

Testimony in Support of SB 767

Higher Education - Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program - Established

Senate Hearing, Tuesday, March 9th, 2021

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 Senate Bill 767 as the issue of food and basic needs insecurity in higher education requires immediate attention and action. SB 767 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended everyone’s lives, but there truly could not be a worse time to be a college student. The systemic problems we were dealing with before – food and housing insecurity, inequitable access to resources, skyrocketing costs of living and tuition amongst others – have now been exacerbated and compounded by the pandemic. In the last year students have lost jobs, faced eviction, huddled by Wi-Fi hotspots to attend class, couldn’t afford food, lost their health insurance, buried family members they shouldn’t have had to. And still, they are expected to show up to their Zoom class as if none of those things matter, and when their grades drop or they leave school altogether, those students are called “underprepared.” Who could prepare for this?

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. Though we have not been open during the pandemic, we will serve our students again, and the effects this pandemic has had on them will have an impact long after we reach our “new normal.” 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.

At the end of the day, higher education is there to serve the student. 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 SB 767.

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