



ARE WE OUR STUDENTS' KEEPERS?

Thinking about country-club campuses and daily bread in North America's universities.

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When you think of a typical college student, what do you envision?

Perhaps you picture a student in a dorm at a four-year college or university with a campus meal plan. This student covers the cost of tuition and basic needs with savings or financial aid. They grumble about the cost of books, but usually buy them, and grumble about the quality of food at their college cafeteria, but usually eat it. Along with a full-time course load, they may play on a sports team or perhaps work ten to fifteen hours a week on campus or nearby.

In recent years, colleges have been competing for these students by marked improvements in facilities and services offered on campuses that are distinct from educational programming. Students at my university, for instance, have 24/7 access to mental-health-crisis support and advocacy services. Many universities have developed food services that accommodate not just those with food allergies, but those with voluntary food commitments (like veganism) that the university now endeavours to support. The spending on university campuses for facilities—whether high-tech fitness centers, shiny new academic buildings, or state-of-the-art student unions—has risen in recent years relative to expenditures on faculty. And even leaving out facilities, the growth areas in the higher-education labour force are not teaching faculty, but a mix of business and student-services administrators.

Of course, one can quickly point to changes in funding as the culprit in the nature of these investments. Government support for higher education has fallen significantly in recent years, so students, alumni, and philanthropists play an increasingly important role in funding universities—and the prospects for new facilities and services can attract funding that the replacement of a retiring physics professor (or a leaky roof) cannot. Investments seem to rely on the prospect (presumption?) that they will pay off in the competition for students. Though success is very hard to measure, recent research by Brian Jacob and co-authors did investigate whether universities consider student preferences when determining their spending on student amenities. They found that a four-year college's ratio of amenity to academic spending varies with their student population's demand for amenities. In short, country-club-style amenities are popular with all students (and particularly rich students), and academic amenities are only popular with high-achieving ones. In some sense, this response to demand may reflect an "arms race" that results in higher costs for everyone but little change in equilibrium outcomes.

But there is a non-financial story here too— and a more charitable one—that reflects the changing nature of what universities see as their responsibility, and even mission. Increasingly, our institutions declare priorities not just of developing students' knowledge, but of ensuring their health and well-being. College ought not be just about gathering information and skills (say our top universities), but about developing a concept of the "good life" and cultivating it. This is bigger than—but not smaller than—providing a gym and counselling centre in recognition of students' embodied and embedded lives. It's a responsibility to provide what Simon Fraser University envisions as a "healthy campus community where the people, programs, practices, policies, and spaces foster wellbeing, supporting campus members to thrive and succeed at SFU and beyond."

From Yale University's course titled Life Worth Living to the University of Florida's What Is the Good Life?, universities are (re-)claiming their role in developing human beings and not merely future employees. Some university mission statements bring to mind Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with "self-actualization" at the top—the consummation of a life that has breezed through basic needs, established solid psychological health, and now involves achieving one's full potential for self-fulfillment.

While I can be a cynic, I must admit there is something to like about these changes, especially from a Christian perspective. We have, after all, always insisted—at least the Kuyperians among us—that whole-person flourishing is fundamental to the very nature of God's redemption. Indeed, Yale introduced a version of their course called Christ and the Good Life, explicitly inspired by the broader Yale course but designed to provide a distinctly Christian perspective. I would almost transplant myself to New Haven for the chance to read Karl Barth, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, and C.S. Lewis under the able tutelage of Miroslav Volf! But even in the absence of such a formal opportunity, my experiences with my own Christian mentors—particularly people like J. David Richardson and Kurt Schaefer—reflected a care for my whole person that was unmistakably rooted in their Christian commitments. Moreover, my Christian college required me to take health and physical education classes, in hopes of helping me build good habits of stewarding my body (which didn't quite take root—but that's on me). From my vantage point now as a professor, the whole-person approach to students is second nature to me. I am fortunate to have interesting and engaged graduate students with whom I have the privilege to walk through both statistics coursework and life decisions.

I have, however, learned recently—perhaps embarrassingly recently—that my experiences as both student and professor do not really reflect some of the most profound realities on college and university campuses today. I have enjoyed griping about bloated administrations, fancy athletic facilities, and universities acting *in loco parentis* for students who haven't figured out "adulting" yet. And I have also enjoyed thoughtful discussions about what it looks like to help students thrive, to give them opportunities to flourish, and even to give hard lessons in perseverance. But all this while it appears I have been at a cocktail party at the top of Maslow's hierarchy while a growing portion of students at colleges across North America are striving to get past the ground floor. Put bluntly: we have many students in our colleges and universities who are hungry.

Basic Needs and University Responses

Some features of the experience of current college students are all over the media: rising prices, high debt loads, low graduation rates, difficulty translating degrees into jobs. The

food issue, on the other hand, just got its second big *New York Times* op-ed in 2018. Developing a better understanding of the changing demographics of our students and their means of making ends meet sets the stage for understanding why a growing population of students don't have dependable access to their daily bread.

First, if students go to college from ages eighteen to twenty-two, you might expect the average undergraduate to be around twenty years old; but the actual average age from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is about twenty-six. Knowing there may be a few much older students pulling up the average, perhaps a more helpful number is the median age of twenty-two; that is, half of enrolled undergraduates are twenty-two or older. For two-year public schools, the median is twenty-four. At a conference I recently attended on the topic of college students and their basic needs, a speaker forcefully instructed us to stop referring to our students as "kids"—not just because it is infantilizing or unprofessional, but also because it is simply false.

Historically, these older students might be classified as "non-traditional." However, there comes a point when one must reconsider this label. NCES recently proposed a definition more related to whether a student operates outside the archetypical framework I described earlier. Specifically, they considered a student "non-traditional" if at least one of the following applied: A student attended college only part time, was employed full time, was financially independent, must provide for dependents, is a single parent, or does not have a regular high school diploma. A whopping three-quarters of college students are non-traditional by this measure— and about a third of non-traditional students fit at least four of the criteria simultaneously! In addition, one-third of students in college this year will be at two-year rather than four-year schools.

Some of the increase in enrollment among non-traditional students is a direct result of success in recruiting first-generation college students through many means, including financial aid. However, in her book *Paying the Price*, professor Sara Goldrick-Rab walks through both the limited nature of the funding (affected by colleges' incentives to minimize perceived cost) as well as the difficulty in maintaining access to funding that has strings attached. Her work and that of others has confirmed that these funding difficulties can lead to food insecurity on our campuses.

Actually measuring the food challenges of college students is, well, challenging. Most of the work done thus far in the United States has used a government questionnaire designed to establish whether someone has consistent access to sufficient, healthy food. The yes/no questions on the survey range from asking about one's ability to afford a balanced diet to one's decisions to reduce portions or skip meals because of lack of food.

While the existing studies of college student food insecurity suffer from small samples (single-campus studies), low response rates, or very general national samples (not designed for a focus on college students), a consistent finding across studies is that there are a significant number of students who struggle with food access while enrolled in college. However, a reliable prevalence estimate eludes us.

One concrete way to assess whether there is a real problem is to observe whether anyone has tried to solve it. The answer is a resounding yes. The organization Swipe Out Hunger (est. 2009) works with thirty-five university partners to connect those who have a meal-plan surplus with hungry students; at Columbia University, two students developed an app for easy swipe sharing in real time. There are also apps like www.universitylunchbox.com to locate events serving free food on many college campuses. (Tagline: "College is expensive. Don't waste your money on things like food.") In addition, coaches of NCAA teams have been given more authority to provide food to players after the story broke that some basketball stars were hungry because they were seldom available when the college cafeterias served meals. Finally, campuses have opened on-campus food banks for needy students at a stunning rate in recent years. The College and University Food Bank Alliance was created in 2012 to generate collaboration across campuses who were starting food pantries. It began with thirteen institutions, and within five years has reached over five hundred members to whom the organization provides resources for implementing campus food banks.

While some of these solutions (or at least Band-Aids) were developed by creative students and non-profits, other programs are being developed and formalized by the university and college administrations themselves. Both private and public institutions have felt the pressure to meet students' basic needs, whether out of a sense of growing moral responsibility or more pragmatic concerns about keeping students enrolled and making sure they graduate. The University of California (UC) system, for example, has allocated over \$4 million over three years (2015–present) to support efforts to assess and address food insecurity, with flexibility given to the ten campuses to implement a variety of ideas. In their reports, the UC system points out the existing research showing that food insecurity leads to lower academic performance, but also takes responsibility as a matter of mission, declaring: "UC is dedicated to providing an equitable and sustainable food system for the University community."

One might expect a role for government assistance to provide support for college students who lack food resources, just as such assistance might be available to others. Indeed, a non-profit called "Single Stop" has developed screening software used at community colleges across the United States to connect students with existing government safety-net resources as well as wraparound services and direct services from their colleges. While it is surely in the interest of colleges and universities to leverage government resources for students—whether for financial aid or other assistance—there

are limits to food assistance access for college students. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) is available to low-income people of all ages, but there is a wrinkle for adults without dependents: they must consistently work at least twenty hours a week or face a three month time limit. While enrollment in training programs can count toward this requirement, enrollment in a traditional educational program generally does not. For first-generation college students or students from lower-quality secondary schools who may need extra time for academics, this work requirement may not be feasible. The consequences of this benefit limitation right at a time of potentially important educational investments is yet to be measured (though I am currently engaged in research on this question, so stay tuned!).

Shared Responsibility?

Because students are hungry, I think we need to change the conversation on the responsibilities of universities in contributing to student well-being. With recent investments in higher education (mis)directed toward increasing the marginal comforts of the most comfortable students, we have an opportunity to advocate instead for a rejection of such investments, sacrificing luxuries for the sake of needier students. Whether we do it with a moral argument or an efficiency argument, there is a case to be made for changes that move money toward students at greatest risk of falling through the cracks; indeed, this maintains the very integrity of the institution, leading to successful higher learning and avoiding "investments" that are actually consumption goods for wealthy students. The solutions don't become simpler, nor the role of the university clearer, but I hope that as we develop an understanding of the realities students face we will at least begin to find the right orbit for a productive conversation. In the context of falling government support for higher education—yet increasing demand for the skills it provides—what does it look like for universities to adapt to the changing needs of students, and particularly students whose basic needs are not met? My thoughts here leave this question open, but try to lay out some opportunities and challenges as we try to navigate our shared responsibility.

One could, first of all, place the responsibility for student basic needs squarely on the shoulders of the government, whether through the education department or through other social services. In this case, the challenge of food assistance at the college level is a natural extension of the challenges the elementary and secondary school systems have been facing for a long time— an increasing obligation to meet the non-academic needs of students. In the public school system in the United States, for instance, nearly all schools participate in the National School Lunch Program, providing free or reduced-price meals for eligible students. It isn't hard to make the case that traditional educational investments (i.e., teaching) work much better when children are fed, and schools are a

central institution for identifying and serving the needs of children in a community. Perhaps colleges are no different?

One could instead place this responsibility primarily with the students themselves— who, as I've noted, are adults. To the extent college credits are an item for purchase like any other, we could simply say that one might need to avoid or delay such purchases if it will cause material hardship. Putting this in its best light, perhaps there is a time and place for a person to go to college; if he currently has too many financial obligations to afford food while attending college, he may need to wait until he has better financial footing. (People operate this way when considering other life choices, after all, like the timing of children.) One obvious challenge, though, is that the education itself is a primary means to better financial footing, and with low wages and increasing college prices the notion of simply "saving up" can be a non-starter. Another challenge is that credits at four-year colleges are purchased in several pieces, paid for over time, that are only really valuable in the market if you "collect them all." Let's call it the Pokémon approach to credentialing. Indeed, the student debt crisis we hear about is mostly a non-completion crisis; for every Ivy League graduate with a huge debt, there are many community-college dropouts whose attempts at a degree did not come to fruition, leaving them with comparably small debts but much larger chances of default.

As a final option for where the buck stops, one could place the onus on the educational institution itself to make sure its students have their basic needs met. In a sense, once students are enrolled they become part of a family and the college is committed to their well-being. I have met college presidents and student-services staff who take this perspective and enact policies commensurate with that commitment. Research by Doug Webber and Ron Ehrenberg confirms that student-services spending at schools with lower entrancetests scores and higher need-based financial aid can improve graduation rates (though their data did not allow them to identify specific types of spending that matter most). There is also an increasing effort to support professors in serving students; in collaboration with colleges and universities, the non-profit Faculty and Students Together (FAST) Fund helps faculty get emergency aid to students who face bumps in the road like an unexpected bill or disruptions in child care. And professors and staff always have the opportunity to advocate for their students' wellbeing. This could be personal help accessing government benefits or removing barriers to their self-sufficiency, but it could also be professional work to push toward broader adoption of evidence-based policies (like emergency aid) that are known to improve student completion of their programs.

Of course, there is the possibility that another player—seldom mentioned in the larger discussion—has not yet been sufficiently tapped for playing its rightful role in meeting needs: the church, and its sisters in campus ministry. Work by Nathan Alleman at Baylor University examines the development of campus ministry's relationship to student

services. While in the late nineteenth century, colleges were comfortable letting the YMCA Student Association establish assistance for students with everything from housing to campus orientation, the last hundred years have seen a transition to the professionalized, in-house Student Affairs department on campuses and away from reliance on campus ministries. We now live in a world in which we can assume the university employs administrative professionals to provide financial aid information, student activities, and career advising. However, there is no doubt that the modern iterations of campus ministry (in partnership with churches) could still engage in many ways to support psychological and spiritual health on campus as well as students' access to basic needs. In fact, I can imagine groups like InterVarsity and others could provide a form of whole-person help— whether it is career advising from a mentor or a bag of groceries delivered by a real-life friend—that is simply infeasible for university staff.

To their credit, some campus ministries do play an important role in supporting or hosting campus food banks, and many ministries counsel students through challenges. But I hope that a Christian understanding of hospitality pushes us further. The notion of sacrificing comforts to serve those in need is a narrative (indeed, is our narrative!) that offers a counterpoint to the incentives of universities to please those with the most financial power. The students who have developed meal-sharing apps are a good example for all of us; the cost to sharing unneeded meals is admittedly small, but it is encouraging that students are willing to go to the hassle of sharing their resources with someone who needs them more. What would it look like for Christian student organizations to lead the way in such endeavours? And could Christian colleges and universities posture in this way as a matter of course, explaining transparently that when faced with the option of a better gym or additional meal funding for low-income students, they are choosing the food? I think they may be surprised at the level of support such decisions would receive from students, who actually care a lot about justice and equity.

These musings perhaps bring up more questions than they answer—but I think it's better than answering the wrong questions. As we consider the responsibilities of government, individuals, and institutions in supporting the well-being of students, I hope we can keep in mind that both Christian and secular campuses alike could benefit from the broader Christian community serving students, whether they need a discussion about "the good life" or just a place at the dinner table. If we're very ambitious, we could even provide both at once.

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