

CUNY campuses pursue unconventional approaches to tackling student food insecurity

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Campuses across the City University of New York are employing a variety of unconventional approaches to provide for students struggling with food insecurity.

At CUNY, 42 percent of freshmen come from households with incomes of \$20,000 or less, and nearly 8 in 10 got free breakfasts and lunches when they attended the city's public schools, the university said. Despite studies showing food insecurity — limited access to a sufficient amount of food — is on the decline, roughly 50,000 students still experience food insecurity due to lack of money or other resources.

"Our campuses have been approaching this problem with increased urgency, and some have devised innovative, effective new interventions," Interim Chancellor Vita Rabinowitz said in a statement. "Now, CUNY is working to identify and institutionalize the best programs and practices."

The university has struggled to fund many of the initiatives but has had some success with philanthropic support.

At Lehman College, students can schedule food pantry visits online. And the Borough of Manhattan Community College requires all course syllabi to include information about the campus Single Stop office. The Single Stop program gives free social, legal and financial services to students and sustains food pantries at community colleges.

In addition to the food pantries, individual CUNY campuses are taking different steps to tackle food insecurity among students.

The food pantries at Bronx and Kingsborough Community Colleges

serve students and their immediate family members and also permit several visits. LaGuardia Community College also has an on-campus food pantry that serves students on weekdays as a walk-in for nonperishable food and fresh produce — enough to feed an individual or family for a week.

Another approach centers on bringing fresh food directly to campuses. Brooklyn College works with the Corbin Hill Food Project, a local community-supported agriculture program. Students visit an on-campus distribution site once a week and get fresh vegetables, fruit and eggs, free of charge. Hunter College also teams up with GrowNYC, which delivers fresh produce to the Upper East Side campus weekly.

At Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, The Campaign Against Hunger drives its Fresh Vibes Market — a custom recreational vehicle that offers health food, screenings for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and cooking demonstrations — on campus twice a month. So far, the program has served 125 people. Students, teachers and college employees get \$10 vouchers to buy fresh produce.

Some schools, like John Jay College and LaGuardia, also team up with campus food vendors to provide food voucher programs that allow students to buy breakfast, lunch or dinner at their cafeterias.

And to combat the stigma associated with using food pantries, Lehman College identifies students through an application process and provides eligible students with "Dining Dollars," which are added to their student ID cards. At the Borough of Manhattan Community College's Panther Pantry, food is packaged in "nondescript bags."

Three campuses are also growing food directly as a way to support students struggling with food insecurity — Kingsborough, Bronx Community College and Hostos Community College.

Kingsborough has an urban farm that produces fresh organic produce

each June through mid-November, which is supported through Kingsborough's workforce development office and multiple grants. Last year, the farm produced 3,000 pounds of food, which was given to 1,100 students who attended distribution sessions.

Kingsborough was also the first CUNY institution to open a Single Stop food pantry on campus. Tanzina Ahmed, an assistant professor of psychology at Kingsborough who has researched and written about student food insecurity, said it's "heartening" that campuses are employing various approaches.

"Ultimately, food insecurity is a problem that emerges from broad structural issues in American society — including increasing rates of income inequality — and it's a problem that CUNY is confronting directly on campus," Ahmed said in a statement.

Deborah Harte, BMCC's Single Stop director, oversaw the creation of the school's food pantry last April with financial support from donors like the Petrie Foundation. By January, more than two tons of food were given to more than 340 students and their families.

"To some degree, it's really been addressed or being addressed in various ways," Harte told POLITICO. "Can we do more? Absolutely. Can we have more pantries? Absolutely. But I think we've tried to respond as best we could, oftentimes with whatever resources we had."