

January 8, 2016

Hunger

“Hunger” is the title of an essay in yesterday’s Inside Higher Education. I hope you will take the time to go read that essay.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/07/toll-hunger-takes-college-students-essay>

I found the article sad, and more than a little alarming. And I find it disquieting to think that this problem is a reality on so many campuses and for so many students, and I have NEVER seen it addressed in any way at a professional meeting or on any of the listservs I monitor for people involved in disability services in higher education. And I have to wonder why that is – and what we are missing!

I read lots of posts that wonder about how to get the right assistive technology to students with disabilities, but I’ve never seen one that wonders if John will be able to hear the text-to-speech application over the sound of his stomach growling. We have lots of students who report problems in focusing attention. But I’ve never seen anyone speculate on hunger as a reason that complicates Sally’s distraction from the academic tasks before her. Maybe this isn’t a significant issue for students with disabilities. Maybe. I have no idea – do you?

We are quick, these days, to suggest that students with disabilities should be considered as full members of the campus community, and that employing Universal Design should be a campus-wide initiative – because it will help make the institution a more user-friendly environment for the students we serve. But when was the last time that we took an active role or interest in other campus-wide initiatives? Are we so tunnel-focused on issues of students with disabilities that we are only ready to contribute to the welfare of the whole if it benefits the welfare of our part of that whole?

Think it isn’t an issue on your campus? Go take a look at the list of institutions currently affiliated with the College and University Food Bank Alliance (<http://www.cufba.org>). I found the names of most of the institutions who played in the recent round of college football bowl games. The community colleges are not alone here. There is significant representation from 4-year state institutions, and even some private institutions and proprietary schools. And these are just the schools who have affiliated with this larger effort.

I went looking for a quote to use to end this piece, and instead I found some quotes that seem to be part of what I am trying to say:

Hunger is not an issue of charity. It is an issue of justice.

If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed one.

I won’t be impressed with technology until I can download food.

I am not afraid that the world will end. I am afraid that the world will continue without changing anything.

I don't have an answer. I don't even have a place to start. I don't know what I, personally, can do to help. But I'm going to find out.

July 15, 2016

Food For Thought

(Your roving reporter, here, coming to you live from Indianapolis, at AHEAD, 2016)

I am **appalled** at the articles I read and the information I continue to gather that speaks to the huge (and growing!) number of students currently enrolled in colleges across the country who are hungry. Really hungry. Constantly hungry. "Food insecurity" is the current "in" term for students who have gone without food at least one day in the last week, or who don't know where (or when!) their next meal will come from. And there are a lot of them.

Ohio State University did a study of its undergraduates within the last year and determined that somewhere in the neighborhood of 15% of their students fit the profile for "food insecure." Remembering the size of OSU's population, that works out to something over 7,000 students. Read that again... 7,000+ students at THE Ohio State University who go hungry on a regular basis. HOW CAN THAT BE???

I can give you all the numbers and statistics that add up to this alarming situation, but the even more jolting realization is that the situation at OSU is not unique. As of last week, the College and University Food Bank Alliance (www.cufba.org) lists 339 colleges throughout the country that have opened food banks on campus to support their students on campus (and those are just the ones that have found their way to the organization – there are almost certainly more out there). Is your campus on the list? If you know that it is, what are you doing to support those efforts? If you DON'T know if your campus is on the list – go find out.

How often do you attend professional meetings or read postings on our professional listservs in which DSS providers lament the fact that "no one cares about students with disabilities on this campus except me/this office. If we weren't doing something to support students with disabilities, no one else would. How do I make the campus understand that support for students with disabilities is EVERYONE's concern?" To which my response is, "you get PAID to care about students with disabilities on your campus. How much do you care, and what are you doing, to support all the students on your campus? Why should others care about your parochial concerns if you aren't doing anything to show that you are part of a caring community on campus?"

At the AHEAD conference this week, I had a box on my table in the Exhibit Hall that was marked with a sign for "Friends of the Buckeye Food Alliance" (the food bank at Ohio State). I invited conference goers to pitch in (literally!) and bring me the hotel amenities (from shampoo and body lotion to coffee and tea packets) that they hadn't used. As I write this, we have already collected more than 30 pounds of bottles, tubes, etc., and there is still this morning's haul to be added to that. I'll be taking all those supplies back to Columbus with me for the food

bank. I thank my friends and colleagues who contributed. It is a tangible way to show your support and to do something actively. It's a start! The question is, where do we go from here?

In my conversations about this with folks during the week, several people pointed out that, knowing what we do about the demographics, it is likely that there are students with disabilities among the students who are hungry. I am sure that is true – but that is NOT why I think we should care. I want people to care because there are **STUDENTS** who are hungry, not because there are students with disabilities who are hungry!

I had this great idea for grounding this essay in a review of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and reminding readers that we have recognized, for many years, that full attention on self-actualization (where else would you place educational attainment?) can't happen unless more primary needs are met – and food is at the bottom of that pyramid. But I decided that it was more important (for now) to stress DOING something about the problem, instead of defining the problem itself.

There is an oft-quoted story about the old man, walking along the beach, who comes across a young boy surrounded by hundreds of starfish that have washed up on the beach in the night. The boy is systematically picking up one starfish at a time and tossing it back into the ocean. The old man admonishes the child with the futility of his efforts, looking at the huge number of starfish who are stranded and the small dent the boy can make in saving them.

"You can't possibly make a difference for all these starfish with your efforts."

The boy thinks for a minute, then reaches down to pick up another starfish and toss it into the water. He grins at the old man and says,

"I made a difference for that one."

We have to start somewhere.

Janie

If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, then what am I?

And if not now... when?

October 27, 2017
But What Can I Do?

There was a conference held in Philadelphia this week called #RealCollege. It was about issues of hunger and homelessness on college campuses. Regular readers of my Friday musings know that this is an issue I am passionate about. And, yet, I let myself get distracted with the excitement of a new school year starting, ongoing classes, and life in general.

I suppose that reading about the #RealCollege conference was the kick in the behind I needed to refocus. Here is the link for the conference's website, where you can read all about their discussions: <https://storify.com/wihopelab/the-second-realcollege>

What you read there will (hopefully) worry you, alarm you, and galvanize you to take action. Here are two classic quotes from speakers at that meeting:

“My students don’t need financial literacy. They need money.”

“Colleges discovered student hunger in the same sense that Columbus discovered America.” (It was there the whole time, and people had been dealing with it for years; the fact that many of us are only noticing now says more about us than about hunger.)

Reading through the report of discussions at the conference is both hopeful and frustrating. It is hopeful because it is clear that the issue IS gaining attention from some people who have the power to do something **transformative** to make a difference. People who can bring about systemic changes that will help a great many students in the future. It is frustrating because very few of my readers have that kind of power. Increasingly, we are aware that the problem exists, but we aren’t in position to do anything substantive to make wide-scale changes. We aren’t the decision-makers with the power to change to system. So what can we do?

[ASIDE: As I was writing this, I thought about one of my perennial arguments with a friend who is very into Universal Design of Learning. She has major objections to putting together a band-aid approach to providing services for students with disabilities from the DSS office when what is needed is systemic change that puts legitimate expectations on faculty to change the way they design their courses. My concern is always whether the current students with disabilities may bleed to death without those band-aids while they are waiting for systemic change.]

Someone else at this week’s conference was quoted as saying:

“We’re not going to food-pantry our way out of this.”

He’s right. We aren’t going to solve the problem by establishing and supporting food pantries on campus. That’s true. But it doesn’t mean that the food pantries aren’t needed.

While I have been distracted from these issues in the last few months, colleague Jennifer Murchison (U. of Memphis) has not been. She has been gathering and publishing a wealth of articles, videos, and ideas about hunger on campus on our Facebook page.

AD HoC

Acting to Deter Hunger on Campus

<https://www.facebook.com/Acting-to-Deter-Hunger-on-Campus-115136972490620/>

Unfortunately, as of now there are less than 30 people following the page. You can help us change that now. Tell you what... I’ll make you a deal. I promise to get started on some of the things I committed to (including a regular newsletter regarding Hunger on Campus for DSS folks), if YOU will take the time to go look over the AD HoC Facebook page and, hopefully, decide to “Like” and follow our efforts. Deal?

Janie