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A Private Struggle at a Private Institution: Effects of Student Hunger on Social and Academic Experiences

Cara Cliburn Allen Nathan F. Alleman

In this exploratory, qualitative study we analyzed the effects of food insecurity on students' academic and social experiences at a private, selective, normatively affluent institution. Findings reveal that students self-excluded from social events that centered around food. Students' academics were often sacrificed and interrupted as a result of their food insecurity and need to work. Furthermore, even as students benefitted from campus resources, including faculty interaction, academic support programs, and a plethora of student organizations, the price of hunger was time, which in turn reduced their campus engagement and involvement.

The financial investment required by higher education has long posed a challenge to attendance, especially for first-generation and low socioeconomic status (LSES) students. Despite this challenge, college can provide an avenue for social transformation and class mobility for often underserved populations (Kaufman, 2003). LSES students' opportunities to pursue higher education have expanded as colleges and universities have increased access (Goldrick-Rab, 2016); however, initiatives to foster access have outpaced initiatives to foster LSES student success (Pendakur, 2016). Consequently, LSES students face a myriad of barriers to success, specifically at selective institutions where the dominant campus culture is affluent.

College student food insecurity (CSFI)

has emerged over the past decade as a pressing issue due to the confluence of escalating costs and college access normativity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). As the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines it, *food insecurity* exists when an individual does not have "access to enough food for an active, healthy life" (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2016, p. 2). College students facing food insecurity have been referred to as an "invisible problem" on college campuses "because of [food insecurity's] cross-cutting nature, and the fact that most people who are experiencing poverty want to keep it hidden due to stigma and shame" (Cady, 2014, p. 265). This invisible problem on college campuses has become more visible since the recession (Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014).

Although 12.7% of the general population in the United States experiences food insecurity, rates among college students are even higher (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016). Most recent research reveals that 36% of students at 4-year post-secondary institutions and 42% of students at 2-year postsecondary institutions experience food insecurity, with 22% of 4-year students experiencing the most acute form of food insecurity, which includes hunger (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018).

Scholarly research has focused on institutional types where food insecurity might be most prevalent, such as community colleges,

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comprehensive institutions, and large state institutions (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Crutchfield, 2016). Though op-ed pieces in newspapers have highlighted the presence of CSFI at private institutions (Davis, 2015), empirical studies that examine the nature or experience of student hunger in this context are scant. Thus far, most studies addressing CSFI have focused on understanding its prevalence, but little is known about how food insecurity, as a particular but important manifestation of socioeconomic status, influences students' experiences in college. Thus, we were guided in this study by the following question: How, if at all, does the experience of being food insecure shape students' academic and social experiences at a selective, private research university?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since World War II, expanding college access to populations that had often been excluded has been a priority in higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Thelin, 2011). Between 1950 and 2005, enrollment in higher education rose from 1.6 million to 17.4 million, reflecting increased access for low-income individuals (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). Initially, federal financial aid systems, such as Pell Grants, were intended to make college one possible option among many for prospective students (Gladieux, 1995; Goldrick-Rab, 2016); however, over the last half century, college has become the primary mechanism for economic security and class mobility (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Among its many effects, going to college socializes students to expect that they have a place in this economy (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). This important credentialing function reinforces college as a normative experience for entering the professional labor force (Brown, 2001; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

Although college access has expanded and

attending college has become increasingly normative, once students enroll in institutions, not all are able to pay the costs of college or the associated costs of living (Cady, 2014). Furthermore, institutions have begun to shift from need-based aid to merit-based aid, especially at private institutions where tuition discounting has become the norm (Woo & Choy, 2011). This shift in funding privileges students who are already equipped with family resources that help them meet the expectations to qualify for merit-based aid (Gladieux, 1995). The result is that many LSES students enter college each year and struggle to afford it once they arrive. Financial aid is neither structured correctly nor robust enough to provide adequate assistance to LSES students, and consequently this group of students is often forced to choose between paying tuition or other expenses, such as food, shelter, utilities, books, and healthcare, despite holding jobs (Broton et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Low Socioeconomic Status Student Enrollment at Elite Institutions

LSES students are less likely than their peers to enroll in 4-year institutions, and those within that subset are less likely to attend more selective institutions (Alon, 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Despite increasing student access to higher education since the 1950s, equality in degree attainment at 4-year institutions has not increased (Tinto, 2006). LSES students at 4-year institutions are less likely to graduate with a baccalaureate degree than their affluent peers (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). For LSES students who do attend selective institutions, financial aid packages that provide equivalent entry to college in the forms of scholarships, loans, and grants nevertheless do not provide equal experiences, because students are often not awarded enough aid to cover all of their

costs of living and extracurricular expenses (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Johnstone & Marucci, 2010). Even when students max out their allotted student loans, take on debt, and find employment, they can still experience material hardship, including food insecurity (Brotton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Unequal experiences for LSES students on selective college campuses exist in part because college and university environments are not class neutral and “reflect the social and cultural presumptions of the dominant classes” (Stuber, 2011, p. 164). At selective 4-year institutions, in which the majority of the student body comprises middle-to-upper-class students, the environment will reflect the ideals, values, and behaviors of the dominant group (Strange & Banning, 2001). Consequently, students from LSES backgrounds often feel marginalized on campus, struggle to develop a sense of belonging, and perceive their campuses as having a less welcoming climate (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Lubrano, 2006; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). LSES students on affluent campuses are aware of the disparity between the possessions they can afford and those of their peers, such as designer clothes, expensive cars, and cutting-edge electronics; these cultural displays reaffirm the perception that they do not belong (Aries & Seider, 2005). The resulting feelings and perceptions of LSES students within the campus environment then shape how they behave in that environment (Moos, 1979).

The Importance of Social and Academic Spheres

LSES and low-income students’ financial and time constraints negatively shape their satisfaction with their academic and social lives on campus (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Martin, 2012; Soria, Weiner, & Lu, 2014). Despite much debate about the particulars that foster or inhibit college student success,

and the terms used to describe students’ experiences, a long lineage of higher education researchers have noted the importance of the social and academic spheres on students’ success and persistence to graduation (Astin, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016; Museus, 2014; Tinto, 1993). Because of different socialization experiences and the social capital available to students, scholars have found that students from different class backgrounds approach academic and social experiences differently, which has the potential to positively or negatively shape their success (Aries & Seider, 2005; Martin, 2012; Walpole, 2003; Yee, 2016).

When LSES students enter college, they encounter an environment in which many of the benefits accrued are social rather than academic, which is often unexpected (Walpole, 2003; Yee, 2016). Lacking socialization to the value of developing social capital (Walpole, 2003), LSES students’ primary aim is professional preparation and completion, whereas affluent students report desires to build social networks (Aries & Seider, 2007; Martin, 2012; Yee, 2016). Even so, students from different class backgrounds tend to approach academic success differently (Walpole, 2003; Yee, 2016); they report less interaction with faculty (Yee, 2016) and spend less time studying and achieve lower GPAs than their peers (Walpole, 2003).

The logistical costs of employment hinder LSES students’ ability to engage in the tacit aspects of higher education. LSES students are more likely to work while in college, take a leave of absence from school, and attempt to graduate more quickly than their upper-middle-class peers (Soria et al., 2014). LSES students report spending less time engaging in social and recreational activities such as fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, and clubs (Martin, 2012; Soria & Bultmann,

2014; Walpole, 2003). The need to work to pay for college and living expenses, as well as a lack of extra income for social activities at selective institutions, detracts from LSES students' abilities to engage socially on campus (Aries & Seider, 2005; Martin, 2012). A lack of social engagement due to work commitments means LSES students are less likely to cultivate the same social capital and cultural capital that their peers are acquiring, as a result, often out of necessity, they acquire economic capital instead (Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003).

Food Insecurity Among College Students

CSFI has emerged as an important manifestation of class and socioeconomic status that shapes how students experience college (Cady, 2014). As college cost, access, and the cost of living have comparatively escalated, CSFI has emerged as a side effect of this cost–opportunity intersection (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). For some students, food has become the sacrificial financial margin in a cripplingly expensive college environment (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). CSFI exists at the intersection of multiple student identities and has ramifications for their college experience. College students are more likely to report experiencing hunger if they are low income (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014), Black or Latinx (Maroto, Snelling, & Linick, 2015), student-parents, LGBTQ students, or former foster youth (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

In addition to socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, food insecurity has been correlated to a variety of academic and social impediments for college students. Food-insecure students are more likely to have lower self-reported GPAs than their peers without food insecurity (Maroto et al., 2015; Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). Silva et al. (2015) found that food-insecure

students were more likely than their peers to have failed courses, withdrawn from courses, or failed to register for courses. Additionally, food insecurity has been correlated with self-reported mental health issues including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts (Broton et al., 2014).

Despite these empirical findings, little is known about how food insecurity shapes students' experiences in academic and social domains at various institutional types. Since it has been demonstrated that students who are food insecure have lower GPAs (Maroto et al., 2015) and spend much of their time working (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018), their on-campus social and academic involvement could be negatively affected (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015). Dubick, Mathews, & Cady (2016) argued, "It is hard to concentrate in class or to focus on your studies when you're hungry or worrying about financial obstacles" (p. 21). Further, the research community has yet to understand how food insecurity relates to or differentiates from what we already know about how LSES students use college differently and struggle with its cost. Though prior research demonstrates that social and academic experiences matter to students' learning and persistence, we know little about how students who are enrolled at private institutions and who are identified as food insecure experience these domains (Tinto, 2006).

METHOD

In this study, we used qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach to conceptualize students' experiences of food insecurity at a private university. Qualitative inquiry emphasizes the significance of participants' unique lived experiences and the meaning that participants construct about those experiences (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy,

2011). Our qualitative research methodology is based on a constructionist ontology, which asserts that all knowledge, and therefore reality, is constructed in and from interaction between humans and their world (Crotty, 1998). A phenomenological perspective asks the individual to engage in meaning making about their experience and context deliberately, directly, and immediately (Crotty, 1998). Qualitative methods, such as the semistructured research interview, thus create a disruptive exchange where fresh reflection about the phenomenon itself (its “essence”), as experienced by the participant, is constructed and captured (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 47).

We followed the interpretative phenomenological tradition to address the confluence of participant experiences and researcher analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This tradition situates us as researchers in a middle ground between the assertive imposition of the researchers’ interpretations and the assumption that the researchers allow participants’ descriptions to speak for themselves. Although the participants’ lifeworlds are always more complex than can be described (van Manen, 1990), researchers seek to construct interpretations of the participants’ unique ways of making meaning about a given phenomenon. Since perception and interpretation are inseparable, to bracket presuppositions would make perception—and therefore experience—impossible (Maso, 2001). Despite acknowledgment of our presumptions and expectations, we as researchers nevertheless are present as interpreters whose views of the world necessarily color these presumptions and expectations.

To follow this middle path and to honor the ontological assumptions of phenomenology, we pursued procedures of data collection and explication to seek trustworthiness, thereby rejecting objectivist standards of validity

(Ashworth, 1999). Revealing our related beliefs, biases, and understandings aids in the identification of our preconceptions distinct from the lived phenomena of the participants in our data collection and analysis. Of particular salience, both authors of this study attended colleges that were private and moderately selective. These parallels may have given us a greater awareness of the features of this normative cultural environment. They may also have led us to falsely assume that we can anticipate our participants’ cultural and social expectations and experiences. Neither of us experienced food insecurity as students, meaning that we may miss important avenues of conversation because of our assumptions about how one might navigate the terrain between college’s social and academic spaces and family dynamics. As a White, female doctoral candidate and as a White, male faculty member, our alignment with the various power dynamics of our site campus likely shaped and inhibited our sensitivity to additional issues of power, administrative control, and identity that are part of our participants’ interpretive experience.

Setting and Participants

To honor the contextuality central to phenomenology, we chose to focus on a single institution: a private research university with selective admissions. Status U (pseudonym) is not typical of the institutional types (e.g., community colleges and public 4-year universities) usually associated with food-insecure students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Studying this site adds breadth and complexity to the study of food-insecure students by problematizing assumptions about where food insecurity exists and what the dynamics of a selective, *normatively affluent environment* (that is, where the vast majority of students are not from low-income families) might mean for the academic and social

experiences of food-insecure students. Status U was selected based on the criteria it met (selectivity, affluence) and the organizational access we, as researchers, had to it. *Selectivity*—defined simply as the difference between the number of students who apply and the number who are accepted—is a widely critiqued measure of institutional quality but persists as a metric of perceived prestige in the public imagination and institutional competition (Brooks, 2005). Status U has an acceptance rate of approximately 40% for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students, placing it in the top 20% of all public and private not-for-profit doctoral granting institutions nationally, according to 2015–2016 IPEDS data. The median family income of students for the study year was approximately \$130,000, placing the institution above most selective peers in the state and making it typical of highly selective institutions nationally (source withheld to protect institutional confidentiality). Approximately 15% of Status U students are eligible for a Pell Grant (a proxy for low-income status), placing Status U in the bottom 15% of the doctoral-granting IPEDS peer group.

Prior to recruiting participants, this study was evaluated and approved by an Institutional Review Board. We recruited participants through a campus-wide survey based on the USDA 6-item instrument assessing food insecurity. To increase the salience of experiences with the phenomenon in question, we selected students who had completed the survey, indicated a willingness to be interviewed, and had experienced the most severe level of food insecurity,

We conducted single interviews with 10 students (see Table 1) using a semi-structured protocol that focused on participants' academic and social experiences. Participants included 8 females and 2 males: 1 Black student, 1 biracial student, 3 Hispanic students, and 5

White students from a variety of academic years and ages. At the time of the study, approximately 30% of the students at Status U came from racially minoritized populations, and approximately 60% of the population was female. Our participant group was intentionally small, reflecting the assumptions and aims of interpretative phenomenology (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Specifically, the emphasis of phenomenological research is on individuals' lived experiences of a particular event or situation (here, food insecurity at a private, selective institution). In our analysis, we identify points of intersection of this phenomenon among participants, known as *phenomenological reduction* (Smith et al., 2009). These experiential convergences are notable for their comparative insights and not because of relative data saturation. Given this focus, the aims of this study were best met by engaging a small participant group where the voice of each individual was more apparent in our analysis and reporting of findings, with patterns noted as they were revealed (Giorgi, 2009).

Interviews lasted 1 to 3 hours. Inquiry categories that guided interview conversations included participant's food experiences as children, college choice perceptions and processes, academic experiences, how they spent their time outside of class, experiences with food scarcity, strategies for managing food scarcity, sources of support, insights or lessons gained from their food insecurity experiences, and their recommendations for institutional solutions to CSFI.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into Nvivo (version 11) ethnographic software for analysis. We used a two-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2016). For the first cycle, we selected In Vivo Coding since our participants have been largely voiceless, due to their marginalized place in the institution by virtue of socioeconomic culture and income. By using the actual words and

TABLE 1.
Participants and Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age (Yrs.)	Academic Year	Food-Insecure Prior to College
Tammy	Female	Hispanic	25	5th	No
Zoey	Female	White	21	5th	No
Dana	Female	White	35	3rd	Yes
Beth	Female	Hispanic	19	2nd	Yes
Chris	Male	White	25	7th	Yes
Emily	Female	Black	22	4th	No
Katie	Female	White	21	4th	No
Eva	Female	Hispanic	23	4th	Yes
Jasmine	Female	Biracial	22	5th	No
Matthew	Male	White	Early 20s	3rd	Yes

phrases of participants to form initial codes. In Vivo coding is valuable for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106). This process resulted in 14 categories of In Vivo codes (such as background, experience, and academic) that reflected the foci of the study. In the second cycle of coding, we sought to understand the unique texture and structure of each individual’s experience while looking for points of convergence across the coded data within the 14 categories. We reread both the In Vivo Codes and the narrative data linked to them to identify what these voices revealed collectively about the sense participants made of their food insecurity experiences in their social and academic contexts.

Throughout our analysis, we pursued trustworthiness through a process that supported credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as detailed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This process included a clear description of research methods, member checks with participants, inter-coder reliability checks of the coders, and peer debriefing. We pursued confidentiality through restricted access to data, the use of pseudonyms

throughout the study process, and generalized descriptions and details in written descriptions of study findings.

FINDINGS

From our analysis, four patterns emerged that highlight the role and function of CSFI in a normatively affluent university: (a) academic experiences, including barriers and the resources of Status U, (b) the role of faculty as providers of support, (c) social inclusion and exclusion, and (d) students’ work experiences. Together, these elements lend insight into how CSFI shapes students’ academic and social domains at a selective institution.

Academic Experiences

Students’ narratives gave us insights into the ways in which being food insecure shaped their academic experiences on campus beyond GPA. As a consequence of being food insecure, students often had to sacrifice academics. Despite the challenges they faced, the students remained committed to their academics, and the resources at Status U aided them in navigating these academic challenges.

Academics are Important but are Sometimes Sacrificed or Interrupted. Students at Status U prioritized the importance of academics but found that experiences with food insecurity inhibited their ability to perform at the same level as their peers. Students noted the effects of hunger on coursework. Dana noted that “not eating right” has “curbed me to perform as best I can.” Compared to her peers, Eva noted, “I think everybody has experienced it at some point, where you’re like, ‘Oh, I can’t study, I’m hungry, I have to go get something.’ I just see a little bit more of that.” Other students, such as Zoey and Dana, described health-related side effects that interfered with their academics, such as migraines that accompanied inadequate food access. Dana shared that in the week prior to her interview she had “passed out, right at the end of class . . . because I didn’t eat enough.” Further, being hungry interfered with the ways in which students structured their schedules. Tammy explained that not being able to afford snacks “made it hard to stay up” to study; but prioritizing academics was important to her, so when she “had to make the choice between groceries and books, I chose books.” Despite her efforts to prioritize academics, she remembers “being so overwhelmed and stressed about food, the apartment, and all of that, that really affected those exams that particular week.” Eva scheduled all of her classes for the morning, so that she would have energy to stay awake before she became hungry in the afternoon.

For most students, the cost of being at Status U often thrust them into acute food insecurity experiences, resulting in interruptions to their academic lives. Students, such as Eva and Chris, noted having to interrupt their academic careers at Status U. For Eva, this meant taking entire semesters off of school to work, which resulted in her self-given title of “seventh-year-senior.” Chris related that one spring semester he realized he

could not afford Status U, so “I took classes at [a local community college].” Emily, a vocal performance major, revealed, “I had to leave the opera because I needed to pick up more hours at work.” Quitting the opera hindered her ability to pursue her career passion as well as her academic trajectory.

Participants noted the ramifications of the cost of time and the inconvenience of being food insecure. Students perceived that time spent worrying about or finding food was time they could have spent studying. Zoey explained, “I guess it’s changed my academic life, because if I wasn’t worrying about where I was going to get food, and if it was going to be healthy, and if I had stuff to live off of where I didn’t have work, then I would be able to study more.” Tammy argued that like her peers who seemed to have “unlimited” access to food, she would have “one less thing to worry about.” Jasmine asserted, “Indirectly, needing to pay for food has caused me to not be able to have time to actually do school as well.” Students were aware that their peers who did not struggle financially were able to purchase food on campus without interrupting their studies, rather than having to worry about cooking every meal or finding food.

Success is Hard-Earned but is Aided by Being at an Institution With Resources. Despite barriers to academic success that food insecurity imposed, participants mentioned that Status U’s vast amount of resources were essential to their academic success. When asked why she felt like she had been supported academically, Tammy disclosed:

[Status U] is really good about having supplemental instruction and having outside tutorial sessions available. . . . There is a success center for just about every discipline we have here. There’s always a plethora of people that can help you, if you just seek it out.

Chris said, “After classes, I just, lately, have been trying to get more help and going down to the tutoring center in the math lab and stuff.” Eva, Chris, and Dana also noted making use of the extensive accommodations available for students with learning disabilities.

The Role of Faculty

In addition to the financial and supplemental resources that Status U offered, faculty members served as valuable mentors, confidants, and advocates for students. As a function of being a private, selective institution, faculty were engaged with students, particularly in upper-level courses. Student participants found the faculty helpful for support in academic contexts, such as visiting during office hours for help on assignments (Eva and Tammy) or navigating career aspirations (Jasmine, Katie, and Zoey). Faculty served as a benefit beyond academic support in two areas: life navigation support and emotional support.

Life Navigation Support. For almost all participants, faculty served as mentors who helped the students navigate life’s challenges beyond the support all students attending Status U received. Eva’s faculty aided her in navigating the challenge of being an LSES student at Status U. Eva noted that Status U’s culture conflicted with her upbringing “in the ghetto.” She explained that she “learned through her mentors how to act,” because they would “challenge her to see the world from different perspectives”—a sort of education that was not needed by her peers, who were accustomed to Status U’s normative environment.

For others, faculty mentors served as a unique form of support to students experiencing food insecurity since faculty were the only individuals at Status U to whom they disclosed their food struggles. Matthew explained that he had a professor he would talk to when “it’s going to be a little tough.

. . . He always will lay out some kind of plan for me that will help me get through, and stuff like that.” The professor even helped Matthew outline a budget. Similarly, Emily’s dean discovered she was not eating. After finding out her family was facing a financial crisis, Emily “had the meltdown to end all meltdowns” in the hallway:

Literally, the dean, he said, “Come to my office.” We sat down and he was talking to me and was like, “You know what? You’re a really talented kid. I don’t want you to drop out, and I don’t want you to feel like nobody is here to help you.” He literally reached in his own wallet and he gave me \$60, and he said, “Your [professor] is going to take you shopping this afternoon and make sure that you’re okay.”

About this experience, Emily confessed, “That was the worst moment of my entire life. . . . At the same time, as embarrassing as it was, I’m glad it happened, because now I have people who are making sure I am taking care of myself better.” For Emily, the caring faculty with financial resources supplemented her experience at Status U and served as confidants for a secret that she did not tell her peers. In contrast, one student, Tammy, did not tell her faculty about her food insecurity experience, because she “wouldn’t want any white knights” or “somebody that would come in and save [me] from the situation,” because she felt that food insecurity was something she should navigate on her own as an adult.

Emotional Support. Receiving academic and life navigation support from faculty culminated in faculty serving as essential elements in students’ emotional support while in college. Faculty helped students navigate the emotional struggles that they faced. Emily explained, “It’s almost like they’re our parents at school. . . . They are always looking out for us.” Students noted feeling a general sense of support from faculty that they could succeed

at Status U, evidenced by making statements such as, “They root for you” (Eva), “They believed in me” (Emily), and “They care” (Matthew). Dana summed up her gratitude for her faculty: “I just always want to give them big hugs. I’m like, ‘If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve just packed my stuff and drove back to [my home state].’” For students such as Emily, Eva, Matthew, Zoey, and Dana, relationships with faculty were what made the physical and material expense of attending Status U “worth it.”

Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Prior research has highlighted the potentially stigmatizing social effects of struggling with hunger in college (Henry, 2017). Our findings add the context of a normatively affluent, private college campus, highlighting three focal areas: friends as a source of shame and support; navigating social class stereotypes and expectations; and the importance of campus involvement despite struggles with food.

Friends as a Source of Shame and Support. Like food-insecure students at other types of institutions previously documented, these at Status U reported attempting to conceal their struggle with hunger from friends and peers. Participants admitted to using excuses such as: “It was kind of a diet thing” (Tammy) when explaining why they had little to eat. This charade was made more difficult because food was often a focal point of students’ socializing. On occasions when friends visited around meal times, food-insecure students did not want to be embarrassed by not being able to provide food or even by the appearance of having no food in their kitchens. Tammy described her strategy to conceal her bare cupboards when a friend visited on weekends:

I’m kind of careful now, when she does come, to make sure that I can buy groceries that aren’t what I would typically buy. Not so much that she has something

to eat on the weekend, but so that it looks like that’s how I generally eat.

More often, the focus was on going out to eat as a social feature of collegiate life. Eva highlighted how central eating out was to the social scene at Status U, though not for her: “It really does impact your social life. . . . Food is how sometimes people bond. It’s where they socialize. I mean, ‘Hey, you want to go grab this and talk?’ I don’t do that.” Academics were frequently used as an excuse to avoid social situations. Matthew recalled an upcoming event he expected to be invited to but which he knew would cost him his food budget:

I just told them, “Hey guys, I’m really swamped this week from schoolwork”—or something. I made up some kind of other excuse to cover up for it, just to make sure that if they did have something planned, I wasn’t going to be invited.

Participants recognized that regularly missing these gatherings had personal and social costs. Zoey reported, “I mean, there’s a little bit of shame in not being able to go out to eat with people because you can’t.” Tammy echoed this sentiment:

When people come over, especially at this age group, the first thing they do is come whip open your fridge, and [they’re] like, “Oh what do you have to eat?” . . . If they want to go [out], “Let’s run to Taco Bell.” It can be embarrassing to say, “I don’t have any money.”

Even when students chose to go out, they were sensitive to this effect on their available food and financial resources, resulting in behavior that sometimes exposed their struggle. As Dana said:

Then socially, when I do go out, no one has said anything, but I know they’re thinking it, or they want to say it. I’ve either (a) cleaned my plate, or (b) ate a portion and just took the rest home so I’d have food for two days.

Social interactions around food, however, were not always negative. A few participants who were willing to share their food struggles with peers spoke about the solidarity that formed around a common struggle to make ends meet. Zoey reported, “I think everyone just realizes that we’re all in the same boat. There is no real ‘Oh, this is an individual problem.’” Matthew also found emotional support in a few others who had struggles similar to his: “I have one friend—she’s a pretty good buddy of mine. Every now and then, we’ve talked about it, how we both have had scary situations where we’re like, ‘Is it rent or is it food this week?’ kind of thing.” The sense that one is not alone in the struggle for food in an environment of plenty was one part of managing this discontinuity.

Navigating Social Class Stereotypes and Expectations. Student culture at most institutions is rife with symbolism, and the symbolism of affluence at Status U was quickly apparent to our participants. Their accounts not only highlighted their struggle to belong in a place where everyone seemed wealthy, but also to overcome stereotypes and expectations of the institution and its students drawn from appearances of wealth. Jasmine described her immediate campus perceptions: “There’s just a lot of status symbol stuff on campus, and not having that status kind of makes you feel like, ‘Oh, everybody notices’—which I’m sure most people don’t, but it’s still like I’m just constantly aware of that.” Jasmine’s sensitization to the markers of wealth resulted in continual self-awareness that she might not completely fit in. In this environment participants struggled with food as an aspect of class identity and representation in two ways. First, food functioned as a type of invisible privilege that provided entry into social interactions for those who could afford it. Matthew described the web of excuses he constructed to explain why he could not go

out to eat for various celebration occasions with friends. The root problem, however, was that he simply could not afford to eat out. Eva recollected that even though her sorority offered scholarships and reduced fees to make membership affordable, her sorority sisters did not recognize how the cost of food connected to regular social events was prohibitive for her. When Eva did not attend these occasions, she recognized the effects:

It really does impact your social life. . . . Especially with the sorority. To them it was \$5, \$7 at [a local fast food restaurant] . . . or stuff like that. . . . Food is how sometimes people bond. It’s where they socialize. . . . I couldn’t do that.

Second, food functioned as a source of contrast between participants’ financial concerns and those of their higher-income peers. Because of the assumptions of financial flexibility that facilitated food-related socializing, Zoey and others found it difficult to form relationships, in part because they did not think that affluent students could understand or respect the life of a student struggling to pay for food. Tammy recognized this seemingly impossible conversation as well: “Especially here, where the culture is, ‘Which Michael Kors bag?’ or ‘Which Versace sunglasses?’ and on and on. It feels odd to bring up things like, ‘Yeah, I don’t really have that much food.’”

Nevertheless, some participants did build friendships across class differences. Jasmine commented that most of her friends come from backgrounds where they do not have to work. Eva, after describing how she felt out of place culturally, acknowledged, “I have run into people that are from affluent families that aren’t horrible . . . like [her friend who is] well off, but [she] is very humble, very nice.” Eva described how this friend unexpectedly bought dinner for her, unaware that Eva was out of food that day.

The Importance of Campus Involvement Despite Struggles With Food. The ongoing challenge of managing finances, work schedules, academics, and, on top of that, food resources, required an extensive investment of time and energy. Beth spoke of an organization that interested her, but she said, “I wanted to join, but I just haven’t had the opportunity to go to their meetings yet, just because of work and everything.” Matthew started playing a team sport but soon gave it up: “I’ve wanted to play rugby since I got here, and I played for two weeks and was like, ‘Hey, I gotta go.’ . . . It kind of got thrown off just because school and work got in the way.”

In addition to interests in engaging in social and recreational organizations, some participants joined groups related to academic majors or future careers and often persisted as members. For example, Matthew spoke glowingly of an education outreach program where he showed elementary students around equipment related to his future profession. He continued this service engagement, even as he withdrew from rugby. Some participants invested in organizations for other strategic reasons, such as the availability of free food. Tammy recounted, “I’ve been to so many Korean interest meetings, because they always have free food there.”

Although participants’ time was often highly structured around employment, academics, and homework, many noted that attending athletic and seasonal events (e.g., homecoming) were important to them, implicitly as part of the attraction of the affluent institutional experience. Football, in particular, reflected the juxtaposition of cost and opportunity at Status U, as Eva explained: “I mean, to go into a stadium, a mammoth stadium, with forty to fifty thousand people—it blows your mind away if you’ve never seen it before. It’s amazing.” Later, when asked about financial struggles, she griped, “Going

to football games and spending \$8 on water. I hate that. I’m like, “This is extortion.” In many ways, the affluence of athletics at Status U was symbolic of the extreme contrast between the opportunities that a wealthy institution offered and the cost of maximizing them. On this point, Eva concluded, “I do hold my resentment, but for the most part, it’s just excitement, it’s love, it’s admiration for the university. . . . It’s weird to love something so much and still harbor deeply rooted hatred for it.”

Students’ Work Experiences

Most, but not all, of our participants held jobs, usually off campus. Eva and Dana elected not to work while taking classes, at least for part of their college careers. Dana described weighing the pros and cons between focusing on academics and the distractions of a job: “I need a focus—school—this is my number one thing, because once I get out of here I’ll have a ton of loans to pay. . . . I’d rather finish strong than crappy because of a low-paying job.” Those who were employed sometimes worked multiple jobs (Emily, 3; Zoey, 4) or worked strange patterns of hours. Matthew worked 40 hours between Saturday morning and Sunday night. Zoey worked until midnight but often rose at 4:30 a.m. to get her homework done for the day.

Despite efforts to integrate employment and academics, many participants found that the two did not coexist particularly well. In some cases, students barely made their shifts; in others, students missed class to work. Beth pointed to the struggle to reconcile these two demands as a primary challenge of her college experience:

I definitely say balancing school work and working, and just the basic things you need to do to make sure you’re prepared for the week—just responsibilities, car insurance, all that stuff . . . it’s hard

getting through all that, but I really do enjoy being here. It's been, overall, pretty good. It's just trying to adjust to being an adult now.

Perhaps in contrast to many of her more affluent classmates, Beth—like other participants—experienced college as an abrupt induction into the challenges of managing competing adult demands with very little margin for error. Despite working these long hours to cover all of their expenses, these participants were still experiencing food insecurity.

Nevertheless, working students found that employment provided advantages beyond covering the cost of groceries and car insurance premiums. For Emily, Beth, and Matthew, work meant engaging in areas of personal and professional interest. Zoey worked at a national coffee shop chain that provided workers a free food item after working a set number of hours. This perk became a central feature of her food strategy: “If I didn’t work at [the coffee shop], if I worked in a retail job, I would not eat nearly as much as I do. That’s been a lifesaver.” Zoey also described taking advantage of her supervisor’s generosity, who would let her take home food items slated for the trash. By contrast, Dana quit a job at a local movie theater in part because of the free food that was available: “Even though I made something to eat, I was eating stuff over there and their stuff is so unhealthy and fattening.” Thus employment, which was a necessity for nearly all participants in some capacity, came with a difficult mixture of benefits and liabilities.

DISCUSSION

These findings contribute to the growing body of research on CSFI by analyzing students’ academic and social experiences in a selective, affluent context. Struggling to afford food influenced participants’ experiences in more

nuanced ways than simply being low-income, differentiating food-insecurity experiences from those based solely on low-income status. This influence is presented in three key summative points: food insecurity reordered time-use strategies; food insecurity accentuated class sensitivity; and food insecurity heightened the benefits and the barriers of attending Status U.

Food Insecurity Reordered Time-Use Strategies

The time cost of being food insecure prevented student participants from fully engaging in social and academic activities by consistently drawing their attention to their lack of food. Research shows that when individuals experience scarcity of any kind, the psychological response is to become mentally consumed by that unfulfilled need, drawing attention away from other concerns (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Zoey narrated the effect of scarcity in her life most directly when she explained that worrying about where food would come from took time away from her studies. Experiencing food insecurity also impeded students in more direct ways: it was a barrier to traditional graduation time-to-completion. Goldrick-Rab (2016) suggested the field reconsider expected graduation timelines, in this case 4 years, because of the barrier they can create for students whose struggle to provide for their basic needs may require employment. This recommendation took specific form for several of our participants. For Eva and Chris the need to stop out of school resulted in nontraditional paths through college. Further, many students were forced to reorient their daily schedules around food strategies, such as attending class in the mornings to prevent sitting through class hungry (Eva), not studying late at night because of an inability to concentrate due to a lack of food (Dana), or seeking out free, on-campus events with food

(Tammy). Indirectly, students, like Jasmine, noted that the need to work to pay for food resulted in poorer academic performance. Prior scholarship shows that students experiencing food insecurity are likely to hold jobs (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). St. John (2008) argued that when studying academic and social integration, employment should be taken into account because the time needed to work can limit students' ability to invest in campus life. This proved to be true for our participants. Eva and Dana made the decision not to work while taking classes due to their perceptions of the distractions and logistical difficulties employment could create. Participants who chose to work often had to decide how to invest their limited remaining time between social and academic opportunities. For Zoey, this meant sleeping only 4 hours some nights to balance her job and homework; however, she found that employment provided both essential income and access to free food. Food was a demanding part of a time management equation for our participants and thus became a consistent distraction from college.

Food Insecurity Accentuated Class Sensitivity

The struggle with hunger in an affluent collegiate environment was represented through cultural status symbols (e.g., handbags, cars, expensive student organizations) that accentuated differences in the daily concerns of students from various class strata. These cultural displays highlight that educational institutions are not neutral regarding class and that they reflect the values, beliefs, and preferred cultural forms of expression of the dominant class (Stuber, 2011). The classed culture that Status U perpetuated was a social barrier for participants in situations where they went to great lengths to conceal their food insecurity experiences from their close friends by lying or avoiding social gatherings for fear

of stigmatization. Another particular way that Status U's classed culture was manifest was in the contrast between what college represented at this stage of life for CSFI students and for higher-status students. Our participants perceived what scholars have noted: for many of their affluent student peers, the Status U experience functioned as a kind of shelter and liminal space between youth and emerging adulthood, where the confluence of social, economic, and student service resources were expected to sustain students through a period of personal self-discovery and professional development (Astin, 1993). Rather than college as a temporary shelter from the full brunt of adulthood, Beth and other participants experienced college as an abrupt and accelerated induction into the challenges of managing competing adult demands with very little margin for error. These students believed they had a very different experience of college than did their high-status peers (Walpole, 2003), and their struggle for adequate food served as a constant reminder that their experience was not normal in this context.

Food Insecurity Heightened the Benefits and the Barriers of Attending Status U

Though food-insecure students in our study paid a high price to attend the university, their experience at Status U was still incomplete. Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that such a financial cost may be justifiable: "The negative effects of the higher costs associated with attending a 4-year college experience were mitigated by the positive effects of the 4-year college experience" (p. 221). Yet the experiences of our participants suggested a different narrative—one in which they were reaping partial benefits at a cost that was high in terms of the personal stress of living on a thin financial margin, often with the additional price of insufficient nutrition.

The social and academic resources of Status U were often the highlights of students' experiences, and they identified particular benefits that resulted. Compared to other higher education institutions, selective institutions may provide better support services for students (Mayhew et al., 2016). In addition to the opportunity to pursue specialty majors, the students in our study experienced the benefits of having extensive academic support services in the form of tutoring and accommodations—when they had time to utilize them. Faculty also played an instrumental role in students' lives, engaging with students as academic instructors as well as serving them as mentors and confidants. LSES students benefit from a strong support system, including social support and mentors who can help them successfully navigate the institution (Dias, 2017; Walpole, 2003). Faculty filled this need for most of our participants. Eva's faculty mentors aided her transition to Status U by helping her navigate and adopt social behaviors that matched the new environment. The faculty were also confidants who helped students navigate their struggles with food insecurity.

In addition to academics, students also reaped social benefits from an expansive student organization system and constant campus programming that provided opportunities to socialize and learn as well as to obtain food. Students enjoyed attending campus-wide events, such as homecoming and football games. However, the benefits of Status U were constrained by students' inability to participate fully in the social aspects of campus.

Despite receiving academic support and social opportunities, the students in our study were not able to fully utilize the full range of benefits that the costs borne should have provided. Students were able to engage in some student organizations but not all that they wanted. Our study confirms findings of prior studies in which LSES students prioritized

academics over social engagement (Martin, 2012; Walpole, 2003). Matthew dropped out of rugby because of work but chose to persist in the student organization connected to his major. Students often maintained involvement in these activities because they more clearly connected to vocational aspirations. Students noted, with regret, that they were able to attend some football games but not as many as they wished. Eva joined a sorority but struggled socially and could not afford it financially. Attending class, which was the most direct benefit students paid for, was typically a priority for the students in our study; however, even this was met with constraints when students skipped class to make work shifts, scheduled only morning classes for fear they would not have the energy to sustain attention due to their limited food supply, or passed out in class. Although students experienced membership in the institution, their food insecurity challenges prohibited them from being able to experience the institution in full. As Johnstone and Marucci (2010) argued, LSES students are given equal access but have unequal experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study revealed the ways that food insecurity complicates students' experiences in college; these complications exist in addition to the influences previously attributed to LSES alone, which is a missing piece in the growing literature on the presence and experience of food-insecure students. In addition, these findings reveal the unique experience of being food insecure in a selective environment that is rife with class symbols and expectations. Experiences of food insecurity worked against the kinds of social and academic participation that the students' perceived affluent peers were able to take advantage of, which we know

from prior literature are beneficial to student success (Mayhew et al., 2016). Consequently, despite paying high prices to attend Status U, students in our study were denied the full college experience. Financial aid that is inadequate only increases the chances of students, such as our participants, experiencing food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). A more robust system of financial support is necessary to assure financial support that is sufficient to cover the full price of college, including food, books, and bills (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). Students should not have to decide between eating and buying a textbook.

As a part of our interview protocol, we asked students: What resources or policy changes could the institution implement to support students who are food insecure? Students responded with suggestions that included program-oriented initiatives, policy changes, and suggestions for campus climate improvements that echo the best practices recommended by experts in the field (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Participants who had received free and reduced lunches in the public K–12 system suggested that Status U should extend these benefits or make meal plans less expensive for students in need. Other students noted that Status U could allow peers to donate dining hall meals to students in need of them. A few students suggested that a food co-op or food pantry would be nice, but they

voiced concerns that students might not utilize it because it “would be seen as embarrassing.” Thinking more globally about the campus community and the value of socioeconomic diversity, Eva asserted, “I would hope to see more impoverished students at [Status U], or in universities of prestige period.”

What has become clear from our participants’ narratives about Status U is that the campus context, specifically their own social cultures as well as the academic structures and supports, significantly shapes the type of effect food insecurity has on the students’ experiences. Initiatives to address CSFI should first take into account the voices and stories of those they are trying to serve. Only then will stakeholders understand the features of the campus environment that powerfully shape students’ academic and social experiences; these must be accounted for in any initiatives that faculty and administrators try to promote. Just as the profession has worked diligently to make strides toward equal access, it is imperative that colleges and universities strive to provide equal opportunities for success for all students.

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