Expanding food assistance may help colleges retain students, study says

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Food insecurity is a pressing issue among U.S. college students and has increased dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In a survey conducted by Healthy CUNY in April 2020, 50% of CUNY students reported worrying that they would run out of food before they could buy more.

In a secondary analysis of the CUNY-wide student survey, Associate Professor Heidi Jones, Distinguished Professor Nick Freudenberg and colleagues explored the association between food insecurity and the impact of COVID-19 on educational outcomes and tested whether anxiety and depression mediated this relationship.

Students who were food insecure were more likely to experience disruptions to their educational experience, reporting higher rates of being unable to do their schoolwork, dropping or withdrawing from classes and anticipating delays in their graduation. There was some evidence that food insecurity may lead to anxiety and/or depression, with both affecting students' ability to do schoolwork, and depression also affecting potential delays in graduation.

In their study published in the *Journal of American College Health*, the researchers suggest developing student campus services that link food assistance with psychological services such as mental health counseling or referrals to community-based or telehealth mental health services to maximize opportunities for leveraging this reciprocal relationship.

"The link between mental health and food security shown in this study suggests that health, mental health and social problems that many college students face are closely intertwined," says Freudenberg. "Expanding food assistance may help especially those community colleges and public universities serving low-income populations to avoid the drops in enrollment that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered."


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