

## **Testimony in Support of HB 1175**

### **Higher Education - Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program - Established**

**House Hearing, Thursday, March 5th, 2020**

My name is Gabrielle Wilson, and I am the Campus Pantry Organizer and Master of Public Administration candidate at University of Baltimore. I am advocating for your support of House Bill 1175, as the issue of food and basic needs insecurity in higher education requires immediate attention and action. HB 1175 aims to establish a Hunger-Free Campus Grant program to be administered by the Maryland Higher Education Commission to designate two- and four-year public institutions that meet a set of anti-hunger requirements as Hunger-Free Campuses and allocate funding to these institutions.

The “starving college student” trope has existed for decades, and the image most have when they hear this is of the 18 year old, fresh out of high school and living off ramen noodles in their dorm room that’s been paid for by their parents. This is seen as a rite of passage in our society, and the image lingers when we talk of college hunger today. It is important to understand why holding on to this image is damaging to our students, their education, and their livelihoods.

We are at a point in time where the “nontraditional” student is becoming a higher percentage of total student population. While there is no agreed upon definition of the nontraditional student, these students are often older, working part- or full-time while in school, may attend school only part-time, are financially independent, and are veterans, returning citizens, and parents (or otherwise have dependents). First-generation and low-income students are also often grouped in this category, even when they are otherwise considered traditional. These students have different needs and interests that are to be addressed when we speak of student support at an institutional level.

Despite rising costs, education is still considered the best path to lifting one’s self out of poverty. How can students be expected to excel in class when their stomachs are rumbling because they haven’t eaten in two days? Students can’t stay on this path forever, and when they withdraw from classes, institutions ask “Why aren’t these students college-ready?” The question that should be asked is “Why aren’t institutions meeting students where they are and supporting their needs so they can perform at their best?”

Speaking from my experience at University of Baltimore both as Campus Pantry Organizer and as a student, I have seen students from every possible background utilize our services. For many of these students, without the resources we are able to provide for them, they would not eat while pursuing their education. Many of them work and have internships on top of full class loads and still cannot afford to buy groceries. Due to ever-changing laws and confusing qualifications, most have no idea they’re eligible for Food Supplement Program (SNAP) benefits. All of these students have a common goal: to obtain their degree and become self-sufficient. Institutions have an obligation to support these students, not only because it is the

just thing to do, but because it is in the institution's best interest. When students have their basic needs met, they perform better academically, graduate sooner, and are proud of their institutions. The severity of the impact of college hunger is becoming a national issue, and this bill is an opportunity for Maryland to stand with its students and set an example for other states. I ask for a favorable reporting of HB 1175.

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