

Viewpoint: College students tackle food insecurity on area campuses

By: *Michael Berndt, Interim President at Inver Hills and DCTC*

Emily Nikkel, Student Senate President at Inver Hills

Daisy Mairura, Student Senate President at DCTC

Eight Minnesota colleges, including Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College, recently participated in the #RealCollege survey. Sponsored by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University, the survey illuminates insecurities among our students.

Of the 3460 respondents, 40 percent reported experiencing food insecurity in the last 30 days. Fifty-two percent reported housing insecurity and 18 percent reported experiencing homelessness in the last year. And sixty-two percent of respondents reported at least one form of basic needs insecurity in the last year.

As a college president, I find these numbers concerning. How can our students focus on their studies when preoccupied with basic needs?

Minnesota results are similar to those of other respondents nationally. This was the message of Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, professor of Higher Education Policy and Sociology and founding director of the Hope Center. Dr. Goldrick-Rab spoke with Lead MN students at their January conference. One of her key points was that students perform better academically when basic needs like food are met. Students from over 30 campuses came together at the conference to develop campus-based action plans including our two campuses.

Students at DCTC not only recognize the problem but have taken steps to reduce how many students are affected. For example, we have the popular Lunch Box program that allows any student on campus to take up to three food items three times a week. The food items often include granola bars, macaroni and cheese or ramen, and a snack. DCTC also provides fresh food items once a month through a mobile pantry. Filled with grocery items, this minibus parks on the west parking lot the first Wednesday of every month from 12:30-2 p.m. All students are informed about the Lunch Box and the mobile pantry during their orientation session.

The student senate at Inver Hills has focused on basic insecurities, emphasizing hunger insecurity prevention. With the help of faculty and staff and our newly formed Basic Insecurity Prevention Committee (BIPC), we are educating students about current resources. We also provide a mobile pantry which comes every other Wednesday and provides both nonperishable and fresh, sustainable foods. Last year, our Lunch Box was used 1011 times by a total of 427 students. So far this year, 322 students have made 1093 visits. We are only half way through the year, and we have already exceeded last year's visits.

The Lunch Box has an anonymous message box that allows students to share what the Lunch Box means to them. "If it wasn't for the lunchbox," wrote one student, "I would be missing lunch every day. Thank you, everyone who made this available for us."

As president, I am proud of the work our students and employees are leading. I am also grateful for partners like The Open Door who make our mobile pantry possible. As the Hope survey results indicate,

basic insecurities are significant for students, encouraging an equally significant response from our communities.