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Why College Students Don't Access Resources for Food Insecurity: Stigma and Perceptions of Need

Attempts to understand college student food insecurity have primarily focused on demographic characteristics associated with higher rates of food insecurity, and have recommended improving awareness of and access to resources such as campus food pantries. We argue in this article that this emphasis on individual-level factors and efforts can lead to stigma or shame for many of those using pantries and other programs. Our survey and interview data collected from 2016 to 2019 show that many college students see hunger as tied to their individual failures. We find that an individualistic perspective on the experience of student food insecurity neglects the larger institutional and social contexts, including changes to financial aid, college funding options, food assistance policies, and discrimination. We propose an alternative model for understanding the stigma of student food insecurity that connects language and stereotypes to power differentials affecting access beyond the individual, and thus better addresses the root causes of student food insecurity. [college students, food insecurity, institutional context]

Introduction

Growing awareness of college student food insecurity has led to both studies and interventions in attempts to improve college student experiences (for a review, see Baker-Smith et al. 2020). Studies show that while around 12 percent of the general adult population is food insecure, college students experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates, ranging from 25 to 60 percent (Peterson and Freidus 2020). Some groups are more likely to experience higher rates of food insecurity due to historical patterns of discrimination; black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, LGBTQ, and part-time students, as well as those with disabilities, are more likely to be food insecure (Baker-Smith et al. 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019).

Food insecure students can also suffer from more than hunger, as they are more likely to have lower grades and graduation rates (Maroto, Snelling, and Linck 2015; Wolfson et al. 2021) and to experience physical, mental, and social distress (Hagedorn, Olfert, and MacNell 2021; Haskett et al. 2021; Hattangadi et al. 2019; Weaver and Trainer 2017), including depression and anxiety (Bruening et al. 2016). Students also report experiencing embarrassment, fear of exposure, and general stigma around food insecurity or help-seeking (Henry 2020), which can lead them to avoid meals or self-isolate (Maynard et al. 2018).

Explanations for higher rates of food insecurity among college students focus on the financial challenges associated with attending college, including tuition, fees, and associated costs, and how this leads some students to working while in school. Financial aid has not kept track with college costs, particularly the rising costs of indirect expenses like housing, transportation,

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and food. The result is that students will often forgo food to pay other expenses (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2018). Campuses have enacted a variety of programs like campus food pantries and Swipe out Hunger, a voluntary redistribution of student meals from prepurchased plans, in an attempt to meet the needs of their students.

However, in the United States and elsewhere, receiving food aid is often seen as socially unacceptable, creating stigma, shame, and embarrassment for recipients (Garthwaite 2016). Only a few researchers have examined the role of stigma in experiences of food insecurity on campus as a way to understand how to better reach students in need of support (e.g., El Zein et al. 2018; Henry 2020; Zeker 2004). More broadly, studies of stigma, starting with Goffman's seminal sociological work (Goffman 1963), have examined how stigma is usually understood as a negative attribute or undesirable difference, tied to being negatively valued in society, stereotyping, and discrimination (Brewis and Wutich 2019; Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). While Goffman's initial work focused on physical or mental capabilities, subsequent studies have examined stigmas related to poverty and illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, as well as some studies of food insecurity. These have led to approaches to stigma that focus on how stereotypes, specific experiences, and power relationships can contribute to stigma, which we review below. However, as Brewis and Wutich note, a limited amount of research around theories of stigma has left the term with some conceptual confusion (Brewis and Wutich 2019). In this article, we examine how stigma manifests for food insecure students at a southeastern U.S. university, and consider how the individualist focus of ideas around stigma and language choice can create or maintain stigma around student food insecurity. We build on our data and other research to propose a model that moves past individual attributions around stigma to acknowledge the social and institutional contexts that lead to food insecurity and related stigma on college campuses. We provide some recommendations to address different aspects of the model. Next, we examine several dimensions of stigma related to food insecurity, including external stereotypes, direct experiences, and power relationships.

Stereotypes: Public and Internalized

Stigma

Stereotypes imply that people experiencing food insecurity are different or "other" in two related

mechanisms: first, in that stereotypes mark a group for discriminatory behavior (external stigma) and second that people can apply those ideas to themselves, even in the absence of other people, indicating that the stereotypes have been internalized (Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). In Henry's research of college students, for example, students who are food insecure are stereotyped as lazy, poor, or less motivated (Henry 2020). In addition, external stigma can also include the belief that only some people experiencing food insecurity are deserving of help due to their circumstances or characteristics (Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). While we know that food-aid discourse, like all discourses, is constructed and maintained by both those who are food insecure and by those who are not (Bax 2010; Swales et al. 2020), stereotypes like these can affect access to needed resources among other effects.

For example, people experiencing food insecurity can internalize these stereotypes and ideas, leading to embarrassment and fear as well as lower self-esteem (Mickelson and Williams 2008; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). For example, El Zein et al. (2018) show that stigma around using the campus pantry is expressed in terms of shame and embarrassment, or fear of judgment. Chase and Walker argue that shame is "almost always co-constructed" in that internal perceptions of stigma are connected both to an expectation that others will judge and to actual experiences (Chase and Walker 2013, 740), including concerns around judgment and rejection (Mickelson and Williams 2008) and ideas of deviance and self-blame (Corrigan, Watson, and Barr 2006). This duality of food insecurity highlights how "shame and disdain [are] used as forms of moral tools which accentuated people's sense of deficiency, and undermined core emotions of dignity, pride, self-esteem and confidence" (Chase and Walker 2013, 751), not only leading people to be resistant to accepting or asking for help but also creating a sense of hierarchy around need, including a belief that others are more deserving of support.

Studies of students also explore how expectations and norms around being a college student shape experiences of food insecurity. Food insecure students often have an expectation that they should be able to provide for themselves since they made the decision to attend college (Henry 2020), and believe that asking for help is a sign of weakness (Evans 2016). Cultural values of individualism, self-reliance, and mistrust of outsiders can further affect help-seeking behaviors, and can differ from group to group (Poppendieck 1999;

Witt and Hardin-Fanning 2021). Anthropological research documents how these values differ across and within cultures (Ong 2006; Shear and Hyatt 2015), and as we have seen in our previous work, student reliance on family and friends can vary greatly among individuals (Peterson and Freidus 2020). These expectations and stereotypes can in turn lead students and others to expect judgment for a perceived failure to live up to expectations (Henry 2017; Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Weaver and Hadley 2009; Weaver and Trainer 2017), and to try to hide food insecurity from other people (Henry 2017) or avoid social situations that involve buying food (Allen and Alleman 2019), similar to what is seen for people living in poverty (Chase and Walker 2013). Recent research also suggests that food insecurity and depression are connected for students who perceive themselves as having low social status (Willis 2021).

Stereotypes about those deserving of aid can also be linked to specific forms of discrimination, which has an important connection to stigma both directly through stereotypes and through unconscious biases (Parker and Aggleton 2003; Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). In particular, health status and race can exacerbate stigma when multiple forms of stigma reinforce each other (Brewis and Wutich 2019; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006), as studies of food insecure college students have also found (Henry 2020). For example, while recent research at one U.S. university indicates that three in four students feel there is a stigma associated with using the campus food pantry, this rate is higher among non-U.S. citizen students (Reyes and Emmanuel 2021).

El Zein et al. (2018) also find that students' perceptions of self-identity are a barrier to using pantries, specifically feeling that they are not needy enough to use the pantry, or that others might need it more. Potential food bank users often report that they do not use them because of a perception that others need them more, or feel that using them would be "greedy" (Edin et al. 2013; Fong, Wright, and Wimer 2016; Kissane 2012). The connections between shame and guilt are important here, as people often employ the terms interchangeably (Chase and Walker 2013, 743; see also Scheff 2003).

Direct Experience

Stigma is also mediated by direct experience, both negative experiences such as when applying for benefits, as well as positive experiences that can reduce stigma, such as when using benefits

(McPherson 2006 in van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol 2014; Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). As Henry shows, students with experience accessing benefits like student pantries perceive food access as a right, while those who lack direct experience say they are nervous about going to the pantry (Henry 2020).

Power and Relationships

Yet researchers have also pushed to understand stigma as an outcome of relationships of power, rather than simply an individual attribute. Pescosolido et al. (2008) propose that expectations around stigma and associated characteristics appear at different levels of interaction: as individual factors, within social networks, and across society. Their Framework Integrating Normative Influences on Stigma (FINIS) is a comprehensive look at external stigma and how it might affect individuals. They find that exposure to stigmatized people through social networks may not lead to reduced stigma, though policies around health care and discrimination can lessen stigma, or at least the outward expression of it (Pescosolido et al. 2008).

Parker and Aggleton (2003) argue that while many studying the stigma around HIV/AIDS interpret Goffman's work on stigma in terms of the individual, Goffman's focus was actually on broader social change and the social construction of reality. In bringing together literature on stigma and discrimination, Parker and Aggleton examine how social structures map onto stigma, reproducing relations of power and control and consequently excluding some groups from power:

Stigma and discrimination therefore operate not merely in relation to difference (as our readings of both Goffman and Foucault would tend to emphasize), but even more clearly in relation to social and structural inequalities. Second, and even more importantly, stigmatization does not simply happen in some abstract manner. On the contrary, it is part of complex struggles for power that lie at the heart of social life. (Parker and Aggleton 2003, 18)

Parker and Aggleton argue that the processes of asserting difference and exclusion are connected to processes of social transformation, which have led to the feminization of poverty and polarizations of rich and poor; these transformations have also contributed to an emphasis on identity and the individual rather than structures of power. Horst

and colleagues similarly explain that in the United States, consumption becomes an important marker of identity and status, and an inability to acquire and consume food can thus cause shame in food bank interactions (van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol 2014). Though they also show how some food bank recipients reject the idea that they as individuals are at fault, preferring to see their experiences as a result of an unjust system (van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol 2014).

As Stuber and colleagues (2008) suggest, models of dependency and choice depend on individuals being responsible for their relative poverty. These individual-focused models say nothing about the norms and relationships that create the context for food insecurity (Pescosolido et al. 2008), nor the ways that stigma is created through power differentials (Parker and Aggleton 2003), as in other forms of discrimination (Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008). In terms of obesity, Brewis and Wutich (2019) also see that a focus on individual control and laziness misses how structural changes could lead to improved health through walkable, active spaces, access to healthier food, and decreasing poverty. As a result, a focus on stigma as a negative individual attribute “has led to interventions targeted either at increasing empathy and altruism in the general population or at enhancing the coping strategies of stigmatized individuals, which are interventions that ultimately have small effects” (Chase and Walker 2013, 740).

Next, we examine our data in light of the above ideas of stereotypes, experiences, and power inequalities to argue that an individual perspective on food insecurity and stigma is insufficient for both understanding stigma and recommending changes to address it (see also Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). For example, a focus on stereotypes and related othering or discrimination are dependent on assessing the individual in terms of their relationship to others, expectations, and other norms, as well as the choices they have made and their ability to provide for themselves. As we start to see above, different experiences with food insecurity or support services can lead to very different perspectives on food insecurity and stigma. We return to these ideas in the discussion, as well as to alternatives to an individualistic focus and how this might lead to better policies and programs addressing food insecurity.

Methods

Our research project is a collaboration with the campus food pantry leadership, and we worked with the leadership and staff to better understand and address student food insecurity. The research has been a mixed methods study, with survey and interview data collected from 2015 to 2019. We report here on data from a 2019 survey and interviews from 2016 to 2017; data from our initial survey in 2015 is reported elsewhere and not included here (Peterson and Freidus 2020).

For our Spring 2019 survey, the campus student affairs office sent a link to the survey to a representative sample of 6,000 students at the university. Of those, 778 students over 18 years old responded, a 13.0 percent response rate. Our survey sample was fairly representative of the student body, though unintentionally includes more female-identifying students (65.6 percent of respondents, versus 48.7 percent of the student body in 2019), first-year students, and Ph.D. students than in the student body (see Table 1). In terms of racial or ethnic identification, our survey also oversampled students identifying as African American, Asian, American Indian, and Pacific Islander (Table 2). The survey included 178 questions with skip logic, took 22 minutes on average to complete, and students who completed the survey were entered into a drawing for two \$100 gift cards. We report on a few relevant questions from this survey here, analyzed with SPSS statistical software (version 27).

In addition to the survey data, we include quotations from 37 interviews we conducted from 2016 to 2017 with students about food insecurity on campus, following Allen and Alleman (2019) and Crutchfield and Maguire’s (2018) recommendation to use qualitative data for understanding the role of stigma. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes using nVivo software (version 20.5.0). Interviewees were not assumed to be representative of the student body as a whole, given that students self-selected to participate by responding to flyers about student hunger posted around campus. Interviewees tended to be older than the general campus population, with about half aged between 25 and 40 and half younger than 25 years. The class level of students was also skewed toward seniors and juniors compared with the general student body in 2019 (Table 1). African American and Asian students were also overrepresented in

TABLE 1. Representativeness of study sample by year

Year in college	Percentage of student body	Percentage of survey respondents	Percentage of interviewees
First	11.91	20.12	6.06
Second	16.82	14.67	6.06
Third	24.03	20.73	30.30
Fourth or above	28.22	26.02	42.2
Masters	11.43	12.1	9.09
Doctoral	3.48	5.75	3.03
Unspecified graduate student			6.06
Other	4.09	0.61	0
Total	100	100	100

TABLE 2. Representativeness of study sample by ethnicity

Ethnic identity (checked all that applied)	Percentage of student body	Percentage of survey respondents	Percentage of interviewees
White	54.3802842	51.75	30.30
African American	15.8877496	17.52	21.21
Hispanic	9.55207771	8.76	9.09
Asian	6.81417521	10.92	33.33
Multiracial	4.10865264	n/a	6.06
American Indian	0.3058104	2.42	0
Pacific Islander	0.10433531	0.27	0
Total	100	100	100

the interviews (Table 1). Finally, 9.1 percent of interviewees reported having dependents living with them, higher than the 5 percent living with children in the 2015 survey.

All methods and procedures were reviewed and approved by our university's institutional review board. All survey respondents and interviewees signed consent forms to participate, and we use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. We note that our survey and interviews preceded COVID-19 but that research indicates that rates for most students have increased during the pandemic due largely to changes in employment, potentially by one-third, though students moving back home with family have generally seen improved food security (DeBate et al. 2021; Mialki et al. 2021; Soldavini, Andrew, and Berner 2021). These studies also suggest that students continue to experience challenges to their psychological and academic well-being, so we expect our results here to be relevant for pandemic and postpandemic understandings of stigma.

Results

Our survey and interview data suggest some important barriers to food access around stigma and guilt, including fear of judgment and believing others need it more. However, we also see some students reject ideas of stigma or judgment, and some recommendations from them on how to improve access by reducing stigma.

Barriers

Our 2019 survey data reveal that 31.8 percent of 481 respondents reported that they did not access resources that they needed to address hunger. We found that lack of knowledge (56.9 percent) was one of the most frequent reasons given for this. Relatedly, 34.8 percent of respondents did not know about the campus pantry but would like to use it, and only 30 percent knew about the Swipe out Hunger program on campus. While awareness is an important factor, it is not the most important

for students: 58.8 percent of respondents did not access resources because they thought someone else needed them more, and 38.9 percent felt fear, shame, or embarrassment in asking for help; a few students commented that perceived or actual application barriers prevented them from accessing help as well. Our survey only captured 19 current pantry users, but of these, five felt that fear, shame, or embarrassment kept them from accessing needed resources; though a lack of knowledge about the resources ($N = 5$, 26.3 percent) and thinking someone else needed them more ($N = 6$) were just as frequent reasons. Of those aware of the pantry but who had not used it ($N = 41$), 29.3 percent said it was because they did not want people to know, while five people wrote in that they believed that others needed it more (12.2 percent). Stigma was a major concern for interviewed students as well; as Wilson, a 40-year-old married African student said, “It takes courage to say ‘I am food insecure.’”

Stigma as Judgment

For our study participants, stigma or embarrassment around food insecurity appears to be linked to other people knowing. As Paula, a 26-year-old junior and Latina said, “You know people don’t want to let other people know like, ‘I’m hungry’ and you know, ‘I’m kinda like struggling right now.’” Another student commented, “My friends that would choose to not access food probably have that stigma of their...it’s probably more of an embarrassment than a stigma, like you don’t want anyone seeing you go into the food pantry.”

This stigma or embarrassment appears for some students to be connected to a perception that they are being judged for personal failings. As Carla, a 23-year-old Latina senior explains, “I feel like in my case so I might just be requesting assistance and feel that other folks might frown and be like maybe you wouldn’t be in this situation if you had waited to have a child, and feels like folks would frown upon her need and ask ‘why don’t you have a job? Go get a job!’ With me being Hispanic, there are always individuals who are saying that we take up their resources.” Carla said she would probably not visit a food pantry because of this stigma, despite the fact that she experiences food insecurity. One student explained that while they are unafraid to seek help, “some people, I don’t know, I guess they don’t want to be viewed that way, ‘cause it makes them feel lesser.”

TABLE 3. Reports of loneliness and food insecurity

How often do you feel lonely?	Percentage of respondents who are food insecure
Never	18.0
Rarely	18.9
Sometimes	29.9
Very often	53.8
Always	50.0

As we saw above, stigma is often connected to stereotypes and expectations. In some responses to our interview questions, we see links to ideas about laziness or poverty, struggling as showing weakness, or being perceived as somehow “lesser” than others. In addition, we found that students often felt that they did not meet expectations, like Kyson, a 31-year-old Laotian senior, who explained, “I should have a hold on my life by now and I should be the one giving it out. I’ve always been taught like the Asian man, you’re the ones who have to put, you know to be the ones that are leaders and whatever.”

This emphasis on self-reliance can prevent seeking help. Ryan, a 30-year-old white male explained, “The biggest thing is breaking the stigma of asking for help... a big, big part of being able to ask for help for a lot of people is, is that insecurity.” Asking for help can mean reaching out to others, though our interviewees often reported struggling with this. Our survey data also suggest a connection between food insecurity and social isolation; students who report that they feel lonely sometimes or more often are more likely to be food insecure (Table 3; $\chi^2(4, N = 469) = 32.345, p = 0.000$).

Overall, stigma for our interviewees is closely linked to expected judgments by others based on perceived personal failures around expectations. This focus on individual characteristics or failings is in line with previous studies that show how external stereotypes and ideas can be internalized as personal failure, and connected with other identity markers. The stigma may be stronger for certain students, like black or Latinx students who have experienced discrimination, as we see in Carla’s quote above, “with me being Hispanic, there are always individuals who are saying that we take up their resources.” Students in the study are certainly

aware of stereotypes and the external stigma around food security, and many have internalized that to self-stigmatize themselves as failures or being less deserving of support.

“Others Need it More”

In some cases, many students do not seek support because they believe others might need it more, as we saw with 58.8 percent of survey respondents above and with many of our interviewed students. The perception that other students need the support more or are more worthy of the support is an important barrier to seeking help. Marty, a white 20-year-old senior, rationalized why she thinks that other people need the student food pantry more:

Um, because they might not have, like I have a job on campus. So like theoretically I could use that money to buy food and stuff and be fine, but it's all going towards education versus other people might not have the time or the opportunity to get a job to have that extra money or, yeah, they might just not be financially stable. They might have other expenses.

This can lead to feeling guilty for getting support, as Destiny explains, “I just always feel like people have it, someone...someone's going to have it worse than you do... I feel like I'm almost taking something away from somebody else that may need it like way more than I do... So, it's kind of like a guilt kind of thing.” She went on to say she would be more likely to use the student pantry “if I knew that I wasn't taking away from people that need it more.”

In addition, students may have a fear of looking selfish. For example, Marty, quoted above, considers how many cans of beans she takes compared to what is left for others, and donates back to the pantry when she can. Paula, an Ecuadorian student with a disability, similarly told us, “I felt the way that I needed it more but I didn't want to take as much as I needed because it would look like I'm selfish but I knew that I needed it, but I don't want to like, you know, look bad or like look like I'm greedy.”

While the belief that others need help more is not often considered part of stigma or shame, we include it here because of the implied assessment of self and (often imagined) other. Our interviewees see support as a limited resource, and believe that their use of it will prevent others from getting needed help. While generous in intent, this reason-

ing draws on some of the same ideas around poverty and worthiness as other expressions about stigma, and continues to focus on individual shortcomings.

Rejecting Stigma

We also heard from some students who are less concerned about stigma or embarrassment. Paula, when asked if the stigma of being food insecure prevents them from going to the pantries or using other resources responded bluntly, “No, I don't give a fuck about what other people think. I don't give a fuck.” This kind of confidence may come with age, as Paul, a 21-year-old biracial junior, proposes:

I think the older you get, the more you don't care. It's what you wear and what you have on, you really stop caring. If you need it, you need it! If I was really that desperate, I would do it, I really would and not care. But some people, I don't know, I guess they don't want to be viewed that way, 'cause it makes them feel lesser, but if you need it to get by, do what you got to do.

David, a 19-year-old white male junior, believes that attitudes toward food insecurity have shifted over time due to social media or shifts in enrollment:

Maybe in the past it would have been more of a stigma, but I think now, stigmas like that, are sort of starting to dissolve because you can see on social media all the jokes about college students being poor, I mean, it's common for a lot of college kids to not come from a middle class or high class family. A lot of college kids are first generation students. They don't have a lot of money, so I think a lot of people can relate to being food insecure or coming from a background where they can't exactly eat out every night.

With these interviewees, we see a decreased concern about what other people think when compared with the quotes in previous sections. These students see a trend toward normalizing student hunger, particularly the last one, and while these students still suffer from food insecurity, they have found other ways to respond to ideas and stereotypes, possibly without internalizing them or accepting them.

Suggestions from Students

Students in our study also had a lot of suggestions about how to improve food security, particularly about how to destigmatize it. In fact, this article arose largely because a class of senior Anthropology students wanted to focus on how to destigmatize food insecurity on campus as a class project.

Student interviewees have repeatedly asked for greater respect and understanding around food insecurity, calling for faculty, staff, and students to “normalize” food insecurity or have more open discussions about it. While surveyed students mentioned the hours most frequently as a way to improve the pantry, responses also suggest that having a more “grocery store” appearance would help, or making it more welcoming. As Joy, a 25-year-old first-year Asian woman suggested in her interview, “Different people have different needs. People who need this should use it without losing their dignity or feeling shallow.” Maintaining dignity often involves greater inclusion of all students in programs and events to reduce the feelings of being judged, as an Asian junior woman suggested: “So, probably like doing a food drive and just um... and like I said setting up the table and that’s just like, probably doing like little small goodie bags like when people walk by just handing out little goodie bags and then having like the little cards inside them like you know with the address and stuff on it, uh to the food pantry.”

Student interviewees also suggested that inclusive advertising could help with increasing awareness, as well as providing opportunities for discussion, as Joy also mentions: “Maybe sending out emails or flyers would help people know about it, or having a sign that leads them there. I think they could help students by making them open up, I know if I needed to use this it would be hard for me to talk about. Maybe having people who work there to arrange all of the food and get more donations.” Other suggestions included social media and outreach through inclusive tabling, as suggested above.

Interviewed students also emphasized the need to reduce stigma through more social approaches, like emphasizing social relationships or creating events. A 30-year-old senior white male suggested, “Um you know, a big, big part of being able to ask for help for a lot of people is, is that insecurity and, you know, more social surrounding reduces that insecurity and you know, if... if you’re... you’re a lot more likely to ask your friends for help.” Friends and family were important resources for our interviewees, and those students who said they didn’t

seek help because they thought others needed it more often mentioned support structures, like family or employment, as reasons they might need less help than others. We also see suggestions about making access more “social” which might include going to the pantry with friends or roommates, as reported by some students, or creating events with food.

Discussion

Our data align with results from other studies of stigma, in that study participants discuss the external and internal dimensions of stereotypes, the role of judgment, ideas of the deserving (and undeserving) poor, and discrimination. Food insecure individuals often ascribe their shameful feelings to not meeting the neoliberal standards of self-sufficiency (Swales et al. 2020). Food insecure individuals can linguistically and discursively create hierarchies of insecurity among food insecure populations as deserving or not, revealing the fear of being seen as the “undeserving welfare recipient” (Chase and Walker 2013, 752) and self-imposed judgments of feeling awkward or guilty, feeling worthless or as if they are a failure, or that they are letting themselves down (Chase and Walker 2013; Swales et al. 2020)

Stigma for students thus appears to be a largely individual experience or expectation, and their solutions also focus on changing these ideas or stereotypes through social events, discussion and awareness. However, our data, particularly the suggestions, also point toward the limitations of individual-focused solutions for reducing stigma and rates of food insecurity. Students are explaining that they need greater institutional support to help them address the stigma of food insecurity, such as more welcoming resources like pantries and more widespread information about resources. Students also had suggestions about increasing understanding through normalizing or social efforts, which are inclusive, highlighting that they view stigma as linked to relationships. In addition, the focus on social approaches and events pairs the support students already use with other resources. These solutions push us toward understanding the social context of and language around food insecurity and stigma. As researchers argue, recommendations around food insecurity are often focused on individual thinking or behaviors (Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006)

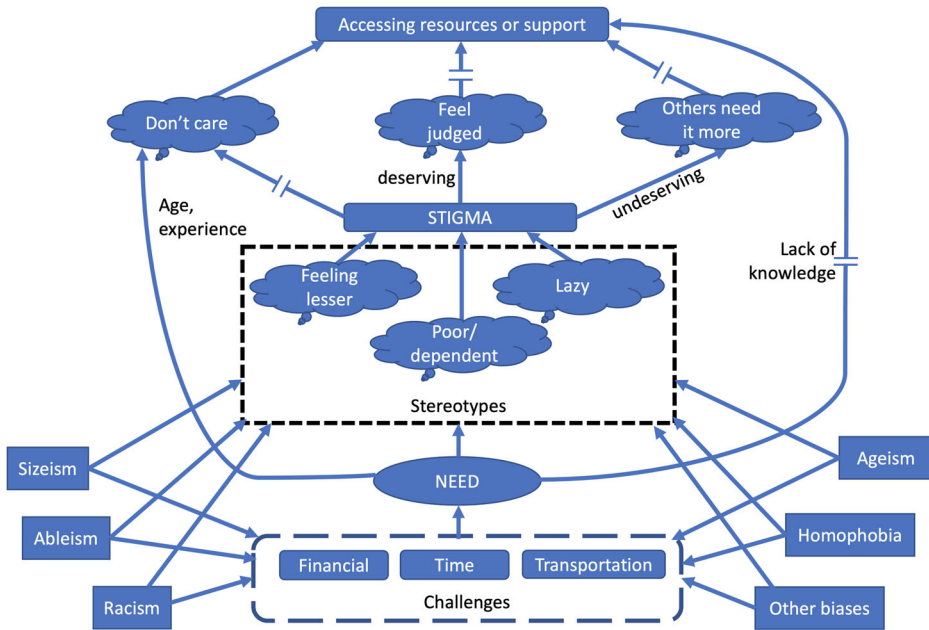


FIGURE 1. Model of student food insecurity and shame.

but these are insufficient to address the root issues (Stuber, Meyer, and Link 2008).

Model

This analysis leads us to propose a model of stigma around student food insecurity that highlights how perceptions related to stereotypes lead to not accessing needed resources (Fig. 1). This builds on the Pescosolido et al. (Pescosolido et al. 2008) FINIS model in that the focus on stigma allows important connections between stereotypes or labels, perceptions, behaviors, and outcomes, alongside key aspects of student food insecurity. In our data and others', we see three general responses to these stereotypes—students evaluate themselves as not (or lesser) deserving of help, deserving of help but judged by others for this, or unconcerned about the stigma. The first two of these can lead students to seek help or not, while the third seems to lead to seeking help. For students who believe they are less or not deserving of support, the idea that other students may need it more can prevent them from visiting the pantry, or at least will contribute to feelings of guilt or selfishness if they do use the resources. For students feeling judged for deserving support, this can also prevent access or lead to embarrassment in accepting the identity as food insecure. We also emphasize that students can

easily experience more than one of these at once, as the students' quotes suggest—they can feel judged and that others are more deserving of support, and can at the same time say that they reject the stigma.

Stigma that leads to perceived judgment or unworthiness derives from other perceptions related to stereotypes around need and related ideas about poverty that students think could be applied to them, including perceptions of laziness, dependency, or being lesser than others. These external stereotypes can be intensified by certain identities or experiences, like race and disability status, which reinforce and exacerbate food insecurity stigmas, as shown in Figure 1.

Yet our model also suggests that we would be well served to examine the deeper causes and contributors to student food insecurity, which we have called challenges in the model. If we consider that stereotypes and stigma arise from students identifying others or themselves in need of food, we can then ask what leads to this need. As we describe in the introduction, the specific challenges associated with student food insecurity are relatively well characterized, and include financial, time, and transportation limitations. Each of these is needed for college life, and so these challenges are not unique for food insecure students. However,

food insecure students tend to experience them as challenges while other students are seemingly able to at least partially address them. As we see in our study and others, there are important disparities in family support, income, and even financial aid that contribute to experiencing food insecurity.

In addition, as our study and others have documented, black, Latina/o/x, and LGBTQ students are more likely to experience food insecurity (Baker-Smith et al. 2020; Crutchfield and Maguire 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019; Peterson and Freidus 2020; Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005; Wood and Harris 2018) and other challenges while in college due to structural racism (Kulick et al. 2017; Meyer 2003; Odoms-Young 2018; Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005). Stereotypes and assumptions about people in these groups can add to those about need or poverty to further stigmatize these students, as suggested in our model. Understanding stigma for these groups thus also requires considering the role of interpersonal and structural discrimination.

Recommendations

Most recommendations around food insecurity focus on increasing awareness of its prevalence and the resources available for those in need, as well as programs or efforts to increase individual access. This effort could include communication through social media, class syllabi, and student organizations. In particular, administrators could e-mail students with low estimated family contributions or other indicators of potentially low financial security (King et al. 2021), or increase awareness through messaging strategies and trainings with students, faculty, and staff (DeBate et al. 2021; Fong, Wright, and Wimer 2016; Henry 2020). These are still considered important approaches for our interviewed students. We also note the cautions about messaging suggested by Brewis and Wutich: messages need to avoid stigma and shame by focusing on improving the context for health and building self-esteem around asking for help, rather than focusing on the individual and blame (Brewis and Wutich 2019). Specifically, they suggest relabeling or reframing away from individual blame (and shame), connecting through narratives of real people, and reeducating around misperceptions. These misperceptions in our case include ideas about being undeserving, others needing it more, or resource limitations.

Students in this study suggest that more communication about resource availability might also

address concerns about taking resources other students may need. The assumption that others needed the resources more and that these resources were limited prevented some students from accessing needed support, in addition to just increased awareness. Yet we need to keep in mind that language choice is also a critical element of communication, in particular: (1) the relationship between food-aid discourse and the co-construction of the emotions of shame and pride (Chase and Walker 2013); (2) the tendency for food-aid discourses to establish and enforce socially stratified hierarchies through linguistic othering (Bax 2010; Swales et al. 2020); and (3) how these elements ultimately reinforce the stigmatization of being food insecure and needing the assistance of resources like the student pantry (Swales et al. 2020). For example, Brewis and Wutich argue that public health messaging around obesity can actually contribute to weight gain, due to people avoiding public or social activities and increased depression due to shame (Brewis and Wutich 2019).

Our findings around loneliness align with growing awareness of mental health challenges of students and their relationships to food insecurity, depression, and social isolation (DeBate et al. 2021; Willis 2021). Developing approaches to food insecurity to address social isolation are critical for addressing stigma, particularly given the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. This can be done through events or the design of spaces for student support.

Another strategy related to increasing awareness is to improve the social acceptability around accessing resources, leading to the “don’t care” aspect of the model. This could include creating more welcoming spaces and processes, such as less noticeable EBT cards (Martin 2021; Zekeri 2004), and events that both provide food as well as discussions with and stories of other students. Classes, workshops, and shared meals can also be means for both sociality and learning about resources and skills such as cooking and budgeting. Free school lunches available to all students is proposed as a way to remove some of the stigma around food access in lower grades, and could be effective for colleges as well (Goldrick-Rab and Cochrane 2019; Taylor et al. 2020).

Yet the study participants’ suggestions, which also resonate with a variety of programs available at other campuses, go beyond basic communication, pantries, and swipe programs to discuss the importance of the social context, such as

discussions, events, and the pantry context itself.

Creating a more welcoming or normalized approach has been attempted through programs like universal free lunch, which can “avoid the soup-kitchen stigma” associated with free lunches for low-income students only approach (Allen and Alleman 2019; Cunningham and Johnson 2011, 5). A recent book on improving food pantries emphasizes the need to create a more welcoming and social atmosphere in response to concerns around stigma and embarrassment (Martin 2021), and another study suggests EBT cards that look like credit cards or student IDs can decrease stigma (Zekeri 2004). Promoting services or creating greater awareness through inclusive advertising is also apparent through an effort by California State University in San Bernardino, which has websites posted around campus list where available microwaves are located for students to use, as well as a list of shelters for college students throughout the local communities. Other studies suggest that inclusive messaging and trainings would raise awareness, such as by emphasizing the diversity of those served or the resourcefulness of users rather than their neediness (Fong, Wright, and Wimer 2016; Henry 2020). Allen and Alleman also found that sharing food insecurity experiences often led to solidarity, with one student responding “I think everyone just realizes that we’re all in the same boat. There is no real ‘Oh, this is an individual problem.’” (Allen and Alleman 2019, 62).

These suggestions and ideas about inclusive and socially oriented programming and marketing would likely help address concerns raised in our data around fear of judgment and perceptions of being lesser by helping to remove some of the stigma around using resources and just general recognition of food insecurity as a widespread issue.

When we examine the challenges behind the need and the stigma, as suggested in our model, we can recognize the relationships and social structures that create unequal college experiences, as well as the power relationships that contribute to their continuation through processes of exclusion (Parker and Aggleton 2003; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). As we note, some of the same characteristics, like race and disability status, can lead to experiencing these challenges at greater rates. Many of these characteristics or identities are connected to historical exclusions from employment, education, or resources and many groups continue to face biases

today. Addressing financial, time, and transportation challenges of students will require reimagining funding, financial aid, and university functions to better meet students’ needs, acknowledging and addressing unequal patterns of discrimination and access, and moving a focus away from individual strategies and resilience to build more universities and communities that offer equitable support through policies and practices.

In terms of funding, colleges can examine strategies like emergency funds (Goldrick-Rab 2020), increased salaries for graduate students or student workers, and reducing on-campus housing costs. Similarly, improving transportation options through shuttle services, access to public transit (Baek 2016), or ride-share programs may also address financial needs as well as time limitations students face. Financial aid also plays a large part in affordability and thus food security, and could be improved by including and allowing nontuition expenses in calculations and disbursement (Goldrick-Rab and Cochrane 2019), as well as efforts like vouchers and scholarships for food, work-for-food opportunities, or more affordable meal plans (El Zein et al. 2018). Other financial support could include programs such as Swipe out Hunger and increased access to SNAP benefits through enrollment outreach efforts and increasing acceptance at campus or area stores. Longer term efforts would include increased state or federal support for SNAP access or other financial support, including lower cost or free college tuition, through a joint effort of advocacy for student needs (Parker and Aggleton 2003). In addition, given the relationships between food insecurity, stigma, and characteristics such as race and disability status in our study and others, colleges can address food insecurity by addressing structural racism in university operations, including in admissions and financial aid criteria and processes (National Association for College Admission Counseling 2022), as well as pedagogical strategies (Barber et al. 2020).

Programmatically, colleges can reenvision college trajectories to incorporate the variety of pathways to success (Allen and Alleman 2019; Goldrick-Rab 2016), and take a broader view of food as part of wellness and health (Brewis and Wutich 2019; El Zein et al. 2018) through changes to student advising and support efforts. In addition, some studies have suggested that centralized resource centers, either online or physical, can connect students more effectively to needed resources

(Cady, Crowley, and Goldrick-Rab 2019, singlestop.org). Particularly given the effects of the pandemic on student health and well-being, universities can examine how resources can better support students through online support, connections to nonprofit organizations, and other creative options, such as through faculty or advisor identification of students in need (DeBate et al. 2021; Lederer et al. 2021).

While at this point, addressing both social acceptability and root causes can help students access needed resources (Earnshaw and Karpyn 2020), we look forward to how more open discussions with students, faculty, and administrators to create new strategies and policies. We hope that eventually, pantries will close and programs will cease because students are no longer hungry.

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