



Written Only Proponent Testimony on House Bill 157
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Submitted by Laura Lanese, President & CEO, Inter-University Council of Ohio
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Chairman Young, Vice Chairman Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written proponent testimony on House Bill 157, the Hunger-Free Campus Act. My name is Laura Lanese, and I serve as President and CEO of the Inter-University Council of Ohio (IUC). Established in 1939, the IUC represents Ohio's 14 public universities, which together educate hundreds of thousands of students and drive innovation across the state.

On behalf of the IUC, I offer our support for this important legislation. The IUC supports HB 157 because it:

- Reduces one of the most common non-academic reasons students leave school.
- Supports public universities in creating sustainable infrastructure to support the basic needs of students.
- Leverages state, federal, and local partnerships to maximize impact.
- Enhances Ohio's workforce readiness and economic development goals.
- Promotes the health and dignity of Ohio students who are setting out on their own for the first time.

Food insecurity is one of the most urgent yet overlooked barriers to student success. According to national research, nearly 48% of college students have experienced food insecurity during their academic journey.¹ For these students, the college experience is not only defined by academic rigor, but by the daily uncertainty of securing a basic necessity—food.

Students facing food insecurity are more likely to perform poorly academically, experience anxiety and depression, and drop out of college before earning their degrees. In fact, researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that food-insecure students are more than 40% less likely to graduate and over 60% less likely to attain a graduate or professional degree.²

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6561835/#>:

² <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/food-insecurity-during-college-years-linked-to-lower-graduation-rate>

A student not finishing school because of food insecurity is not just a loss for the individual; it is a missed opportunity for Ohio's economy. Higher education is a proven engine of upward mobility, workforce development, and economic resilience. Every student who leaves school because of hunger is a lost chance to strengthen Ohio's communities, industries, and civic institutions.

House Bill 157 addresses this challenge by establishing the Hunger-Free Campus Grant and Designation Program to be administered by the Ohio Department of Higher Education. The legislation creates a structured, statewide framework for supporting colleges and universities in their efforts to reduce food insecurity on campus.

To earn a Hunger-Free Campus designation, institutions must demonstrate concrete steps to address student hunger. These may include:

- Operating or partnering with on-campus food pantries or local foodbanks.
- Promoting awareness and access to federal nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP.
- Offering emergency assistance funds for students in crisis.
- Establishing campus meal credit donation programs.
- Raising awareness of available basic needs services through student-centered outreach.

The bill prioritizes funding for institutions with the highest share of Pell-eligible students, ensuring support reaches campuses with the greatest demonstrated need. This targeting of resources helps to smartly invest programmatic dollars where they are most needed.

Furthermore, HB 157 is designed with both flexibility and accountability in mind to ensure resources are best utilized at each institution. Institutions must use grant funds to support or expand basic needs infrastructure, funds cannot simply replace existing funds to fight food insecurity. It also requires reporting to the Governor and General Assembly so that the program's effectiveness can be measured and refined over time.

This bill is not about duplicating the good work already being done by dedicated staff and volunteers on campuses across Ohio, it is about building a consistent, durable system that benefits the students who need a hand-up, not a hand-out. Currently, many Ohio campus food pantries rely on the goodwill of individual employees, patchwork funding, and limited institutional support. HB 157 offers a path toward sustainable change by empowering campuses to meet students' needs with dignity and reliability.

It should also be noted that HB 157 is not without precedent. Nine other states—including California, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania—have implemented similar hunger-free campus programs.³ These efforts have proven effective at improving student outcomes,

³ <https://swipehunger.org/hungerfree/>

strengthening campus communities, and reducing the stigma of seeking food assistance.

With the passage of HB 157, Ohio has the opportunity to become a national leader in addressing student hunger. By acting now, the General Assembly can continue to signal to Ohio's college students that their health, wellbeing, and academic success are priorities.

To conclude, House Bill 157 is a smart and responsible investment in Ohio's future—our students. The bill ensures that no student must choose between staying in school and putting food on the table. Addressing food insecurity at institutions of higher education is not only a moral imperative, but also an economic strategy that benefits all Ohioans. The IUC urges the committee to stand with students across the state in pursuit of a hunger-free path to academic success and favorably report this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony. The Inter-University Council of Ohio is proud to support HB 157 and welcomes any questions you may have.