



# HUNGRY MINDS

**Pilot program addresses food insecurity among students**

**Story by Emily Huston**

**Photos by Janeth R. Sanchez**

Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin, chair of African American Studies, offered her turkey sandwich to a student on the City College football team. He was eating a can of spinach in the cafeteria because he couldn't afford anything else. That was nine years ago. "I've always been giving out food, always," Dunn-Salahuddin says.

Many City College students hunger for more than knowledge. It's not uncommon for professors to buy snacks — or even bring meals from home — for students facing inadequate access to food.

Just down the hall from Dunn-Salahuddin, Jennifer Dawgert-Carlin, chair of the Behavioral Sciences

Department, recalls a student who was shaking in her class. Dawgert-Carlin asked if she was okay and she replied, "I just haven't eaten today." Ever since, Dawgert-Carlin has offered snacks from her office at Batmale 354.

When English professor Jennifer Levinson surveyed her classroom for food security, one student wrote, "It's easier to get drugs than it is to get food." The student spoke as a mother who preferred to feed her child before herself and used drugs to quell her aching stomach.

These hungry students prefer anonymity, but are part of a very real problem at City College: food insecurity.

Above: Student Angélica Cabral, blows on a hot Cup Noodles. She relies on the food shelves at school for food during the day. "It's hard to study when your body is not running on fuel," she says.

Out of a survey of 1,100 English students, administered by the City College Food Pantry Work Group, 41 percent reported food insecurity and 20 percent reported severe food insecurity. According to a 2018 national survey (the largest of its kind) by independent research institution Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 42 percent of community college students fall into the highest category of food insecurity. This includes those who, on a weekly basis, skip meals, lack nutritious or culturally appropriate food and skimp on meal portions.

As opposed to the physical sensation of hunger, food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as the

lack of available financial resources for food at the household level.

"There's a concern that I won't be able to meet my personal food needs today. Or that I have to worry about whether or not I'm going to be hungry today. That's food insecurity," says Dawgert-Carlin, who speaks from experience. She, like many professors who give food to students, was once on the other side of that relationship.

As a young student at City College, Dunn-Salahuddin also struggled with food insecurity. She now helps run a food shelf and has brought plates of spaghetti from home to share with students.

"Having all my stuff in a bag and not knowing where I'm going to sleep, let alone what I'm going to eat, is a reality for so many City College students," she says.

Food insecurity has implications on a student's academic performance, retention and ability to graduate. The Wisconsin HOPE Lab found that a sizable fraction of students who were getting grades below the C average were dealing with food insecurity, housing insecurity or both. As former Director of Student Health Services Becky Perelli asks, "If you don't have (food), how can you possibly work on academics?"

Fed up that City College had few resources

to help, a small group of faculty, staff, and community members — including Dunn-Salahuddin, Dawgert-Carlin, Levinson and Perelli — formed the City College Food Pantry Work Group. What started as a handful of people has grown into a 40-strong email list that includes community activists and students.

"We did things when no one else would because students were hungry today and yesterday," says Levinson at the group's October meeting.

Their efforts paid off. The work group, in coordination with the administration, piloted the On-Demand Food Shelves Program in February 2018. Now in its second semester, six food shelf locations at Ocean Campus offer any student two snacks per day. It's not a food pantry with proper groceries, but it's a way to get food to hungry students now.

At the Women's Resource Center food shelf, Jalaya Morales, a third-year journalism student, prepares herself a cup of instant noodles. While between paychecks working at the Dollar Tree, she went around asking friends for food and was referred to the shelves. She's been using them twice a week since.

Student Ken Young, who plans to study medicine, speaks to the importance of the shelves as a way for students to have



Angelica Cabral, a social and behavioral sciences student, brings snacks from the food shelf to eat during her African American History class.



Cup Noodles, instant oatmeal, apple sauce pouches and candy at the the LINK Center food shelf.

what they need to stay healthy and be focused. "As a potential doctor, you have to listen to your body," he says, grabbing a granola bar from the shelf at the African American Studies Resource Center.

For students like Morales and Young, the food shelves are a way to get through a long day of classes and a lifeline when tight on money at the end of the month. Other students rely on the oatmeal, tuna, peanut butter, coffee and, yes, ramen for food all week long.

At the center for Homeless At-Risk Transitional Students, HARTS, Program Coordinator Maraea Natua Master sees famished students — and not just homeless students — who rely on their food shelf for meals everyday.

"I remember. I was a HARTS student. The dollar store and a cup of noodles saved my life," Master says.

Yet there's only so much a bowl of instant ramen or packet of oatmeal can do to help students.

Nine student workers who help run the food shelf at the Linking Learning and Action Center signed a petition protesting the low nutritional value of the foods

being supplied by City College to the shelves. "What's the difference between a Cup Noodle with 51 percent of the daily value of sodium for a person with a 2,000 calorie per day diet versus a meal at McDonald's?" the students write.

One student worker at HARTS, who prefers to remain anonymous, also expressed frustration over the choice of food items on the shelves, some of which are impractical for students without access to refrigeration or kitchens.

"Even when I was homeless, I wouldn't want to sit down and eat an entire can of corn," she says, brandishing a 16-ounce can of corn kernels at a student government meeting. "Would you want to eat this?"

Despite ongoing conversations with the SF-Marin Food Bank about a proper food pantry on campus, many wondered if plans would move forward.

Meanwhile, the food shelves opened in

February 2018. Work group members and the student resource centers bought food from their own budgets.

**"I remember, I was a HARTS student. The dollar store and a cup of noodles saved my life."**

– Maraea Natua Master

When the June 2017 state budget was passed, \$2.5 million in Hunger-Free Campus funds were allocated to 114 community colleges. City College was allotted \$49,000, only available after a detailed plan of its allocation was submitted.

The work group won a big victory this past October when Associate Vice Chancellor Elizabeth Coria officially announced a pop-up food pantry at Ocean campus slated for January 2019. "Food insecurity is not just a low-income student issue. Food insecurity is a CCSF issue," Coria says.

With the funds secured, management of the food shelves transitioned from the work group to the administration. However, there have been major slip-ups along the way. As Dawgert-Carlin says, "It was all a big mess at the beginning."

At the start of the fall semester, the shelves lay bare, with students and faculty left wondering when they'd be filled. Although some shelves were stocked with faculty donations, others remained empty. Hungry students who went to the resource centers were turned away.

In the meantime, work group co-founder Levinson organized an offensive. Forty faculty and staff separately called Associate Vice Chancellor Coria to look into the status of the funding for the food shelves. After a meeting between Coria and representatives from the work group, the administration provided the first batch of food a full three weeks after classes had started.

After the resource centers went through



Professor Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin restocks the African American Studies Resource Center food shelf with granola bars. Dunn-Salahuddin is sensitive to the needs of hungry students because she was food insecure herself as a student at City College.



Meg Brittain restocks the LINK Center food shelf with trail mix, graham crackers, apple sauce pouches and granola bars.

the first batch of food, there were periods when the shelves weren't restocked. "I'm on a trial and error basis right now," says Amy Coffey, management assistant of student activities, in regards to stocking the six food shelves. There's a lot on her plate, but for many students there's not enough on theirs.

The so-called "starving student" is a trope that goes deeper than imagined. Food insecurity intersects with income inequality, food deserts and housing insecurity across San Francisco. Students have the additional stress of schedules strained by the demands of jobs, classes and school-work, plus transportation costs and school supplies.

"The reality is, to go to college now, (students) are having to overcome many more obstacles," Dunn-Salahuddin says. "They will sacrifice eating just to get to class that day. And that breaks my heart."

The data backs her up. According to the Wisconsin HOPE Lab study, food insecure students care just as much about school as their peers, but have more hurdles to success.

Whether or not students struggle to access food, they spend the same amount of time attending class and doing homework. Yet, according to the same study, those under the stress of food insecurity spend more time taking care of family members and commuting, and less time on leisure activities and sleeping.

For students, teachers and anyone dropping by, the shared table of the food shelf builds community.

In the African American Studies Resource Center, amid the midterm studying buzz of her fellow classmates, student Brie Love shares a plate of take-out with Dunn-Salahuddin and complains that there are few affordable options at Ocean Campus.

"I can't get anything under five dollars on this campus," Dunn-Salahuddin says, adding that she's not above using the food shelf herself.

"It's the difference between a student

coming to learn or not. I don't want to come to school if I'm hungry all day," Love says.

Dunn-Salahuddin is inspired by the Black Panthers, who gave free breakfasts to elementary school students in the 1970s.

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– Brie Love

"I feel like giving is contagious," she says. "We don't have to wait on institutions or systems or bureaucracies to give us what we need. We can manifest it ourselves, little bit by bit. An apple at a time, a can of tuna at a time."

There's a heavy stigma attached to food insecurity. "We have this stereotype that people that don't have enough to eat or that are struggling financially are somehow bad people, that they somehow deserved it," says Dawgert-Carlin, referring to the "just-world hypothesis" that good things happen to good people and vice versa.

The assumption then becomes: "If something bad is happening to someone, they must be a bad person," she says.

For example, "If you're a person who doesn't have enough food to eat, then maybe you shouldn't have an iPhone... Or maybe you shouldn't have spent your money on a latte" she continues.

"You end up getting this idea that if you are struggling or failing in San Francisco, there's something wrong with you," Dawgert-Carlin says. "That doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you a normal person."

After the food pantry at Ocean is established in partnership with SF-Marin Food Bank, Coria says they will explore expanding to the ten City College centers around San Francisco.

Meanwhile, in every classroom of 40 students at City College, ten are food insecure. Feeding students – through the shelves and the pantry – is caring for students. It's a means to feed their success.

"There's something about the emotional experience of feeling like you're cared about," Dawgert-Carlin says, as her eyes well with tears.

"There's something about when the school cares about you and your instructors care about you. We want you to succeed.

"And if we're only saying we're going to feed your mind, but we're not going to feed your body, it's not enough."



## City College On-Demand Food Shelves

Pick up a free healthy snack at:

<b>African American Studies Resource Center</b>	Batmale 325
<b>Jennifer Carlin's Office</b>	Batmale 354
<b>HARTS</b>	Student Union/MLK Rm B
<b>LINK Center</b>	MUB 301
<b>Queer Resource Center (QRC)</b>	Bungalow 201
<b>Women's Resources Center (WRC)</b>	Smith 103/4

For additional assistance contact the CalFresh Program