activities, athletics, and research. Often, fundraising campaigns will align with university priorities set by university leadership. Funds are typically raised through individual gifts from alumni and friends of the institution, sponsorships through corporations, and grants from foundations. Studies show that alumni donors are more likely to engage when they can see and understand the impact of their giving (Schlesinger et al., 2015). Additionally, studies have shown that university donors tend to support causes that assist student success and extracurricular activities (Pedro et al., 2021).

Given that most universities already have development infrastructure and food insecurity interventions, it can be a prudent move for development offices to align to support food insecurity interventions. In addition, literature
about alumni engagement shows that tangible projects, such as on-campus food pantries - that support student success appeal to alumni, offering further credibility to using development to support these efforts. Fundraising efforts can be useful in higher education institutions with great need, yet limited financial resources, such as community colleges (Amour, 2021).

Global Context

There is evidence that colleges and universities outside the United States recognize that campus food insecurity may be a problem. For example, the number of campus food pantries in Canadian universities doubled from 2004 to 2016 (EAB, 2018). In France, universities have started requesting help from non-profit organizations to assist food-insecure students, a trend that has grown with the COVID-19 pandemic (Fournier, 2021). While the cases in this paper are from the United States, institutional interventions for food-insecure college students could be broadly applied. Given that recent research has shown that alumni university donors in Europe have similar preferences in giving to American universities, it is reasonable that fundraising for food insecurity interventions would work in a global context (Pedro et al., 2020).

Additionally, universities outside of the United States can use campus interventions as a model to help assist students in need.

Development Case Examples

There are successful examples of how university-led development efforts can bolster the efforts of student food insecurity interventions. Often, these fundraising efforts provide significant resources to students in need.

Fundraising Competitions

In 2019, two large, public Big Ten Universities hosted a week-long head-to-head giving challenge in advance of a rivalry football game. The goal was to mobilize the alumni bases of both universities in a friendly competition. There were significant alumni and donor activation, with the winning university raising $213,830 from more than 10,000 donors (PSU News, 2019). Additionally, there was substantial media and social media coverage of the competition. The funds were used to support on-campus food pantries.

Swipe Drives

A national non-profit first started at a public California university started the “swipe drive” program in 2010, which encourages colleges and universities to bolster on-campus fundraising efforts. This occurs by allowing students with excess dollars on their meal cards to “swipe to donate” towards campus food insecurity programs (SOH, 2021). These programs now exist at nearly 400 colleges and universities. It is suggested that this program is not only a vital fundraiser for on-campus interventions but also raises significant awareness of food pantries and help available on campuses (SOH, 2021).

Major Gifts

The university president for a large public university in Pennsylvania pledged a $525,000 gift to form a campus food security
endowment (PSU News, 2021). This fund provides meal plans to students in need and signals to other university donors that food insecurity is a key institutional priority. Major gifts can also come from foundations, with an example being a $500,000 gift from a California foundation to the local community college system’s food insecurity efforts (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office News, 2019).

**Corporate Donors**

For corporate donors, food insecurity can be a compelling reason to give. A leading yogurt brand partnered with 23 higher education institutions and hosted a virtual student hunger summit in 2021. After the summit, more than $100,000 was pledged to support college food insecurity efforts (SOH, 2021). A mix of companies supported a California university’s food pantry fundraising drive by providing $150,000 in matching funds, which catalyzed $327,275 in fundraising (FSN, 2021).

**Practitioner Recommendations**

Addressing food insecurity at institutions of higher education should be a multi-pronged approach. To maximize the impact of fundraising and food insecurity interventions, the following recommendations should be followed:

1. **Increase Institutional Support**

   Institutional leaders should signal their support for addressing food insecurity on campus. Collaboration with development offices across campus units, including administration, housing, and food services, student affairs, is vital to the success of fundraising campaigns.

   Fundraising for food insecurity should be worked into the development office priorities, and front-line staff should be familiar with the needs and resources available to food-insecure students. Consideration should be given to making large donations into endowments, providing on-campus intervention support into perpetuity.

2. **Storytelling**

   The most robust fundraising campaigns showcase student need and tangible interventions such as on-campus food pantries. They also display donor impact in easy-to-understand languages, such as "your contribution of $X will provide Y meals to hungry college students. The use of compelling campaigns, stories and imagery will enhance fundraising efforts, and the education of donors on student needs will allow for more effective marketing and utilization of resources.

3. **Alumni Engagement**

   Creative ways to engage donors can yield substantial fundraising success. Competitions, giving days, and matching opportunities can bolster strong support. These food interventions are often the opportunity for smaller-level donors to impact, so alumni outreach efforts should be targeted and considered differently than regular donation appeals. Alumni involved with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts should be made aware of food insecurity programs, given the disproportionate impact of food insecurity on underrepresented populations.
4. **Federal Support**

Students are often unaware that federal nutrition assistance is available. Universities can use on-campus food pantries and **marketing campaigns** to increase students’ use of federal assistance programs. Coupling current interventions with resources to help students connect to federal resources can improve long-term success.

5. **Advocate for Expanded Federal and State Support**

Universities and their supporters who are passionate about solving the campus food insecurity problem should recognize that federal and state support is limited. Working with state legislatures to ensure that state rules allow for easier access to SNAP funds for college students can help maximize the effectiveness of existing federal programs. State interventions and programs are rare and generally modest.

**Conclusion**

Collegiate food insecurity is a significant issue. Aligning development efforts with existing food insecurity intervention efforts can catalyze enhanced support for students in need.

**References**


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