



## Why the Time is Right to Expand the National School Lunch Program to Higher Education

**Sara Goldrick-Rab**, Temple University  
**Katharine Broton**, University of Iowa  
**Emily Brunjes Colo**, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Education beyond high school is increasingly necessary for a good job, and so growing numbers of people are paying ever-rising prices to attend college. Yet many are not completing degrees. Food insecurity should be added to the list of factors contributing to this shortfall. Our work suggests that too many undergraduates are struggling to afford sufficient nutritious food – and current policies provide insufficient support. An expansion of the National School Lunch Program to help college students could help many more complete their degrees.

### Who are Today's Students?

Most undergraduates defy conventional stereotypes. Just 13% of them live on college campuses; nearly half attend community colleges; one in four is a parent; and about 75% work for pay while in school, including a significant number of full-time workers. Today's students are also more likely to face financial challenges. From 2007 to 2013, the number of students qualifying for the federal Pell Grant grew from 6 million to 8.5 million. Nationally, about half of these Pell recipients are from families living below the federal poverty line.

College attendance could help level the playing field for low-income students and their more affluent peers, but right now it does not. According to a 2015 U.S. Department of Education report, just 14% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile complete a bachelor's or higher degree within eight years of high school graduation, compared to 60% for students from the highest socioeconomic quartile. These gaps persist even after prior academic achievements are taken into account.

Financial constraints contribute to this achievement gap. The price of college is rising faster than inflation and healthcare costs and need-based financial aid covers less than ever before. At its inception, the Pell Grant covered 80% of the total cost to attend a public four-year college or university, including tuition, fees, and living costs. Today it covers barely one-third of total costs. As a result, students from low-income families must devote enormous portions of their income to pay for college – around 40% of annual income for dependent students and more than 100% of annual income for independent students pursuing a two-year degree.

### Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Research suggests that food insecurity inhibits learning. Yet with more than one in five U.S. children living in poverty, college-going rates at a national high, and the price of higher education continuing to rise, food insecurity among undergraduates may very well be more common than it has ever been. Most students' who grow up in poverty continue to have the same financial constraints when they enter college. Without sufficient financial support, they (and their families) are faced with hard choices between work time and study time. They also grapple with tough trade-offs between paying tuition bills or grocery bills.

Our research indicates that large numbers of college students struggle to obtain sufficient nutritious food. We have conducted three surveys of undergraduates to pinpoint their nutritional problems. We measured food insecurity using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's standard six item inventory, which asks about experiences like running out of money for food, eating "less than you should," cutting or skipping meals, not eating for a full day because of lack of funds, and not being able to afford balanced meals.

- In a 2015 survey of students at 10 community colleges in seven states, 52% of respondents reported some degree of food insecurity in the previous 30 days.

- The problem isn't limited to community colleges. In a 2008 survey of Pell Grant recipients at public two and four-year colleges in Wisconsin, we found that 24% of students had experienced at least one form of food insecurity in the last 30 days.
- A 2015 survey of low- and middle-income undergraduates, mostly in Wisconsin four-year colleges, found that 61% reported some food insecurity during prior academic year.

## Expanding the National School Lunch Program to Colleges

For schoolchildren across America, the National School Lunch Program has reduced the incidence of malnutrition and increased the intake of protein, fiber, and other nutrients that boost educational attainment. Given the growing problem of food insecurity in higher education, this program should be expanded to help college and university students complete their degrees.

Administrative costs would be minimal, because Pell Grant eligibility requirements map nicely onto existing National School Lunch Program income eligibility standards. Students already identified as qualified for financial aid could be deemed eligible for subsidized college lunches. Congress merely needs to modify authorizing legislation to redefine "school" and extend program participation to adults. To avoid logistical problems due to college contracts with multiple food vendors, an expanded program could simply provide campus-based lunch vouchers directly to students.

A pilot program could be undertaken in a state community college system at a cost ranging from \$17 million per year in a smaller state to \$64 million in California. If full national expansion is eventually undertaken, it would cost around \$4 billion annually.

Additional options also exist to address students' food problems. Colleges could be given incentives to accept Food Stamps at campus dining and retail food outlets, or federal Food Stamp eligibility requirements could be changed to allow college enrollment to count toward the work requirement for recipients. Funds could also be channeled to private initiatives such as the College and University Food Bank Alliance, Single Stop, and the Working Families Success Network, each of which work to meet student needs in the absence of an adequate public food safety net. One way or another, the growing nutritional difficulties of America's lower-income college students must be addressed.

**Read more in Sara Goldrick-Rab, Katharine Broton, and Emily Brunjes Colo, "Expanding the National School Lunch Program to Higher Education," Wisconsin HOPE Lab, April 2016.**