The Elephant in the Dining Room: Do NIU Students Experience Hunger?

By Michelle De Jean, Director of Marketing, NIU College of Business

For some, the recent holiday season invokes memories of food overflowing on dining room tables. But for many on college campuses across the country, an abundance of food is far from reality.

Several national media outlets—The Atlantic, The New York Times, Rolling Stone, among others—recently carried stories about hidden hunger and even homelessness on college campuses. A Washington Post article entitled “More college students battle hunger as education and living costs rise” conveys the heart of the matter in the title alone and for readers here begs the question: how many NIU students go hungry? How often? Once a month? Every week? Every day?

The Huskies Student Food Pantry estimates that 1,500 NIU students battle hunger. In order to gauge the full extent of hunger on campus, your input as a student is needed. Help make a difference. Take NIU’s first ever university wide food-needs survey at this link: go.niu.edu/hunger

All responses are anonymous. Please also share the survey link with NIU students you know. Thank you.

By Michelle De Jean, Director of Marketing, NIU College of Business
Getting a handle on campus hunger, a conversation gathering steam at a number of universities nationwide, is the central focus of NIU Research Rookie Jenée Carlson’s project.

Carlson’s study shines a light on an issue that often remains hidden...an issue for which secondary research reveals unmistakable need:

- **48.1 million** Americans (holding constant at the highest level ever) are food insecure (Feeding America)
- **600,000** persons in northern Illinois are food insecure (Northern Illinois Food Bank)
- **14,560** persons in DeKalb County are food insecure (Northern Illinois Food Bank)
- **1,500** NIU campus students are thought to be food insecure (Huskies Student Food Pantry)

“Initially, I wasn’t sure what ‘food insecure’ meant either,” Carlson says in response to a question about the phrase that accompanies those rather staggering statistics. “I’ve since learned that the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines ‘food insecure’ as a lack of nutritional food for an active, healthy life at all times.”

*It bears repeating: “1,500 food insecure” represents the number of NIU students thought to be battling hunger. Right here. Right now. Compounding the problem, as noted in the Washington Post story, is that food insecurity is often shrouded in shame and students are often reluctant to talk openly about it.*

To address this, Carlson launched NIU’s first ever food-needs survey. Her overriding goal is to learn the extent of hunger on NIU’s campus and to formulate meaningful solutions for students based on what she learns directly from them.

“NIU students themselves are the key to understanding what’s really happening in their lives,” Carlson says. “Together, we can figure this out. Even though the survey-takers are anonymous, no student is alone in this fight.”

Not even Carlson. For this project, she works with a number of like-minded individuals, many of them well-versed in making an impact. They range from a highly accomplished faculty mentor to experts seasoned in the battle against hunger.

“After Jenée introduced herself to me to discuss research ideas, the first thing she said was: ‘I want the work to make a genuine impact,’” Dennis Barsema recalls.

Barsema happens to be a strong advocate for making a difference, and Research Rookies provides a perfect venue to make meaningful things occur. NIU’s Research Rookies program links together undergraduate first-year, sophomore...
Beyond serving as Carlson’s Research Rookie faculty mentor, Barsema’s long list of accomplishments also includes founding the social entrepreneurship program in NIU’s College of Business.

The field of social entrepreneurship and its underpinnings of doing business differently have gained not only traction but momentum and not only in classrooms but within actual firms across the country in a variety of industries. Socially responsible organizations measure the impact of everything they do in three key areas known as the triple bottom line: People, Planet, and Profit. Ultimately, then, as a management department faculty member, Barsema focuses on redefining what it means for an enterprise to be successful. Beyond profits, success now must also include, and give prominence to, making a positive impact in people’s lives and in the life of the planet.

“Jenée’s intention to make a difference is compelling,” Barsema adds, his smile nearly audible. “She’s taking on a very big issue that requires her to work with a wide variety of people; both learning from them and contributing to the larger effort. As with most complex problems, lasting impact has a greater chance of occurring when talented and committed individuals collaborate together.”

Shortly after Carlson contacted Barsema out of the blue in fall 2015 (a first-semester freshman at the time), her path to creating an impact opened up even more.

“I knew about Mr. Barsema and his teaching focus. It’s incredible that I was able to meet with him especially when he didn’t even know me,” Carlson says. “I’m very grateful that he agreed to be my mentor. And it’s because of Mr. Barsema that I’ve met a lot of other really great people, too.”

In fact, barely two weeks into her Research Rookie project, Carlson began working side by side with key members (including a CEO) of organizations at the forefront of fighting hunger.

“I’m learning a huge amount from Dennis and from Julie Yurko, the CEO of Northern Illinois Food Bank,” Carlson says, “and Kelly Brasseur, who is a dietitian and also with Northern Illinois Food Bank. I’m also collaborating on campus with Kathy Zuidema, the founder of the Huskies Student Food Pantry, which is a member of the College and University Food Bank Alliance.”

“All of these individuals are amazing people who care so much and have accomplished so many things, including overcoming their own challenges at various times in their lives. It’s really tremendous to learn from them and join forces with them. It’s really humbling.”

And energizing.

Carlson’s typical day includes meetings and phone updates with all four individuals, often at the same time. Together, they created a food-needs-assessment questionnaire customized for NIU, the first of its kind for the university.

Typically food banks such as Northern Illinois Food Bank or Feeding America...
(the national organizing charity) develop and administer these surveys. And historically, these assessments tend to cover the county or city levels only.

For Carlson’s campus hunger project, however, she and her collaborators crafted the survey specifically to address the college student population. In fact, theirs represents one of very few food-needs assessments in the country to target higher education students on a university campus.

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“We find ourselves in the position of trying to understand student hunger without a comprehensive national study that breaks the information out by campus,” Julie Yurko, CEO of Northern Illinois Food Bank, says. “The data—and the solutions—cannot arrive soon enough. This makes Jenée’s research project vitally important.”

Feeding America, the nation’s largest domestic hunger-relief charity, organizes 200 food banks across the country, including the Northern Illinois Food Bank, into a powerful national network. Through this network, food banks then provide support and nourishment to their coverage areas, which include local food pantries on the ground where community members feel the impact most immediately.

Enter Kathy Zuidema of the Huskies Student Food Pantry. By day, Zuidema is a full-time employer relations specialist in NIU’s Career Services division. By night (otherwise known as her personal time), Zuidema takes it upon herself to operate the Huskies Student Food Pantry. In fact, she founded it. When asked why, she immediately replies, “I felt compelled.”

Zuidema goes on to say that her daily interactions with NIU students continue to reveal huge, unmet needs. Primary among them: students go without eating “often for a couple of days on end” and many battle hunger on a constant or near-constant basis.

“It’s incredible that Kathy created the Huskies Student Food Pantry on her own,” says Brasseur, a Northern Illinois Food Bank dietitian and NIU alumna. “It’s such an important beginning. Yet what we still don’t know is what happens when the pantry isn’t open. What do students eat when—or if—they are able to find food?”

Think back to those times when you experienced hunger pangs that kept you awake all night and you begin to have a sense of the situation. Yet in its worst form, chronic hunger does the consuming...consuming every moment. Eating away at your energy, focus, health and well-being long into an indefinite stretch of days. Devouring even your choices. If you could eat absolutely anything at all, you would, empty calories or not.

“Campus hunger is a large, hidden problem that needs attention,” Zuidema says, conveying an insight she’s gained from being on the front line as an evening and weekend warrior when it comes to actual Huskies Student Food Pantry operations and planning. “We don’t usually associate chronic hunger with food-rich nations or universities. But it’s quite real in the United States. It’s very real for many campus students right here.”

Indeed, it’s quite real for many college-level students across the country.

According to the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), referenced in the January 2016 Atlantic story on campus hunger, nearly 50% of American high-school students qualify for free meals or reduced-priced meals. A reality that for this group of individuals, CLASP notes, “…doesn’t tend to change when they go to college.”

At NIU, more than 1,500 students have
used the Huskies Student Food Pantry since it opened a year and a half ago. To this stat, Zuidema also counts easily 60-75 students who continue to visit the pantry during its twice monthly operations from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at its current location in the Grace Place Campus Ministry building.

“I was amazed to learn from Kathy how many of my peers utilize the Huskies Student Food Pantry,” Carlson says. “Then I volunteered and saw for myself.”

As campuses around the country look to address the complex issue of student hunger—caused by the perfect storm of a variety of factors, including economic realities, changing demographics, hikes in the cost of living as well as tuition and university living expenses—the number of food pantries on campuses has increased dramatically. According to the College and University Food Bank Alliance, only four existed in 2008. Fast forward just seven years to 2015 and the number jumps to 199 food pantries in operation on college campuses.

With growth like this the odds are very good that, without even realizing it, you probably know a student who has no idea when they will eat next.

“The choice for students shouldn’t come down to buying a book or buying food. It shouldn’t be a daily choice between stressing about where the next meal will come from and being able to focus on learning,” NIU Business freshman Carlson says.

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Help Solve Hunger on NIU’s campus.

**NIU students:**

a. Take an anonymous food-needs survey at this link: [go.niu.edu/hunger](go.niu.edu/hunger)
b. Or complete the survey on a tablet on March 3rd or April 7th at the Huskies Student Food Pantry, which operates from 5:30 p.m.—7:30 p.m. and is located in the Grace Place Campus Ministry building.

**NIU faculty and staff:**

a. Tell your students about this project and share the link to the anonymous food-needs survey: [go.niu.edu/hunger](go.niu.edu/hunger)
b. Encourage your students to complete the survey.
c. Complete the survey yourself.

**Everyone:**

*Show your support* for the Huskies Student Food Pantry.

If you have the means, be a donor to the Huskies Student Food Pantry.

Thank You.