

Frank Lamas: Food security for all Fresno State students

By Frank Lamas

Many of us are fortunate enough that we don't wonder where our next meal is coming from. For some college students, however, that worry is a daily reality, and it can impact their success in the classroom.

Food insecurity among college students is a topic of national concern. Researchers say a combination of rising college costs, more low-income and first-generation students attending college and changing demographic trends are making this issue more significant than it may have been in the past.

If you haven't heard the term "food insecurity" here's a simple definition: The state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

For past generations, living on a lean budget might have just considered it part of the college experience. We've all heard the jokes — and maybe lived through the experience — of surviving on mac and cheese, ramen and peanut butter.

However, for many students who are coming from low-income families and of limited socio-economic standing, this may be a continuation of food insecurity they've known before. And they don't have as many resources to help them out. Even with the financial assistance Fresno State provides (a record \$200 million disbursed this year) college can be costly.

At Fresno State, we are committed to student success. We believe an important component to success is that students should feel secure about nourishment. They shouldn't have to decide between buying books and supplies for class or food to eat. They shouldn't be working two or three jobs when they need to be doing homework, studying for a test or fully engaging in their college experience beyond the classroom.

A 2013 faculty research project surveyed 674 Fresno State students and found that 30.7% of them said they were food insecure. Other data indicates the number may be higher, and nationally it's estimated to be over 50%.

Last fall, Fresno State President Joseph I. Castro recognized this as not just a moral issue but also a student success and academic issue. He charged me and a small group, including Vice President Deborah Adishian-Astone and Mrs. Mary Castro, to come up with ideas to assist our students.

In November, we launched the Food Security Project with several initiatives. The most visible initiative is a Student Cupboard, which provides current Fresno State students with access to healthy food and hygiene items.

In March, 444 individuals came to the cupboard for supplies and in its first 68 distribution days, the cupboard had 1,771 visits. Food supplied served approximately 6,000 individuals. Clearly, we are meeting an important need for many students and their families.

We are grateful to our faculty, staff and community members for their goods and monetary donations to the cupboard. We also are partnering with the Community Food Bank and other agencies to receive food.

The cupboard is open Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from noon to 5 p.m. We hope to expand our hours in the future.

Other components of the Food Security Project are:

- Meal Buxx: gift certificates for food insecure students (\$5 gift certificates for Paws-N-Go Market (North Gym) or meal vouchers for the dining hall.

- Value menu items at Paws and Go Market: low-cost, healthy options for students to grab on the go.
- Educational programs: We have about 10 classes working on projects for the Food Security Project, including public relations and marketing of the initiatives, the Hunger Banquet, educational workshops and more. In March we started budget-friendly meal workshops for students, CalFresh workshops and more.
- Mobile app: We are working with our DISCOVERe tablet program to finalize an app that will be an immediate way to communicate to students who are food insecure about where food is available at the conclusion of catered events on campus.
- Good Samaritan Fund: This emergency fund assists students who experience a momentous occurrence ranging from extreme misfortune to a personal tragedy that negatively impacts, or has the potential to negatively impact, their success at Fresno State.

Food security for all of our students is necessary and possible. We are off to a good start and believe that with help from the university's friends, we can make this happen. We hope to build a new student cupboard in the future to better meet the needs of future Bulldog students.

Frank Lamas, Ph.D., is vice president for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management at California State University, Fresno. If you'd like to donate to the Food Security Project, please email sadiv@csufresno.edu.