

**Testimony of Thomas Hilliard**

Senior Policy Analyst  
The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice  
Temple University

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Higher Education Subcommittee**

In Support of HB 582, Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program; notice to students

And

In Support of HB 629, Hunger Free Campus Grant Program

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My name is Thomas Hilliard, and I am Senior Policy Analyst at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. **Our primary expertise is in basic needs security, including food security, among college students.**

Our work at The Hope Center shows that basic needs insecurity in higher education is real, pervasive, and something that we can absolutely solve with the right combination of political will and strategic investment. I am therefore testifying to offer The Hope Center's full support for HB 582 and HB 629, both of which will support the food security of Virginia's college students, thereby improving student success and contributing to the state's economic prosperity.

## KEY FACTS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Food insecurity harms academic, social, and psychological functioning among college students.<sup>1</sup> Students experiencing food insecurity are often more likely to struggle with academics, drop classes, and have lower (and slower) completion rates. Additionally, food insecure students report higher rates of illness, both physical and psychological. Ensuring college success by reducing student food insecurity serves to address racial injustice and interrupt generational poverty.

The Hope Center was the first to collect data on college food insecurity across the nation. Our #RealCollege Survey, which has been fielded every year since 2015, is the nation's largest annual assessment of students' basic needs that provides a detailed assessment of the problem by institution, and often by state. Our most recent survey, fielded in the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, included responses from nearly 200,000 students attending 202 colleges and universities in 42 states.

In particular, we have been able to take a deep dive into the experiences of students in the Virginia Community College System.<sup>2</sup> Our survey received responses from 11,000 students at all of Virginia's 23 community colleges. Consistent with what we see in states across the country, over half of VCCS students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity, and thirty-two percent, almost one in three, reported experiencing low or very low levels of food security within the past month: that's one in three students who struggled to learn because they could not access or afford balanced meals; because they were worried about whether food would run out before

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<sup>1</sup> Leung, C., Farooqui, S., Wolfson, J., and Cohen, J. (August 2020). "Understanding the Cumulative Burden of Basic Needs Insecurities: Associations With Health and Academic Achievement Among College Students." *American Journal of Health Promotion*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0890117120946210>; Maroto, M., Snelling, A., Linck, H. (2014). "Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and association with grade point average." *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10668926.2013.850758>

<sup>2</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). #RealCollege 2021: Basic needs insecurity among Virginia community college students during the ongoing pandemic. <https://hope4college.com/rc2021-vccs/>

they could buy more; because they were experiencing hunger. Furthermore, basic needs insecurity has a powerful effect on racial equity, which Virginia’s “Pathways to Opportunity” strategic plan has identified as a key priority. For example, 63% of African-American students have experienced basic needs insecurity, 14 percentage points higher than the rate for white students.

In too many cases, students are locked out of supports that would help them afford food, are unable to navigate complex bureaucracies, or receive wrong information about eligibility. For example, only 21% of VCCS students who reported basic needs insecurity received benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), even though many students may meet eligibility criteria for SNAP. Sixty-three percent did not apply for benefits because they did not know how.

## **HB 582: THE IMPORTANCE OF SNAP OUTREACH**

It is crucial to connect students with benefits that would help them reduce food insecurity and remain in school, and give them consistent resources to navigate the process of applying for and receiving those benefits. HB 582 would require public institutions of higher education to ensure that students have access to accurate information about the federal SNAP program, including eligibility and how to apply. The Hope Center strongly supports this legislation, which builds on the earlier achievement of HB 1820 in clarifying SNAP eligibility.

SNAP is the most powerful asset available for reducing food insecurity, and the programmatic cost is entirely covered by the Federal government. Research has shown that SNAP reduces food insecurity and strengthens local economies during recessions.<sup>3</sup> SNAP enrollment is associated with higher retention rates among students,<sup>4</sup> and findings from a demonstration project that connected low-income students to public benefits showed that SNAP, with other public benefits, can increase students’ financial stability and improve their likelihood of completing degrees or certificates.<sup>5</sup> As the cornerstone of the nation’s nutrition assistance safety net, SNAP helps ensure low-income people (those at 130% of poverty or below) have access to healthy, affordable food.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Canning, P. and Stacy, B. (July 2019). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier, ERR-265, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/93529/err-265.pdf?v=7262.1>

<sup>4</sup> Carr, B. and London, R. (2020). “Healthy, Housed, and Well-Fed: Exploring Basic Needs Support Programming in the Context of University Student Success.” *AERA Open*. [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2332858420972619?\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk=\\_\\_vuP6z3MzTN2ac9wlvTYCARLZ8mNxdHAZ.iXDXA2ntRA-1642805687-0-gaNycGzNB6U](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2332858420972619?_cf_chl_jschl_tk=__vuP6z3MzTN2ac9wlvTYCARLZ8mNxdHAZ.iXDXA2ntRA-1642805687-0-gaNycGzNB6U)

<sup>5</sup> Benefits Access for College Completion, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2017, <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/04/Benefits-Access-for-College-Completion-Lessons-Learned.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, January 6, 2022. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>

Yet the vast majority of students who should receive SNAP benefits are going without. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), which provides more sophisticated analysis of students' SNAP takeup than any other state, found that 104,000 students at public higher education institutions in Virginia were potentially eligible for SNAP in 2019, but only 11,700 were receiving it – about one in nine potentially eligible students.<sup>7</sup> HB 582 would help close that gap to ensure more students have the information they need to access SNAP.

Misinformation continues to circulate about college student eligibility for SNAP, creating a need for states to step in and help students. Federal law limits the availability of SNAP benefits to low-income college students that meet sometimes complex criteria, which can be confusing, especially to students who are first generation or receive little support from their family. Last year, Congress took the necessary step of temporarily expanding SNAP eligibility for students with a \$0 Expected Family Contribution and those eligible for work study, and reaching potentially eligible students represents a powerful but time-limited opportunity. In addition, the Biden Administration and the USDA revised and updated the Thrifty Food Plan which will expand SNAP benefits by nearly 25 percent from pre-pandemic levels.<sup>12</sup>

These two efforts will only be successful if states like Virginia help students understand and apply for benefits. HB 582 would help address the SNAP information gap, provide awareness of expanded eligibility criteria, and ensure colleges demystify SNAP for their students by providing SNAP information across a range of means, including college websites, orientation, and emails.<sup>8</sup> Virginia institutions have an opportunity and obligation to connect students with benefits that have been expanded during the pandemic. By any measure, far more students are eligible for SNAP than currently receive it, and HB 582 will help to close that gap.

## **HB 629: THE VALUE OF MOBILIZING HUNGER-FREE CAMPUSES**

HB 629 would establish the Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program to address student hunger at public colleges and universities, leverage sustainable solutions to address basic food needs, raise awareness of services offered to address hunger, and build strategic partnerships to address students' food insecurity. The Hope Center strongly supports this legislation, which reflects the lessons gained from hunger-free campus programs in several other states.

Many institutions in Virginia are already doing good work to address food insecurity on their campuses:

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<sup>7</sup> Undergraduate Fall Enrollment, SNAP Participation and Potential Eligibility. State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. <https://dashboards.schev.edu/college-students-on-snap>

<sup>8</sup> Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits, Government Accountability Office, 2018. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-95>

- Tidewater Community College is partnering with the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore in a five-year initiative to establish food banks at its campuses.<sup>9</sup>
- Old Dominion University launched FeedODU, a student engagement enrollment services initiative which addresses food insecurity by connecting students to a network of food resources, education, and support.
- Virginia Tech conducted its own study of food insecurity, which found that 29% of undergraduate students and 35% of graduate students were food insecure, and provided recommendations for supporting students.<sup>10</sup> The university then created a task force to identify next steps, and followed up by creating a unique facility called The Market to “build lasting relationships with, and provide ongoing nutritional support for, the students that visit each week.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet institutions that seek to address food insecurity struggle with inadequate resources and inconsistent relationships with state and local agencies and potential partners. The will to make a difference must be paired with resources and other forms of support.

This bill would create a grant program to invest in dedicated staff on every campus to coordinate benefits and initiatives for students. Participating institutions will be required to notify students who receive need-based financial aid of their potential eligibility to receive SNAP and other food assistance programs, which as mentioned, can be transformative for the thousands of students who may be eligible for SNAP or other benefits but are not receiving benefits.

## CONCLUSION

At both the state and federal levels, our higher education and public benefit systems have fallen behind the times. Students are dropping out of college not for lack of talent but for lack of food. This is the legacy of a lack of investment and of misunderstandings and clichés about who students are and what they need to succeed. More robust SNAP outreach and a hunger-free campus program are necessary steps to build sustainable investments to solve the very real problem of campus hunger.

I thank this committee for its leadership and for the opportunity to share our perspective and data. We look forward to working with you to end the crisis of food and basic needs insecurity across the Commonwealth.

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<sup>9</sup> Tidewater Community College (April 2019). “TCC partners with the Food Bank to help students in need.”

<https://news.tcc.edu/tcc-partners-with-the-foodbank-to-help-students-in-need/>

<sup>10</sup> Hall, R. et al (October 2019). Virginia Tech Food Access and Security Study. Virginia Tech.

<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/95218>

<sup>11</sup> Snell, B (September 29, 2019). “An innovative approach to fighting hunger.” Virginia Tech.