

Special Section: Justice and Equity Approaches to College and University Student Food (In)Security

Justice and equity approaches to college and university student food (in)security: Introduction to the special section

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A ccording to myriad studies, college and university student food insecurity is a pervasive and systemic problem. Most show that nearly half of college and university students experience food insecurity (Breuning et al., 2017; Broton, 2020; Nazmi, 2019). As defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is the "limited or uncertain availability of

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^c Caitlin McLennan, MS Environmental Policy and Planning Candidate at Tufts University, and Sustainability Coordinator at Utah State University; <u>caitlin.mclennan@usu.edu</u> nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (USDA Economic Research Service, 2022, para. 3). The experience of food insecurity, however, manifests in various ways for students, including the actuality of being hungry, not having enough food, consuming poor-quality food, rationing, embarrassment and stigma, and consistent worry and fear about accessing their next meal (Henry, 2020).

Beyond the moral imperative that students as human beings should have a right to food—which

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The leadership and collaboration of numerous University of Wyoming Food Security Taskforce members, including staff, faculty, and administrators—but most notably, students inspired this special section and continues to ensure that every Poke is nourished. is what drives our and many efforts to investigate and address this problem (Broton, 2020)-students who experience food insecurity also experience interrelated wellbeing challenges that impede their ability to succeed and thrive in higher education and beyond. They are more likely to experience anxiety and depression, poorer physical health, low grades, attrition, and housing insecurity and homelessness than their food-secure peers (Dubick et al., 2016; Hattangadi et al., 2021; Maroto et al., 2015; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2017). Moreover, research increasingly shows that historically marginalized and underrepresented populations of college and university students are inequitably at greater risk for experiencing food insecurity. Recent studies focus on whether students of color, first-generation students, students who are parents, international students, military-connected students, and LGBTQIA+ students disproportionately experience food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Henry, 2020; Savoie-Roskos et al., 2022; Schinkel et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these challenges (Hagedorn et al., 2022).

Colleges and universities have responded by implementing strategies to address student food insecurity, many of which take the form of emergency or temporary support. Strategies include food pantries, meal swipe sharing, growing food on campus, recovering good food from events and dining centers, subsidized or at-cost grocery stores, and resources for accessing existing community and federal support (Anabel's Grocery, 2023; Cady, 2020; Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Duke-Benfield & Chu, 2020; Heffernan, 2018; Novak & Johnson, 2017; Oonorasak et al., 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Student organizing has often played a key role in these strategies, both through individual campus-level and large-scale efforts, such as Swipe Out Hunger and the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness (Broton, 2020; Oonorasak et al., 2022; Sumekh, 2020).

The research exploring broader prevalence of student food insecurity, related outcomes, and ameliorating strategies within and across higher education institutions has surged in recent years (Broton & Cady, 2020; Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022; Henry, 2020). During our own action research surrounding student food (in)security, however, we found that, while burgeoning in the literature, studies of the inequities described above and strategies to address them have received relatively less attention. Student-led strategies that would lend themselves to justice-those most affected by food insecurity having pivotal voice and agency over those strategies (Bradley & Herrera, 2015)are similarly less explored. Other than studies and efforts focused on leveraging access to federal support programs for students, scholarship on nonemergency, systemic, and more radically transformative student food security strategies is, to our knowledge, nearly nonexistent.¹ Overall, student food (in)security has largely lacked the overt equityand justice-based lenses more frequently applied to broader food security and systems scholarship and approaches (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Gotlieb & Joshi, 2011).

In this special section, we call for an explicit justice and equity approach to student food (in)security research and practice to better understand who is experiencing food insecurity and position those students' needs, priorities, and voices at the heart of strategies to address it. As the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*'s inaugural special section sponsored by the Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture and Sustainability (INFAS),² we drew inspiration di-

¹ The California State University Basic Needs Initiative and its engagement of students as stakeholders in research and action is a notable exception, as a recently documented systemwide effort striving toward more transformative, scalable, and sustainable change (Maguire & Crutchfield, 2020; Woods-Bevly & Sanders, 2020).

² Hosted by the University of California, Davis, but spanning institutions, INFAS "connects food system scholars, educators, and action-researcher activists across the United States...to catalyze frontier work in food systems research, higher education, extension, and institutional change that we can achieve much better together than by working alone; increase our capacity to help build U.S. food system resilience, sustainability, and equity; raise visibility of research-based insights into food system problems and solutions, including increasing racial equity; diversify who is doing food systems work in academia and in action-focused research, education and extension" (INFAS, 2023, para. 1).

rectly from both JAFSCD's and INFAS's equity agendas and statements. These acknowledge and aim to equitably transform practices in privileged and powerful higher education institutions and enhance academics' capacity for food system justice and equity research and action around race, class, and gender oppression. Perhaps nowhere is it more in our purview—our responsibility, even—as academics to do this work than at home at our own colleges and universities, where we can ally with students and collaborate with other partners to make equity and justice "non-negotiable" principles of student food security (INFAS, 2022, para. 1; Porter et al., 2019).

Beyond these commitments, our own shared experience with student food (in)security action, research, and teaching through the University of Wyoming (UW) Student Food Security Taskforce most deeply inspired this special section. Formed and led by students in 2019, the taskforce includes students, staff, faculty, and, later, administrators, who have collaborated to uncover and address food insecurity at UW amid little previous institutional support for students experiencing food insecurity. As faculty members, both Rachael and Christine (who serve on JAFSCD's editorial board and in INFAS) supported the initial formation of the taskforce and its ongoing work through their sustainability and food justice project-based, experiential courses and their work mentoring student research and leadership. Caitlin was a founding taskforce student co-leader. Her lived experience with poverty and food insecurity has infused a justice stance throughout her leadership and has been integral to our taskforce work and the spirit of this special section. Together with numerous other members, we maintain a commitment to dignified, open access food sharing for all students (and staff members) while also exploring which groups of students disproportionately experience food insecurity and how to more equitably support them. Key to our work is that since its start, it has been *led by students,* from the bottom up.

With these statements and experiences in mind, we sought empirical and practical contributions on a range of equity and justice topics:

- expanding the literature on underlying factors contributing to student food insecurity and which groups of students disproportionately experience it;
- approaches for addressing student food insecurity that are explicitly equity-based for and with historically marginalized and underrepresented student populations; and
- student-led and other approaches that contribute to justice (e.g., novel, radical, and systemic, seeking to move beyond emergency support; dignity-based, sharing, and stigma-reducing).

Together, the six peer-reviewed articles and three edited practice briefs or essays featured in this section—and others that may be published after its initial launch—answer nearly every aspect of our call³ to more explicitly center equity and justice in student food security in research and practice.

Several contributions add to the growing literature on which students disproportionately experience food insecurity according to demographic categories and identities. One study finds that food insecurity at the private Loyola University in Chicago surged during the COVID-19 pandemic and is significantly associated with socio-economic conditions, race and ethnicity, first-generation status, and sexual orientation (Rafferty et al., 2023). Another surveyed a representative sample of students at University of California, Davis to study the relationship between student food insecurity, resource use, and demographics. Findings show that transfer, first-generation, fourth-year, and Latino(a)/Chicano(a)/Hispanic students are more likely to experience food insecurity but do not uniformly access campus resources (Tanner et al., 2023). Both articles recommend targeted outreach and support strategies based on students' diverse

³ Only our request for contributions around community-university partnerships for addressing student food insecurity remained unanswered. We urge greater action and research in this area, as universities have an obligation to serve their own students and often have greater resources to do so than community partners—not to mention that such partnerships frequently present their own inequities around academic supremacy in research, teaching, and practice (Budowle et al., 2021; Porter & Wechsler, 2018).

identities and unique needs. Henry and student coauthors (2023) conducted an ethnographic inquiry into LGBTQIA+ students' experiences with food insecurity at the University of North Texas. Uncertain family support and stigma and discrimination around both food insecurity and their identities complicate their experiences of food insecurity and ability to access food relative to non-LGBTQIA+ students' experiences, requiring different and more inclusive support approaches.

Other pieces in this section provide insight into engaging students in identifying food security needs and implementing related strategies. Researchers at North Carolina State University engaged the campus community, including students, in participatory asset-mapping to identify and address underlying causes of food insecurity, including systemic inequalities, and center diverse voices for targeted approaches (Shisler et al., 2023). Brand (2023) describes engaging students through a course at the University of San Francisco in participatory action research as a justice-based methodology. Drawing on their experience and knowledge inspired students toward collective action and innovative approaches. Two practice briefs by DePorter et al. (2023) and Porter et al. (2023) detail concrete justice and equity strategies. The former describes a student-led Community Food Shed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which collects farm and grocery contributions in centralized refrigerators for stocking and distributing food to students, along with recommendations around barriers and strategies for doing so. In the latter brief, students in a project-based course in partnership with the UW Food Security Taskforce deliberately infused an equity approach into addressing student food insecurity. They formed a working group and held listening sessions with organizations and support units that serve LGBTQIA+, Native American, and international students who disproportionately experience food insecurity at UW to identify their priorities and targeted strategies and then share broader lessons learned.

In response to the novel and systems-level aspects of the section call, Evans & Roggio (2023) draw parallels between crises and inequities in the broader food system and the college campus in a

reflective essay. They suggest that by profoundly restructuring college spending and retention practices; nutrition, food, and health education; and waste reduction and food sharing strategies, college campuses can serve as living laboratories to directly address these issues and inform broader food policy changes. Finally, drawing on research at Western Washington University, Darby et al. (2023) sharply distinguish between the general experience of college student food insecurity and its inequitable intersection with particular identities amid the neoliberalizaton of higher education. They reflect on their experiences with food security efforts on their campus, delineating between food access, justice, and sovereignty approaches. Sovereignty approaches may help resolve the unsustainability and inadequacy of traditional food access approaches by building and amplifying communities of support to better serve students who disproportionately experience food insecurity in relation to their identities.

These pieces join a nascent body of scholarship on equity and justice approaches to student food insecurity across the range of topics we put forth. When advertising this open call, however, we were struck by how many submissions conflated student food insecurity, generally-which is undoubtedly important to recognize and, again, morally imperative to address-with justice and equity, specifically. We commend the authors who corresponded with us, both those whose work appears and even some whose work does not ultimately appear in the special section, for grappling with and/or honing a justice and equity focus in their papers. The fact that practitioners and experts in this field initially found that focus to be somewhat elusive further demonstrates to us the pressing need to name, measure, and tackle the inequities and injustices in student food insecurity that manifest around class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and other demographic categories and gaps in centering students' voices. We hope this section advances such a research agenda and coalesces a community of practice around equitable, just, systemic, and transformative approaches to understanding and addressing student food (in)security.

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