Unpacking the invisible problem of campus hunger: The Hunger Awareness Initiative at WSU

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In the U.S. we often hear phrases like “starving college student” and “freshman 15” to the point that they have become clichés. How much truth lies behind these phrases? Existing data on hunger and food insecurity does not effectively address these issues. Ironically, despite the fact that research is conducted on university campuses, there is still significant need for such research. The present study reports phase 1 results of an on-going community-based, participatory initiative to enhance understanding of hunger issues on one campus, the Wichita State University (WSU) Hunger Awareness Initiative. Data were collected through surveys made available online through a social media campaign directed toward the WSU community, during a food-packaging event, and through focus group discussions. Data from 44 individual survey respondents to the prompt: “Tell us your hunger story” and the information shared by 50 participants in focus groups held during a campus-based “Dinner and Conversation about Hunger” were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Results indicated that while hunger stories varied widely among participants, several themes were found within participant groups. Stories offered by international and graduate students indicated that food insecurity was an issue for them. Indicating the complexity of this issue, three consistent themes found in the focus groups were that students feel reluctant to admit they are food insecure due to the stigma of asking for help, or the need to be self sufficient; students eat low-budget meals regardless of nutrition or taste due to lack of resources; and finally, there are opportunities to help hungry students now, and that preventative measures can be taken. The WSU Hunger Awareness initiative is the first step in a coordinated effort to understand hunger and food security awareness on college campuses.