



Higher Education & Employment Committee
Public Hearing
March 2, 2021
Testimony
by
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H.B. No. 6229 AN ACT ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF FOOD-INSECURE STUDENTS AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

In October 2019, in response to SA 19-25, *An Act Concerning Food Insecure Students at Public Institutions of Higher Education*, the University of Connecticut conducted a survey using the validated survey instrument created by the US Department of Agriculture to assess levels of food security among its undergraduate students. In preparing this survey and, especially, in analyzing the results, we drew extensively on the research and policy expertise of UConn's Rudd Food Policy and Obesity Center. The data revealed that there is clearly a need for a differentiated response that addresses the variance amongst our different student populations, as reflected in the survey responses. Most significantly, the survey confirmed that the rate of food insecurity at our regional campuses (Avery Point, Hartford, Stamford, and Waterbury) is notably higher than that at the main campus in Storrs.

This difference is attributable to a variety of factors, among them the availability of a comprehensive meal plan in Storrs and the lack of such a plan at any of the regional campuses (though Avery Point does host a university-operated dining facility that offers meals for purchase). The Storrs meal plan makes possible the UConn Swipes program, which allows students to donate meals from their own meal plans that can then be redeemed by students in need. What's more, students have access to the Students First fund, a resource that provides emergency funds to students facing unanticipated needs on an ad hoc basis. Thanks to the generosity of donors, through the Division of Student Affairs the UConn Students First Fund has awarded nearly \$150,000 over the course of three semesters to students in need. While this fund is available to all UConn students, Storrs-based students take much greater advantage of the program.

Having confirmed the disparity between Storrs-based students and regional campus students, we have been working over the last year to develop strategies to address the specific, distinctive needs of the latter population, taking into account the different geographic and structural challenges these regional students face. We are poised to send out a follow-up survey to these students, which will help us to understand the nature of their needs better, evaluate the relationship between financial aid packages and food insecurity, and assess the impact of the experience of food insecurity on academic success. With this richer, more extensive data in hand, we can then turn our attention to both short-term and long-term solutions specifically targeting our regional campuses.

We are supportive of this bill and its requirement of a biennial survey. We applaud the designation of all Work-Study eligible students as eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

(SNAP) pursuant to the Federal Food and Nutrition Act of 2008. UConn will identify all students who fall within this category and notify them of their eligibility. Through our network of student support services, we are committed to insuring that all students who are eligible and wish to enroll in SNAP will be able to do so, whether they are Storrs-based or at one of our four regional campuses.