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"I can't learn when I'm hungry": Responding to U.S. college student basic needs insecurity in pedagogy and praxis

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“I can’t learn when I’m hungry”: Responding to U.S. college student basic needs insecurity in pedagogy and praxis

Cover Page Footnote

This work was supported by a high-impact learning grant from Emporia State University. We thank our EAT Initiative co-founder Blythe Eddy as well as all of our collaborating students, faculty, staff, and community partners for their ongoing commitment and efforts to support students’ basic needs.

"I can't learn when I'm hungry":

Responding to U.S. college student basic needs insecurity in pedagogy and praxis

Students' ability to thrive is directly tied to how well their basic needs are met. As one student noted, "I can't learn when I am hungry." Drawing on our experiences launching an initiative dedicated to combating food insecurity on our campus, we illustrate our feminist pedagogy in practice in responding to the basic needs of U.S. college students. We aim to spark conversations about changes we can make in our own classrooms, while identifying actions to push for broader changes in higher education.

Responding to Basic Needs Insecurity Among U.S. College Students

Even before COVID-19, many U.S. college students' basic needs were not being met. Basic needs security refers to having sufficient and reliable access to food, housing, mental and physical health services, transportation, technology, childcare, and financial resources. College students in the U.S. experience basic needs insecurities at higher rates than the general population (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Nazmi et al., 2019; Weaver et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). A national survey by the Hope Center (2021) found that nearly 3 in 5 college students experienced food and/or housing insecurity. These needs have been exacerbated by the pandemic with job losses, student housing closures, and difficulties accessing food (Hope Center, 2021).

Basic needs insecurities disproportionately impact minoritized students (e.g., LGBTQ+, students of color, students with disabilities, non-U.S. citizens, student-parents, and/or first-generation students), who are more likely to experience basic needs insecurities than their peers but also less likely to access campus resources (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Willis, 2019). These issues significantly affect students' academic performance and well-being (Leung et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2019), affecting their ability to stay enrolled and graduate. To that end, basic needs insecurities are issues of educational (in)equity and (in)justice.

As professors at a public regional Midwestern university, we observed many of our students were struggling with food insecurity among other basic needs. We heard stories from students making the difficult decision to purchase textbooks instead of food, working multiple jobs so their children would not go hungry, and skipping meals in an attempt to extend their groceries until payday.

As feminist teacher-scholars, we knew these problems were difficult and systemic with no simple solution. Called to action, we secured a high-impact learning grant in 2019 to launch Emporia at the Table, also known as the EAT Initiative—a collaborative and interdisciplinary effort designed to combat food insecurity on our campus and our community through research, education, and

action. Through the EAT Initiative, we inserted content on food insecurity in our classes and organized activities, such as community action workshops, food drives, and photo-voice exhibits. Students joined the effort and started a student organization aimed at ending hunger. Through the advocacy of students, faculty, and staff, we convinced our then-university president to establish a basic needs coalition, institutionalizing efforts to support students.

Reflecting on Implications for Feminist Pedagogy

Throughout this work, we have reflected on what it means to be feminist teachers in the context of basic needs insecurities. Our feminist pedagogies entail seeing students holistically when they enter the classroom. Our pedagogical approaches are further animated by values and practices such as care, equity, collectivity, reflexivity, and personal and community transformation (e.g., Crabtree et al., 2009; hooks, 1994; Linabary et al., 2017). For us, putting our feminist pedagogy into action has meant actively taking steps to connect students to basic needs resources, recognizing that basic needs are an equity issue and differentially impact students, exercising care not just in policy but also in practice, and enacting resistance to institutional structures.

We believe in addressing basic needs insecurities by connecting students with resources and familiarizing ourselves with campus and community resources. We share this information at multiple points throughout the semester using strategies like a syllabus statement, class website, emails, and printed materials. In our classrooms, we discuss basic needs issues, so students know they are not alone in their experiences. We have walked students to our on-campus food pantry or dropped off pre-packaged food bags when they were quarantined.

We also put our feminist pedagogy into practice by reflecting on power inequities and equipping students with resources specific to their needs (e.g., mental health support specific for LGBTQ+ students, Spanish language resources). We have conversations around the hidden barriers to accessing resources, particularly for first-generation students. We also recognize the unique needs of student parents and have encouraged their children to attend class as needed. As a breastfeeding mom, Rebecca has offered office space and mini-fridge storage for students who need to feed or pump.

We seek ways to exercise care through classroom policies but also our interactions with students. We seek to design policies that extend grace and recognize how basic needs are tied to academic performance. For example, Jasmine uses a 'golden ticket' policy, what others may call an 'oops token' (Darby & Lang, 2019), where students can receive an extension or revise an assignment with no questions asked, recognizing life circumstances and reducing the stigma around asking for help. Exercising care also entails emailing students

who missed class or an assignment to 'check in' and talking informally to students to ask how they are doing and if they have eaten today.

Our feminist commitments motivate us to enact resistance to institutional structures and norms. This may involve subverting campus contracts and building policies to provide students with food. Given the privileging of individualism, hierarchy, and competition within academia, we have enacted resistance by building coalitions with others to engage in advocacy and to push for more substantial change, including the hiring of a basic needs coordinator. Coalition building sustains efforts when we individually may be experiencing burnout or managing the circumstances of our lives beyond the campus (e.g., caregiving, health).

Catalyzing Change in and Beyond our Classrooms

Given that basic needs insecurities are persistent and systemic among our students, it will take the concerted effort of many to make change happen. To that end, we offer recommendations for action.

In the classroom, we urge educators to be mindful of students' lives, especially considering the pandemic. Include a basic needs statement on syllabi with information about different resources on campus and in the community. Educators may also offer self-care check-ins at various points in the semester and remind them about resources.

At the institutional level, we encourage creating coalitions among students, faculty, staff, and community partners to move toward centralizing basic needs resources to reduce access barriers for students (e.g., basic needs centers or other one-stop shops; Price & Umaña, 2021). Share resources and best practices across institutions to learn from each other. Lastly, work alongside others like the Hope Center, Swipe Out Hunger, and the #FUELHigherEd project in pushing for policy solutions that would contribute to more sustainable change.

In putting our feminist pedagogy into practice, we urge educators to recognize that students learn as whole people, and they cannot learn unless their basic needs are met. In advocating for change, we caution educators to take care of themselves and model self-care and self-compassion. We are hopeful that in reflexively centering the needs of college students, higher education itself can be transformed.

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