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Addressing College Food Insecurity: An Assessment of Federal Legislation Before and During Coronavirus Disease-2019

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ABSTRACT

Research conducted before coronavirus disease-2019 illustrated high rates of food insecurity among college students. The pandemic has likely increased student food insecurity because of factors like unemployment and closure of campus resources, and many students cannot access federal food assistance because of long-standing student restrictions. This perspective reviews federal legislation on college food insecurity introduced in the 116th legislative session (2019–2020) immediately before coronavirus disease-2019 in the US, as well as pandemic-related stimulus bills and their implications for future policies and practice. Food insecurity promises to become more pressing as colleges try to reopen and the country grapples with economic recovery.

Key Words: food insecurity, college students, food security, policy, federal legislation (*J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2020; 52:982–987.)

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INTRODUCTION

A key social determinant of health in the US is the successful completion of higher education,¹ and it has been recognized as such by authorities such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH)^{2,3} and Healthy People 2020.⁴ When Americans envision a typical college student, some may call up stereotypical images of students from generations ago—young people supported by upper-middle-class families, living in exclusive dormitories, and eating in bountifully sourced dining halls.^{5–7} However, times have changed. With Obama-era policies creating new opportunities for students at both 2- and 4-year

postsecondary institutions, we see that now 44% of students seeking Bachelor's degrees are students of color⁸ and 56% of all undergraduates are first-generation students,⁹ or, in other words, do not have a parent with a 4-year degree.

These new-to-college students face challenges to academic success, many of which stem from economic hardship. For example, many of the 20 million US college students today¹⁰ experience food insecurity, defined by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle.¹¹ Although there are no nationally representative estimates of food insecurity among

students, recent literature reviews showed that about 1 in 3 college students experienced food insecurity before the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) crisis.^{12,13}

The COVID-19 pandemic has made things much worse for students. Jobs have been cut in unprecedented numbers, and 18–24-year-olds have experienced some of the highest rates of unemployment.¹⁴ In 2020, students living on campus were forced to relocate; some had limited options of where to go.¹⁵ Students paid 2020 spring semester costs for goods and services they could not use, such as meal plans and Internet access, and although some universities have provided refunds, others have not.¹⁶ Many students worry about what to expect in the short- and long-term future.^{17,18} Troublingly, many students may have limited access to community resources, such as food pantries, and also cannot access federal nutrition assistance, such as the USDA *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (SNAP) benefits.¹⁹ There have been long-standing SNAP restrictions for full-time college students, known as the college SNAP rule, that were created under the assumption that most students enter college directly after high

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school and are supported by their parents.^{19,20} There are limited exceptions to these restrictions, and those students who are SNAP-eligible face significant challenges in getting this much-needed assistance, a challenge that has been thoroughly detailed in a recent Government Accountability Office report.²¹ Unfortunately, a federal waiver to provide college students with expanded access to SNAP (ie, eliminate the requirement to work at least 20 hours per week) was recently denied.²²

THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

With its substantial impact on health and other metrics, successful completion of higher education is important.¹ College graduates earn more money²³ and have half the unemployment²⁴ of nongraduates, translating into more long-term resources, better health, and, ultimately, longer life expectancy.²⁵ A growing patchwork of recent research studies further shows college students experiencing food insecurity are in poorer health and have higher rates of depression, lower grades, and more academic challenges^{12,13} than their counterparts. Although much of the research on this topic has been conducted with undergraduates,^{12,13} some evidence from 2019 suggests that rates of food insecurity may be similar between graduate and undergraduate students.²⁶ Students of color and first-generation students are at the highest risk for food insecurity,¹² which could ultimately delay or derail graduation. In recent years, research on college food insecurity has spurred national attention to this crisis.^{6,27–31} In response, colleges leaders are now struggling to understand the scope of student food insecurity and identify evidence-based prevention strategies.^{32–35} Many colleges have begun to operate campus food pantries and other hunger relief initiatives as a result. However, many people,^{36–38} including the authors, assert that many of these strategies are short-term remedies, and federal policy changes are needed to initiate and enhance systemic support for students.

CURRENT FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS

In response to the food insecurity crisis, federal policymakers have introduced a range of bills to address college food insecurity during the current 116th legislative session (2019–2020). The authors here sought to comprehensively summarize the current federal legislative efforts addressing college food insecurity, to identify opportunities and gaps in this area better.

In total, 17 such bills (12 unique bills) were introduced in the current legislative session, before COVID-19 in the US. These bills (see [Table](#)) were identified through a key-word guided search of the current 116th legislative session (2019–20), in consultation with university librarians and 2 legal experts (S.F. and C.P.) independently screening results, extracting data, and coding. We excluded legislative efforts focused generally on college affordability.

Findings indicated that 1 bill (S. 1221) had been sponsored by a Republican, whereas the remaining were Democrat-sponsored. Key mechanisms of the 12 unique bills included the following: (1) small-scale grant programs or related grant eligibility changes ($n=7$), (2) SNAP eligibility information dissemination and outreach ($n=2$), (3) SNAP eligibility expansion ($n=2$), (4) required food insecurity reporting ($n=2$), and (5) cross-agency data sharing to identify students eligible for food assistance ($n=1$).

All bills were in the early stages, having been only introduced and referred to the: House Committee on Education and Labor ($n=10$), House Committee on Agriculture ($n=3$), Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry ($n=1$), and Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions ($n=4$). Only 1 bill (H.R. 4297) had more than 50 cosponsors. Bills used several legislative levers, and most focused on amending the Higher Education Act of 1965 ($n=12$), Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 ($n=11$), and Child Nutrition Act of 1966 ($n=3$). Others mention the Social Security Act of 1935 Title IV ($n=3$) or the Housing Act of 1937 ($n=1$).

Furthermore, none of the 4 COVID-19 stimulus bills (P.L. 116-123; P.L. 116-127; P.L. 116-136; P.L. 116-139) have specifically addressed food insecurity in college students, although bills have been introduced to address paying college loans during the pandemic (eg, S. 3556 and H. R. 6316). The Emergency Ensuring Access to SNAP (EATS) Act (H.R. 6565) and End Pandemic Hunger For College Students Act (H.R. 6756) were recently introduced to ensure low-income college students who meet other eligibility standards are not denied access to SNAP during the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The rapidly growing legislative enthusiasm across agriculture and education committees and a range of legislative leaders is encouraging but also challenging, given the limited evidence on which proposed legislation can be based. From the authors' perspective, 1 limiting factor and pressing research need is for nationally representative estimates of college food insecurity. In addition, to conduct research on college student food insecurity, a valid, widely accepted measure of food insecurity is needed. This issue needs consideration given recent research suggesting standard USDA food insecurity measures may not perform well in college populations.³⁹ Despite this potential limitation, the National Center for Education Statistics has recently announced their intention to collect surveillance data on college food insecurity in the coming years.⁴⁰

The authors here also assert that to inform policy efforts effectively, other pressing research needs include (1) rigorous longitudinal cohort studies quantifying short- and long-term consequences of food insecurity, including those related to health, academic, and economic outcomes, and, perhaps more importantly, (2) rigorous evaluation of natural experiments and controlled intervention trials to identify approaches that are both viable and effective in lessening the burden of food insecurity on students. Ultimately, once strategies to

Table. Current 116th Legislative Session (2019–2020) Bills Aiming to Address Food Insecurity Among College Students

Bill Number and Title	Bill Purpose (As Relevant to Food Insecurity)
America's College Promise Act (H.R. 3933; H.R. 4212; S. 2250)	To amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to establish State and Indian tribe grants for community colleges and grants for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and minority-serving institutions
Basic Assistance for Students In College (BASIC) Act (H.R. 4968; S. 2225)	To provide for the basic needs of college students by (1) sharing data among Federal agencies to identify students eligible for SNAP and other programs and (2) coordinating assistance to colleges to enhance enrollment in these programs
Cost Assistance Made Possible for Undergraduate Students (CAMPUS) Act (H.R. 4308)	To amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to establish an emergency grant aid program
Campus Hunger Reduction Act (H.R. 1723)	To amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to make colleges eligible for assistance for community food projects
Closing the College Hunger Act (H.R. 3718 & S. 2110)	To address college food and housing insecurity by (1) assessing food and housing insecurity in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, and (2) requiring the Secretary of Education to send SNAP enrollment information to eligible students
College Student Hunger Act (H.R. 3809 & S. 2143)	To amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to expand the eligibility of students to participate in SNAP
Enhance Access to SNAP Act (EATS Act) (H.R. 4297)	To amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to treat college attendance the same as work for SNAP eligibility purposes
Food for Thought Act (H.R. 4065)	To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to add a pilot meal program in community colleges
Hispanic Educational Resources and Empowerment Act (H.R. 3827)	To support collaboration between Hispanic institutions and Hispanic serving schools, including grant funds for student needs that are barriers to college success, such as food insecurity
Innovation Zone Act (S. 1221)	To amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to create an innovation zone initiative, hosting voluntary experiments on statutory and regulatory changes to test the impact on student success, including increases in student safety, wellness, or food and housing security
Opportunity to Address College Hunger Act (H.R. 4637)	To amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to require colleges to provide notice of SNAP eligibility to students receiving work-study assistance
Supporting Transparency to Overcome Poverty (STOP) Campus Hunger Act (H.R. 3743)	To amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to require annual disclosure of nutrition assistance program eligibility criteria on the Department of Education Web site and elsewhere

SNAP, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*.

effectively reduce the duration and magnitude of college food insecurity have been identified, the extent to which these strategies also attenuate long-term disease risks known to accompany food insecurity in the general population can subsequently be evaluated. Legislative action can help create opportunities for such natural experiments.

One reason research on college food insecurity has been challenging is that this issue (food insecurity) and population (college students) do not clearly fall in the purview of a specific institute at NIH, the major sponsor of health research in the US. College food insecurity often falls outside the scope of child health, and also has

not yet been generally adopted within the chronic disease research portfolios. Importantly, college youth, particularly those with food insecurity, are a vulnerable population needing special consideration and prioritization by NIH and other funding agencies, along with non-government funders. The first-of-its-kind Strategic Plan for NIH Nutrition Research⁴¹ may help accelerate progress on such research needs, but only time will tell.

However, although pressing research needs exist, public health nutrition professionals and policy advocates have long had to cope with the slow pace of scientific research. Many assert that policy action

cannot necessarily wait for scientific certainty.⁴² Through this legislative review, several bills were identified from this legislative session that proposed more promising approaches, despite limited evidence, including piloting federal meals programs in community colleges and expanding SNAP eligibility for students.

Other bills have proposed grant programs for postsecondary institutions to support students' basic needs, which may be successful, but the authors believe colleges need support from nutrition and other professionals to identify best practices in which to invest. In addition, although successful pilot initiatives can establish feasibility and estimate

reach, high-quality evaluation is needed. The authors' view is that partnerships with skilled, independent nutrition/food insecurity evaluators are imperative for adequately assessing the effectiveness and sustained impact on longer-term food insecurity, health, and well-being. The authors believe federal support for rigorous, independent, and coordinated evaluation across institutions is warranted. For example, similar to the \$31 million USDA-funded center charged with evaluating local programs providing financial incentives for healthy SNAP purchasing, the US Department of Education and USDA could fund grants to rigorously evaluate programs across the US addressing food insecurity in college students.⁴³

Beyond federal efforts, there are also emerging state legislative initiatives to address food insecurity. Although outside the scope of this federal assessment, a preliminary 50-state assessment of legislative initiatives by the authors revealed 14 states have introduced and/or passed legislation to address college food insecurity. California leads this area, having enacted 4 laws to date; for example, 1 law mandated all community colleges in the state offer a "hunger-free campus" designation for campuses with a food pantry, a meal donation program, and dedicated staff to disseminate food assistance information.⁴⁴ Other states have also taken policy action; for instance, Minnesota recently enacted a law also establishing minimum criteria for Minnesota State community and technical colleges to receive a *hunger-free campus* designation.⁴⁵

Beyond these efforts at both state and federal levels, the downstream impact of COVID-19 may result in opportunities to make other upstream changes to move the needle on college food insecurity. Additional policy opportunities have been suggested regarding SNAP, including SNAP agency mandates to collaborate with colleges to screen eligible students; enhance enrollment processes for efficiency and transparency; and address concerns about financial aid, loans, and work-study funds limiting students' SNAP eligibility by being included in income

assessments.⁴⁶ Other suggested policy actions have included: requirements for colleges to convene student food insecurity task forces, possibly as part of *hunger-free campus* designations; incentives for SNAP purchases at on-campus retailers; and funding or technical assistance for creation of campus food pantries, food recovery, or dining center meal donations.⁴⁷ Although the authors contend these additional suggested policies alone are likely weak, they may provide important first steps toward more comprehensive policy action.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Well-informed advocacy can accelerate policy change.⁴⁸ The Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior includes advocacy as a core component of the leadership for which it strives.⁴⁹ Nutrition professionals with expertise in school meals and SNAP enrollment can play an especially valuable role in advocacy efforts for college food insecurity now, as well as in implementation later, should such bills be passed and codified into law.

In the authors' view, nutrition professionals must work with others across disciplines to advocate for promising policy changes to support students who identify as food insecurity, especially as academic institutions aim to reopen this fall amidst an on-going pandemic, as well as at a time when widespread economic recovery efforts are being considered and launched. For example, higher education professionals, including student affairs practitioners and others, could be important partners in addressing food insecurity needs. Multidisciplinary task forces could facilitate the visioning, planning, and implementation of campus-based action and advocacy. These types of coordinated efforts can provide collective and intentional plans to support students' basic needs.⁵⁰

Other keys to accelerating successful action on college food insecurity include coordinated national surveillance and more whole-of-government approaches, between agencies like the Department of Education, USDA, and Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, as well as federal, state, tribal, and local governments and postsecondary institutions. Given the pace of rapidly developing action to address college food insecurity in the US, there is also a critical need for strong communication networks across diverse disciplinary perspectives, enhanced, for example, by cross-sectoral convenings for sharing cutting-edge findings and best practices in research, policy, and practice innovation. Groups like the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice⁵¹ and the Food Research & Action Center⁵² have established convenings across several sectors in recent years; hopefully these efforts will continue to spur comprehensive national communication and rapid dissemination that can fuel future policy action.

Finally, as a result of COVID-19, additional university- and college-level challenges relevant to food insecurity are now surfacing with the anticipated reopening of college campuses—including food service venues and campus food pantries—this fall. Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior members can play a pivotal role in reviewing these reopening policies to ensure they are most sensitive to the needs of students experiencing food insecurity. Importantly, more work is needed to assess the implications of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance for reopening college campuses⁵³ and the growing patchwork of university and college reopening policies, particularly with a food insecurity lens.

Overall, through collective action, strong communication, and well-informed decision-making, nutrition professionals can play important roles in building systems that better support students in their pursuit of higher education and better health. Without collective and timely action for policy change, college food insecurity will likely only worsen.

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