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Testimony on Hunger and Nutrition in New Jersey Higher Education

*Submitted to the New Jersey State Legislature
Senate Health, Human Services, and Senior Citizens Committee*

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I prepared this testimony in my role as a scholar of higher education policy, with particular expertise on the challenges associated with the price of college. I have devoted the last 12 years to studying the college trajectories of students from lower and moderate-income families, and over the last eight years I partnered with my colleagues at the Wisconsin HOPE Lab to conduct extensive research on issues of food insecurity in higher education.

When I first encountered an undergraduate who was struggling to afford to eat while attending college, I was surprised. Here was a young woman—18 years old—attending a state university, reporting that one of her biggest challenges was hunger. I thought that perhaps she was unusual, an anomaly created by the relatively high tuition charged in Wisconsin where we met or the poor economic conditions in the city where she lived. But over time, as we began to survey undergraduates in both community colleges and universities around the country, I learned that there is a serious problem of food insecurity among today's college students. According to the most recent estimates, based on a 2016 survey of more than 33,000 students attending 70 community colleges in 24 states, as many as two in three community college students are food insecure. This means that they do not have consistent access to nutritionally-adequate foods. Furthermore, 33% of students experience the very lowest levels of food security, a condition associated with the feeling of hunger. On March 15, my research team will release that new study, conducted with the Association of Community College Trustees and supported by the Kresge Foundation.¹

Food Insecurity in New Jersey Higher Education

There is no doubt that food insecurity is affecting undergraduates in New Jersey, and the problem is not isolated to community college students. Studies reveal that college food insecurity is not geographically constrained, nor is it only a problem at urban colleges or those with large numbers of students on financial aid. Essex Community College participated in the Wisconsin HOPE Lab's 2015 survey on food insecurity, and Bergen Community College participated in our

forthcoming study.ⁱⁱ In addition, Rutgers students from Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden participated in a 2015 study led by the College and University Food Bank Alliance.ⁱⁱⁱ In all cases, the measured rates of food insecurity in New Jersey were very similar to those reported at other institutions around the country.

In some ways, this is a predictable yet devastating problem. Three in four undergraduates defy traditional stereotypes.^{iv} Just 13% live on college campuses, and nearly half attend community colleges. One in four students is a parent, juggling childcare responsibilities with class assignments. About 70% of students work for pay while in school, including a significant number of full-time workers. The number of students qualified for the federal Pell Grant—a proxy for low-income status—has swelled substantially over time. This was expected, given the corresponding growth in participation in the National School Lunch Program.^v With more than one in five children living in poverty, college-going rates at a national high, and the price of higher education continuing to rise, food insecurity among undergraduates is probably more common than ever.^{vi}

While memories of a ramen-noodle diet are easy to summon among college graduates, food insecurity goes well beyond that stereotype. Consider the results of the HOPE Lab's 2015 study of 4,000 students at 10 community colleges, including one in New Jersey. We found that 13% of students experienced anxiety over their food supply, 19% reduced the quality or variety of their diet, and 21% indicated a very low level of food security—or hunger.^{vii} The most prevalent challenge was the ability to eat balanced meals, which research suggests may affect cognitive functioning.^{viii} In addition, 39% of students said that the food they bought did not last and they did not have sufficient money to purchase more. Twenty-eight percent cut the size of their meals or skipped meals at least once, and 22% did so on at least three days in the last 30 days. More than one in four respondents (26%) ate less than they felt they should, and 22% said that they had gone hungry due to lack of money.

In another, broader, study, we surveyed more than 2,000 Pell Grant recipients attending 42 public 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across Wisconsin. The results showed that 27% percent of students indicated that in the past month, they did not have enough money to buy food, ate less than they felt they should, or cut the size of their meals because there was not enough money. When asked if they ever went without eating for an entire day because they lacked enough money for food, seven percent of students said yes.^{ix}

Insufficient attention to the nutritional needs of undergraduates may contribute to the inadequate production of college-educated labor in New Jersey. Two-thirds of jobs in the state now require some college education, but only 46% of New Jersey residents hold at least an associate degree.^x

Enough students start college to meet these goals, but not enough finish. Among first-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree, 59% graduate within six years while 29% of students seeking an associate degree obtain one within three years. These completion rates mask significant variation by economic background. Just 14% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile had completed a bachelor's or higher degree within eight years of high school graduation compared to 29% of those from middle socioeconomic families and 60% of students from the highest socioeconomic quartile.^{xi} By one estimate, students from high-income families are six times more likely to graduate from college than those from low-income families.^{xii} Moreover, these gaps persist even after controlling for prior academic achievement.^{xiii}

The consequences of this challenge are significant. As Madeline Pumariega, chancellor of the Florida University System, put it, “When a student is hungry, he does not feel safe, and it is hard to help him synthesize class material. We have to meet students’ basic needs in order for them to fully concentrate on assimilating the information in a class in a way that they can apply it, learn, and take it forward.”^{xiv}

The Policy Challenge

Policies designed to alleviate food insecurity are sorely lacking in higher education. Eligibility for the federally funded food safety net on which many schoolchildren rely (including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, the National School Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program), erodes abruptly for most when they enter college. Though students’ financial needs remain while pursuing a postsecondary education—increasingly a prerequisite for a basic standard of living—food assistance becomes very difficult to access. This may be why undergraduates are at greater risk of food insecurity compared to the general population.^{xv}

When students require assistance affording food, colleges and universities may refer them to local food banks. Increasingly, food banks and food pantries are opening on college campuses. The College and University Food Bank Alliance now supports over 400 food banks on college campuses across the nation, and there are at least five on campuses in New Jersey.^{xvi} Feeding America estimates that one in ten of its 45.5 million clients are college students.^{xvii} Organizations such as Single Stop and the Working Families Success Network are also expanding to help colleges develop these services to meet students’ needs, in the absence of a clear and cohesive food safety net. As the food pantry director at Rutgers-New Brunswick notes, the pantry is “a Band-Aid for us to help a student get back on their feet and be able to graduate.”^{xviii}

Many low-income college students are ineligible for SNAP—and many more do not know that they are eligible. In order to qualify for SNAP, students must work at least 20 hours per week, take part in the Federal Work Study (FWS) program, have children, or participate in other safety net programs.^{xix} It can be very difficult for undergraduates, especially those without children, to meet these criteria. Consider the FWS program. It is underfunded and misallocated, such that only 1 in 10 Pell recipients at public colleges or universities receive any support. Moreover, apart from FWS, Pell recipients may struggle to secure and maintain 20 hours per week of employment due to increasingly common labor practices that require flexibility and availability incompatible with the demands of students’ class schedules.^{xx}

Moreover, working long hours while in college is counterproductive, reducing academic achievement and inhibiting course completion.^{xxi} Students working 20 or more hours per week are more likely to drop out of college. And among those who manage to graduate, working extends their time to degree and thus increases their college costs.^{xxii}

Even so, students who are food insecure are more likely to work than their food secure peers. According to one study, the typical food insecure college student works 18 hours per week. Employed students are nearly twice as likely to report experiences with food insecurity, indicating that work and financial aid are not enough to meet the financial demands of attending college.^{xxiii}

SNAP also has limited utility for undergraduates because it is rarely accepted on college campuses where students spend their time. SNAP cannot generally be used to purchase ready to eat prepared foods. Qualified retailers must meet stringent requirements on the types and

quantities of staple foods such as meats, dairy and vegetables they sell, and also be equipped with challenging sales hardware. While Oregon State University just became one of the first universities in the country to accept SNAP, the requirements for retailers make it very difficult for other schools to follow suit.^{xxiv}

For these reasons, in practice the help SNAP provides college students is quite limited.^{xxv} An analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 2012 revealed that just 27% of undergraduates who are likely eligible for SNAP actually participate in the program.^{xxvi}

What New Jersey Should Do

In order to address food insecurity in higher education and support all hard-working students in their quest to finish college, I recommend that the New Jersey legislature take the following actions:

1. Create incentives for New Jersey's colleges and universities to assess undergraduates for food security, in order to identify the need for support and to offer additional supports as needed. In addition, all institutions should inform students receiving federal Work-Study funds and Pell Grants of their potential eligibility for SNAP, and offer on-campus screening for eligibility.
2. Utilize existing options under the federal SNAP regulations to expand access to food stamps for college students without children.
 - a. Current rules make it possible to make students enrolled in college eligible for SNAP *without requiring them to work 20 hours per week* (which is counterproductive if degree completion is the goal) if they are in public career and technical education programs that may be completed in four years or less, or in remedial courses. Massachusetts has embraced the state's right to decide what "counts" for these programs, exempting students from the work requirement if they are enrolled in a Perkins-funded program. This is a well-targeted approach that supports some of the most vulnerable students. Indeed, my team is currently testing whether helping to ensure that students have adequate food will reduce their need for remedial education—an approach that could save states a great deal of money.
 - b. For students who must meet the 20-hour-per-week work requirement, New Jersey should average work hours across a month rather than computing eligibility on a week-by-week basis. This is especially important given evidence of under-employment among undergraduates, and the frequent use of inconsistent shift work by employers.^{xxvii}
3. Develop a state emergency grant aid program to offer immediate relief to students experiencing food insecurity, for example by providing vouchers to help them obtain food in their college cafeterias. Wisconsin's new program for that state's technical colleges provides a model.

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