JERRI CALDWELL HAMMONDS

Banish hunger on university campuses

For World Food Day, **Esther Ngumbi** *calls on institutions of higher education to help students know where their next meal is coming from.*

When I had to skip meals to pay for rent during my student days at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, studying became hard. In the first weeks of the semester, when I had enough money for food, I would wake up early to revise notes before class; lectures always made sense to me, and I was sharp in seminars. But as my food money dwindled, I went hungry and could feel my attention span shrinking. I would not spend my time learning, but thinking of where to get my next meal. Instead of visiting the library, I would sleep. I would stay in my room rather than go out with other students — and I struggled in some of my courses.

At long last, universities and research institutions are starting to pay attention to bullying, harassment and mental health. Now, they need to recognize that far too many students in higher education are hungry or are spending their time worrying about where to get food. A survey at two universities in Nigeria found that 45% of students had gone hungry or cut down on their food consumption to save money — and even higher rates were found at a university in South Africa. Rich countries can also face this burden. The University of California estimates that one-quarter of its graduate students have experienced food insecurity, meaning that they have skipped meals or reduced portions to save money, or ran out of food before they could afford to buy more.

World Food Day is on 16 October, and I call on institutions of higher learning to address food insecurity on their campuses. I urge them to strategize around both long- and short-term solutions. It is humane as well as pragmatic to ensure that students can be fully present and actively learning in classrooms — which is impossible if they're too hungry.

As an agricultural researcher, I study beneficial soil microbes. My ultimate goal is to find sustainable ways to grow crops and prevent insect losses amid a changing climate. I have also established Oyeska Greens, an agriculture-focused start-up in Kwale, Kenya, that creates farming systems that produce more food using fewer resources than traditional farms. But I am increasingly aware that efficient food production is just one aspect, although perhaps the most straightforward, of creating a world with food security. For the benefit of their students — and to create a model for tackling important problems — educational institutions should take on the difficult task of making sure that nourishing food is available to the members of their communities.

Some institutions have taken the initiative. Several have food pantries or gardens on campus. The University of California, San Francisco, created an app to let students know when food is left over from catered events, and some 69% of its student population — all post-graduates — have signed up. The University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, set up its Food Sovereignty Centre and other outreach programmes to encourage student donations and to offer meals and food grown in a campus garden to matriculants in need.

> **BUT AS FOOD MONEY DWINDLED, I WENT HUNGRY AND COULD FEEL MY ATTENTION SPAN SHRINKING.**

And educational institutions must adopt a more comprehensive, long-term view. But how?

First, universities should collect hard data about hunger and food insecurity on campus. In 2018, the US Government Accountability Office found evidence that this was a growing problem, but that there was a dearth of data. Students already take surveys after completing courses and at key points in the academic year. Some of these should be co-opted, or new surveys should be commissioned, to address food security, so that educational institutions can assess how many students, postdocs and junior faculty members are worrying about hunger.

Even simple steps are useful, such as compiling lists of resources for students who face food insecurity, mental-health issues and other challenges. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and the University of Oregon in Eugene present this information in online letters to students. Accurate data could help to get effective messages to the most vulnerable.

Universities should also work to devise fresh ideas for tackling these issues. Students are the most affected, so institutions should engage with them to design solutions. I can imagine an innovation challenge that spans countries. Campuses could join together to share how they have solved or mitigated food insecurity and other challenges. Education leaders should record and monitor what makes campus programmes addressing this food insecurity sustainable through the years.

In the end, the hard truth is that combating hunger costs money. Universities should set aside funds to help students cope. At the same time, governments need to step up and create nutrition-assistance programmes for students, or at the very least ensure that students are eligible for existing ones.

The good news: change is happening. A coalition of more than 100 institutions across 29 countries asks students to take the lead and push administrators to fight hunger and food insecurity. That includes raising awareness, holding food drives and more.

Students can do much more than they or the societies they live in assume, and they should not be afraid to try. While I was a graduate student at Auburn University in Alabama, I founded a primary school in Kenya. It now serves more than 100 students from poor families. I know at first hand how difficult it is for children to learn when they are hungry. Because of my concern for these children, I made sure the school would provide them with meals — supplied in part by four greenhouses that grow food for the school and the community. When these students get to university and beyond, they will be all the more prepared to tackle the world's problems. ■

Esther Ngumbi *is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*
e-mail: est28@yahoo.com