ABSTRACT

BEYOND RAMEN: STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAMPUS FOOD INSECURITY AT TWO CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Food insecurity (FI) among college students is a relatively new area of study that has revealed alarming rates of FI on four-year campuses. Most current scholarship on food insecure college students (FICS) measures the extent of the problem with scant attention paid to private institutions, including Catholic colleges. This study fills these gaps by exploring the issue of campus FI through the eyes of those experiencing it within the context of the Catholic environment.

This study utilized a case study method to understand the lived experiences of FICS at two Catholic colleges. It applied the concepts of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame in a novel approach to understand how participants made meaning of their experiences. Twenty-three participant interviews were included in the findings. Additional data was gathered from site visits, publicly available documents, maps, and conversations with university staff.

The findings are illustrated through a figure labeled the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity. This model centers the FICS within their campus environment and identifies the forces that influence the severity of the students’ FI. The adverse forces are comprised of the individual’s financial situation, which cause their FI, and the factors that exacerbate it. The protective forces propelling the FICS towards food security consist of coping strategies and support from family, friends, faculty, and university staff. Experiencing FI leads to mostly negative academic, social, and health outcomes for the FICS.

The findings revealed students used three interchangeable filters to make meaning of their experiences. The filters of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame were incorporated into a framework, which was labeled the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making. The Kaleidoscope shows how these filters influence students’ understandings of who is responsible for causing and fixing FI, and whether FI is shameful. By illuminating these filters, this study exposes the poverty stereotypes, which drove participants to avoid resources, hide their FI, and blame themselves for their situation. These findings demonstrate the need for universities to combat poverty stereotypes surrounding FI in order to promote students’ use of resources, address systemic causes of FI, and diminish its stigmatization.