

ACHIEVING ON AN EMPTY STOMACH

When we think of food insecurity among college students, we might be tempted to imagine teenagers away from home for the first time and subsisting on ramen noodles for a week after mismanaging their meal plans. The reality is quite a bit more stark than that, especially for community college students.

Community college students represent a far greater range of ages than most four-year institutions. With age comes a greater share of students who maintain jobs while studying, who care for elderly relatives, and who have families of their own. For these students, food insecurity is rarely a short-term phenomenon: it is a fact of life, too often a distracting and enervating one.

In the course of the research I conducted toward my dissertation, I surveyed 74 community college students and conducted interviews with six of those who responded to the survey. They ranged in age from 20 to 52. Each supported a dependent at home, and all but one, who received child support payments, depended on income either from their own employment or that of their spouse.

Diverse in age and in living arrangements, the participants were united by their determination to improve their prospects through higher education and by the thin margins by which they kept food on the table.

I found that their ability to stretch their tenuous food supplies was matched only by these students' resourcefulness. One participant used a \$5 daily meal stipend to last the entire day:

“it sustained me in certain cases maybe [through] breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Cause if I got something earlier enough in the day, I was able to sustain me throughout the entire day. I would use that one \$5 stipend, and I would buy something that can carry me throughout the day.”

Others drank copious amounts of water to manage hunger pangs (hint: adding a bit of lemon juice makes tap water more filling). Oatmeal was even better: “Whenever I go shopping, I always get at least a box of some type of oats or whatever. So if I don't eat the whole day, that'll carry me throughout the whole day, and I wouldn't even be hungry.”

These aren't sob stories. Only one of the students I interviewed even hinted that food insecurity had affected their studies. One tied her food intake directly to her coursework: “on those days [in which she has exams], it is crucial that I have some type of protein in my system so that I'm not filled with anxiety.”

But research shows conclusively that hunger and the food insecurity that causes it can have significant negative effects on students' concentration and performance. For all that we invest in community colleges, and all the promise they offer to the places they serve, we should consider seriously and programmatically whether issues like food insecurity are depriving some of our

Tenin Terrell
Writing Sample: Food Insecurity on Community College Campuses

most talented and tenacious students of the educational opportunities they deserve, and robbing us of the best they can contribute to society at large.

I invite those interested in supporting community college students in a real way to research and implement one of the many solutions to food insecurity.