



Book Review: Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention. Editors: Katharine M. Broton and Clare L. Cady

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From the images of snaking queues outside community food banks in the US to the ongoing campaigning over the funding of free school meals for schoolchildren from the poorest backgrounds in the UK, as Covid-19 has blazed across the world, it has exposed in its wake the glaring universal injustice of food insecurity that has stalked the reality of everyday existence for many long before the pandemic struck. Against this backdrop, Broton and Cady's *Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention*, a collection of essays which threads together the experiences and expertise of a richly diverse group of US Higher Education practitioners, student activists and academics, each chapter offering a unique insight into the effects of food insecurity and potential practical solutions to eradicate it from our campuses, is a timely and highly pertinent contribution, with relevance to those with a vested interest in student inequalities both in and beyond the US.

Encompassing both affective and physiological impacts across a spectrum of varying degrees of severity, food insecurity relates to instances where individuals go hungry, worry about their ability to source food, or are unable to obtain nutrition of an adequate quality and quantity because of a lack of money. Shockingly, approximately half of college undergraduates in the US are food insecure. This is due in part to the growing chasm between the financial aid available to students and the stark reality of rising university and living costs which, under the normalcy of neoliberalism, falls to individuals and their families to try and bridge. Historically marginalised and underrepresented groups within Higher Education, who are less likely to be able to draw upon family capital, including BAME, LGBTQ and first-generation students, care-leavers and those from low-income households are disproportionately more likely to be food insecure. However, the legacy of stagnant wages and shrinking incomes left by the 2007/8 global recession has resulted in stretched parental resources even amongst families that would have once previously comfortably supported their children through university, fuelling a rise in food insecurity.

Although food poverty is becoming more and more pervasive with Higher Education, the longstanding and often romanticised stereotype of the impoverished student, existing on a diet of noodles and baked beans, has created a culture in which it is all too easy for sceptics to trivialise, normalise and even glorify food precarity as a rite of passage synonymous with student-hood. However, by threading the personal stories and lived experiences of students into each chapter, the essays not only make visible these hidden voices, but in doing so, offer an affective insight into the far-reaching consequences of food insecurity. Crucially, the students' accounts draw attention to the body that weathers the effects of food insecurity not only through hunger, but worry about when and where the next meal is coming from; to the body that is depleted not only of energy, but of time spent working extra jobs to cover the ever increasing cost of living. From poorer attainment and retention rates to deterring prospective candidates from applying to university, food insecurity shapes and stalks the experiences of students across the student lifecycle.

The sense of shame, however, that prevents students from speaking out and seeking support means that the scale and severity of the problem is often underreported. With students also affected by or at risk of homelessness, family estrangement and proliferating personal debts, food

insecurity is indicative of and interconnected with poverty and precarity on a wider scale. For many, it is often the first manifestation of financial insecurity; as Broton and Cady note, ‘when students do not have enough money to make ends meet, food is often the first thing to go: you have to eat every day, whereas other basic material goods like housing and clothing require less frequent purchases’ (p.19). Food insecurity therefore only often scratches the surface of a wider web of basic needs insecurity.

Acknowledging this complexity, Broton and Cady’s carefully curated collection therefore deliberately begins with direct aid programs such as campus pantries or food banks and voucher systems which provide instant relief to students in hunger, and graduates to more holistic, long-term and sustainable approaches which address basic needs insecurity as a whole, including the importance of using evidence-based research and implementing policy reform. In doing so, the collection refuses to simply locate the individual at the centre of our understanding of the causes of and solutions to food inequality; instead the emphasis is placed on how students are being failed and penalised by badly conceived and bureaucratic funding policies and a lack of compassion and understanding. This stance is vital given the negative political rhetoric surrounding food inequality across wider debates in society: time and time again, sceptics have pedalled the idea that food insecurity is caused by an individual deficit and is due to poor financial management or a lack of cooking skills. This placing of blame at the helm of the individual, however, deflects both attention and responsibility away from the structural inequality and cruelty of politically induced poverty, austerity and neoliberalism. By endorsing a multi-stakeholder approach which locates individual students within a wider conversation with HE staff, policymakers and the local community, the collection therefore both challenges and rewrites these harmful narratives.

Food Insecurity on Campus is without doubt an invaluable and vital resource for practitioners, academics, and policy-makers responsible for addressing student welfare on campus through practical interventions; however, it is much more than a guidebook on how to tackle basic needs inequality within Higher Education: it is also a disturbing reflection of just how dangerous the myth of meritocracy that fuels our universities is. The fact that the students disproportionately more likely to be affected by food insecurity are also those that are the focus of social mobility targets and widening access programs highlights the failures of a Higher Education system that encourages individuals from non-traditional backgrounds without the sustainable supporting structures, programs and policies in place needed to create a level playing field. Holding up a mirror to this uncomfortable reality, *Food Insecurity on Campus* is therefore also a powerful and much needed call for a more equitable and just Higher Education.