10 Myths of Student Food Insecurity

A guide that provides you with information and knowledge to challenge common misconceptions that surround the issue of student food insecurity

#hungryforknowledge
10 Myths About Student Food Insecurity

Despite a widespread lack of awareness of student food insecurity, emerging research suggests that student food insecurity is on the rise. There are also deeply-held ideas and beliefs that may make it challenging to create meaningful change. This document is meant to dispel common misconceptions of student hunger and invite others to the table to discuss long-term, effective solutions.

Here are 10 most common myths that surround the issue of student food insecurity and responses:

**Myth #1: Campus food banks are solving the problem**

Food banks in the community and on campuses play an important role in immediate hunger relief, however, campus food banks are unable to ‘solve’ food insecurity for several reasons:

- They are often solely funded through student unions and rely heavily on food donations, which limits their capacity to provide both the amount and quality of food students need. Research on Canadian campus food banks have found that much of the food is processed and low in nutritional value (Jessri et al., 2014). These limitations are not because food banks and the people who run them don’t care, but because they are limited in their resources to provide quality non-perishables and fresh foods on a consistent basis. They do the best they can with small budgets and what donors choose to donate.
- Students volunteer their time to keep campus food banks up and running, and therefore are limited in their ability to access additional resources to improve their service. Our student leaders have anecdotally reported rising rates of campus food bank usage, which means these limited resources are becoming more and more strained.
- Like other food-insecure populations, only a fraction of students experiencing food insecurity access campus food banks. A survey at the University of Saskatchewan
found that 28.1% of student respondents experience food insecurity but only 0.6% of respondents had used a food bank to get the food they need (University of Saskatchewan, 2015). Meal Exchange’s Hungry for Knowledge report had similar findings, in that only 16.8% of food-insecure students reported accessing their campus food bank (Silverthorn, 2016). Moreover, many students don’t know about the service, and the stigma associated with going to a food bank further prevents usage.

The fact is that food banks do not address the root causes of why a student might experience food insecurity in the first place. Using a food bank is often viewed as a last resort by many students struggling with food insecurity, and should not be viewed as a long-term solution.

**Myth # 2: Students always went through this, and all students had to have jobs**

Students are vulnerable to food insecurity more than ever before. Education used to be much more affordable: tuition fees have risen 238% since 1991 (Canadian Federation of Students, 2014). National average debt upon graduation is now over $28,000 (Burley & Awad 2015) and due to the replacement of full-time work with precarious part-time employment (Statistics Canada, 2016), students’ ability to pay off debt is increasingly uncertain (Ferguson and Wang, 2014). A 2011 report by TD economics stated that, “there was a time that students could fund their tuition, other school fees, and living expenses from savings accumulated through summer and part-time jobs. Those days are past”.

There is evidence that summer jobs are just not cutting it anymore. For example, the maximum contract through the federal Canada Student Summer Jobs program is 560 hours at minimum wage. In Ontario (which has the nation’s highest minimum wage at $11) this would bring in $6,160 before tax and other deductions. The average cost of tuition in Canada is $5,772 (Canadian Federation of Students, 2015), which means that the work the student did over the summer is insufficient to cover tuition costs. Moreover, these numbers assume that students do not spend any of their earnings over the summer.
There is also the reality that not all students can find a summer job in the first place: student summer unemployment was at 16.5% despite the Canada Summer Jobs program mentioned above (Statistics Canada, cited in Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2014).

**Myth #3: Students are mostly rich kids - you’re being dramatic**

Meal Exchange’s Hungry for Knowledge report found that an average of 39% of students across five Canadian campuses experienced food insecurity in 2015/16. Research from university and college campuses in the U.S. and Australia have reported similarly shocking numbers (Gallegos et al. 2013, Hughes et al. 2011). If over a third of students are experiencing food insecurity, it is not only low-income students being impacted; students from working and middle-class families may also be experiencing food insecurity.

Despite some provincial changes to public financial aid, which have streamlined the process for students from the most vulnerable families, most students may still be at risk; A 2012 report from the Canadian University Survey Consortium found that more than 62% of student debt is owed to the government, indicating that the majority of students’ financial support is not coming from familial sources (University of Saskatchewan, 2012). Students need to demonstrate financial need to qualify for the Canada Student Loans Program, contributing to the argument that most post-secondary students do not hail from high-income families who can fully support them throughout school.

Moreover, existing systems of financial aid do not address food insecurity among particularly vulnerable groups, such as single parents and international students. There is also evidence suggesting that students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities are at greater risk for experiencing food insecurity, and as tuition becomes less affordable, fewer and fewer low-income students enroll (Canadian Journal of Economics, 2009). Education in Canada should be accessible to all those wishing to pursue it.
**Myth # 4: If students can’t afford college or university then they shouldn't go**

We all benefit when people in society get a post-secondary education: it strengthens our economy, spurs innovation, supports democracy, and fosters healthier communities. When only those who can afford it go to college or university, it denies many the opportunity to learn, to improve their economic and social mobility, and to contribute to society in a significant way.

If Canada wants to be a leader in terms of equal opportunity, democracy, and a healthy society, improving access to higher education is crucial.

**Myth # 5: Food insecurity is tolerable during school because students will get a good job at the end of it**

Post-secondary education generally correlates with employment and higher earnings. However, that is becoming less of an asset as more and more graduates have trouble finding decent work, despite the need for a highly education workforce; In 2010, approximately 70% of jobs require some form of post-secondary education, and the and the percentage of jobs in this category has been shown to be rising (Miner Management Consultants, 2010).

A recent report found that 65% of Canadians believe that the high cost of education is the major deterrent for qualified and interested students who otherwise would go to university or college (Canadian Federation of Students, 2015). With no guarantee of a good job after racking up student debt, it is increasingly viewed as not worth it. This attitude is especially common among low-income families where the risk of taking out loans is higher.
Debt is stressful, and paying off student loans is becoming a decades-long process. Graduates without loans have an average net worth of $39,200 more than graduates who have student loans (Statistics Canada, 2010). Carrying student debt also limits purchasing power, which hurts the economy when graduates delay starting families, purchasing homes, and investing. Therefore, it is risky to the whole economy to increase the debt-load of Canadians who are not able to pay off those loans.

In addition, research suggests that food insecurity is not just something that students will be able to “get through”. Food insecurity has been linked to a wide variety of negative health implications, including chronic diseases, nutrient inadequacies, and poor disease management (Guicciardi et al. 2009, Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk 2008). Instances of hunger in adolescence have been linked to a greater risk of experiencing depression and suicidal ideation in young adulthood (McIntyre et al., 2013). There are a variety of psychosocial consequences of food insecurity, including stigma, shame, and guilt (Hamelin et al. 2002). Finally, research from the U.S. and South Africa suggest that students who experience food insecurity have difficulty concentrating on school-related tasks and have a lower GPA compared to food-secure students (Munro et al. 2013, Maroto et al. 2013).

**Myth #6: Students don’t know how to budget: they always have money for extras, not for food**

Students do not have much money to budget in the first place. In addition, it’s important to remember that lots of material things are bought on credit - the average consumer debt in Canada, excluding mortgages, is now $20,910 and growing (Equifax cited in Global News, 2015). There is immense pressure in our culture to have the latest stuff, and this is in large part fueled by the fact that we are bombarded with thousands of ads every day. Campus urinals and bathroom stalls even advertise while you’re doing your business! There is also the issue of inappropriate access to credit: lenders are lending to people who should not have access to credit and then profiting off of the interest they are forced to pay --- a practice known as predatory lending. At this point, credit card sign-up tables are a fixture on campuses, and it is very easy to qualify for a card. Despite these challenges with access to credit, credit cards
may be crucial for students who are struggling, as charging food purchases to credit cards is one strategy food-insecure students use to attempt to cope (Gaines et al. 2014).

Another thing to remember is that what might seem like “extras” are necessities: computers are often needed or mandated for school or work; cell phones are not only a basic status symbol but also an important means of communicating with potential employers, colleagues and friends; and access to the internet is increasingly becoming like a utility for academic, professional and social functioning.

Even with all of the above, students should be able to participate in social life by spending money on things for enjoyment, entertainment, staying connected with friends, fun and stress-relief. Not only can these things be healthy, but they will also help with productivity and creativity.

**Myth #7: It’s not the Government or Campus’ job to make sure all students are fed**

Food insecurity is not only a precursor to academic success, it is a key social determinant of health; this means that Health Canada has recognized food security as an essential component of a healthy life. If students don’t have enough to eat, then how can they succeed? It is therefore within the interests of health practitioners and promoters, policy makers, and campuses alike to ensure that all students have access to food that will allow them to thrive.

Both food and education are human rights that Canada endorsed when they signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Canada has a legal and social responsibility to uphold these laws and fulfill the right of people in Canada to have access to food and education.
**Myth #8: Governments and Campuses are broke**

Some governments are taking in less than they spend, and thus campuses are given less funds. Federal government funding for education has declined by 50% since 1992 (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015), at the same time that taxes on corporations and wealthy Canadians have declined and their profits have soared. Canada has not seen these levels of inequality since the 1930s (Statistics Canada cited in The Toronto Star, 2013).

Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. The government has the right to redistribute wealth to solve social problems. We should not force students to struggle through food insecurity to get an education in a country as rich as ours. It is bad for students, and bad for society.

**Myth #9: Professors are overpaid, and that’s why students are forced to pay higher tuition**

Good academic jobs on our college and university campuses are crucial to ensure high quality education. And, the proportion of university budgets that are spent on professor salaries has declined steadily in the last 30 years (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015). In addition, while many professors do have good jobs, a growing number are contract faculty who are working in precarious, part-time positions with relatively low pay and no job security. Like many students, these workers are often also facing challenges supporting their family and making ends meet.

The main reason tuition fees have risen is reduced government funding, especially from the federal government which has fallen by 50% since 1992 (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015). However, while many universities have been forced to do more with less as public funding dries up, it is fair to question university budgeting priorities. Many groups have pointed out that administrative costs and salaries have increased as students are bearing more and more of the cost of their education.
Myth #10: Change isn’t Possible

Given the gravity and breadth of the problem, creating change can seem overwhelming. Yet, unpredictable positive changes have happened throughout history, often a result of a small group of people getting together and pressuring decision-makers to end unjust practices and implement better ways of doing things. The end of slavery, women’s right to vote, universal health care, old age security, voting rights for racialized people, the minimum wage, environmental protections: all of these realities came about because people cared enough about them to take a stand.

Another great, local and recent example: Quebec has the lowest tuition fees in the country, as students and student unions exercise their democratic right to hold the government accountable. When the provincial government tried to raise tuition fees by 75% in 2012, the students held some of the largest demonstrations in Canada’s history, and eventually the government was voted out of office in large part due to this movement. The students have successfully defended the affordability of education.

Beyond Campus Food Banks arises out of students saying, enough is enough. We will not accept that any students experience food insecurity to get an education. Polls show that the many are with us: 77% oppose any rise in tuition fees (Canadian Federation of Students, 2014), 72% of Ontarians support a rise in minimum wages to at least $14/hours (CTV Poll cited in Workers’ Action Centre, 2013), 71% support increased federal investment in affordable and social housing (Federation of Canadian Municipalities cited in The Toronto Star, 2013). We’ve have a chance to bring this issue to light, to shift the way people think, and create change.

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