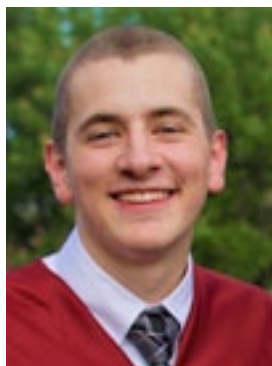


Does Food Insecurity Exist? A Wheaton College Case Study

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Discussions regarding food insecurity on college campuses have been increasing since a 2011 study was published finding widespread food insecurity existed at a university in Australia. The goal of this original research is to identify if food insecurity is present on the campus of Wheaton College and to examine the severity of the issue through the use of qualitative analysis. This study hopes that an increasing knowledge of student hunger will lead to changes in the access of both healthy and affordable food to students at Wheaton College, and more generally to students all across the country.

LATELY, THE ISSUE OF FOOD INSECURITY on college campuses has been garnering increasing attention from the media and scholars alike. The phenomenon can be defined many different ways. Factors such as price, nutrition, hunger, preferences, and in extreme cases not knowing where a student's next meal may come from all fall under the umbrella of food insecurity. In short, however, food insecurity means that some college students are not getting enough affordable nutritious food to keep up with the rigors of academia. Recent studies have suggested that the issue is prevalent on college campuses. Colleges in Australia, Southern Illinois, Hawaii, and Alaska have used research to determine if food insecurity is truly an issue among their students. The studies have almost unanimously agreed—to varying degrees, of course—that food insecurity is an issue that their students face. The findings are stark: nearly all of the studies estimate that college students face more widespread food insecurity than the average American household. These sobering statistics demonstrate a need for further research on the topic of hunger, especially at colleges and universities that have not yet determined the scope of the problem on their campuses.

As awareness regarding food insecurity grows, so must the research that accompanies it. A recent study of four colleges in southern Illinois sheds new light on the topic and acknowledges the prevalence of food insecurity among the students at all four schools. This study brings into question how other schools in the region might be affected by food insecurity. Wheaton College is one of those institutions. The distinguished Christian liberal arts college has many unique characteristics that differentiate it from other schools that have been studied and may affect how

its students relate to food insecurity. Located in Wheaton, Illinois, a wealthy suburb outside of Chicago, it might be surprising to some community members if the school found that its students struggle with food insecurity. Yet the high costs of college, the risks that come with student independence, and studies from other campuses suggest that students at Wheaton College could in fact be dealing with food insecurity. This paper asks the question: Does food insecurity exist at Wheaton College? And, if so, to what extent?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before these questions can be asked or answered, however, a closer look at previous studies is necessary to provide context for future research. Published in 2011, a study conducted by Roger Hughes has been at the forefront of food insecurity research. The study polled 399 Australian university students and broke down food insecurity statistics into dozens of demographic categories. Although the results were not shocking, patterns of food insecurity among students across the board were noticed. A key takeaway from Hughes's study was that government action should be considered to counteract issues of food insecurity on university campuses. This suggestion raised the stakes of the issue of food security by acknowledging that leaders should respond to its severity with strong action. Another way the Hughes study raised the stakes surrounding food insecurity was the way in which it defined the topic: "as a basic human right, (that) exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active lifestyle." The strong

phraseology of this definition caught people's attention and raised awareness for a relatively overlooked subject. The research in Hughes's study proved effective in advancing the conversation of food insecurity among college students, but it had one glaring flaw. The niche location of Australia hinders the research from being closely associated with American colleges and universities.

Following the release of the Australian study, research advancing awareness of food insecurity grew. The findings of the Roger Hughes study spurred on an American audience, eager to discover whether trends of food insecurity were also prevalent among their students. One such domestic study was conducted in Illinois (Morris). The 2016 survey polled 1,882 college students from four public universities. This survey concluded that 35% of students were deemed food insecure—a remarkable and concerning total. The study also found that the relationship between race, grade point average, loan use, and housing location all negatively impacted a student's likelihood of being food insecure.

While the majority of the research agrees that food insecurity is a large issue on college campuses, one study objects. A 2019 study by Cassandra Nikolaus challenged these previous conclusions by saying, "food insecurity methods commonly used in studies with college students have not been scrutinized for psychometric properties, and varying protocols may influence resulting food insecurity prevalence estimates." This objection may very well be valid. Much of the previous research in the field acknowledges flaws in the way that students were sampled, namely, on too limited a level. Also, the tests likely contained elements that were too subjectively psychological. Nikolaus's research went on to conclude that "until these survey modifications are made, results of this protocol comparison analysis provide evidence that the way that food insecurity is estimated among college students makes a substantial difference in reported prevalence." Despite its cautionary viewpoint, this study never claims that food insecurity does not exist among college students; it simply states that previous estimates were over-exaggerated. These contending studies provide more ground for further research to cover and point to the need for sounder methodologies.

Hypotheses

To further research into food security, this paper shares qualitative case studies concerning students at Wheaton College to discover if any of them are food insecure. Based on previous studies, it would be surprising to discover that food insecurity is not an issue at Wheaton College. The

further question then should be to what extent students are food insecure. A first prediction is that there will be signs of food insecurity on Wheaton's campus. Furthermore, the study is likely to find that the age of students and their housing type will affect their likelihood of being food insecure. Age and housing type go hand in hand because older students typically live off campus and are not required to be on a school-provided meal plan. This independence and lack of consistent meals could affect their ability to acquire healthy and nutritious food at affordable prices.

METHODS

To test these hypotheses about food insecurity at Wheaton College, data initially had to be collected. A survey was conducted to determine food insecurity's prevalence among Wheaton students. Fifteen respondents each received an email containing an identical set of five interview-style short answer questions. Of the 15 respondents, 12 were faculty or staff members at Wheaton College. Additionally, three student leaders were sent this survey. These 15 individuals were not selected at random. They were chosen because their positions were identified as ones likely to have some perspective about student life and to have opinions about what food insecurity exists on campus. The leaders surveyed cover a wide range of academic disciplines and have varying levels of interaction with students. The diverse experiences of those surveyed helps ensure that the research provides an accurate depiction of an average Wheaton student. In addition to the identical five questions, some of the surveys contained supplemental questions specific to the recipient of that survey. For example, someone who works closely with graduate students was asked a question relating specifically to their line of work. This research methodology was chosen because surveying the entire student body would be impossible without institutional approval. A quantitative analysis to document issues of food insecurity on Wheaton's campus still needs to be performed. Yet, through the input of experienced and informed members of the Wheaton community, the present research will be able to offer insight into whether or not students struggle with food insecurity, and to what extent.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Data

The email survey yielded a 46% response rate, with seven people providing answers. Two of those seven were discarded due to inadequate responses to the questions asked. Despite these limitations, the goal of achieving a diverse survey was achieved. Respondents from the graduate

student program, food services, financial services, and the international student program offered a closer at the issues of food insecurity facing students at Wheaton College. The survey contained two questions that asked for numerical estimates of food insecurity at Wheaton: “On a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the most serious) how serious an issue is food insecurity at Wheaton for students?” This question fielded a wide variety of answers. The lowest estimate was 1 and the highest estimate was 7, with an average rating of 3.6. Respondents were also asked: “Roughly what percentage of the student body do you believe may struggle with food insecurity?” Again, responses were spread across a wide percentage range, with the lowest answer being 5% and the highest being 30%. The mean value for this question was 18.3%. An outlier at the lower bounds might skew these statistics, but the mode of the data suggests that 25% of Wheaton students may struggle with food insecurity.

Qualitative Data

Aside from these quantitative questions, participants in the survey were also asked to respond to short answer questions seeking to elucidate any first-hand experiences they might have had with student hunger. Two repeated themes were common among the responses. The most prevalent was that older students struggle with food insecurity more frequently. Jerry Woehr, Wheaton’s Director of International Student Programs, said of students living in apartments, “It seems like a good way to save money to reduce your meal plan—but it’s much harder to shop and prepare your own food than some people are ready for.” Wheaton’s Faculty Vice-Chair, Jill Lederhouse, made a similar connection pertaining to older students: “I know of some students who find it very difficult to manage during student teaching because they are no longer on a campus meal plan, and are trying to cut costs.” The difficulty for older students, who are no longer on a meal plan, seems to be an issue that they have to face in order to eat healthily and affordably.

A second major finding of this qualitative research is that some faculty members are already actively participating in solving student hunger. Three faculty members said that they had helped students financially, offered them food, or helped them to find cheaper alternatives. While food insecurity may not be generally acknowledged on campus, it is clear that faculty members have already begun to notice the problem and offer solutions.

DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that the first part of the hypothesis is true and that food insecurity does exist on Wheaton’s

campus. The numerical data collected indicates that hunger is a reality some students face. Regardless of the fact that estimates cannot compare to fully validated statistics, average estimates that 25% of the student body is struggling with food insecurity show that this is a very present issue. The survey’s mean of 3.6 out of 10, with regard to the severity of the issue, also suggests that even if hunger is not extremely widespread, it still does exist. Despite these overall findings, one of the collected surveys disagreed with the rest of the respondents. This survey called the percentage of students struggling with food insecurity “very low.” This dissenting opinion is outweighed by the other responses, which all agreed that food insecurity was a problem among Wheaton students.

The second hypothesis was also shown to be true. Multiple responses acknowledged that student housing and stage of life played an impact on the likelihood of food insecurity. One respondent estimated that graduate students are twice as food insecure as undergraduate students and attributed this to their student loan debt and the fact that they live off campus. Another reason for the disparity of food insecurity between undergraduate and graduate students is that graduate students are often more financially independent. Older students typically work their own jobs and receive less support from their parents, making it all the more difficult to acquire healthy food at reasonable prices.

Identifying that food insecurity exists was quite simple based on the data collected. Nearly every respondent acknowledged that the issue was present on campus. Yet the varying estimates received make answering the question of to what extent Wheaton College students struggle with food insecurity far more difficult. A broad numerical range of estimates from 5% to 30% suggests that the campus has not reached a consensus on the scope of the issue. Unfortunately, limitations of the present survey prevent this question from being answered completely. In order to determine the full extent of food insecurity at Wheaton College, more research must be done.

Potential Flaws

The limitations of this study are evident. Possible bias in to whom the survey was sent, limitations in sample size, and the subjectivity of some of the questions asked must all be taken into account. The survey did, however, document that food insecurity exists on Wheaton’s campus. Future studies should view this research as a pilot study and should seek to find more specific ways in which food insecurity exists at Wheaton College. A more objective and

detailed look at a cross-section of the student body through a larger survey would help to determine specific demographics that struggle to find affordable food.

Either the administration or Student Government could conduct such a survey. Another possible flaw of this research was the way that food insecurity was defined. The questions asked had a level of ambiguity to them that resulted in a wide range of answers. Providing specificity in the questions and definitions for future research is important to ensure consistency across answers.

Solutions

Solutions to issues of food insecurity on Wheaton's campus have already begun to be implemented. One respondent said that she was "able to secure some additional scholarship resources so a student could afford a meal plan." Another spoke of his habit of stocking his office with granola bars and fresh fruit for hungry students that were looking for a quick snack. These solutions for the problems at hand are very important, but they are not organized on a campus-wide basis. Relational solutions to these problems exist, but the College lacks tangible policies for adequately addressing student nutrition. For real change to take place, other campus resources may need to be deployed. Campus groups that could address the problem—as suggested by faculty and staff respondents—are the Student Wellness team, Student Development, Residence Life, and the faculty. Adequately solving these problems may prove difficult, given the large amount of research that still needs to be conducted. Until that information is gathered, these groups will not know how to attack the issues of food insecurity among the wider student population.

CONCLUSION

Expanding knowledge about food insecurity on college campuses has attracted media attention and led to a growing number of studies. Awareness has steadily grown, to the point that student hunger is no longer the overlooked or even taboo subject that it once was. Many colleges and universities now understand that food

insecurity is an important issue that exists, yet many lack understanding of the needs of their student body. The present research can help Wheaton College to have a greater understanding of food insecurity and its causes, and to begin to look at potential solutions. Findings that food insecurity does exist and its disproportionate effect on upperclassmen and graduate students came as a result of this study. While this information has some value, it is not until further research can be conducted that Wheaton College will be able to effectively address the issues of food insecurity on its campus. In the meantime, raising awareness of food insecurity through studies like this one may help diminish or erase the stigma associated with food insecurity, so that students no longer feel the need to fight their hunger on their own.

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