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Responding to Student Hunger at NECU Institutions

In Fall of 2015, a student entered my office suite and offhandedly declared, “I am always so hungry at this school.” With those words, something fundamentally changed in my life and work in ELCA higher education. As I began to build a relationship with that student, I embarked on a new and more nuanced understanding about students and economic hardship at our NECU institutions. I also entered into a new lived experience about my role as a college chaplain at Augustana College and then Muhlenberg College, as well as about the calling of our collective colleges to meet the needs of the students whom we serve.

The student did not intend to enter the chaplain’s office to talk about food insecurity. She came into the integrated and holistic student advising, career, and vocation center to talk about the things we hope our students talk about—academic and co-curricular interests and how those might intersect and be lived out on campus and in the community. I quickly realized that we cannot have conversations about meaning and purpose, academic aptitude, and career ambition until students’ basic needs are met.

In going deeper with the work, I found that the story of that initial student was replicated over and over in other students. It wasn’t that students didn’t have food all the time—it was that there weren’t always transparent mechanisms in place to ensure student success and access to a wide array of things including food, personal hygiene items, clothing, and school supplies which includes

textbooks and required online portals. Often, students and families were stretched to the very limit to provide the minimum amount of money needed to enroll and register for classes. When a disruptive event happened (for example, an unexpected family emergency or broken laptop or field trip fee), students were often unable to make up the cost, even if it was minimal.



Responding to Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined by “not having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.” According to the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), and a study by Durbin, “The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students”:

- 30 percent of college students are food insecure;
- 22 percent of college students have the lowest level of food insecurity; and
- 13 percent of students at community colleges are homeless.

The Rev. Kristen Glass Perez is College Chaplain at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Previously, she served as Chaplain and Director of Vocational Exploration at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois and as Director for Young Adult Ministry for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

A common question I have heard over and over in five years of working on these particular issues is: "Doesn't everyone have a meal plan?" The simple answer is "no," and the more complicated answer is that not all meal plans are created equally. So even if a majority of students *do* have a meal plan, there are varying levels of meal plans and meal plan availability. For example, few campuses maintain a dining service that is open during breaks or the summer. This has a great impact on students who may not be able to leave campus or have another primary residence outside of campus. At each of the two NECU institutions where I have served as a college chaplain, I have worked with cohorts of students who, outside of college-owned housing, identify as homeless. This does not include international students, many of whom remain on campus for the entirety of their time as a student. Additionally, across all college campuses, there are increasing numbers of transfer, commuter, and off-campus students who are less likely to have meal plans (Swipe Out Hunger).

"These types of small loans can make a huge difference in the lives of college students."

At both Augustana and Muhlenberg, we began to address these complicated needs by instituting new programs, including on-campus pantries, food recovery efforts, and expanded emergency loans and grants. At Muhlenberg College, we also convened a comprehensive working group to look more strategically at student economic hardship on campus. As a result, we launched a set of new initiatives (Muhlenberg) including emergency grants in two categories: grants for basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), and experiential learning grants. The former fund basic needs, food, housing, or other unexpected hardship outside of cost of attendance. The latter enable students to engage in the fullness of curricular and co-curricular life at the college. Examples include a fee associated with a student club or organization or a field trip for a class. Students are eligible to apply two times or up to \$500 per year through a centralized application process. They receive a response within 24 hours of the request.

Often, these types of small loans can make a huge difference in the lives of college students. In 2018, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) launched a new website "to support institutions that desire to or currently offer emergency financial resources to students in need." The website builds upon the 2016 report from NASPA (Kruger); according to their research:

- Emergency loans or grants can have a huge impact on student success.
- 41 percent of emergency loans or grants come from foundations and individual donors.
- 78 percent of private institutions say lack of financial resources is the greatest barrier to serving a greater number of students who need emergency loans or grants.
- 72 percent of the loan or grant need is less than \$1,000 per student. (Kruger)

Testimonies by Students and Educators

At Muhlenberg, we also took a deeper dive into our own student data around these issues. In the 2019-2020 academic year, we participated in the HOPE Survey, the largest national survey addressing basic needs insecurity for college students.¹ In its third round of administration, the focus has been on enrolling more private, liberal arts colleges to provide more specified data to these campuses. In Spring of 2018, we also conducted a "Hidden Costs Survey" with students, faculty, and staff. Students were asked, "To what extent have these additional costs impacted your ability to engage in College life?"

One student responded, "I have two jobs to help with expenses. I want to pull my weight. But when the college provided that \$50, it went a long way both in terms of food and helping me be able to concentrate to do well in class." Another wrote, "There were so many unexpected costs like food at break periods, having plates, utensils, dish soap, etc. Also, if you didn't have a fan right away it was sweltering. I could not afford one."

Faculty and staff were asked, "What have you or your department done to assist student with financial hardship?" One faculty member responded, "I've

purchased/donated books and other school supplies for students, and I've used my account to print course materials for students that needed to be able to write on physical copies, but who couldn't afford to print. I've also brought in food for students who were hungry, and/or fed them at my home." Over and over again, the responses showed us the way to begin to address some of the need. Not all the need, but some of it.

In his book, *The Privileged Poor: How America's Elite Colleges are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, Anthony Jack, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, refers to some students as "doubly disadvantaged." These are students who are strong academically, but come from low income backgrounds. They are less exposed to the norms and unspoken expectations of campus life, particularly at elite institutions. Jack describes his own experience at Amherst College. He wondered if he was the only student like himself. This experience, along with figuring out the process of navigating campus culture, became the focus of Jack's research and scholarship as a sociologist.

"I am grateful for all of the students who are on our campuses and willing to share their experience and, in doing so, bring our institutions to the front lines of this work."

Muhlenberg College hosted Anthony Jack in Fall of 2019 for a series of on-campus engagements including a meal with students, a faculty and staff enrichment session, a public lecture, and a meeting with senior leadership including the president. Of all of these different opportunities for campus engagement, I was most struck by the student comments during his public lecture. It was the first time that I have been at an event where there were lines of students at the microphones waiting to respond and to ask questions. In many cases, students thanked him for sharing his own story, remarking that it was the first time they heard their own story reflected publicly.

My own reflection on the event was to recall my interaction five years ago with that first student who was bold enough to share her story in a public space, to declare that

she was hungry. In many ways, the telling of these stories about food and economic insecurities parallels the #metoo movement. I am grateful for all of the students who are on our campuses and willing to share their experience and, in doing so, bring our institutions to the front lines of this work.

Lessons Being Learned

My experience as a chaplain working directly with these efforts at two colleges in different parts of the country has taught me many lessons. Here are five:

1. *This is daily work.* There needs to be more than a one-time effort. Like many aspects of life, the issues are intersectional. There are many different reasons a student might face an economic hardship. Often, the reasons overlap, and thus, our responses must also overlap.
2. *There are skeptics.* Both in the on-campus and broader college communities, I have found that many people have a disbelief that "our" students are mirroring the national trends around student hunger and economic insecurity. This is simply not the case. Another common misconception is that students might "abuse" the resources. In five years of this work, I can confidently say that I have never had a student receive support from the pantry or the emergency grant program who wasn't truly in need of extra support. I will also note that the students in need have been from a wide variety of backgrounds and identities.
3. *It does not always require a huge or new budget line.* At both colleges, we were able to reallocate existing funds in order to launch the majority of the programs. At Muhlenberg, the resources are now housed in a central place, giving us the ability to track and assess the need and demand.
4. *The chaplaincy has a unique but not solo role to play.* On both campuses, my work on these issues has been deeply collaborative with a wide array of partners including faculty, trustees, presidents, student affairs staff, alumni and alumni affairs staff, admissions and enrollment staff, and students themselves. As with other work on campuses, support staff including

administrative assistants has been at a forefront of the work. They literally open the pantries for students or alert other staff members that a student may have an emergency need. Without the coordinated work of all of these partners, we could not accomplish this work.

5. *Student learning is an outcome.* At each college, student workers, student organizations, and students working on academic research were involved with the initiatives. The pantries essentially require intern-level research, planning, and reflection in order to launch. I can cite several examples where student workers have been deeply impacted by their work in these initiatives; they ended up pursuing graduate school and professional opportunities to further work on issues related to food and housing insecurity.

“It is within our common calling as NECU institutions to help ensure that many barriers to success are removed so that students can navigate the college experience with grace and dignity.”

Final Thoughts

I do not want to idealize or glamorize the support we are able to provide. It is not realistic to expect that we can meet all student financial hardship needs. It is also not realistic to expect that for the students with the highest need, their need will disappear when they leave our campuses. I do believe, however, that it is within our common calling as NECU institutions to help ensure that many barriers to success are removed so that students

can navigate the college experience with grace and dignity and that they complete their degrees. With these kinds of programs, we are not celebrating economic hardship. We are celebrating our community’s ability to meet the very real needs of our students. I have come to believe that this might be the defining calling of a NECU college or university.

Endnotes

1. Results from the survey will be available later in the Spring of 2020.

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