



Period Poverty Among College Students: Access, Equity, and Strategies to Address the Issue

This brief highlights the equity issues and potential negative consequences related to a lack of access to menstrual products at U.S. institutions of higher education (IHEs). It also describes promising strategies and practices that IHEs can implement to increase access to menstrual products.

Introduction

Students' inability to afford adequate supplies during menstruation can create barriers to them accessing menstrual products (e.g., sanitary pads, tampons). Vulnerable populations—including college students and those with low incomes—face the most barriers to accessing menstrual products (Cardoso et al., 2021; Kuhlmann et al., 2019). Difficulty affording menstrual products is referred to as “period poverty” (Cardoso et al., 2021, p. 2).

College students experiencing period poverty are at risk for negative physical, emotional, and academic consequences. IHEs can take steps to ensure that their campuses provide a consistent and secure supply of menstrual products.

Period Poverty on Campus

Students with basic needs insecurities may be at higher risk of anxiety, depression, and poor physical health (Coakley et al., 2022). Many college students have trouble accessing and affording basic life necessities, including menstrual products.

A study of 471 U.S. undergraduate university students who menstruate found that 14.2% could not afford menstrual products at some point in the past year. An additional 10% could not afford menstrual products every month (Cardoso et al., 2021). An Australian study found that only 16% of college students felt “completely confident” in managing their menstruation while attending a university (Munro et al., 2022). Students without adequate access may use products for longer than is healthy (e.g., using a tampon for longer than recommended) or forgo using menstrual products altogether, which, as explained further below, can lead to negative consequences for a student's health and academic achievement.

By providing menstrual products, IHEs can help to meet students' basic needs. Because period poverty is more prevalent among historically marginalized students—students of color, immigrants, and first-generation students—it is

also an equitable practice (Broton, 2020; Cardoso et al., 2021; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2021). In a small but nationally drawn sample, period poverty was most frequent among Latino or Hispanic students, with 24.5% reporting inadequate access to products, followed by 19% of Black students reporting the problem (Cardoso et al., 2021). In addition, one in five first-generation college students reported not having sufficient access to menstrual products.

Consequences of Period Poverty

In general, university students report negative experiences with menstruation, such as menstrual pain, shame and distress, and difficulties with menstrual blood leaking onto clothing (Munro et al., 2021). These factors adversely affect their education through absenteeism, reduced engagement, and poor academic performance (Munro et al., 2021).

Period poverty magnifies the challenges of menstruation. Research shows that a lack of access to menstrual products coupled with menstrual pain and anxiety among college students impacts their health, well-being, and educational experiences and contributes to depression (Hennegan et al., 2019; Mason et al., 2013; Phillips-Howard et al., 2016; Sivakami et al., 2019; Sumpter & Torondel, 2013; van Eijk et al., 2016).

Very few studies cover racially and culturally diverse and transgender and nonbinary students' menstruation experiences. "Further research on the menstrual experiences of gender diverse, migrant, and international students is needed as there is insufficient evidence to date" (Munro et al., 2021, p. 2).

Addressing Period Poverty on Campus

Although IHEs have made significant strides in addressing the basic needs issues of food and housing insecurity for the students they serve, very few have fully addressed the basic needs issue of period poverty.

A few states are beginning to recognize the importance of combatting period poverty by providing or planning to provide free menstrual products on IHE campuses (Gruer et al., 2021). In 2021, California [passed a law](#) that requires public colleges to provide free menstrual products to students. This law is the first such law in the nation, and campuses were required to be compliant by the start of the 2023 academic year. However, the law does not apply to private colleges. And students at public colleges where initiatives have begun have reported that menstrual product dispensers often are empty (Forschen, 2021).

Experts say that program and policy responses are necessary to improve students' menstrual experience on campus, which will help to improve their well-being and increase their educational engagement (Munro et al., 2021).

IHEs can take local and immediate action to increase access for students on their campuses. Best practices for increasing equity and access to menstrual products on campuses have yet to be established, but recent research can shed light on what has worked and the challenges that remain.

[A 2021 multicase study](#) examined university-level menstrual product equity initiatives at four diverse IHEs in the United States. Each initiative provided free menstrual products on campus, although the programs varied greatly in their scope, funding, maintenance, and implementation strategies. Despite the differences, all four IHEs noted that success relies on student champions, administrative support, and addressing inclusivity. All four IHEs also faced obstacles in moving the initiatives from the small pilot phase to larger scale implementation (Gruer et al., 2021).

The next section highlights effective strategies and identifies challenges faced across the categories of student champions, administrative support, and scaling initiatives.

Student Champions

What Worked

All four IHE initiatives featured in the study were led by student champions who worked with campus administrators and fellow students to launch and sustain the programs. At all four IHEs, the champions were members of student government, giving them “unique access to members of the administration” (Gruer et al., 2021, p. 5) and an understanding of IHE bureaucratic processes. The researchers explained as follows:

Across all four schools, champions played a critical role in the success of these initiatives from initiation through implementation. In all cases, the menstrual equity initiative was initiated and championed by undergraduate students, typically with one to two students identifiable by fellow students and administrators as the initiative leaders. . . . The presence of one to two clear student leaders associated with the initiative seemed to facilitate success, providing unity to the student’s messaging and a singular point of contact for conversations between the administration and student body. (Gruer et al., 2021, p. 5)

The researchers found that the champions were primarily motivated to act to improve equality and inclusivity after hearing news stories or learning about fellow students’ experiences with period poverty.

The champions at three of the four IHEs were instrumental in generating campuswide buy-in, such as agreement from custodial staff to fill dispensers, and financial and logistics support from campus administrators to start the program. (The fourth school did not need widespread campus support because the student government fully funded the program.)

Challenges

Each student champion cited the “immense time commitment required” for pilot testing and launching a menstrual product equity initiative. (Notably, the burden on champions was less at two of the IHEs with more administration support and buy-in.) In addition, once the original student champions graduated, the initiatives lost steam without a clear student successor, staff support, or infrastructure to sustain the initiative.

Administrative Support

What Worked

The researchers found that administrators were essential for the success and sustainability of menstrual equity access initiatives because they were the ones who could approve and provide logistical support for the programs on each campus. To help gain administrative support, champions used surveys and petitions to gauge student body interest in menstrual product equity and used the results to demonstrate campuswide support and program need to administrators.

Administrative support also was necessary at three campuses to finance the initiatives, wherein administrators approved the use of funds from student government or other student budgets to run pilot programs. The pilots were then used to demonstrate the positive impact of the initiative and show administrators that products were being used appropriately, with little to no product tampering, stealing, or vandalism (which had been major administrative concerns). These activities helped get buy-in from administrators for scaling up the initiatives.

Challenges

The four IHEs were concerned about the costs of the initiative and the uncertainty of funding, which the researchers described as follows:

[O]ne of the most common concerns was the potential cost of the initiative. Across the universities, students and administrators alike struggled to estimate the real implementation costs. While administrators tended to overestimate how much the initiatives would cost, student's initial budgets often failed to account for less visible expenses such as the cost of labor to maintain the stock of the menstrual products and maintenance of the dispensers in cases of damage or malfunction. (Gruer et al., 2021, p. 6)

These concerns show that administrators need to work with student champions to create budgets and secure funding that accounts for ongoing operation and maintenance costs.

Bringing Initiatives to Scale

What Worked

When bringing initiatives to scale, champions at two of the IHEs secured grant funding to purchase menstrual products and used student volunteers to stock products in dispensers. At the other two IHEs, the champions conceived of and got the initiatives off the ground, but the administration fully funded the initiatives and their ongoing implementation.

Challenges

All four IHEs faced problems bringing their programs to scale because of a lack of time, funding, labor, and maintenance after the pilot tests. These resource limitations led all four IHEs to cut funding to their proposed initiatives. For example, IHEs reduced the number of locations where free products would be available. There also was unsettled debate on some campuses whether products should be in bathrooms assigned to only female-identifying students or if they should be in all bathrooms.

Finally, all four IHEs noted that a lack of ongoing administrative and financial support and a campus organization to lead the work made sustainability after scaling a challenge. Sustainability considerations underscore the need for IHE administrations to create policies and supports to generate and sustain menstrual equity initiatives.

Recommendations for IHEs

As the menstrual equity movement gains recognition, IHEs can address period poverty by taking steps informed by the experiences of the four IHEs in the study discussed in this brief.

The study's authors believe it is important to address the two largest barriers to implementing a menstrual equity program: administrative opposition and funding. IHEs can create structural solutions guided by the following steps to help mitigate these barriers (Gruer et al., 2021).

Work with student champions to establish, scale, and sustain equitable access to menstrual products.

- **Help student champions navigate the political contexts and constraints** on campus to garner campuswide support. For example, administrators can help champions gain access to leaders within the institutional

bureaucracy. This allows champions to address questions and concerns among administrators, custodial staff, and others who will provide implementation and budgetary assistance.

- **Advocate for shared responsibility and accountability** for menstrual equity initiatives. Shared responsibility for the program will help ensure that the initiative does not lose momentum when the champion graduates. Collaboration among student champions, student groups, and administrators can ensure consistency.
- **Find ways to make the “student champion” an official and consistent role** to minimize burden on any one student. Examples include
 - creating a role for “basic needs advocates” on campus who have coordination of the menstrual equity initiative as part of their job description and
 - making the leader of the menstrual equity initiative an elected position.
- **Support pilot testing of initiatives** to help ensure buy-in from fellow administrators and assist with scaling up.

Build capacity to support sustainable menstrual equity initiatives.

- **Commit financial and human resource capacity** to ensure that menstrual products are widely available.
- **Write funding proposals with student groups** that accurately describe scope, timeline, staffing, and so forth to help secure funding for programming.

Ensure that equity initiatives are inclusive.

- Provide free-of-charge menstrual products in all bathrooms.
- Provide menstrual products at campus food banks and food pantries.
- Use inclusive language (e.g., use terms such as “menstrual products” rather than “feminine hygiene products”).
- Include menstrual equity initiatives as part of broader equity/inclusivity efforts on campus.
- Ensure materials and supplies are accessible for individuals with disabilities (e.g., place soap dispensers and menstrual products at a height that can be reached by individuals using wheelchairs).¹

Additional research is necessary to understand the most effective implementation approaches for menstrual equity initiatives on diverse campuses. Specifically, researchers and IHE officials want to know how such initiatives impact the experiences of transgender and nonbinary students, students of color, and those experiencing homelessness while attending a university (Gruer et al., 2021).

¹ This recommendation was not listed in the study. However, it is an important consideration for inclusivity and comes from UNICEF’s guidance on menstrual health and hygiene (UNICEF, 2020).

Conclusion

Period poverty is a real issue on university campuses that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable student populations. Inequitable access to menstrual products can lead to a host of negative physical, emotional, and academic consequences.

Menstrual product access initiatives fit within the efforts of IHEs to improve the overall well-being of students. Addressing period poverty can reduce inequity; improve students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being; and increase educational engagement and outcomes.

IHEs should not wait for statewide or national initiatives to address the issue of period poverty; rather, they can work closely with student champions to ensure equitable access to menstrual products on campus. Student-run pilot initiatives to increase access to free menstrual products show promising outcomes. Administrators can create and support programs and policies that increase access to menstrual products, facilitate program scale-up, and ensure sustainability.

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