

# Starving College Students: An Examination of the Cliché

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**Abstract.** Many have heard the phrase "starving college student." This paper answers the question - are college students really hungry? And if so, what is the nature and the scope of the issue on Wichita State University's campus? Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this paper takes a comprehensive route to address an issue that has previously been mostly absent from the body of scholarly literature. Additionally, this paper explores the possibility of solutions which may be applicable in a local context.

## Introduction

The goal of this paper is to uncover potential problems for Wichita State University students specifically, and to examine possible solutions to these problems, so that no one in our community has to face the reality of being hungry, and the stigma and shame that goes along with it. Hunger is an issue that has many different facets. The world's farmers produce enough food to feed every person in the world; therefore, the global problem of hunger is a problem of access and availability, not supply (FAO 2002). Due to this, a fundamental assumption of this paper is that no one should go hungry. This seems to be a simple notion; nonetheless, the glaring problem still exists.

## Research Questions

[RQ1] Are there students at Wichita State University who are food insecure?

[RQ2] What can be done to alleviate food insecurity in this unique context?

## Theoretical Foundation & Methods

This research is grounded in the tenets of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Israel et al 2005, Minkler & Wallerstein 2008), Engaged Scholarship (Van de Ven & Johnson 2006), and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider et al 2003).

CBPR is based upon the principle that knowledge dealing with communities is best when co-produced with community members, practitioners, and researchers. Decision-making is shared between each of these groups. Community Based Participatory Research is used in the present project to keep the community at the center of the focus. Engaged Scholarship is a theory which focuses on the practicality of research, and the importance of co-producing knowledge. To this end, a pivotal theme of Engaged Scholarship is collaboration (Van de Ven & Johnson 2006). Engaged Scholarship has been used in the current project as a way of operation for members of the research team. AI is another strengths-based approach which integrates theory and practicality. AI is often referred to as a change theory – it is understood that this approach seeks to bring about some sort of revolution in thinking and/or action (Cooperrider et al 2003). AI has been used in the current project as a focus for qualitative research methods. The theoretical foundations upon which this research is built (Community Based Participatory Research, Engaged Scholarship, and Appreciative Inquiry) all focus on collaboration, conscientious processes, practicality, and strengths-based approaches to research. This project is based on the assumption that the community is at the forefront. In order to find solutions for student hunger and food insecurity, students and their experiences must be the focus. Students' experiences are vital to our understanding of issues which affect them, and this combination of theories allows us to glean understanding from students' expression of their experiences.

Collection of data took place through hunger story gathering, focus groups at Dinner and Conversation about Hunger at Wichita State University events, and through a WSU campus-wide quantitative hunger survey. The iterative process of research started with open-ended qualitative data gathering. Community

members were asked in-person or via Facebook or Twitter to share their stories relating to hunger – whether they were personal stories or experiences they have had with other individuals. A second method was used to collect in-depth qualitative data: focus groups at Dinner & Conversation at Wichita State University events. Three Dinner & Conversation events were held over the course of three semesters. From this qualitative data, researchers formulated a quantitative survey to be distributed to the community. The campus-wide survey was distributed to everyone in the WSU community via campus email.

The aim of this research is to gain a deep and broad understanding of students' experiences with hunger and food insecurity, while being able to estimate the community's capacity for sustainable solutions. In order to achieve all three objectives, a triangulation of methods was used. Triangulation is defined as a combination of methodologies in research (Olsen 2004). The qualitative methods of focus groups and hunger story gathering contributed to our depth of understanding, and the quantitative method of surveying contributed to the breadth of our understanding. Qualitative data also aided in estimation of the community's capacity for hunger solutions. Triangulation adds to the whole picture of student experiences at Wichita State, by providing several different research viewpoints rather than a single viewpoint which would be provided by a solo methodology.

### Results, Discussion, & Significance

Data was collected over the course of the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. We received a total of 56 hunger stories from our initial qualitative data collection effort. Approximately 150 people from the Wichita State community participated in focus groups taking place at three Dinner and Conversation events, and the quantitative campus-wide survey received 1,051 responses.

Six key themes emerged from the qualitative data. The first theme is an awareness of a social stigma relating to hunger, shame resulting from people knowing about a person's hunger, and a sense of pride that may restrain people from seeking assistance. The second theme is that of low nutrition or purchasing inexpensive food regardless of its nutritional value. The third theme, which may contribute to food insecurity, is income instability. Having (or not having) a support system was the fourth theme that emerged around the topic. The food assistance system was addressed many times and

emerged as the fifth theme, and despite its function as a helpful program, was often viewed as a barrier to food security. A scarcity of time was the sixth and final theme that emerged; many students simply do not have the time to prepare food or find that their schedules conflict with local food sources. From the quantitative survey, the following key results emerged:

16.9% of respondents reported eating fewer meals than they would like to eat in a day. 34.5% responded that their schedule conflicts with the hours of local food sources. 40% responded that a lack of easily accessible alternatives impacts their ability to get healthy food. 54.2% said that a lack of affordable alternatives impacts their ability to get healthy food. On average, .91 meals/week are skipped due to lack of money, and 2.38 meals are skipped due to lack of time. 20.2% are not comfortable asking for help if they are hungry, and 22.2% are currently on government food assistance.

### Conclusions

Returning to a fundamental assumption of this paper: no one should go hungry. It is apparent from these results that there are students at Wichita State University who are struggling with hunger and food insecurity. Additionally, major issues that are contributing to this issue are: conflicting schedules and a poverty of time, a lack of affordable and easily accessible alternatives, and an unwillingness to ask for help (possibly due to social stigma and shame). If we can begin to address these obstacles, we may be able to help alleviate hunger as a community.

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