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## **Filling the Basket: Addressing Student Food Insecurity at Lasallian Institutions of Higher Learning**

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### **Introduction**

During the breakfast and the afternoon snack, one of the students . . . shall have a basket before him for receiving bread for the poor. Any who shall have brought plenty of bread will be able to give some piece of it or what they have left after having had sufficient to eat . . . At the end of breakfast, some time before grace after meals, when the alms shall have all or nearly all been collected, the teacher shall take a piece of bread from the basket and, having made the sign of the cross, shall hold it in hand. Then all of the poor students shall stand up and remain standing without making any sign. The teacher shall then go to all, one after the other, to distribute to them what is in the basket, according to their need (John Baptist de La Salle, 1706).<sup>2</sup>

Hunger is the personal, physical sensation of discomfort, craving food to satisfy bodily needs. Food insecurity, while it generally encompasses hunger, is the broader socioeconomic and psychological situation of a person who is uncertain where the next meal is coming from – a person who is experiencing the persistent “lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” Food insecurity refers to a lack of available financial resources for food.<sup>3</sup>

Food insecurity – which existed among the families of the schools of John Baptist de La Salle in late seventeenth-century France and still exists in our institutions of higher learning today – takes a significant toll on the well-being of those who experience it: the constant anxiety and exhaustion of feeling hunger and obsessing about sources of food, the physical depletion and mental fog produced by inadequate nutrition, the loss of time and energy that must be devoted to finding and affording food resources, and the feelings of shame and hopelessness that come with the inability to meet one's basic needs. For students, this drains away their ability to focus on their education and development as fully contributing members of the community. How should Lasallian colleges and universities respond to this pressing need?

### **Lasallian Thought on Student Food Insecurity**

Educational service to the poor is fundamental to the Lasallian charism and mission. An important value within the Lasallian tradition of service rooted in solidarity and justice calls us especially to identify and actively respond to societal inequities, which we are pledged to do in association with our community and with special care to our younger brothers and sisters – our students. An understanding of the particular needs of the poor and disadvantaged has pervaded Lasallian thought throughout its history and heritage.

The Christian Schools, as the first Lasallian schools were called, were founded with a mission to serve the children of artisans and the poor. Who, then, were “the poor”? Although Saint John

Baptist de La Salle did not himself define “the poor,” definitions in other writings of the times focused on lack of the means of sustenance for daily living:

It seems that at the time and with reference to those everyone called poor a good parameter would be “assuring daily bread for oneself and one’s own,” understanding the words assuring, bread and daily in their most obvious meaning.

Poverty was widespread in the France of the Great King. Many of its inhabitants – certainly more than half – subsisted in danger of not being assured at one time or another of their daily bread.<sup>4</sup>

Food insecurity was thus recognized as a defining characteristic of many who were most in need of the intervention of the Brothers to have a chance at a dignified and productive life. It is hardly surprising that the detailed instructions set forth in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* included direction on how teachers could assure that their students had the food they needed to learn and participate in the carefully designed activities of the schools. Woven into these instructions was the demonstration to all students that the needy were among them, that those in need should be acknowledged and treated with dignity, and that the community has a responsibility to ensure that all of its members have sufficient food.

Although today’s students attending Lasallian institutions of higher education in the United States may not be as poor as those earlier definitions suggest, many students do struggle to meet their daily needs. Further, as young adults, they often have family and work obligations that put further pressure on their time and other resources. Because of the particular nature of our values and how they are expressed in our educational institutions, Lasallian colleges and universities are especially likely to embrace students who are at risk for food insecurity. As noted in “Lasallian Values in Higher Education,” Lasallian schools have long made particular efforts to reach out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

. . . the Lasallian college or university is committed to honor the tradition of a special mission to the poor and disadvantaged. Our colleges can be legitimately proud of the large numbers of young persons from deprived backgrounds that, for almost 150 years now, have been provided at little or no cost with the advantages of a college education. As the memory of the immigrant generations and the great depression fades into history, our institutions of higher learning actively seek to recruit students from minority groups, or those whose environment has prevented them from realizing their full learning potential.<sup>5</sup>

As we reach out to include these students in our Lasallian communities, we are certainly responsible to ensure that their basic needs are met once they join us. However, it is easy to overlook their struggles. After all, few students will disclose their embarrassing lack of resources unless asked in a non-judgmental and supportive manner and unless the existence of their needs is normalized as well as de-stigmatized. Too often, the evidence of their struggles is misinterpreted as a solely academic issue.

A school has a very natural tendency to concern itself first and foremost with the needs related to teaching. Service of youth and particularly that of the poor requires that we go beyond such a limited point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Often, what seems to be a need related to the classroom can actually be a reflection of other kinds of needs. Is that student who is late to class unmotivated to learn, or did the fact that he had to put in extra hours at his job cause his tardiness? Is the student who is dozing off in her seat disinterested in my class, or is she too hungry to stay alert? As Lasallian educators, we are instructed to act as the elder brothers and sisters to our students. What caring older sibling would ignore the hunger of a younger member of the family?

In addition to the Lasallian value of making education accessible to the poor, our tradition requires, as part of our commitment to educating for justice, that we educate our students regarding the needs of the poor and the root causes of poverty. *Circular #412: Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* extensively explores the intersection of the Lasallian educational mission with concern for social justice. Arguing that social justice education is an indispensable aspect of the mission, *Circular #412* states:

we should view actions on behalf of justice as essential to the broader view of service to the poor that is desired by the contemporary Church, because it gives this service a firmer social dimension.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Brother Ernest Miller argues in his extensive analysis of Lasallian thought and practice on educating for justice – *Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization in the Name of Justice* – that the mission, charism, and curriculum of the Lasallian school fundamentally links educational service to the poor with education of our students in social justice and advocacy:

Examining the rich Lasallian heritage has yielded three significant elements: the whole curriculum of the Christian Schools was infused with a religious sensibility; an implicit commitment to social justice; and the linkage between the educational service to young people, especially those impoverished and marginalized, and the promotion of justice. Together, these elements can function as building blocks to continue shaping the Lasallian journey.<sup>7</sup>

We must, therefore, I contend, bring into the open the basic food insecurity needs affecting many of our students, for their sake and for the edification of all members of our Lasallian communities.

As a teacher of future nutrition health professionals, I recently presented my students with a case study of a patient whose medical chart labels her as being "non-compliant" with the dietary and medical advice she has been given by her care providers. We discussed how they would feel when confronted with such a patient. Most of the initial classroom discussion was focused on "I" feelings of frustration, disappointment, even being disrespected by this unmotivated patient, until one student began to ask for more information about the patient's situation. When the next layer of information was presented, indicating that the patient is a parent with limited income who has

chosen to forgo her medication and skip meals so that she can feed her children, the conversation turned to empathy and efforts to address the woman's situation. Yet, the situation is, when presented to students in this way, still hypothetical.

When I was planning a survey of our students in our own university (La Salle University, located in Philadelphia) to assess campus food insecurity, many of the same students took part in a focus group on student food insecurity. As they listened to the personal lived experiences of food insecurity as related by their classmates, the reality hit hard. Many of them indicated an eagerness to learn more about this issue, volunteer in community food assistance programs, and help out with campus food security initiatives. Beyond that, they became concerned about historical, environmental, socioeconomic, and governmental and institutional policy realities that are the root causes of food insecurity in the United States, the wealthiest country on the planet. They clearly want to act.

If we are to produce graduates who work to remedy injustice and oppression, we must first guide them in encountering those darker sides of the world they are living in. Although we must not overwhelm the optimism of our students with such a picture of the suffering around them that they become paralyzed, Downey argues that we must

convince our students that the world is actually much worse than they already think it is, without thereby plunging them into reflexive denial, abject despair, or nihilistic apathy – or at least not leave them there.<sup>8</sup>

Sensitizing them while engaging them in service and advocacy can give them the hope, motivation, and direction to promote social change.

## **Food Insecurity in Higher Education in the United States**

### ***National Trends***

The association between limited access to affordable, healthy food and multiple chronic health problems is well known. Optimal nutritional intake is a core issue in the social determinants of health identified in *Healthy People 2020*, because inadequacies can cause poor development and loss of human potential, and can contribute to common chronic diseases such as obesity, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and osteoporosis.<sup>9</sup> Food insecurity causes people to turn to low-cost, high calorie but nutritionally inadequate food choices, or to go without sufficient food intake when even that becomes unaffordable.

The college student living on a diet of ramen noodles is a long-standing trope, with its image of the student incapable of cooking anything more complicated than a 3-minute packet of dried noodles. Unfortunately, the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses in the United States has erased the humor from this image. The student living on a diet of ramen noodles, filling his or her empty stomach with a comforting bowl of starch, fat, sodium, and little else is no laughing matter.

Why is food insecurity rising among college students? Because higher education has become increasingly expensive for the majority of students. The book *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* documents the parallel rise in costs and stagnation or decrease in family income that burdens today's students: costs of tuition have climbed as government support of higher education has declined; costs of living have increased while wages have not; and financial aid has not kept pace with the increasing gap between student resources and costs. To put this into stark financial terms: 75% of families pay at least 20% of their annual income for higher education, after taking into account all financial aid; for the poorest families, those earning \$16,000 or less per year, the net cost amounts to 84% of their annual income. Today's students are left with difficult choices between affording textbooks or affording food; between working while in school or focusing on their studies; and often, between remaining in school or succumbing to unrelenting financial pressures.<sup>10</sup>

Food insecurity on college campuses and its impact on academic success have only recently been formally researched. In a 2018 nationwide survey conducted by HOPE Lab, 36% of university students reported food insecurity in the 30 days preceding the survey. Food insecurity negatively affects attendance and academic performance. For example, more than half of students in this survey who reported receiving Ds and Fs as grades for coursework also reported being food insecure; and many food insecure students indicated that they were unable to afford their textbooks. Food insecurity is also correlated with extended hours for student employment. The most food-insecure students were working the most, with approximately 50% of students working 40+ hours per week being food insecure. Even living on campus and having a meal plan doesn't eliminate food insecurity. Twenty-six percent of students in that situation also reported being food insecure within the past 30 days.<sup>11</sup> Another study noted that students at highest risk for food insecurity include first-in-family to attend college (56% vs. 45% who had at least one parent who attended college), students of color (57% vs. 40% of non-Hispanic white), and/or Pell Grant recipients (52%). This study also found many students with meal plans (43%) to be food insecure. The impact of food insecurity on their academics included not buying a required textbook (55%), missing a class (53%), and/or dropping a class altogether (25%). Undoubtedly, their academics were further impacted by their work responsibilities: 56% reported having a paying job, with 38% working 20 or more hours per week.<sup>12</sup>

What has been the response of higher education to this crisis? A 2017 survey of higher education administrators found that administrators' awareness of student food insecurity, as well as their knowledge of aid programs and of procedures and policies for connecting students to aid programs, varied considerably. While 80% of administrators acknowledged that food insecurity was a problem on their campuses, 65% indicated that there was no official campus-wide program to address the problem.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, there is a gap between perceived need and an organized effort to meet that need.

A model food access and security plan developed by the University of California system includes the following components:

- expanding food pantry storage and access.
- integrating food preparation and secure storage space into new housing design and construction.

- increasing collaboration with state and county offices to register students for nutrition assistance programs.
- establishing and expanding campaigns for students on student support services and food access awareness.
- providing access to mobile kitchen services.
- enhancing financial aid communications about housing and food costs.
- expanding existing economic crisis response teams and creating new teams to provide support and guidance to students experiencing immediate and unexpected financial hardship.
- expanding (or implementing) Swipe Out Hunger programs, which allow university students to donate excess dollars on their meal plans to other students in need.
- developing food voucher benefits and financial aid guidelines to support increased resources for students.<sup>14</sup>

With such a variety of impactful actions to choose from, certainly our Lasallian institutions of higher learning can begin to address student food insecurity on our campuses. To this end, La Salle University in Philadelphia has begun to implement some measures to assist our students.

### ***Combating Food Insecurity at La Salle University***

The national picture of students at highest risk of food insecurity characterizes many students at La Salle University: 33% are first generation college students; 37% come from families in the bottom 60% of household income<sup>15</sup>; approximately 50% are students of color; and 45% received Pell Grants in 2017.<sup>16</sup> It should also be noted that La Salle University is located in Philadelphia, which according to recent U.S. Census data is the poorest large city in the United States, with a 26% poverty rate.<sup>17</sup> La Salle University recognizes that food insecurity affects our students and their families and is addressing the problem. A needs assessment Qualtrics survey of our student body, which I conducted with the assistance of student Emily Finkbinder of the La Salle University Nutrition program in spring semester 2018, found 37% of the 206 student respondents identifying as recently food insecure. Consistent access to good food has been documented as a continuing challenge for many La Salle students, including those with meal plans – nearly 2/3 (63%) of food insecure students reported having some type of meal plan. Additionally, 74% of respondents stated that they lived on or within walking distance of campus; despite this, two of the most common reasons for missing a meal within the previous two weeks were lack of time in their schedules (35%) and the dining facilities not being open when they were hungry (20%). One reason for their lack of time to eat could be their employment status: 78% were employed part-time and 22% full-time. Although so many were working, 19% stated they had skipped a meal due to lack of funds; and 16% reported that they had skipped a meal to help them pay for other important items or to pay bills. An additional 9% reported skipping a meal because they were unable to find foods that met their medical or religious/philosophical dietary needs.

La Salle University has maintained a campus food pantry, The Basket, for six years, operating out of the Office of University Ministry and Service. However, this pantry has limited reach. In the above-referenced survey, more than 2/3 of students were unaware of its existence. Currently, The Basket is donation-supported with storage for non-perishable goods only. To date in 2018 it has served 185 students, 6.2% of a total of 5,067 students. Compared to the need documented in

the survey, the supplies and support The Basket can provide for students experiencing food insecurity is insufficient. Furthermore, The Basket has no facilities for food education or preparation.

In response to this apparent need, I submitted a grant proposal aimed at expanding the food pantry by relocating it to the Foods Lab area of the Nutrition program. We were fortunate to obtain funding to staff and increase the capacity of The Basket and expand its offerings to foods that require refrigeration. We will shortly send a Qualtrics survey to all students to identify the types of food and hours of service that they desire from an expansion of The Basket.

Beginning this spring semester, we will partner with Philabundance, Philadelphia's largest hunger relief organization, to obtain appropriate food to stock The Basket. The Qualtrics survey will also ask students whether they have an interest in a La Salle University partnership with the SHARE program, which would allow them to purchase boxes of food at a deep discount. Instructional space in the Foods Lab area will allow for food and nutrition education programming, and eventually for community meals that students can participate in as a learning and social experience. Consistent with the Lasallian concept of "community as classroom," this will also provide nutrition students with opportunities to provide service to the La Salle community while developing educational skills. It is expected that this project will turn the underutilized institutional kitchen and classroom space of the Foods Lab into a tremendous asset to La Salle's more needy students, and could in time form a basis for outreach into the larger community.

With the support of the Office of University Ministry and Service and the Faculty Senate, I have also launched another initiative to combat both student food insecurity and food waste, using the Canvas electronic course management system to set up a "Free Food on Campus!" site. La Salle faculty and staff have committed to post announcements that notify students when food is left over after campus events. Students receive alerts to their emails and telephones telling them what is available, and when and where they can come to pick up the food for themselves or others. Because this is a new initiative, there is no data yet to report on its effectiveness; but nearly 300 students signed up for the alerts within the first two weeks of receiving the invitation to join. This initiative has no cost other than the time invested by the volunteer "Food Rescue Champions" and will also contribute to sustainability efforts at La Salle University by addressing the related issue of food waste on campus. Because this project utilizes the existing Canvas system, it can later be expanded to serve as a resource hub for food security and education, informing students of additional means to obtain information and assistance.

Our needs assessment included a request for student ideas to further combat food insecurity at La Salle University. Frequent suggestions included expanded dining hours and options on campus, allowing students to share/donate unused swipes on their meal plans, offering a wider cost range of meal plans, increasing variety of options for students with religious or medical dietary restrictions, having a designated faculty advocate to assist them, and publicizing (or establishing!) a campus food pantry. We will continue to seek student input and feedback as we implement and build upon our current efforts.

This year, in addition to continuing our own investigation of food insecurity on campus, La Salle University has joined the HOPE Lab study to contribute our students' experiences to the national

database and conversation. Data from this survey will support more targeted planning of the services needed to continue to improve the food security of our students, while adding to the national understanding of basic needs insecurity in higher education.

## Conclusion

Our mission and charism as Lasallian educators compels us to address student food insecurity as a social justice issue. By bringing this issue into the light within our campus communities, we will teach and model advocacy, support the dignity of our students, and provide opportunities for student engagement in the promotion of social justice. We will also be acting to care for the basic needs of our younger Lasallian brothers and sisters.

Retaining the students who come to us for an education and the opportunity to better their lives depends on many aspects of their experiences on our campuses. Certainly, providing attractive campus environments, upgraded living and leisure spaces, and engaging activities make students want to stay with us. Of course, our passion and ability to teach and inspire our students is essential; and providing academic support to those who need it to succeed in the classroom is a necessary service. For too many of our students, however, the great things that we do as Lasallian educators are not enough to keep them with us. Self-actualization can only occur if basic survival needs are met. If our mission is to educate the whole person of our students, then surely we must work to ensure that those persons, who are hungry to learn with us, are not so literally hungry that their ability to learn with us is jeopardized.<sup>18</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Laura B. Frank has served as an associate professor and Director of the Didactic Program in Nutrition in the Department of Urban Public Health and Nutrition at La Salle University since 2015. She was previously professor and chair of the Department of Nutrition Education at Immaculata University, where she served for 17 years. She earned her PhD in Health Education and MEd in Counseling Psychology from Temple University, and MPH and BSPH from the University of California, Los Angeles. She also holds the Registered Dietitian credential granted by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and is a Licensed Psychologist in Pennsylvania. Her research and teaching interests are in food security/justice, sustainability, applied nutrition research and cultural competence in nutrition practice.

2. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools (extract from the 1706 manuscript)*, translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arandez, FSC and edited with notes by William Mann, FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1996, reprinted 2007), pages 235-236.

3. Feeding America, *What is Food Insecurity?*  
<https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>. Published September 2018, accessed December 18, 2018.

4. Bruno Alpago, FSC in *Lasallian Studies #17: That Your School Runs Well: Approach to Lasallian Educational Model*, edited by Pedro María Gil, FSC and Diego Muñoz, FSC (Brothers



of Christian Schools: International Council of Lasallian Research and Resources, 2013), pages 22-23.

5. Luke Salm, FSC, “Lasallian Values in Higher Education” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 6, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, 2015).

6. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular #412: Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* (Rome, 1980).

7. Ernest J. Miller, FSC, *Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization in the Name of Justice*, DMin thesis, The Catholic Theological Union Chicago, Illinois. 2015.

8. Jack Downey, “Critical Self-Reflection and Social Justice as Lasallian Mission” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2017).

9. *Healthy People 2020* <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/food-insecurity>. Accessed December 18, 2018.

10. Sara Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

11. “Still Hungry and Homeless in College.” <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>. Published April 2018, accessed December 18, 2018.

12. James Dubick, Brandon Mathews, and Clare Cady, *Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students* (College and University Food Bank Alliance and the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness) [https://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger\\_On\\_Campus.pdf](https://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf). Published October 2016, accessed December 18, 2018.

13. Talia Berday-Sacks, Arielle Pearlman, Carly Zimmerman, *The Campus Hunger Project Year 1 Report*, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6ZcCmdOHPn3X0xwLUM1clpxVzg/view>. Published August 2017, accessed December 18, 2018.

14. Susanna M. Martinez, Katie Maynard, and Lorrene D. Ritchie, *University of California Global Food Initiative: Student Food Access and Security Study*. Published July 11, 2016, accessed December 18, 2018. <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/july16/e1attach.pdf>

15. Kristin Norton, “La Salle’s Impact: The Academic, Economic and Social Imprint La Salle Leaves on the World” in *La Salle Magazine*. <https://www.lasalle.edu/magazine/story/lasalles-impact/>. Published Fall 2018, accessed December 28, 2018.

16. National Center for Education Statistics: La Salle University.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=La+Salle+University&s=all&id=213367#outcome>.  
Accessed December 28, 2018.

17. <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.html>.  
Published September 12, 2018, accessed December 18, 2018.

18. Since this article was submitted, La Salle's food security initiatives have grown tremendously. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, which caused our residential students to leave campus, during Fall 2019 through Spring 2020 there were over 2,000 student visits to obtain food. The Basket has remained open during the pandemic, averaging 15 student visits per week. Through our partnership with Philabundance, which was initiated during July 2019, we have purchased 7442 pounds of food for distribution to our students. Additionally, through their Grocers Against Hunger program, we have partnered with our local Fresh Grocer supermarket to rescue and distribute a total of 12,850 pounds of food, including meat, dairy, baked goods, produce, and dry goods. Finally, our Free Food on Campus! food rescue system has allowed us (pre-pandemic) to notify students of leftover food after most campus events, reducing food waste while providing many students with good quality extra food.