



DIVISION OF
STUDENT AFFAIRS

COUNSELING CENTER

Chair Paul G. Pinsky
Vice Chair Cheryl C. Kagan
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
2 West
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

March 3, 2021

Dear Chair Pinsky and Vice Chair Kagan,

My name is Yu-Wei Wang. I am a Clinical Associate Professor, Research Director, and Assistant Director of the Counseling Center at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). I am writing to provide my support for the Senate Bill 767/House Bill 891 Higher Education–Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program. Research across various U.S. college campuses suggested that many students struggle with food insecurity. Our study with UMD students also revealed that food insecurity has pervasive, negative impacts on our students' academic success, well-being, and long-term career development. I believe that this bill will provide the necessary support for 4-year and 2-year Maryland public institutions of higher education to address campus hunger.

In partnership with our Department of Dining Services, University Health Center, and Maryland Parent and Family Association, we conducted a large-scale survey with 4,901 undergraduate and graduate students (77% and 23% of the total participants, respectively) to investigate the prevalence of food insecurity on our campus during the Fall semester of 2017. Subsequently, we interviewed 23 survey respondents who experienced food insecurity. According to the survey findings, approximately 20% of students were food insecure (i.e., having “limited or uncertain access to adequate food;” United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2019) at some point in the 12 months preceding the survey.

In addition to rates of food insecurity among our students, we assessed the impacts of food insecurity on academic success. Food insecure students reported that they sometimes had a hard time focusing on their academics, fell asleep in class, or missed class because of hunger. Compared to food secure students, those who were food insecure were more likely to fail an assignment or exam, fail or withdraw from a class, have lower GPAs, or withdraw from the University before completing their degrees. For example, one student told us during the interview:

"I didn't know [if I had a scholarship this semester until one to two weeks ago]. I was thinking ... 'I don't have enough money to buy ... food and pay rent....' So, that was kinda tough ... I was thinking: 'Should I do part time? ...should I drop the semester?'"

Furthermore, food insecurity appears to have an adverse effect on student subjective well-being. On average, compared to their peers, food insecure students experienced poorer health (e.g., losing weight and developing health problems from lack of nutrition), and higher levels of depression, anxiety, distress, anger, and loneliness. The following quote from another interviewee illustrates how food insecurity affects students' mental health:

"I was more depressed than usual, and at one point, I ended up having to go to the hospital because of it. So, it just got really bad. And doctors and my mom probably thought that the food played a big part on my mood being bad. I needed more nutritious food.... I had suicidal ideation, and one of the biggest concerns was financial stuff."

Our research findings also revealed the negative impacts of food insecurity on students' self-esteem, body-image, social relationships, and future career pursuits. Because of food insecurity and financial constraints, some students described feeling like a "failure at adulthood" and avoided any gathering with friends that would cost money. Some of our interviewees indicated that food insecurity limited their ability to network with future colleagues or potential employers (e.g., attending conferences) or take unpaid training opportunities (e.g., internships) due to budget shortages. As a result, our findings suggested that food insecurity may negatively affect students' future career and professional development.

In addition to the impacts of food insecurity on individual well-being and development, students with children also had to worry about their children's health and nutrition as well as their own. One such student shared with us:

"Because I had a child, I had extra expenses, but no increase in the amount of money I was able to get to go to school. Also, SNAP only allowed money for my child's food, so our budget was \$230.00 a month.... This did not leave much for clothing. My boy wore his summer shirts all winter, but wore his coat everywhere, for example."

Overall, stigma around hunger is an ongoing issue. Some students did not use food access resources they qualified for due to embarrassment or shame attached to being poor and food insecure. Others did not know where to find help or avoided asking for assistance because they did not want to take resources away from those who "really need it." The following quote from a student illustrates such struggles:

“Early in my graduate school experience I went through incredible financial difficulty, a brief period of homelessness escaping domestic violence, and limited food access. I cried most nights because I didn't have enough money to make ends meet. Many people thought I was anorexic because I didn't eat much, but there wasn't food at home or time to go grocery shopping, let alone prepare food. I took 3 classes at night, taught 2 during the day and worked another part-time job, still only earning \$1000/month. I was ashamed to tell anyone how bad things were and was scared to ask for help. I didn't know about any resources to help me. A friend was on food stamps and I started an application but with my pay, it seemed I didn't qualify (I made \$50 too much per month to qualify in [a nearby city], where I lived).”

In light of our research findings, a number of actions have been taken on our campus to combat the pervasive, negative impacts of food insecurity on student health and academic performance (for more information, please refer to our report: <https://studentaffairs.umd.edu/student-life/food-access-student-well-being-study>). For example, our Student Government Association pioneered the Emergency Meal Fund program to help students in need. Also, the INNOVO Scholars Consulting class at the Robert H. Smith School of Business made recommendations for possible solutions for student hunger after conducting a semester-long project on students' struggles with financial and food insecurity. Furthermore, in partnership with Campus Compact Mid-Atlantic and with the support from the Capital Area Food Bank and Maryland Hunger Solutions, the UMD Department of Dining Services—which runs our Campus Pantry—launched a three-year project to address hunger in our community. Also, recently we were selected to receive the NACAS Foundation 2020 Campus Care Grant to support our campus initiatives, research, and services that aim to reduce student hunger. As a result of these efforts, there is a new campus coalition at UMD that focuses on expanding community and off-campus collaborations to address student basic needs, including food and housing security.

In conclusion, consistent with other national studies, our research has clearly demonstrated that food insecurity is a serious concern for many students and that there is a great need for campus-wide, systemic interventions. The Senate Bill 767/House Bill 891 Higher Education – Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program will provide essential resources for Maryland public institutions of higher education to coordinate such efforts on their campuses in order to eliminate student hunger. Therefore, I urge you to vote YES on SB 767/HB 891 because no Marylander should have to choose between finding the next meal and staying in school. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



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