

The Prevalence of Food Insecurity in College Campuses: The Invisible Truth

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The Food Pantry at Columbia University | Photo Credit:Columbia University

Last August, while visiting my cousin at Columbia University, we strolled through the lively streets of Columbia, embracing the last sunshine days of summer, relishing the smell of roadside pizza wafting through the roads, and enjoying the fun music drifting around campus from a crew of street performers. As we strolled, one thing was unmistakably apparent — the smiles worn on the faces of every student that we passed. On the surface, the streets of Columbia appeared, well, perfect. It wasn't until after conducting profuse research on food insecurity that I questioned the word I had used to describe Columbia: Do the seemingly perfect appearances of Columbia, and all colleges in fact, fail to portray the underlying issues that are prevalent among colleges across the U.S.? After further investigation, it was evident that one such issue looming under the perfect exteriors of colleges, was food insecurity. A survey administered by the Hope Center in 2019 found that 33 to 42 percent of students attending four year college were food insecure. Fortunately, this issue is not going unnoticed by colleges. Many on-campus initiatives across the U.S. work towards alleviating hunger faced by food insecure students, including the College Student Pantry at SAFH in NYU, the Pace Market in Pace University, and the Food Pantry at Columbia in Columbia University.

After speaking with Ms. Wen Xi from Pace University, who works in residential life and is involved in managing the Pace Market; Mr. Matthew Wilds at Columbia University, who is the current director of the Food Pantry at Columbia; and Ms. Eleanor at New York University, who is the student pantry coordinator at the College Student Pantry at SAFH, I am enlightened to learn about the extensive action being taken to combat food insecurity in colleges.

The measures being taken are brought to life through the specific initiatives involved in each college. At Pace University, there is the Pace Market, which is located in Elm Hall and was founded in accordance to their strong partnership with Feeding Westchester, another local organization in 2023. In addition to this, a mobile pantry that was created in 2018 occurs 1-2 times a month to

alleviate hunger on campus and serve those who are incapable of transport. The pantry is funded by Feeding Westchester, a budget line allotted to the operations by their division, and donations from the department and students. But one thing that really drives the pantry are the student and staff volunteers that spend their time and effort bettering their community. At Columbia University, the Food Pantry at Columbia was founded in 2014 with its first permanent location opened in 2017, addressing the need for a resource that food insecure students could use. It has and will continue to be a part of the university life administrative wing and is budgeted by the University itself. At NYU, the College Student Pantry at SAFH, located in Trinity's SAFH is a large part of the college's battle against hunger. It was founded in 2020 in partnership with SAFH and the PRiSM Progressive Student Ministry in response to the rising awareness of how apparent food insecurity on campus was and is operated by students.



The Pace Market | Photo Credit: Pace University

While food insecurity is an issue that an extremely large number of college students face, it is often perceived as an unusual phenomenon in colleges. In an article written by Olivia Thielke on Feeding America, she writes, "Because low-income students often can't afford meal plans (which on average run \$4,500 per year) administrators are mostly exposed to students who can afford to eat on campus." The lack of awareness surrounding food insecurity only leads to a lack of willing

contributors to help fight it. Pantries like the Pace Market, the Food Pantry at Columbia, and the College Student Pantry at SAFH understand this. When speaking with Ms. Wen, I learned that Pace University integrates a food insecurity task force which works in accordance with a variety of departments to help educate the general Pace community on food insecurity outside the boundaries of the pantry. In unison with alleviating on campus hunger, they also provided a way for the community to unify through their recently founded program which allows students to donate their dining dollars to other students. Mr. Wilds from the Food Pantry at Columbia informed me that Columbia definitely recognizes the problem as well. They continue to interact with University administration and advertise the issue to students. Mr. Wilds stated that the pantry is “a small part in the larger whole.” After educational responses from Ms. Eleanor from the College Student Pantry at SAFH, I learned that NYU has taken on a very efficient method of spreading awareness. They are performing informational series on the topic through very accessible platforms like Instagram and their monthly newsletter. In a more interactive fashion, they also spread resources through flyers and bulletin boards. Although the three schools all have different ways of spreading awareness, the common message conveyed is that pantries in colleges are realizing the importance of raising awareness and are making it a primary focus.

A large part of the reason that awareness on food insecurity in colleges is low is due to students feeling embarrassed to reach out for help. Many see food insecurity as a threat to their social status and are afraid of friends learning about their circumstances. To combat this, colleges ensure privacy of students seeking help. At the Pace Market, students are only required to give their signatures, never their names. At the Food Pantry at Columbia, in place of names, University IDs are collected. At the College Student Pantry at SAFH, there are strict policies surrounding the spread of student information. Privacy is a key factor at all pantries, and helps combat the issue of students feeling embarrassed to reach out for help.

Food insecurity presents a myriad of challenges for college students, specifically involving their academic career, physical health, emotional state, and social well-being. Without the proper nutrition, students don't have the fuel needed to power their brain, are exposed to potential issues like heart disease, diabetes, or eating disorders, are forced to live with an omnipresent stress, and are possibly embarrassed to share their situations with friends. With its large amounts of issues attached to it, it is a problem that must be solved.

This idea of colleges being perfect is undermined by the very much existent issue of food insecurity. Through avid efforts from food pantries, the issue is not only being brought to light, but also being alleviated. For instance, the mobile market at Pace University recorded 168 different household visits in just under two months, while a total of 620 different households accessed the market during the same period. Food insecurity is an issue that is present and dangerous — to join the fight against hunger we can support initiatives such as the Pace Market, the College Student Pantry at SAFH, and the Food Pantry at Columbia.