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Ending Hunger in America: Hunger on College Campuses

Allen University: An HBCU Perspective on Ending Food Insecurity on Campus

Thank you Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Rules for holding this hearing and providing me with the opportunity to speak today about food insecurity on college campuses. My name is Dr. Joseph Ray and I am the Acting Director of Counseling and Placement at Allen University located in Columbia, South Carolina.

Data Shows that Food Insecurity is a Widespread Problem on College Campuses.

Food insecurity is a major issue on college campuses across the country, with recent studies indicating that 20-50% of college students in the U.S. experience food insecurity. This is far higher than rates of food insecurity among the general population, which is closer to 12%.¹ It is also important to note that not all students have equitable access to food supports and services, with recent research showing that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are significantly more likely to be located in low food access areas than public non-HBCUs.² Food insecurity can have a negative impact on student academic performance as well as overall health and well-being.^{3,4,5} Yet, the misconception that food insecurity doesn't affect college students remains commonplace. This is fueled in part by outdated perceptions of what the "typical" college student looks like. For example, not all students come from middle-or upper-class backgrounds. Many are the first in their family to attend college and work full-time jobs while attending school to support themselves and their families.

¹ Freudenberg, N., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Poppendieck, J. (2019). College students and SNAP: The new face of food insecurity in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 109*(12), 1652-1658. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305332>

² Kornbluh, M., Hallum, S., Wende, M., Ray, J., Herrstadt, Z., & Kaczynski, A. T. (2021). Examining Disparities in Food Access Between Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities. *American Journal of Health Promotion, https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171211024412*

³ Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., & Hernandez, A. (2017). Hungry and homeless in college: Results from a national study of basic needs insecurity in higher education. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. Retrieved from <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>

⁴ Crutchfield, R. M. & Maguire, J. (2018). California State University Office of the Chancellor Study of Student Basic Needs. Retrieved from <http://www.calstate.edu/basicneeds>

⁵ Raskind, I. G., Haardorfer, R., & Berg, C. J. (2019). Food insecurity, psychosocial health, and academic performance among college and university students in Georgia, USA. *Public health nutrition, 22*(3), 476. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003439>

Knowing that Columbia has a host of colleges and universities, and that food insecurity on college campuses is a rising issue across the U.S., the Columbia Food Policy Committee voted in 2020 to create a subcommittee to help bring about programmatic and policy change on Columbia campuses and across the city to reduce the rate of college students experiencing food insecurity. The subcommittee is currently comprised of five institutes of higher learning: Allen University, Benedict College, Columbia College, the University of South Carolina, and the University of South Carolina School of Law, with 2-3 College Student Organizers and a minimum of one faculty/staff mentor representing each school.

The Columbia Food Policy Committee believes that the insights and voices of college students are vital to this work, however, they also recognize that many students face financial barriers to completing their schooling and must prioritize employment over other opportunities. To create a more equitable opportunity for students to participate in this subcommittee, the committee secured funding to compensate students for their time and efforts in the form stipends and food vouchers.

Since beginning work in the Fall of 2020, the subcommittee has focused on a variety of topics including:

- Sharing best practices surrounding campus food pantry management.
- Supporting Benedict College's successful opening of a food pantry on their campus.
- Reducing the stigma associated with food insecurity.
- Exploring the feasibility of and planning for a Food Pantry Reciprocity Program. The program would allow students from participating schools to gain access to all food pantries located at participating schools.
- Conducting student-led virtual focus groups to explore the ideas, concerns, and perspectives of college students, faculty, and staff regarding food insecurity on their campuses. Findings will be shared with the full Columbia Food Policy Committee, the Columbia City Council, and be used to inform future directions of the subcommittee.
- Expanding transportation options for students to access grocery stores.

Future plans include:

- Creating a central hub/platform for college food pantries to share resources.
- Developing food security trainings to present to different campus and community organizations.
- Creating policies that will increase healthy food options available at the food pantries housed in our academic institutions.

Allen University's Food Pantry Provides Welcomed Relief to HBCU Students Experiencing Food Insecurity.

Today's college student does not fit the profile of the typical college student of the late 1950s and 1960s. During this era college students were warned that they would be 20-25 pounds heavier by their senior year. Eating an abundance of campus cafeteria food was blamed for the massive weight gain of students which drastically increased the waistlines and ring sizes of many students who never dreamed that they would have a weight problem. As a freshman at South Carolina State University in 1969, I heard the rumors about becoming overweight if you ate too much of the cafeteria food. To complicate matters even further, I was a work study student assigned to the campus cafeteria.

During my four year (1969-1973) stretch as an undergraduate and work study cafeteria worker, I noticed lots of bloated waistlines around campus. I am proud to say that the bloated waistlines at SC State University, an HBCU located in Orangeburg, South Carolina, were a direct result of Black students having adequate financial aid, scholarships, and work study jobs that allowed them the luxury of having access to an adequate food supply (Campus cafeteria) and to live on campus as a fulltime student. Many of my classmates chose to live on campus because the nearest grocery store was at least 4 miles from campus. In essence, the HBCU I attended, and 98 other HBCUs were in Low food access areas (LFAs)

according to a study published in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* titled: *Examining Disparities in Food Access Between Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities*.² As one of the co-authors of this research study, I was surprised to learn that so many HBCUs are in LFAs.

In May of 1969, President Nixon addressed Congress with a message that according to a Time magazine report exposed the problem. In his message to Congress he promised to revamp the Food Stamp program. However, despite his promises, things got worse, and by 1974 he resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal when the United States was now experiencing a full-blown food crisis. In 1984, *President Reagan's Task Force on Food Assistance* failed because the task force infuriated community activists when they stated that they could not find widespread evidence of hunger. Now here we are today dealing with a food crisis that will cause a young student to fail a class because they had to choose between paying rent or buying food. Today's HBCU college students are having it rough. So many of our students must work fulltime jobs to help pay for their tuition because they are not receiving enough Pell grant money to cover the cost of their tuition. They do not have the luxury of having enough to eat, devoting enough time to study, getting adequate rest, and experience prolonged bouts of stress and anxiety.

Allen University Food Pantry.

I started the *AU Food Pantry* in *April of 2019* when I was hired as the campus counselor in the division of Student Affairs. In my job description, it clearly stated that starting a food pantry was a top priority of Dr. Ernest McNealey, President of Allen University. I was hired on a Monday and had the food pantry up and running on Friday. The tremendous sense of urgency to start the food pantry was very evident in the *110 students* that showed up during the Grand Opening ceremonies.

The success of the AU Food Pantry is due to the generous help of one community nonprofit that stepped in to help me set up the food pantry from the very start. I have also picked up two additional sponsors which have helped the food pantry to continue distributing weekly food bags throughout the academic school year. We also have two student organizers who serve as volunteers and on the College Food Insecurity Subcommittee. To date, the AU Food Pantry has distributed **2,878 food bags** to students living on and off-campus. In addition to providing students with healthy snacks, we also include a variety of fruits and nuts.

Recommendations for Addressing Food Insecurity at HBCUs:

- Increase the amount of Pell Grant money to offset the rising costs college tuition.
- Establish an Emergency Fund Account to help students from creating debt to pay for living expenses like rent, utilities, food, car repairs, and other incidentals.
- Allen University has a cooperative agreement with Comet City Bus Transportation to allow our students to ride the city bus “free” anywhere throughout the city (Students only must show their Student ID).
- Since many of our students are from rural, low-income families, where many of their family members also face food insecurity, efforts should be made to conduct a needs assessment to ensure that the food insecurity problems are not ongoing when they leave campus to return to their respective hometowns. For instance, monthly food packages can be sent to families from nonprofits in the area in which they live.
- Improve the financial wellbeing of students by teaching them financial literacy.

Thank you for your time and for helping to bring national attention to this important issue.