



Ruben Canedo

Beyond the Campus Food Pantry

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FIELD: Food Security

Ruben Canedo is an advocate for meeting the basic needs of all college students. Canedo, who works at his alma mater and is the first in his family to complete a four-year college education in the US, chairs UC Berkeley's Basic Needs Committee and co-chairs UC's Basic Needs Committee, a system-wide effort across all 10 UC campuses. Canedo was named one of the "30 Under 30" by the Global Food Initiative in 2016. His focus is access, education, outreach, programs, and policies that go beyond providing an emergency food pantry on every campus.



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Born in the United States, Ruben Canedo spent his childhood straddling the border communities of Coachella and the Imperial Valley in the US and Mexicali in Mexico. Canedo grew up in a mixed-immigration-status household that stressed the importance of sharing scarce resources.

“My parents raised me to never assume that people have their basic needs met,” says Canedo, now 29. “Many of my paternal grandmother’s clients were from undocumented backgrounds, barely surviving on the checks from working in the date fields. Her golden rule: If you come to my restaurant, you will get fed.” His Dad helped his martial arts students fundraise for travel and donated classes. His mom volunteered at schools and shelters. “That was the environment I grew up in. It was always about giving back.”

So it was second nature for Canedo, when he arrived as a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley, campus on a full ride, to share what he had. For his student friends, that often meant food. Canedo saw that many students were skipping meals in order to survive in one of the most expensive college towns in the country.

In 2013, Canedo began working at UC Berkeley’s Centers for Educational Equity and Excellence. “I was asked to identify the biggest challenge that students and staff have the least education, training, and resources to handle. Basic needs—including affordable housing and food access—topped the list,” he says. Canedo wasn’t surprised. “For many students, family finances don’t just improve because they go to college.”

A 2016 University of California survey (the latest available) found that 44 percent of its undergraduate students and 26 percent of graduate students reported experiencing food insecurity. Nearly one-third of those in need reported difficulty studying due to hunger. In December 2017, the GFI released a report, “Food and Housing Security at the University of California,” detailing the scope of the problem and efforts to address it.

“Students have been struggling for a long time. We just never embraced it as our responsibility,” says Canedo. “The university had all of these anti-poverty and anti-hunger effort but they were all outward facing, serving the local community. None of them served students.”

The UC Berkeley Food Pantry, launched in 2014, is the most visible response to the hunger crisis on Canedo’s campus. The pantry allows students to take five nonperishable food items twice a month in addition to fresh produce. It provides immediate emergency assistance to food-insecure students.

Before they had data, Canedo had students speak out. “I would show up with students at meetings so they could tell their stories,” says Canedo. “It’s very hard for an administrator—who could say this is not a priority—to tell that to a student who hasn’t eaten in the last three days or a student who could only afford to eat once a day for four years.”

The pantry, open to all students on the honor system regardless of financial status, stocks fresh produce from the Alameda County Community Food Bank, Student Organic

Gardening Association, and the Berkeley Student Food Collective, the campus's non-profit cooperative grocery store. A campus nutritionist weighs in on nonperishables such as canned pasta sauce and boxed cereals, and Cal Dining sources from a national distributor of natural and organic foods.

"You don't want to address food insecurity and cause public health challenges by not providing nutritious foods," says Canedo. "Otherwise, you're just feeding them here and then you're sending them to the emergency room."

In the 2016–2017 academic year, the pantry clocked just over 10,000 individual visits. But it's only one part of addressing the food security of college students. "The pantry is an emergency relief effort to keep students in crisis from starving," says Canedo. "That's not the end game. We're trying to solve ongoing hunger and malnourishment by creating an institutional model."

Canedo's work centers on increasing the graduation and representation of historically underrepresented students, including first-generation students, low-income students, parents, veterans, and older individuals. Many of these students struggle financially. For some, paying rent takes precedence over buying groceries.

What's needed, Canedo says, is a three-pronged approach beyond emergency assistance. Students need early education to learn about managing college finances before they even enter a dorm room. "Students are taught how to apply for college but nobody walks them through a financial aid package or how to make a budget," he says. "That needs to happen in high school."

Students must also develop food skills in college. Workshops on buying groceries, how to keep a food budget, and how to prepare and cook nutritious, affordable meals, should be available to all students, says Canedo. And students need to learn how to maximize the resources available, including applying for CalFresh, the statewide Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps. Navigating the government assistance paperwork can be challenging, so offering clinics on applying can help.

The campus-wide goal is to have all these pieces in place by 2020. Canedo wants to see a basic needs center on every UC campus that houses all services, trainings, information, and emergency support systems in one location. UC Irvine and UC San Diego have done so; UC Berkeley is expected to be next. UC Davis and UC Santa Cruz have confirmed they will follow suit in the 2018–2019 academic year, according to Canedo.

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As campuses struggle to contain costs, finding sustainable funding is a major challenge, along with finding space and funds for staff. But in Canedo's mind, it's about prioritizing problems and redistributing resources. "We cannot continue to believe that funding prisons and investing in prisoners is a better strategy than funding higher public education and college students," he says.

A movement that began as a campus effort is now UC-wide. The UCs have in turn joined forces with California State University and California Community Colleges. Canedo speaks with colleges across the country on the subject. "What we've been able to do here is 100 percent a testament to the village approach," he says. A one-college-student strategy is powerful from a policy and political point of view.

What drives Canedo? "This shouldn't be happening to any human being. There is more food than hungry people. This is not a resource issue. This is a moral, ethical, and political issue."
—Sarah Henry