



BROWN

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FULL ENGAGEMENT: STRENGTHENING FOOD SECURITY AT BROWN

Executive Summary / May 2019

INTRODUCTION

Food security among college students has emerged as a significant national issue. While specific information about the prevalence of food insecurity is limited, a December 2018 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (*FOOD INSECURITY: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits*) noted evidence that college students across the country are experiencing food insecurity, which can have a range of negative effects, including health, wellness and opportunities for academic success.

Recognizing that this is an issue on many campuses, including Brown's, in February 2019, the Office of the Provost convened an ad hoc food security working group. This was done as part of an ongoing effort to reduce barriers to student success, particularly for students with the highest financial need (as determined by the Office of Financial Aid). Working group membership included students appointed through outreach to the Undergraduate Council of Students, Graduate Student Council and Medical Student Senate, as well as faculty and staff. The group included representatives from the College, Campus Life, Graduate School, Warren Alpert Medical School, Dining, Financial Aid, Finance and Administration, and the Office of the Provost. The group was charged with assessing the presence, prevalence and origins of food insecurity among undergraduate, graduate and medical students at Brown University. The group was also asked to consider relevant policies and practices at other institutions of higher education that are dealing with this national issue, and to offer possible recommendations for consideration based on its findings.

The working group's primary purpose was to make recommendations to ensure that students at Brown have **access to healthy, safe, nutritious food in order to thrive and take full advantage of their educational experience.**

The recommendations were submitted on May 10, 2019, to Dean of the College Rashid Zia and Campus Life and Student Services Vice President Eric Estes, who co-chair a committee to assess the needs of lowest income students. The report and recommendations were then sent to Provost Richard M. Locke and Executive Vice President Barbara Chernow, and then to President Christina Paxson. This document summarizes the process and key findings, and provides the working group's full recommendations.

Process

The group gathered data from processes in place through Campus Life, the College, and the Graduate School – including emergency funding programs such as E-Gap Funds. This was supplemented through

surveys of undergraduate, graduate and medical students. The surveys sought to assess the experience of students while enrolled at Brown regarding access to adequate food, and potential driving causes for issues of food insecurity. Responses were disaggregated based on factors such as class year, financial aid status, meal plan enrollment, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status.

Findings

Data gathered confirmed that students at Brown experience food insecurity, though at varying degrees based on a range of factors. Further, while the survey information reflected that finances are a factor for those students who report experiencing food insecurity at Brown, not having time to shop for groceries was reported as a leading cause for food insecurity among all student groups. What follows are some survey highlights.

Undergraduates:

- 28% of the undergraduates responding to the survey reported that within the last three months, there was a time when they did not have enough food, and 22% indicated they had skipped meals because they did not have enough money for food.
- Higher rates of food insecurity were reported by undergraduates without a meal plan (40% v. 19%), those who report receiving financial aid (40% v. 16%), are first-generation (46% v. 25%), or are from historically underrepresented groups (39% v. 24%).
- First-year students reported experiencing food insecurity at a much lower rate (15%) than sophomores (30%), juniors (34%) and seniors (32%).

Graduate Students:

- Doctoral students reported the lowest rates of “not having enough food over the last three months” (11%), while MFA and other master’s students were higher, at 38% and 16%, respectively.
- Not having sufficient funds to buy food was reported as a factor, but not having enough time to get to a grocery store is a much larger issue for students who reported having experienced food insecurity (70% of doctoral students reported this as the reason, while 81% of MFA students and 66% of master’s students noted this as a primary factor).

Medical Students

- Approximately 26% of the medical students who responded reported experiencing a time while at Brown of not having enough food, and 36.3% noted that the reason was that they did not have the money to buy food.

Recommendations

Through the following recommendations, the working group has sought to identify policies and practices to promote University values of equity, health and wellness, and inclusive community, and to expand time for students to devote to their educational endeavors and personal growth.

1. Continue to require that all first-year students enroll in the 20-meal plan or 460 flex plan, which provides them the maximum number of food options while they navigate their first year at Brown.

2. Align Brown's meal plans for sophomore students with many peer institutions and require that all sophomores* enroll *at a minimum* in the 14-meal plan or 330 flex plan, to ensure food security, promote community and offer choice. Encourage sophomores to continue to enroll in the 20-meal plan or 460 flex plan, which most who enroll in a meal plan already do. (**Note: According to current-year data, most sophomores enroll in a meal plan (approx. 65%), yet there are still approximately 35% who do not enroll in a meal plan, including 22% of students receiving financial aid. Approximately 70% of the sophomores on a meal plan have 20 meals or Flex 460.*)
3. Include meals over spring break as part of meal plan at no additional cost.
4. Continue to review the benefits and challenges of requiring all students living on campus to be enrolled a meal plan, given the success of the required meal plan for first year students, the limitations of cooking facilities in residence halls, and the role and value of dining for cultivating community.
5. Assess the feasibility of requiring all undergraduates living on campus to have an **unlimited** meal plan.
6. Encourage dining services to establish a working group that includes the diversity of Brown's student body to explore opportunities to provide food options that match student schedules, curricular and co-curricular demands and eating styles.
7. Explore tailored, affordable meal plan options for graduate students. (Perhaps pilot a program with MFA students, who report food insecurity at the highest rate.)
8. Conduct focus groups with MFA and MA students to understand their issues in greater depth.
9. Explore options for offering timely access to affordable groceries, such as deepening the partnership with FarmFresh RI, offering regularly scheduled shuttle services to affordable grocery options, expanding grocery delivery services to campus, and/or establishing a food cooperative or at-cost grocery store on campus.
10. Provide information for students living off campus about purchasing and preparing affordable, healthy and quick meals.
11. Develop a website that provides information on readily accessible, "healthy foods" defined as foods that mitigate risk factors for chronic diseases.
12. Educate students about the true costs of providing high-quality, safe and healthy foods. Students surveyed often raised concerns about the costs associated with University dining service meal plans. The working group feels strongly that there is work to be done to ensure students understand the many factors that contribute to the meal plan costs.

Conclusion

Brown has evolved in meaningful and significant ways over the last decade. The University community has become more diverse in every way, including attracting more first generation and low-income students. The learning community has also changed, with technology, policy and practice offering more options for students to take full advantage of the Brown curriculum (such as through 24/7 study space etc.) Given the evolving needs and interests of students, and the important role that food plays in health, well-being and community engagement, the working group encourages an ongoing, thoughtful review of Brown's policies related to dining and access to food for undergraduate, graduate and medical students.