

Chapter 10

Re-Inventing Student Services for Food-Insecure Students in an Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the need to modify, fortify, and expand student services to support food-insecure students due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the chapter, the author surveys the existing scholarship on the importance of student services to reduce barriers to academic success for food-insecure college students. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the impact of COVID-19 on hunger and poverty and the impact on college students. Third, the researcher will survey the various approaches taken by colleges to address changes to the delivery of services due to reduced limited access, a reduction in resources, and safety protocols. Lastly, the researcher will discuss new approaches to support food insecure students during a global pandemic. This chapter concludes that colleges must refine their approaches to addressing students' needs to ensure they achieve their academic goals.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced college institutions to move to online instruction at the mid-point of the Spring 2020 semester. While continuity plans were quickly finalized and put into action, the primary concerns involved the successful delivery of content to students. However, the impact of campus access and course delivery went well beyond academics. Many college students rely on institutions not only for instruction but also for the services that they receive while on campus. Food-insecure students are one example of individuals who lost more than their classroom during the crisis.

Although food-insecurity is increasing due to the pandemic, it is not a new issue on college campuses. Before the pandemic, food insecurity was a reality for many students who attend both two-year and four-year institutions (Chaparro et al., 2009; Freudenberg et al., 2011; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Patton-López et al., 2014). A study at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa surveyed 441 students to determine

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6557-5.ch010

the prevalence of food insecurity on campus. The researchers found that 21 percent experienced food insecurity and an additional 24 percent were at risk of becoming food-insecure (Chaparro et al., 2009). Other institutions had similar results including food insecure rates of 42 percent at the California State University, and 39 percent at the City University of New York (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Researchers have also investigated food insecurity at community colleges. In a study of 70 community colleges, researchers found 56 percent of students were food insecure (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

While colleges focus on best practices for online instruction, evidence reveals that supporting student success goes beyond the virtual classroom walls. Food-insecure students face barriers that negatively impact academic success. Poor academic outcomes correlate with the insufficiency of basic needs (Broton et al., 2018; Maroto et al., 2015; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Research identifies a statistically significant relationship between food insecurity and key metrics of student success including completion, persistence, and credit attainment. Results from a study conducted within the California public university system (N= 8705) identified that students experiencing food insecurity reported lower GPAs. The study also found the negative correlation between food insecurity and GPA was both direct and indirect through mental health issues related to food insecurity (Martinez et al., 2018). Food-insecure students are also more likely to drop classes, be withdrawn by the instructor due to poor attendance, fail to persist into the next semester, and fail classes due to financial stressors (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2015).

Food insecurity is an issue that college campuses must address to promote student success. Food insecurity is not only associated with a lower GPA (Maroto et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2018), but it also reduces completion and persistence rates (Maroto, 2013). Food insecurity forces students to make choices between eating a meal or purchasing educational resources needed for academic success. As students struggle with these decisions, they are more likely to withdraw from a class or choose not to register for the following term (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2015). When colleges and universities fail to address food insecurity not only will they see reduced student success, but institutional success rates will suffer as well.

Student services are critical for food-insecure students. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic as institutions extended breaks and converted to online instruction students lost access to, at least temporarily, to critical services such as student food pantries, meal vouchers, educational resources, counseling services, and coordinated benefit offices. While many of these services are now operating, at least in part, due to the focus on online education with little face-to-face interaction colleges must re-invent the way these services operate to ensure accessibility for the students. This chapter explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students, the importance of student services, and institutional approaches for the transformation of student support services to increase the academic success of food-insecure students in an online environment.

The ensuing argument unfolds in four steps. First, this paper surveys the current scholarship on the importance of student services to reduce barriers to academic success for food-insecure college students. Second, this paper will discuss the impact of COVID-19 on hunger and poverty and the impact on college students. Third, the researcher will survey the various approaches taken by colleges to address changes to the delivery of services in light of reduced accessibility and increased focus on virtual platforms. Lastly, the researcher will discuss new approaches to support food insecure students during a global pandemic.

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