Food Insecurity at Evergreen:

Addressing a National Crisis at Home

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*“Paying tuition allows students to go to class, but they will fail if they have no books, no pencils, no gas money to get to school, and no food in their stomachs” (Goldrick-Rab, 2016: 235).*

**Introduction**

Upon my arrival at The Evergreen State College, I quickly took the position of Vice-Chair of the Food Systems Working Group, a presidential committee whose primary goal is to uphold the Real Food Campus Commitment in the efforts to create a more ecologically sound, humane, fair, and local food system at Evergreen. While these efforts have been successful in shifting products to create a better food system, it has come at both a literal and figurative cost – being that “real” food is generally more expensive, the price of food on campus has naturally increased, making the food system more ecologically sustainable, but less economically sustainable.

If we take a moment to step away from Evergreen and look at national trends, recent shifts in higher education, professional standards, the US economy, and the food system have created a breading ground for food insecure students. As college continues to become more expensive and is seen as “the only available next step,” cost of living increases, and educational funding continues to stay stagnant and be spread thinner across an increasing population of students, it will only become more difficult for individuals striving for a higher education to feed themselves throughout the process (Goldrick-Rab, 2016: 19). This particular crisis is not only an assumption made from the culminating juncture of all of the aforementioned contributing factors. All of the academic literature measures food insecurity among college and university students at a significantly higher rate than the 2015 national household rate of 12.7%, and even that of the 2014 rate of 14% (USDA ERS, n.d.). Supplemental aid to meet the needs of students that aren’t already addressed by government or familial intervention such as food pantries, food recovery programs, and campus gardens are becoming more popular at colleges and universities across the country. However, even in combination with institutions such as the Pell Grant or SNAP benefits, multitudes of students continue to struggle through college without the means for, or access to sustenance.

United States rhetoric has always equated a higher education with upward social mobility – an investment that reaps the rewards of a better life for future generations. This idealized “American Dream” is only possible when the bodies and minds of all who pursue a college degree, at Evergreen or elsewhere, are nourished and sustained along the way.

**Methodology**

In order to get a wholesome picture of the prevalence and existing solutions to address food insecurity among students at The Evergreen State College, I took a two-pronged approach. Over the ten-week quarter I inserted myself into any and all food and/or human services campus groups, offices, and committees, taking part in meetings, and interviewing and emailing staff and administration involved in fighting food insecurity on campus. Under the title of Food Systems Working Group Vice-Chair I was able to join the Human Services Working Group, Food Advisory Committee, and connect with staff and students from the Center for Community Based Learning and Action, The Thurston County Food Bank Satellite, Residential and Dining Services, and the Campus Childcare Center. Many of these resources aided me in my search for information outside the scope of Evergreen, including best practices conducted by other schools, and third party organizations that aimed to address food insecurity issues on college campuses. I complemented this informal qualitative investigation with a collection and assessment of peer reviewed literature and published works to get a broader understanding of food insecurity as a whole in the United States, and specifically the rates of prevalence on other college campuses across the country where formal studies were taken in order to put Evergreen in a national context.

**Literature Review**

When compiling the literature that specifically measures student food insecurity rates, it is important to note that to date there has been no study conducted that measures food insecurity rates among students on a national scale. However, from the specific case studies conducted at colleges and universities in varying geographic, political, and economic regions of the US, most measured higher food insecurity rates compared to national household averages taken during the year of the study.

Although very much the exception, a study conducted at large public university in Alabama found food insecurity was prevalent at a rate of 14.06%, a number almost exactly aligned with the 2014 national household average of 14%, and even less than the Alabama food insecurity rate of 18% (Gaines et al., 2014). However, seven other studies have measured food insecurity among students at significantly higher rates than the national household rate, ranging anywhere from 21% at University of Hawai’i at Manoa, up to 59% at a rural university in Oregon (Bruening et al., 2016; Chaparro et al., 2009; Dubick et al., 2016; Freudenberg et al., 2011; Maroto, 2013; Morris et al. 2016; Patton-Lopez et al., 2014).

When assessing the demographics of students that are most at risk of being food insecure, the literature suggests a few key populations. While it is widely accepted that food insecurity is most associated with low-income, this is supported by the fact that there was a positive correlation between financial aid recipients and students who were food insecure according to Gaines et al. (2014), Dubick et al. (2016), and Patton-Lopez et al. (2014). Specifically, Dubick et al. (2016) found that 61% of students who are food insecure are already taking advantage of assistance. Dubick et al. (2016) also found that 56% of first generation students are food insecure compared to 45% of non-first generation students. Additionally, of the students surveyed in *Paying the Price*, one third of them agreed with the statement “I feel obligated to support my family financially,” implying that many low-income students are not only worrying about feeding themselves, but also their families. Non-white students were also found to have disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity compared to white students in studies conducted by Chaparro et al. (2009), Dubick et al. (2016), Freudenberg et al. (2011), Maroto (2013), Morris et al. (2016), and Gaines et al. (2014). Specifically, Maroto (2013) found that 61% of surveyed African American Students, and 50% of Hispanic students were food insecure, compared to 32% of their white counterparts.

The literature also found a number of very concerning consequences among those affected by food insecurity. Many of the studies found a negative correlation between food insecurity and academic success (less food, lower GPAs) (Bruening et al., 2016; Gaines et al., 2014; Maroto, 2013; Morris et al. 2016; Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). In addition to poorer physical health, Bruening et al. (2016), and Freudenberg et al. (2011) found a positive correlation between increased food insecurity, and a prevalence of depression and other mental illnesses. Specifically, Bruening et al. (2016) found that the likelihood of anxiety and depression among food insecure freshmen was almost three times as great as their food secure peers. The implications of these consequences are great – academic success, and physical and mental wellbeing are all required in order to achieve the social mobility that college supposedly guarantees.

While the literature that measures the prevalence of food insecurity in college students has not also specifically studied the effectiveness of current solutions, each does contribute suggestions regarding how to mitigate food insecurity on college campuses. Chaparro et al. (2009), Dubick et al. (2016), and Morris et al. (2016) suggest solutions at the individual university level, such as implementing campus food pantries or food banks, food recovery programs, and community gardens on campus. Beyond the supplemental solutions, a handful of the literature suggest either more readily available education about SNAP benefits, better access to retailers that accept SNAP benefits, or an expansion of SNAP itself to include a larger percentage of college students (Bruening et al., 2016; Dubick et al., 2016; Morris et al. 2016; Patton-Lopez et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Morris et al. (2016), for example, suggests “campus counselors and nutrition educators could provide information to students regarding eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.” Bruening et al. (2016) insists that “universities could test the effectiveness of more affordable meal plans with minimum requirements that would cover all meals and/or subsidized breakfast or lunches for students to increase students’ access to healthy food (as the National School Lunch Program does for low-income kindergarten through grade 12 students).” Although not included in the scholarly conversation of food insecurity among students, Millimet et al. (2015) claims in “Financial Literacy and Food insecurity in Extremely Vulnerable Households” that an effective solution in creating food security is an increase in financial literacy and the ability to understand how to spend money. Logically, this might be an effective solution for students who come from low-income households, and especially first generation students. Finally, all eight studies measuring food insecurity of college campuses recommend that a broader, national study of food insecurity on college campuses be conducted in order to obtain more accurate demographics, correlates, and solutions (Bruening et al., 2016; Chaparro et al., 2009; Dubick et al., 2016; Freudenberg et al., 2011; Gaines et al., 2014; Maroto, 2013; Morris et al. 2016; Patton-Lopez et al., 2014)

**National Solutions**

**Grassroots Efforts**

As previously mentioned, the literature suggests a number of common supplemental solutions in the efforts to combat food insecurity on college campuses. These solutions that have increased in popularity and prevalence across the nation include, primarily, food banks and pantries, food recovery programs, and community gardens.

Of these solutions, campus food banks and pantries seem to be the most common implementations, so much so that in recent years a national network of college food banks has formed. As of February 2017, The College and University Food Bank Alliance, or CUFBA includes programs from 454 institutions across the country. Notable chapters within this alliance first and foremost include its founders – Michigan State University: Student Food Bank, which was the “first food bank in the nation run by students for students,” and Oregon State University’s Human Services Resource Center, who not only hosts an emergency food pantry, but provides, “intermediary services between students and agencies that offer **rental assistance, food stamps, food boxes, and health insurance”** (“Our Members,” n.d.).

While students go without meals because of lack of funds or access, there are simultaneously massive amounts of food waste produced by campus dining halls and retail locations. An innovative strategy to reconcile this disconnection is the practice of food recovery. Specifically, the Food Recovery Network is a national organization that collects food waste or excess from dining halls and facilitates donations to other students or the larger community. Since it’s inception in 2011, there have been 206 chapters created across the country, and more than 1.8 million pounds of food have been recovered and repurposed (“About,” n.d.).

A seemingly attractive solution that many have encouraged is the implementation of community gardens. While this mirrors a national trend towards a resurgence of community gardening and urban farming, this implementation may not be as practical as the previously mentioned solutions in addressing food insecurity on campus. During a presentation of her research regarding community orchards, Jennifer Blecha suggested that community gardens, although wonderful for community building, do little to actually address food insecurity issues within their neighborhoods because they simply don’t produce the quantity of food required to meet the need (Blecha, 2016). Another issue specific to implementing community gardens on college campuses is that usually the students who are food insecure are the most busy taking care of their families, studying, and working one or more jobs, leaving little free time to tend a garden.

**Institutional Policy Solutions**

Beyond grassroots solutions, there are national policy-based resources to combat both the rising costs of college, and the increasing prevalence of food insecurity. However, these resources, even in combination, do little to effectively address these issues in practice.

The most common source of financial aid for students attending college is the Pell Grant, created in 1972 following the Higher Education Act of 1965, which increased federal investment in higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2016: 13). Although at the time of its inception the Pell Grant was a viable solution to make college affordable for all aspiring Americans, it has since fallen incredibly short. As more of the population attends college, which continues to increase in cost, the relatively stagnant funding for the Pell Grant continues to be spread thinner and thinner over time. “Today the maximum Pell covers less than one-third of the cost of attending a public four-year university and barely 60% of the cost of attending community college” (Goldrick-Rab, 2016: 17).

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly the food stamp program is the “largest program in the domestic hunger safety net” (Dubick et al., 2016). Other aid such as TANF, which is temporary assistance, and WIC, assistance for pregnant women, infants, and children are available for those who are food insecure (USDA ERS, n.d.). Although there are some students who qualify for these assistance programs, there are a large number of full time students who are not eligible, one major reason being that working at least 20 hours a week is extremely difficult for a student with a full academic course load (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Another major concern with this program is that most college food providers and retail locations are unable to accept EBT cards, preventing students who live on campus from accessing affordable food even if they are receiving government assistance.

One of the most successful government assistance programs that nourishes students in need is the National School Lunch Program. Although it allows students who would normal go without breakfast or lunch to stay fueled throughout the day, there is clearly a major stipulation. Only extending these subsidized through high school leaves students who once benefited from these services and are now pursuing an Associates or Bachelors Degree extremely vulnerable (Bruening et al., 2016).

**Innovative Programs**

Although the shortfalls of the aforementioned strategies are deeply concerning, the need that still exists despite the more traditional solutions has inspired a handful of innovative and creative answers to address student food insecurity. Particularly, the app Single Stop “harnesses America’s most effective anti-poverty tools to create economic mobility for low-income families and individuals” (Daughtry et al., 2016). Although SNAP is not accessible to many students, even students who are eligible often don’t know they are, or don’t know how to apply (Goldrick-Rab 2016: 58). Streamlining these resources makes government assistance much less daunting. According to a study conducted by the Rand Corporation, the use of this app increased retention rate, ultimately increasing student success, claiming “Single Stop users were 6%-11% more likely to persist into their next year of college” (Daughtry et al., 2016).

With 25 chapters nationally, Swipe Out Hunger is another innovative organization that aims to address student food insecurity by partnering with college dining services to allow students to anonymously donate their unused “meal points” to their peers who don’t have the funds to feed themselves. This reallocation of already existing resources is similar to the strategy of food recovery programs, but focuses on monetary redistribution rather than leftovers in a more traditional sense (“Our Programs,” n.d.).

**Food Insecurity at Evergreen**

**Evergreen Student Demographics**

If you ask around at The Evergreen State College about the prevalence of food insecurity on campus, any staff, faculty, or student involved with food services, human services, or financial aid will say that it is a major issue. Although there has not been an official study conducted to measure just how many students are food insecure at the Evergreen State College, demographics and other such statistics suggest a large population of students who are, at the very least, at risk of being food insecure. As the literature indicated, there are certain population characteristics that positively correlate with food insecurity, such as poverty stricken or low-income students, first generation students, financial aid recipients, and students of color. According to research done by Evergreen’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, as of 2016, 51% of Evergreen students are considered low-income, 45.6% of students live below the poverty level, and 46.2% of undergraduate students receive the Pell Grant. Additionally, just shy of one third of the student population are students of color, and/or first generation students – populations very much correlated with food insecurity. If these numbers weren’t enough to indicate a potential issue of food security on campus, the rate of enrolled students identifying with any or all of those previously mentioned at-risk demographics has increased over the years. For example, since 1971, the rate of Evergreen students of color has gone from 7% or 29%, and since first measured in 2001, the rate of Evergreen students below the poverty level has increased by 10 percentage points (“Evergreen Institutional Research Fact Page,” n.d.).

Aside from the secondary correlate factors, 2016 statistics from the Thurston County Food Bank Satellite on campus indicate a large portion of the Evergreen population already utilizing the relief programs in place at Evergreen. For the year 2016, there were 2,049 visits to the satellite food bank on campus, totaling 656 unique households, and 904 unique individuals (Bauermeister, personal communication, February 2, 2017). Although the satellite is open to other community members aside from students, if we assume that most of the households served include Evergreen students, that would indicate approximately 16% of all Evergreen students have utilized the on campus satellite.

As these at-risk demographics continue to become more prevalent within the student population at Evergreen, and the food bank continues to be heavily utilized, creating effective systems to combat and prevent food insecurity on campus must become a priority of the administration.

**Existing Efforts**

When assessing an action plan to address food insecurity at Evergreen, it is important to thoroughly consider and assess existing efforts being taken by administration, faculty, and students. After extensive outreach and involvement, it is clear that there are many entities putting forth effort to combat this issue. Institutions on campus such as the Center for Community Based Learning and Action, Residential and Dining Services, Aramark, TRiO, the Childcare Center, Police Services, the Food Systems Working Group, Human Services Working Group, and the Campus Food Coalition have contributed to creating food security for Evergreen students.

One of the largest programs to combat food insecurity on campus is the previously mentioned Thurston County Food Bank Satellite that is open to students every Tuesday afternoon, where students can take a specific quantity of groceries including perishable fruits and vegetables. In conjunction, Police Services houses a more informal food pantry that provides mostly nonperishable food items for students to take freely and anonymously, and an even less formal food donation box is housed at the Campus Childcare Center. Additionally, Evergreen’s first Food Policy written by the Food Systems Working Group requires Aramark to donate $5,000 a year in food products to assist the food pantry at Police Services.

Previous efforts taken by the student group Campus Food Coalition in conjunction with Aramark, Evergreen’s Dining Service Provider, and Residential and Dining Services have recently yielded an industrial-sized refrigerator in order to preserve and donate perishable and prepared foodstuff, such as casseroles, that would otherwise be thrown away. Although an impressive effort, unfortunately this food cannot be donated to students directly on campus due to regulations.

Another recent effort to find ways to address hunger and homelessness on campus is the inception of the Human Services Working Group, chaired by Casey Lalonde, director of the Childcare Center. This group consists of staff and representatives from most of the relevant parties at Evergreen, including the Financial Aid office, Thurston County Food Bank, TRiO, Police Services, the CCBLA, the Childcare Center, and the Food Systems Working Group.

In addition to facilitating the food bank satellite, the CCBLA is currently working on a Title 3 Grant to support low-income students, as well as a Legislative funding ask for the position of a Student Retention Director, a preventative measure that has helped combat homelessness and hunger on campuses across the country. One notable student retention program being Florida State University’s Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement, or CARE, that aims to provide students at risk with social services before they find themselves hungry or homeless (Lalonde, personal communication, March 3, 2017; “CARE,” n.d.).

**Institutional Recommendations**

After a quarter-long investigation of the prevalence of food insecurity on campus and efforts being taken to combat it both at Evergreen, and at a national level, I propose a series of recommended actions be taken by Evergreen to improve food security on campus.

The first recommendation is a relatively simple one –expand the Human Services Working Group to include representatives from Residential and Dining Services, Aramark, The Eggplant, the GSU, First Peoples Multicultural Advising Services, and administration. It is clear that all aforementioned parties are interested in this issue, and consolidated communication from all relevant entities in one place with a collective purpose is the most effective way to plan comprehensively and pool both efforts and resources to address food insecurity.

As it currently stands, The Evergreen State College employs students to work a maximum of 19 hours a week. Extending this maximum allotment to 20 hours a week would allows student employees in need to qualify for SNAP benefits without acquiring an additional job outside of their Evergreen employment to meet the 20 weekly hours required by the USDA to qualify for assistance (USDA ERS, n.d.). Although there are a few cost-related and legal barriers, such as the requirement of providing healthcare benefits, this one-hour shift would make worlds of difference for students employed by the college.

Thirdly, I recommend that strategies such as the Police Services food pantry and food donation box at the Childcare Center be extended to other parts of campus, such as the Housing Community Center, Student Health Center, the Library, the CRC, etc. Creating a series of unattended, informal pick-up locations for food makes food pantries or “snack shelves” less stigmatized for students who would normally be too embarrassed to reach out for resources, or students who feel uncomfortable interacting with Police Services (Lalonde, personal communication, March 3, 2017). Although these boxes or pantries would run on an honor system, in order to maintain these locations I would recommend campus networks such as the Food Systems Working Group, and the Campus Food Coalition be responsible for encouraging, facilitating, and transporting any student, staff, or faculty donations.

Although this suggestion may take a lot of legwork and fundraising, developing a food scholarship that specifically covers meal plans for hungry or food insecure students would be a direct way to guarantee that at least a select amount of students who couldn’t feed themselves otherwise will be nourished throughout their time at Evergreen.

Efforts towards a more fair, humane, ecologically sound, and community-based food system on campus using a third-party organization has already proved successful with the recent implementation of the Real Food Challenge, however adopting additional practices or organizations to balance these efforts with making sure that food remains affordable for all Evergreen students is incredibly important. With that being said, my final recommendation would be to pursue creating a Swipe Out Hunger chapter here on the Evergreen campus. Although Katherine Striggow, Evergreen’s Aramark Director, has voiced her reservations when previously presented with this idea, I believe with the proper amount of student support and dedication, this program could be implemented relatively smoothly (Striggow, personal communication, March 1, 2017).

**Policy Recommendations**

While immediate action can be taken at an institutional level to combat food insecurity at Evergreen, the fact that this is a national issue indicates more systemic causal factors that colleges and universities can only fix or mitigate to a certain extent with “Band-Aid solutions.” With that being said, after considering the literature and other research, I also recommend specific policy shifts in order to combat the root cause of this national epidemic.

First and foremost, I would concur with all of the current studies in that a national study measuring prevalence and correlates of food insecurity in higher education is conducted. Luckily and coincidentally, a group of Senators including Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts have recently sent out a letter of request asking “the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a study on food insecurity at American colleges and universities” (Warren et al., 2017).

My second policy recommendation is in line with literature from Goldrick-Rab (2016), and Bruening et al. (2016), in that the National Lunch Program is extended to qualified students pursuing Associates and Bachelors degrees at public colleges and universities. In addition, I recommend an overall increase in federal higher education funding. This would include reorienting the Pell Grant and passing the Working Student Act of 2015 during the next legislative session, an Act that recently died in Congress for the second year in a row (Civic Impulse, 2017).

Finally, on a state level, I recommend student and university lobbying efforts be made for Washington State Legislative House Bill 1569, “requiring the department of social and health services to request all necessary exemptions and waivers from the federal government to allow students to use electronic benefit transfer cards at institutions of higher education” (Marci, et al., 2017). Although the bill is dead for this year’s legislative session, mobilizing grassroots lobbying energy regarding this issue now will ensure prepared efforts for the next Washington State Legislative session.

**Conclusion**

After reflecting upon my findings, it is clear that in order to combat this rising national crisis it is imperative that colleges and universities across the US create action plans unique to their students’ needs that incorporate both emergency and long-term solutions. However these efforts will only be worthwhile in partnership with national, political action that addresses more systemic factors.

As a university home to a great number of students at risk of food insecurity and homelessness, The Evergreen State College specifically must be particularly mindful in prioritizing their efforts to pool resources, information, and time in order to address food insecurity among their students – an issue that will only continue to get worse unless there are collective and individual actions taken.

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