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Are college students dealing with hunger, inconsistent housing and homelessness being helped?

May 12th, 2017 · by Olivia Q Davila, Special to the Independent · Comments: 0

Until recent years, information regarding students dealing with hunger, inconsistent housing and homelessness on college campuses was all but nonexistent. However, a new report by the research group [Wisconsin HOPE Lab](#) suggests that basic needs security for college students are not being met.

The report, [Hungry and Homeless in College](#), sent student surveys to 70 community colleges across 24 different states. Collectively, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab received responses back from 33,000 community college students.

"We think that the problem has been there," Anthony Hernandez, co-author of Hungry and Homeless in College, said. "We stumbled upon it and now we're trying to draw attention to it."

Focusing on what influences college completion, the report found that factors such as rising tuition, increased cost of living and low-wage markets all hindered students' abilities to graduate. Additionally, the report observed that funding for public benefits programs was suffering and that many college-based programs tended to be highly restricted and therefore inaccessible to students.

"Students are having to make tough decisions about going to school or paying their rent or buying food," Mr. Hernandez said.

The report's conclusion: Two in three community college students are food insecure and experiencing uncertain access to food, half were housing insecure and dealt with high housing costs compared to their income, and 13 percent to 14 percent were homeless.

When reducing the number of students facing these hardships, Mr. Hernandez believes schools should follow the example of other community colleges that show success in aiding students. For housing assistance, [Tacoma Community College](#) in Washington addressed students dealing with housing uncertainties by building its own housing facilities for students. Another point made within the Homeless and Hungry in College report is to support investments in food and housing assistance programs.

Mesa Community College

Mesa Community College offers a few strategies deemed successful in helping food insecure students on campus. The first of those strategies is through [Market on the Move](#), a branch of the nonprofit organization [The 3000 Club](#).

Brought to MCC's Dobson and Southern campus in the spring of 2016 by Landon Kea, MCC student and coordinator of [MCC's Market on the Move](#), Market on the Move delivers a truck of produce to the east parking lot once a month. Receiving its produce from farms, donations and grocery store overstock, Market on the Move allows individuals to fill two boxes with up to 60 pounds of produce for a \$10 donation. According to Mr. Kea, all donations collected are then given back specifically to food banks.

Nedd Anderson, student engagement specialist at MCC, further explained that the "vision" of Market on the Move is not only to help people but also to save edible food that would normally be thrown away from places like the grocery store.

"This organization has come in and created a partnership where they can recycle it," Mr. Anderson said. "That's why you're not purchasing the food, you're offering a donation to the nonprofit and then hand selecting the produce you would like to take."

In addition to coordinating Market on the Move for MCC, Mr. Kea has also implemented a program called Pay It Forward, which works in conjunction with Market on the Move to cover the donation fee for those who are unable to

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afford the cost.

Another way MCC supports its students is through maintaining a small on-campus pantry, which has three storage cabinets containing non-perishable canned goods and snacks. The pantry is kept stocked predominately by students and employees and is open to MCC students and staff during the day.

According to Beth Ann Wright, MCC program advisor, the pantry receives about 40 to 50 student and faculty visits a month and limits individuals to taking no more than 10 items per week.

Aron Mixson, MCC student body president, says that he believes the pantry is MCC's most useful resource to food insecure students because it allows any person access to the inventory if they want it.

"A student doesn't necessarily need to alert anybody of their situation," Mr. Mixson said. "All they need to do is say that they would like something to eat and then they are taken access to the pantry."

Different from the two previous approaches, MCC uses to assist students in need of food in that it is more indirect. It is engaging in continuous campus involvement with community hunger awareness and homelessness projects. Campus engagement serves primarily to bring awareness to problems of hunger and homelessness.

The most well known of MCC's awareness projects is the Empty Bowls event, which aims to raise money and bring campus and community awareness to the issues of widespread hunger and homelessness.

Brought to MCC in 1992 by Linda Speranza, MCC ceramics faculty member, Empty Bowls fills ceramic bowls made by students with a single-serving meal and then offers them to be purchased by the public for \$10. According to Ms. Speranza, "all the money goes to [Paz de Cristo](#), a nonprofit organization that provides multiple services to individuals struggling within the East Valley.

In addition to her annual Empty Bowls event, Ms. Speranza has previously organized smaller campus events like cooking contests, with the intent of highlighting the resources available to students outside of campus. She said that the contests used food from the food boxes "so people could see that what comes from the food pantries and food boxes are very good food."

"So, we tried to make it seem more accessible," Ms. Speranza said. "We had all of the local food pantries and places where you can go and get food in this area come and talk about their services, just so students would know what was available to them."

In assisting students dealing with housing insecurity and homelessness, MCC has a limited emergency fund that provides \$500 to qualified students, various scholarships, military-veteran-specific services and connects students with issue-related outside sources.

According to Rob Schwing, Maricopa Community Colleges chief marketing officer, all community colleges within the system are encouraged to offer assistance to students.

Olivia Q Davila is a journalism student at the [Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism](#) and wrote the article as a class assignment.

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