

House Committees

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14<sup>th</sup> House District**

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**Sponsor Testimony**

**H.B. 590: To Enact the Hunger Free Campus Act**

Chair Edwards, Vice-Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of House Standing Committee on Finance. Thank you for allowing us to present sponsor testimony on H.B. 590 to enact the Hunger Free Campus Act. The implementation of a Hunger Free Campus program is not just a compassionate initiative; it is a necessity for fostering a conducive learning environment.

This legislation comes to you today after much work with a lot of key supporters, including a great cross section of anti-poverty, nutrition, workforce and higher education advocates working in conjunction with Ohio's colleges and universities to craft a program that will effectively assist them in addressing an urgent and often overlooked issue that affects many of today's college students - food insecurity.

When I was a poor college student attending the University of Dayton on a Pell Grant, the Student Choice Grant, and other scholarships in the late 80s and early 90s, food accessibility was typically not a problem. Tuition and housing costs were more affordable and you could grab 3 tacos for a buck at Taco Bell and 3 Kraft Mac 'n Cheese packages at Kroger for the same, for instance. Further, I was a traditional college student – a single guy with no dependents living on campus.

However, today all of these costs are making it tougher for students to find sustainable and affordable food options, especially for the growing number of non-traditional students with children. In fact, I recently learned that the average age of a student at Cleveland State University – my Master's degree alma mater - is 27, so students are now coming from all walks of life.

Food insecurity among college students is more common than many realize. In fact, studies show that up to 48% of college students experience food insecurity at some point during their academic journey.

This issue goes beyond mere hunger; it affects students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. When students are unsure where their next meal will come from, they struggle to focus in class, perform poorly on exams, and are more likely to drop out. In fact, researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School and Public Health found that students considered food insecure were more than 40% less likely to graduate from college and more than 60% less likely to achieve a graduate or professional degree.

Further, food insecure students whose parents and grandparents had not attended college fared even worse in terms of educational attainment – less than half graduated from college. Not having all their basic needs met directly not only leads to lower education attainment, but of all the other harmful outcomes that students experience when they are food insecure and living in poverty, like poor mental and physical health outcomes, chronic stress, and making tradeoffs between basic needs.

A Hunger Free Campus program addresses these challenges directly by providing accessible resources and support systems tailored to meet students' nutritional needs free from stigma. Such initiatives ensure that no student has to choose between paying the electric bill or buying textbooks or groceries, allowing them to concentrate fully on their education.

Moreover, the presence of a Hunger Free Campus program promotes equality and inclusivity. Food insecurity disproportionately affects marginalized groups, including low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color. By addressing this issue, we take a significant step towards leveling the playing field, ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed academically and personally.

The benefits of a Hunger Free Campus extend beyond individual students. A well-fed student body contributes to a healthier, more vibrant campus community. Students who have access to adequate nutrition are more likely to engage in campus activities, volunteer, and develop a strong sense of community. This collective well-being fosters a positive campus atmosphere and enhances the overall educational experience for everyone.

Many institutions in our state have some sort of basic needs program, but the college student basic needs landscape in Ohio is hodge-podged. There is not consistency on where the pantries live, the size, what is offered, what department they are under, and what you have to prove in order to utilize. On a lot of campuses, especially public and community college campuses, the campus pantries and the quality of them depends on a dedicated staff member to carry the torch and support the funding and grant writing out of the kindness of their heart. Sometimes it's a single staff member going to the local grocer on their day off to buy things for the pantry.

H.B. 590 asks the Chancellor of Higher Education to establish the hunger-free campus grant and designation program. It sets aside \$2.5 million in 2025 that the Chancellor is to award in the form of grants to qualifying institutions, prioritizing institutions with higher percentages of Pell grant-eligible students enrolled. Institutions must use grants to support or leverage existing basic needs infrastructure, maximize federal programs, build strategic partnerships at the local, state, and national levels to address food insecurity among students, and raise awareness on resources available to address basic food needs.

The bill also requires the Chancellor to develop an application process for a qualifying institution to receive a hunger-free campus designation. The Chancellor must award a hunger-free campus designation to each qualifying institution that the Chancellor determines satisfies two conditions. To meet the first condition, a qualifying institution must either: 1. Provide free meals to students who have demonstrated food insecurity or establish campus emergency funds for such students; or 2. Assist students with accessing food pantries or charitable food distributions by establishing an on-campus food pantry or charitable distribution.

To satisfy the second condition for a hunger-free campus designation under the bill, a qualifying institution must meet at least three of the five following criteria: 1. Ensure that students have access to accurate and current information about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), other available food assistance programs, and programs that support basic needs security, including program eligibility, application processes, and how to use program benefits. An institution may satisfy this criteria by doing any of the following: a. Including information on food assistance and basic needs security programs in all financial aid information; b. Including information on food assistance and basic needs security programs in new student orientation materials; c. Including information on food assistance and basic needs security programs in each course syllabus; or d. Posting information on food assistance and basic needs security programs in all on-campus housing locations. 2. Designate at least one on-campus employee who students may contact for information on SNAP, other available food assistance programs, and programs that support basic needs security. 3. Notify, on an individual basis, students who receive need-based financial aid of their potential eligibility to receive benefits under SNAP. 4. Conduct an anonymous, campus-wide survey assessing student food security at least once every two years. 5. Sponsor at least one event per academic semester to spread awareness about student hunger and provide information to students about services available on campus to alleviate student hunger.

A version of this bill has passed in California, Washington, Oklahoma, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Massachusetts

In conclusion, establishing a Hunger Free Campus program is not just about providing meals; it is about supporting the holistic development of our students. It is about ensuring that every student, regardless of their financial background, has the opportunity to thrive academically and personally. By addressing food insecurity, we can build stronger, more resilient campus communities and empower students to achieve their full potential.

I want to thank Sarah Kuhns and Hope Lane-Gavin at Ohio Foodbanks, as well as the folks from Swipe Out Hunger and Ohio Campus Compact for their instrument role in this legislation. I also want to thank everyone in Ohio who helps feed our fellow residents, from generous donors, to volunteers, to those who work for our foodbanks and food pantries - you are all doing God's work. It is an honor to carry this legislation and I pray that the members of this committee will support it and, thereby, invest so many hard working Ohioans seeking to further their educations so that they can improve their lives, the lives of their families, and contribute even more to the world's 20th largest economy, if Ohio were a nation.

I also want to thank my joint sponsor Rep. Dobos for joining me on this important piece of legislation. It is an honor to work with him.

Thank you Chair Edwards and members of the committee - students throughout our great state and we would be honored by your support.

