FOOD EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY STRATEGY FOR TOMORROW (FEAST)

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Business Administration
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Science

August 2025

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Riley Hoerner for the degree of Bachelor of Science
in the Department of Business Administration to be taken August 2025

Title: Food Equity and Accessibility Strategy for Tomorrow

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The issue of food insecurity on college campuses is often masked by the common trope of the “starving college student,” an image that's been normalized as part of the student experience. However, this mindset trivializes the deeper problem: students regularly face the inability to access nutritious food, which has serious academic, mental, and social consequences. This project focuses on how institutions of higher education can mitigate food insecurity with low initial investment while also reducing waste. Through strategies like diverting excess food from campus dining services and implementing student-centered resources like food pantries, this guide explores actionable solutions to address food insecurity.

Unlike the traditional view that food insecurity is just an unfortunate aspect of student life, this project underscores the importance of creating sustainable food systems on campus. Beyond alleviating hunger, these efforts can also reduce waste, promote student health, and strengthen community partnerships. By viewing food insecurity mitigation as both a moral responsibility and a strategic business decision, institutions can ensure students’ well-being while enhancing their operational sustainability. Changing the narrative from “starving student” to “supported student” is not just an ethical move—it’s an investment in student success and long-term institutional health.

Acknowledgements

I, first and foremost, would like to thank my family and friends for getting me to where I am today. I absolutely would not be the person I am today without their, sometimes incessant, expectations to make sure I am always doing my best. Particularly, I want to name my mother, Melissa, and my father, Justin, who provided fuel for my passions and ensured I always worked to the best of my abilities and never gave up on anything (no matter how much I hated peewee football).

Second, I would like to thank the University of Oregon, and everyone therein, who allowed for this passion to come to fruition. Thank you to my professors, peers, volunteers, and my coworkers at the Basic Needs Program for allowing me to explore this passion. Without this institution this proposal would have never been accumulated and published in its entirety.

Lastly, and not to be understated, I would like to thank my thesis committee. This project truly would not be what it is if not for those who helped me write it. It was only under their guidance that this thesis exited revisions and into the eyes of those who can create realized change.

Foreword

When I first arrived at the University of Oregon, food security was not something I had thought much about. I was drawn to volunteerism and community engagement in a general sense, but it wasn't until I began working with the university's Basic Needs Program in 2022, and by extension the ECM Student Food Pantry, that I was confronted with the realities of hunger and food insecurity on college campuses. What struck me most was how preventable so much of it is. Food insecurity, I came to realize, is largely manufactured. Born out of operational decisions, institutional priorities, and policy gaps, food insecurity can be significantly mitigated through relatively simple, sustainable changes. That realization was what ultimately inspired me to dedicate my thesis to the expansion and advocacy of food security resources, both at the University of Oregon and at institutions across the country.

Although I have not personally experienced food insecurity, I do know the strain of being a working college student responsible for covering tuition, rent, textbooks, and food while also balancing the demands of a full course load. That experience has helped me understand the precarious position so many students find themselves in, where the question of whether you can afford your next meal is tied not to effort or merit, but to systemic structures that do little to support students' most basic needs.

My academic journey provided me with a multifaceted lens through which to approach this issue. My studies in business administration gave me insight into the operational and financial dimensions of food security work, where what seem like logistical hurdles are often matters of institutional choice. My coursework in planning, public policy, and management informed me of the policy frameworks that shape access to food, while political science gave me the philosophical grounding to interrogate why these inequities persist, why systems are

designed in ways that keep those with fewer resources perpetually behind while the wealthy continue to benefit. Together, these perspectives shaped both the questions I asked and the solutions I pursued in this project.

Of all my experiences in college, it was my time working at the ECM Student Food Pantry that was the most formative. Coordinating volunteers, overseeing operations, and witnessing firsthand the steady stream of students relying on these resources showed me both the gravity of the problem and the potential for meaningful change. It also challenged me to think creatively about solutions, about how institutions could build new models of support rather than relying on interventions that, while helpful, have already been tested to their limits. Finding fresh ways to bridge the food security gap, beyond what has been widely attempted, has been the most difficult and rewarding part of this thesis.

Ultimately, my hope is that readers, universities, and changemakers alike can take something from this work that is actionable, that the ideas and strategies I explore here might serve as starting points for mitigating food insecurity on their own campuses and within their communities. For me, this project connects directly to my future goals in law and public interest advocacy, where I aim to continue fighting for equity and justice in the systems that shape people's lives. If this thesis makes even a small contribution toward reframing food insecurity as an urgent issue of equity rather than a cultural punchline, it will have served its purpose.

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Glossary of Essential Terms

Following are terms repeatedly used throughout this thesis. To understand what is being discussed, listed below is a short description of what each new term means in the context of this writing.

Core Concepts

Food Insecurity – "The condition assessed in the food security survey and represented in USDA food security reports—is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food."[1]

Food Waste – Any food that at one time was edible and not consumed prior to its spoilage or thrown away before any spoilage occurs.

Institutions of Higher Education – An institution of higher education is any post-high school voluntary educational institution. In many cases this may refer to colleges and universities, which are some of the largest institutions, but this term is used to be inclusive of community colleges, trade schools, beauty schools, community transition programs, and all others.

Basic Needs – The essential needs and services necessary to survive and maintain a decent standard of living. These needs include shelter, water, food, and all other fundamental requirements for health, safety, and overall well-being.

Food Desert – Areas with a limited access to affordable or nutritious food, often due to lack of grocery stores or reliable transportation

Malnutrition – The chronic lack of access to foods to uphold a well-balanced and entirely fulfilled diet.

[1] *Food security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security | Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security

Food Recovery – Practice of redirecting surplus food that would otherwise be converted into food waste.

SNAP – The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a federal nutrition program that provides monthly benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families

Institutional/Policy Terms

Public Benefit Navigation – Institutional assistance in applying for government aid or other assistance programs

Community Partner – External organizations that collaborate on food security initiatives

Institutional Infrastructure – Physical and organizational resources within an institution of higher education that supports students

Contextual Terms

Students – Those of all ages, genders, religions, and all other characteristics that are enrolled at an institution of higher education.

First-Generation Student – Student whose parents or guardians have not earned a four-year degree

Retention – Institutional measure of keeping students enrolled through graduation

Equity – Fair access to opportunities and resources, with attention to systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups

Accessibility – Degree to which resources are usable and reachable by all students, regardless of financial, physical, or geographic barriers.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Food Insecurity

What is food insecurity? How does this differ from any other kind of insecurity? What does food insecurity look like in history?

Food Insecurity: A Brief Synopsis

Before trying to solve the food security crisis, it is first helpful to describe what food security is. Food security is a persistent and multifaceted issue that affects populations across the globe, with varying degrees of severity. The broadly accepted definition of food insecurity is when individuals or households lack reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. This is distinct from hunger on its own, which refers to the actual physiological sensation of needing food, whereas food insecurity encompasses the structural and economic barriers that prevent consistent food access.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) categorizes food insecurity into two levels: low food security and very low food security.[2] Low food security indicates reduced quality and variety in one's diet, while very low food security signifies a significant disruption in food intake due to some form of constraint (financial or otherwise). On a global scale, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations uses similar classifications, highlighting the role of economic instability, conflict, and climate change in the exacerbation of food insecurity.[3]

Several key factors contribute to food insecurity, including economic disparities, unemployment, food price fluctuations, inadequate social safety nets, and geographic barriers to

[2] Food security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security | Economic Research Service. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security
[3] Background | Measuring hunger, food security and food consumption | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). MeasuringHunger. https://www.fao.org/measuring-hunger/background/en

food access. Rural and urban communities alike experience food insecurity, though the underlying causes and manifestations often differ based on regional infrastructure, government, and social support systems. While food insecurity is most often associated with developing nations, it remains a pressing concern in high-income countries, like the United States, where systemic inequalities create significant access gaps.

Recent data can better illustrate the scale of this challenge. Globally, the FAO estimates that nearly 2.4 billion people experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2022, an increase of over 500 million since it was taken previously in 2019.[4] In the United States, the USDA reported that 12.8% of households were food insecure in 2022, including more than 6 million households with very low food security.[5] Disparities are especially pronounced with marginalized groups like households with children, Black and Latino households, and low-income communities.

Understanding food insecurity at this broad level establishes a clear foundation for analyzing its impact within specific populations. Subsequent sections will explore how food insecurity has evolved over time and how it manifests within demographic groups, including, namely, students in higher education.

History of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is in no way a recent phenomenon, but rather a recurring issue that has shaped human societies throughout history. The availability and accessibility of food have long been influenced by economic structures, climate conditions, political stability, and technological

[4] The state of food Security and Nutrition in the world 2024. (2024). In *FAO; IFAD; UNICEF; WFP; WHO; eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4060/cd1254en
[5] *Food security in the U.S. - Key Statistics & Graphics | Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics

advancements. Periods of widespread food insecurity, often marked by famines and malnutrition, have played a critical role in shaping economic and social policies across civilizations.

Historically, food insecurity has been closely tied to agricultural production and subsequent distribution. In pre-industrial societies, subsistence farming was the primary means of food acquisition, making whole communities highly vulnerable to environmental fluctuations like droughts, floods, and pests. The reliance on hyper-localized food sources meant that any disruption could lead to widespread hunger and societal instability.[6] Some notable famines, such as the Great Famine (Ireland, 1845-1852)[7] and the Bengal Famine (Bengal Region of India, 1943)[8], show the devastating consequences of food shortages that are furthered by political mismanagement and economic constraints.

The Industrial Revolution introduced significant changes to food security by increasing agricultural productivity through various mechanization and scientific advancements[9]. However, these improvements were not evenly distributed, rather, disparities in food access persisted, especially among lower-income populations. The Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, highlighted the vulnerabilities of even the strongest countries in economic downturns, as millions faced food insecurity despite agricultural surplus.[10]

In the United States, the Great Depression exposed the inequity gap of being one of the world's wealthiest nations while still having widespread hunger. In response, the federal

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[6] Lähde, V., Vadén, T., Toivanen, T., Järvensivu, P., & Eronen, J. (2023). The crises inherent in the success of the global food system. *Ecology and Society*, *28*(4). https://doi.org/10.5751/es-14624-280416
[7] The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Great Famine Facts | Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/facts/Great-Famine-Irish-history#:~:text=A%20million%20Irish%20died%20and,life%20than%20most%20modern%20famines.
[8] Others, & And, F. B. (2025, July 19). *Bengal famine of 1943 | Cause, Effects, Death Toll, & Description*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bengal-famine-of-1943
[9] *Industrialization of Agriculture | Food System Primer*. (n.d.). Food System Primer. https://foodsystemprimer.org/production/industrialization-of-agriculture
[10] *The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl: 1929-1941 · Food Waste · USU Digital Exhibits*. (n.d.). http://exhibits.lib.usu.edu/exhibits/show/foodwaste/timeline/thegreatdepression

government under then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented New Deal policies, including the Social Security Act of 1935, which established unemployment insurance and aid programs aimed at stabilizing households. While not a food program itself, it laid the foundation for a broader federal role in addressing poverty and hunger. In 1939, the government piloted the first Food Stamp Program, which allowed low-income households to purchase surplus agricultural production. Although this program ended in the 1940s, it was revived and made permanent with the Food Stamp Act of 1964, creating the structure for what is not the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). [11] By the late 1960s, despite these interventions, food insecurity persisted and studies showed millions of Americans, particularly in rural areas and among black and low-income families, were still malnourished.

Public awareness shifted dramatically after the documentary *Hunger in America* (1968) aired on CBS, exposing the realities of child malnutrition to a national audience. The resulting public pressure spurred Congress to expand the Food Stamp Act and create new targeted programs, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in 1972 and the National School Lunch and Breakfast expansions that provided free and reduced meals to school-aged children. [12] These programs attempted to directly address gaps left by earlier policies by ensuring children and vulnerable populations received consistent access to food. While they significantly reduced rates of severe hunger, critics noted that many families still fell through eligibility gaps or faced stigmas associated with accessing their

[11] A Short history of SNAP | Food and Nutrition Service. (n.d.). https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/history
12 CBS News. (2025, February 4). Hunger In America: The 1968 CBS documentary that shocked America. https://www.cbsnews.com/video/hunger-in-america-the-1968-cbs-documentary-that-shocked-america/#:~:text=Hunger%20In%20America:%20The%201968,%2Dthat%2Dshocked%2Damerica/

benefits.[13] SNAP remains one of the most effective anti-hunger programs in US history, serving over 42 million Americans annually today.[14]

In the second half of the 20th century, globalization and technological innovations in food production further transformed food security dynamics. The Green Revolution (also referred to as the Third Agricultural Revolution) of the 1960s and 70s significantly increased food yields, reducing famine in many developing regions.[15] However, despite all these advancements, food security remains a pressing issue, influenced by contemporary challenges like climate change, economic inequality, and political instability.

Causes and Risks of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is the result of a complex network of economic, social, environmental, and political factors. While specific causes can vary across regions and groups of people, there are universal underlying conditions that consistently contribute to these food access challenges. These different factors can be grouped into the categories of structural determinants, economic constraints, environmental influences, and sociopolitical conditions.

The largest driver of food insecurity, as it has been seen in the US, is economic instability.[16] Low-income households are particularly vulnerable, as they often lack the financial resources to afford food that is both sufficient and nutritious. This can be further exacerbated by unemployment and underemployment, often making it difficult for individuals to prioritize food

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[13] Geanacopoulos, A. T., Branley, C. E., Garg, A., Samuels-Kalow, M. E., Gabbay, J. M., & Peltz, A. (2025). Missed opportunities to address SNAP for nonenrolled children. *PEDIATRICS*, *155*(3). https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2024-066652

[14] Percent of population receiving SNAP benefits in fiscal year 2024 | Economic Research Service. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/chart-detail?chartId=55416

[15] American Experience, PBS. (2025, April 22). The Green Revolution: Norman Borlaug and the race to fight global hunger. *American Experience* | *PBS*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/green-revolution-norman-borlaug-race-to-fight-global-hunger/

[16] *Food security in the U.S. - Key Statistics & Graphics* | *Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics

over other essential expenses (such as housing, education, and healthcare). Rising (and often volatile) food prices further compound these economic barriers, disproportionately affecting those with limited flexibility financially.

Environmental factors are causing an increased disruption in current food logistics. Today, the global food systems emit one third of all emissions. Global food demand is estimated to increase to feed a projected global population of 9.7 billion people by 2050. As climate change wreaks havoc, causing unpredictable weather patterns, including droughts, floods, and wildfires, there has been an increase in food supply chains. By 2050, average global temperature is expected to be between 1.8 and 5.4 degrees higher, and weather will become more extreme. As a result, yields of major US crops such as corn, soybeans, and wheat are projected to decline, creating both domestic and global ripple effects on food availability and prices.[17] Soil degradation, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss have contributed towards long-term food shortages, particularly in regions heavily dependent on agriculture. Natural disasters can also create immediate and severe food crises, as seen in the aftermath of hurricanes, earthquakes, and other extreme weather events internationally.

Furthermore, sociopolitical instability further heightens food insecurity risks. Armed conflicts, economic sanctions, tariffs, and forced displacement can disrupt food production and distribution networks, leaving vulnerable populations without consistent access to food. At the time of writing, 16 countries have implemented 23 food export bans and 8 have implemented export-limiting measures.[18] A food export ban occurs when a government prohibits the sale of certain food products to other countries to secure domestic supply. For example, during the 2022

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[17] Food and agriculture projections to 2050 | Global Perspectives Studies | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). https://www.fao.org/global-perspectives-studies/food-agriculture-projections-to-2050/en/
[18] *Food export restrictions hurt millions in least developed countries*. (n.d.). UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). https://unctad.org/topic/least-developed-countries/chart-march-to-june-2022

global food crisis, India restricted wheat exports and Indonesia temporarily banned palm oil exports.[19] An export-limiting measure is less absolute but still restrictive, such as imposing quotas or tariffs on food exports, like Argentina who has repeatedly capped beef exports to keep local prices stable. While these policies may help keep domestic food prices lower in the short term, they often backfire when extended for long periods. Export restrictions reduce global supply, driving up international food prices and worsening food insecurity in import-dependent countries.[20] Government policies, like agricultural subsidies, trade restrictions, and social welfare programs, play a significant role in shaping food security outcomes. Inadequate policies, or those poorly implemented, can exacerbate these disparities and limit access to food, housing, and other basic needs.

In addition to these factors, which can affect all people, there are certain populations who face heightened risks of food insecurity due to systemic inequalities. Marginalized communities, including racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, and individuals experiencing homelessness are disproportionately affected. Limited access to grocery stores, food deserts, and transportation barriers further restrict food options, making it difficult for individuals to obtain fresh and nutritious options for a reasonable price.

Whether in internal policies or governments at large, food insecurity has manifested as one of the key issues impacting the health and wellness of the constituency. Understanding food insecurity by the root causes and risk factors is essential when sculpting effective interventions. By addressing economic, environmental, and political determinants, policymakers and

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[19] Fao. (2022). *Global Report on Food Crises 2022*. United Nations Digital Library System. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3972013?ln=en&v=pdf

[20] *Why banning food exports does not work*. (2025, May 25). The Economist. https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/05/25/why-banning-food-exports-does-not-work

institutions can work toward sustainable solutions that improve food access and reduce felt disparities.

Manifestations of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity does not have a single experience, but one that varies in intensity, duration, and visibility. Recognizing the different types and manifestations of food insecurity is paramount for developing targeted responses and accurately measuring its scope. These distinctions help identify not only who is affected but how their experiences with food insecurity differ.

As the USDA defines, food insecurity can be put into two primary categories: low food security and very low food security. Low food security typically entails a reduction in diet quality, variety, and desirability, without any substantial disruptions in intake. Individuals or households in this category of food insecurity may rely on inexpensive, energy-dense foods that are nutrient-poor, or they may skip more costly food groups altogether. By contrast, very low food security is marked by actual reductions of food intake, disrupted eating patterns, and physical sensations of hunger due to insufficient resources. This condition often reflects a more severe deprivation and economic hardship.[21]

Food insecurity can be further classified as either chronic or transitory.[22] Chronic food insecurity refers to long-term or a persistent inability to access adequate food, often due to enduring poverty or systemic barriers. Transitory food insecurity, on the other hand, is short-term and normally results from sudden changes like job loss, natural disasters, or other emergencies.

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[21] *Food security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security | Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security
[22] *Definitions*. (n.d.). https://www.fao.org/4/w4979e/w4979e05.htm

Each type requires different policies and institutional responses; chronic insecurity may necessitate structural reform, while transitory insecurity calls for rapid relief and interventions.

The way in which food security presents itself can be both visible and hidden. While some individuals may show clear signs, like undernutrition or reliance on emergency services, others may conceal their struggles due to stigma or a desire to maintain social appearances. For college students, this often manifests in unique ways, as limited income, rising tuition costs, and the high price of housing for students frequently force them to choose between paying for food and other expenses (such as rent, medications, or necessary class materials).[23] Approaches to food insecurity often include skipping meals, eating less nutritious food, rationing food between family members, or relying on charity/assistance. These adaptive behaviors can have significant long-term consequences for physical and mental health, especially among children, the elderly, and those with preexisting conditions.

Different demographics may experience food insecurity slightly differently, shaped by intersecting factors like race, gender, geography, and disability status. For example, women are more likely to report food insecurity, rural residents may face geographic isolation, and people in cities may have to deal with high food prices and limited access to fresh food.

Understanding the ways food insecurity functions and shows itself is how institutions can develop a tailored intervention strategy. As displayed in the following chapters, these insights are particularly relevant when examining how food insecurity affects students in higher education.

[23] Thoelke, O. (2025, May 21). Why college students face hunger. *Feeding America*. https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/why-college-students-face-hunger

Chapter 2: Why is Food Security so Important?

Why is food security so important for the college student demographic? Are there any major concerns at present that should be immediately addressed?

Food as a Right

The concept of food as a fundamental right stems from its undeniable essential role in human survival, as well as dignity and the ability to meaningfully participate in society. Just as we recognize the rights to clean water, shelter, and basic healthcare, access to adequate nutrition is critical for human well-being and development. This right is formally recognized in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[24] and further elaborated on in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights[25], which specifically identifies the right to adequate food as part of the right to an adequate standard of living.

When we consider this right in the context of students seeking a higher education, the implications become apparent. College students face unique challenges in securing consistent access to nutritionally sustainable food. Many, especially in traditional universities, are living independently for the very first time, often on tight budgets even further constrained by rising cost of living and education costs. The assumption that all college students have family support or sufficient resources to meet their most innate basic needs overlooks the diverse reality of modern student populations, which includes many first-generation students and international students, who may not have the correct visas to work traditional jobs, and/or those from low-income backgrounds.

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[24] United Nations. (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations*. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

[25] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (1964). In *United Nations*. United Nations. https://treaties.un.org/doc/treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20pm/ch_iv_03.pdf

Recognizing food as an essential human right in higher education contexts requires a concrete response. Whether institutions want to adhere to international doctrine, provide resources for their students, or simply to market themselves as caring, it is on these institutions to recognize the rights of their students to holistic well-being. It may not always be apparent, but these insecurities reach far deeper than many care to admit or explore, leading towards mounting failures and distrust in the very systems meant to provide support.

The Breadth of Food Insecurity

As defined by the USDA, food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.[26], this seemingly straightforward definition encompasses a much broader and more complex reality that affects individuals and communities in varied and, often, unexpected ways.

Beyond *just* not having enough food, food insecurity manifests in the quality, variety, and consistency of food access. It includes situations where individuals may have sufficient calories but lack nutritional diversity, or where they experience unpredictable cycles of having and not having enough food. This can often lead to patterns of feast and famine, where people overeat when food is available because they're uncertain about future access. Such patterns can contribute to both malnutrition as well as obesity, challenging the common assumptions that food insecurity always presents as visible hunger or undernourishment.[27]

The relationship between food insecurity and eating disorders is particularly complex and often overlooked. Food insecurity can trigger disordered eating behaviors as individuals develop

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[26] *Food Security in the U.S. - Measurement | Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement
27 Hazzard, V. M., Loth, K. A., Crosby, R. D., Wonderlich, S. A., Engel, S. G., Larson, N., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2022). Relative food abundance predicts greater binge-eating symptoms in subsequent hours among young adults experiencing food insecurity: Support for the "feast-or-famine" cycle hypothesis from an ecological momentary assessment study. Appetite, 180, 106316. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2022.106316

complicated psychological relationships with food due to its scarcity.[28] This might manifest as hoarding food, skipping meals to make food last longer, or binge eating when food becomes available. These behaviors can persist even after food security improves, demonstrating how the psychological impacts of food insecurity can extend far beyond the period of experienced scarcity.[29]

Access to food is another important aspect to consider, with food deserts contributing to food insecurity not only because of economic barriers but also because of limited physical access. While food deserts often coincide with low-income neighborhoods and communities of color,[30] the concept extends beyond income alone. It includes barriers such as transportation access, the quality and variety of available food, cultural appropriateness of food options, and the time and knowledge required to prepare healthy meals. Even in areas where grocery stores technically exist, challenges like work schedules, public transportation limitations, or lack of cooking facilities can create functional food deserts.

The impact of food insecurity also extends into social and cultural domains. Many cultural and religious practices center around food and communal eating.[31] When individuals or families face food insecurity, their ability to participate in important social events and maintain cultural traditions can be compromised. This can lead to social isolation and the erosion of

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[28] Laraia, B., Vinikoor-Imler, L. C., & Siega-Riz, A. M. (2015). Food insecurity during pregnancy leads to stress, disordered eating, and greater postpartum weight among overweight women. *Obesity*, *23*(6), 1303–1311. https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.21075

[29] Hazzard, V. M., Hooper, L., Larson, N., Loth, K. A., Wall, M. M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2021). Associations between severe food insecurity and disordered eating behaviors from adolescence to young adulthood: Findings from a 10-year longitudinal study. *Preventive Medicine*, *154*, 106895. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2021.106895

[30] National Academies Press (US). (2009). *Introduction*. The Public Health Effects of Food Deserts - NCBI Bookshelf. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK208016/

[31] *The intersection of culture and cuisine: How food shapes our identity - Faculty of Arts*. (2024, September 12). Faculty of Arts. https://www.arts.ubc.ca/news/the-intersection-of-culture-and-cuisine-how-food-shapes-our-identity/

cultural connections, which is especially prevalent for immigrant and international students, where traditional ingredients could be scarce or expensive.

Time poverty, or the lack of time to shop for, prepare, and cook nutritious meals, represents an often-overlooked element of food insecurity. This particularly affects student workers, student parents, or those with other dependents that they may care for. Even when nutritious food is technically available and affordable, the inability to dedicate the time to food preparation can result in a reliance on less nutritious convenience foods or irregular eating patterns. This is another way that food insecurity can intersect with broader social issues like labor conditions, access to affordable childcare, and having sufficient work-life-school balance.

Food Insecurity as a Public Health Hazard

Food insecurity represents a significant public health hazard on college campuses with far-reaching consequences that extend far beyond just immediate hunger. The inability to consistently access adequate nutritious food creates a cascade of health crises that affects individuals, communities, and healthcare systems. This challenge impacts physical health, cognitive development, and psychological well-being across one's lifespan, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

The physical health impacts of food insecurity can manifest in many ways. When individuals lack reliable access to nutritionally dense foods, their immune function weakens, increasing susceptibility to infectious diseases and complicating recovery from active illness.[32] These vulnerabilities create a potentially disastrous feedback loop - as health deteriorates, the ability to work, study, or maintain stability further declines. The economic constraints

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[32] Morales, F., La Paz, S. M., Leon, M. J., & Rivero-Pino, F. (2023). Effects of malnutrition on the immune system and infection and the Role of Nutritional Strategies regarding Improvements in Children's Health Status: a literature review. *Nutrients*, *16*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu16010001

accompanying food insecurity often force individuals to make impossible trade-offs between purchasing nutritious foods and other necessities like medications or healthcare. Research has consistently demonstrated that food-insecure populations experience higher rates of chronic conditions including diabetes, hypertension, iron-deficiency anemia, and even obesity, due to a reliance on inexpensive, energy-dense foods with poor nutritional profiles.[33] These conditions can not only diminish one's quality of life but place additional burdens on overworked and expensive healthcare systems through increased emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and escalating costs.

The developmental consequences of food insecurity warrant particular concern, especially within the context of higher education. During critical periods of development, inadequate nutrition can have permanent effects on cognitive architecture and potential.[34] This is especially relevant for traditional-aged college students, who are often experiencing their final stage of brain development. The prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for executive functions like planning, decision-making, and self-regulation) continues developing into the mid-twenties, making this population particularly vulnerable to the developmental impacts of nutritional inadequacy.[35] When food insecurity interrupts this crucial window of development, the effects may persist long after the immediate crisis resolves, potentially altering life trajectories and limiting future capacities.

Food insecurity causes a large mental health burden for students. Students facing uncertainty about their next meal experience chronic stress that can fundamentally alter both

[33] Seligman, H. K., Laraia, B. A., & Kushel, M. B. (2009). Food Insecurity Is Associated with Chronic Disease among Low-Income NHANES Participants. *Journal of Nutrition*, *140*(2), 304–310. https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.109.112573
[34] Cusick, S. E., & Georgieff, M. K. (2016). The role of nutrition in Brain Development: The golden opportunity of the "First 1000 Days." *The Journal of Pediatrics*, *175*, 16–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.05.013
[35] Selhub, E., MD. (2022, September 18). *Nutritional psychiatry: Your brain on food*. Harvard Health. https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626

brain function and psychological well-being. Food-insecure individuals demonstrate heightened levels of anxiety, increased rates of depression, reduced self-efficacy, and compromised cognitive function, including diminished concentration and decision-making capacity.[36] These impacts can directly interfere with learning, academic performance, and, ultimately, completion of degree programs, essentially undermining the core purpose of higher education. The chronic stress of food insecurity activates physiological stress responses that, when sustained over a period, contribute to physical health problems through inflammation and dysregulation of bodily systems. This stress-health connection creates a dangerous cycle where mental health challenges exacerbate physical health problems, which can intensify psychological distress.[37]

The public health implications extend beyond individual suffering to create a broader societal cost. When food insecurity undermines educational attainment, it simultaneously reduces workforce productivity and economic contribution while increasing healthcare expenditures.[38] These effects disproportionately impact already marginalized populations, perpetuating health disparities and social inequities. For institutions of higher education in particular, student food insecurity represents a preventable public health risk that threatens not only individual well-being, but also institutional goals related to educational equity and student success.

Being able to conceptualize campus food insecurity as a public health hazard rather than an individual failure, institutions of higher education can recognize their role in breaking cycles of disadvantage by promoting public health measures related to food insecurity. The

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[36] Ejiohuo, O., Onyeaka, H., Unegbu, K. C., Chikezie, O. G., Odeyemi, O. A., Lawal, A., & Odeyemi, O. A. (2024). Nourishing the Mind: How food security Influences Mental Wellbeing. *Nutrients*, *16*(4), 501. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu16040501

[37] Schneiderman, N., Ironson, G., & Siegel, S. D. (2004). Stress and health: psychological, behavioral, and biological determinants. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *1*(1), 607–628. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.144141

[38] Dean, E. B., French, M. T., & Mortensen, K. (2020). Food insecurity, health care utilization, and health care expenditures. *Health Services Research*, *55*(S2), 883–893. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13283

consequences of inaction extend far beyond the geographic boundaries of campus, affecting healthcare systems, economic development, and social cohesion. Addressing food insecurity through comprehensive programs represents not a mere humanitarian response, but a necessity for contributing to public health.

Food Security at the University of Oregon

Data from the Student Wellbeing and Success Initiative (SWaSI) indicates that the predominance of food security among students at the University of Oregon (UO) closely mirrors national averages, making it a valuable case study when understanding the broader trends within higher education. SWaSI polling at the UO is the key to discovering how institutional factors and systems of support are impacting student wellbeing, engagement, and academic success.[39] Data from the Hope Center places collegiate food insecurity at approximately 41 percent[40], with UO's rates aligning closely to this figure at 39.5 percent[41], suggesting that the same pressures (financial strain, housing instability, and inconsistent access to nutritious food) that apply nationally apply to Oregon. The broader economic landscape of Oregon further reinforces this as a sample. As of 2024, the state's gross domestic product was approximately $265.1 billion[42], with a per capita GDP of $70,685[43] and a per capita personal income of around $65,426[44], almost exactly the national average income of $66,622.[45] Despite this slightly lower income

[39] *Assessment and Research | Division of Student life*. (n.d.). https://studentlife.uoregon.edu/research
[40] *2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey Report*. (n.d.). The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/2023-2024-student-basic-needs-survey-report
[41] *Impact | Basic Needs Program*. (n.d.). https://basicneeds.uoregon.edu/impact
[42] *Real gross domestic product: all industry total in Oregon*. (2025, March 28). https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ORRGSP
[43] *Per capita personal income in Oregon*. (2025, March 28). https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ORPCPI
[44] *State of Oregon: Blue Book - Oregon's Economy: Income*. (n.d.). https://sos.oregon.gov/blue-book/Pages/facts/economy-income.aspx
[45] National Average Wage Index. (2024). In *Social Security Administration*. https://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/AWI.html

level, Oregon's poverty rate of 12.2 percent is nearly identical to the national poverty rate of 12.5 percent.[46]

Compounding these conditions, Oregon ranks among the more expensive states for groceries, with average annual per capita grocery costs estimated at $249.38 weekly, or $14.12 higher than average.[47] This combination of near national average income, comparable poverty levels, and higher food costs reflects the structural imbalance that intensifies the prevalence of food insecurity, especially among those with limited resources. By situating the UO within this framework, it becomes clear that the institution serves as a perfect example of the challenges faced by higher education nationwide. As such, the University of Oregon case reinforces the argument that food insecurity is not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon, but rather a pervasive and systemic issue requiring response.

[46] Poverty in states and metropolitan Areas: 2023. (2024). In *United States Census Bureau*. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/acsbr-022.pdf
[47] *Grocery prices by state 2025*. (n.d.). World Population Review. https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/grocery-prices-by-state

Chapter 3: Why Institutions of Higher Education are Best Equipped to Address Food Insecurity

Based on a variety of factors, institutions of higher education are uniquely equipped to be one of the best front-line responses to student food insecurity.

Institutional Context of Campus Food Insecurity

Food insecurity among college students has shown itself to be a pressing issue nationally over the past two decades, with research consistently demonstrating that students face higher rates of food insecurity than the general US population. According to a 2019 survey by the Hope Center, 39% of students at two-year institutions and 30% at four-year institutions experienced food insecurity within the last 30 days, rates nearly double the national average,[48] with those facing food insecurity being 60% less likely to graduate.[49] Historically, universities were not designed with food access in mind. Residential dining halls and meal plans largely catered to traditional, residential, four-year students, leaving nontraditional, commuter, and low-income students without the same support. As the demographics of higher education have shifted, gaps in food access have become increasingly visible.

Funding structures play a major role in shaping how universities can respond to these needs. Public universities, which are reliant on state appropriations and tuition, often face tighter budgets that make it difficult to expand student support services beyond academic programming. In contrast, private universities may have larger endowments and more flexible discretionary

[48] *The Hope Center Student Basic Needs survey*. (n.d.). The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey

[49] Food insecurity during college years linked to lower graduation rate. (2021, September 1). *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*. https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/food-insecurity-during-college-years-linked-to-lower-graduation-rate

funding to dedicate to student well-being, though they also tend to serve wealthier student bases. Community colleges, which make up nearly half of all undergraduate students in the US, are particularly constrained. They typically receive less funding per student than four-year universities and largely lack on-campus housing or dining infrastructure, yet they serve disproportionately high numbers of food insecure students.[50] This funding disparity helps explain why two-year college students report higher rates of food insecurity than their four-year counterparts.

Globally, these challenges play out differently depending on how higher education is structured and funded. In many European countries, for example, higher education is publicly funded at much higher levels, and students benefit from subsidized dining services and housing supports that decrease their food insecurity risk.[51] In contrast, the US model of high tuition costs and limited subsidy places a greater burden on individual students to secure food and housing while also pursuing a degree. Thus, the institutional and financial framework of higher education both within the United States and abroad shapes the degree to which students experience food insecurity and the capacity of institutions to respond.

Transportation

Food insecurity often manifests differently across rural and urban environments, and transportation plays a decisive role in shaping these disparities. National data indicate that 12.1% of rural households experience food insecurity compared to 10.3% of urban households, with rural communities more likely to face higher rates of very low food security. These differences

[50] Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits. (2018, December 21). US Government Accountability Office. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-95
[51] Education at a Glance 2022. (2022). In Education at a glance. OECD indicators/Education at a glance. https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en

are tied to the reduced availability of nearby grocers, greater distances to low-cost food, and limited public transit options in rural regions.[52] Conversely, while urban areas may have more food sources in proximity, affordability and accessibility can remain as barriers due to the high costs of living and reliance on public transit. For college students, these dynamics are intensified. Those attending rural campuses may face barriers like long commutes to the nearest grocery store or pantry, while those in urban centers may deal with the expense of transportation and competition for limited resources. Institutions of higher education, therefore, sit at a critical intersection where they can use their centrality to mitigate both rural and urban access challenges by providing on-campus resources and linking into existing networks of transit.

Institutions of higher education often serve as a central transportation hub within their respective cities or regions, whether they are in sprawling urban environments, mid-sized towns, or densely populated metropolitan centers. This centrality offers a unique strategic advantage when it comes to addressing food insecurity. By placing food security resources on or near campuses, institutions of higher education can maximize accessibility, especially for those students who may be living in less expensive housing far from campus.

[52] Household food security in the United States in 2022 | Economic Research Service. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=107702

Large Institutions in Large Cities

Figure 1: The Chicago Transit Authority system map centralized on the University of Chicago[53]

[53] *Chicago Transit Authority Map*. (n.d.). Chicago Transit Authority. https://www.transitchicago.com/maps/

In large cities, institutions such as the University of Chicago demonstrate how embedded urban campuses can be within their respective transit networks. Students from anywhere in Chicago can take a bus or light rail line that intersects at or near campus, making food pantries located in student centers or nearby outreach offices easily accessible. This is particularly important in a city where one in five households is food insecure and where transit allows students without cars to reach pantries without incurring additional costs of vehicle ownership or parking.[54]

Large Institutions in Small Cities

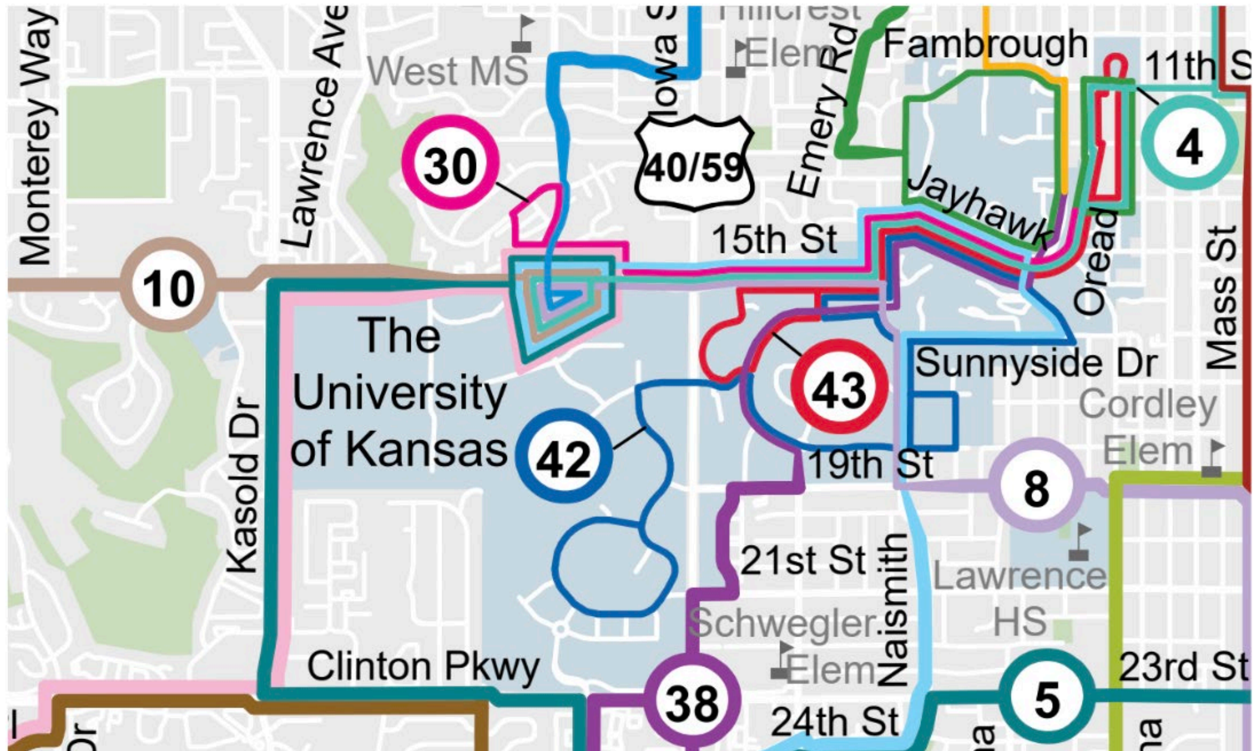

Figure 2: Lawrence (Kansas) Transit System map centralized on the University of Kansas[55]

[54] *Ending Food Insecurity*. (n.d.). Greater Chicago Food Depository. https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/get-involved/learn-2/

[55] *Routes - Lawrence Transit*. (2022, June 14). Lawrence Transit. https://lawrencetransit.org/routes/

Smaller cities with well-integrated public transit networks can also leverage this advantage. For example, the University of Kansas in Lawrence sits along multiple bus routes that connect residential areas (including lower-cost housing districts on the city's edge) to the university. This means that students without cars can still reach the on-campus food pantry. Lawrence itself has three community pantries serving the public, but none are student-focused, making the university's central role in food access particularly critical.[56]

Small Institutions in Large Cities

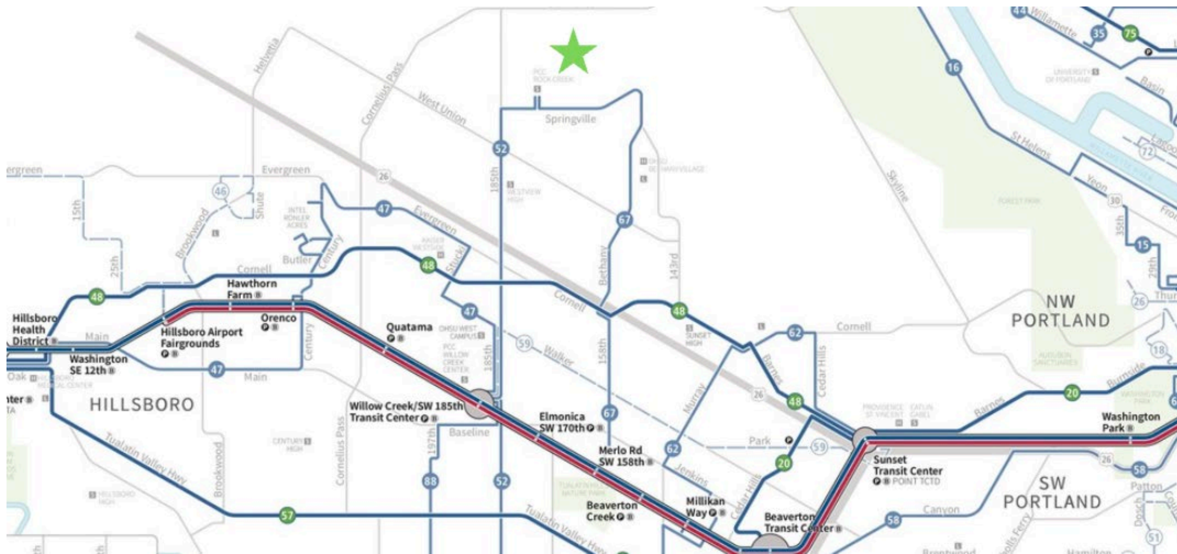

Figure 3: Trimet (Portland, Oregon) system map centralized on Portland Community College (PCC) Rock Creek[57]

Even smaller institutions in larger metropolitan areas can play a significant role in accessibility. Portland Community College Rock Creek, though not as large as other area institutions is situated on a major TriMet bus line that directly connects suburban residential neighborhoods to campus. This bus access ensures that students living in lower-cost housing on the edge of town can reach the on-campus food pantry without needing a car.[58] Although the campus location is somewhat remote, the transit connection mitigates geographic isolation and extends the reach of its food security programs.

Although comprehensive studies are not available at the University of Chicago and the University of Kansas to display student food insecurity rates, research at Portland Community

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[56] 2023 Community Health Assessment (CHA) | LDC Public Health, KS - Official website. (n.d.). https://ldchealth.org/493/2023-Community-Health-Assessment-CHA

[57] TriMet. (n.d.). *Maps and schedules*. https://trimet.org/schedules/

[58] PORTLAND INSIGHTS SURVEY. (2025). In *City of Portland*. https://www.portland.gov/budget/documents/2024-insights-survey-full-report/download

College has indicated that levels have remained consistent with other institutions, despite their more remote location and serving a student-base that largely comes from a lower socioeconomic background.[59] This goes to affirm that PCC's on-campus basic needs programming is working to effectively intervene on students insecurities.

According to the USDA report on food deserts, without reliable transportation, even nearby food outlets may remain effectively inaccessible.[60] Thus, having robust transportation infrastructure is imperative towards a successful program. Centrally locating resource centers near transit often determines whether programs will succeed. Other considerations would be the inclusion of bike racks close to resources, or 30-minute parking spaces for those who need to drive for accessibility. A successful program is one that works for its students, not one whose students must cross barriers to access. Transportation is just the first consideration when deciding to place a food security resource on campus.

Finance

Addressing holistic well-being of student populations is not a new responsibility placed on institutions of higher education. Among the mechanisms available to fulfill this responsibility are funds expressly intended for student enhancement and welfare. Traditionally, however, these resources are directed toward administrative initiatives like the creation of task forces, advisory panels, or exploratory committees, rather than tangible "boots-on-the-ground" interventions. While these efforts are well-intentioned and can lead towards broader understanding of the issue, it can inadvertently delay the implementation of these critical services. In the context of food

[59] *Student Basic Needs Survey 2023 | Institutional Effectiveness at PCC*. (n.d.). https://www.pcc.edu/institutional-effectiveness/survey/student-basic-needs-survey-2023/

[60] *Food Access Research Atlas | Economic Research Service*. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas

insecurity, where the need for relief is both urgent and constant, this tendency towards bureaucracy can be particularly detrimental. Institutions must prioritize action-oriented solutions alongside strategic planning by allocating the available funding onward practical, direct service programs that address food insecurity on their campuses.

A fundamental shift is necessary to begin working for students. These efforts should not be viewed as experimental, instead, they should be seen as core components of a campus infrastructure that is committed to equity and student success. Allocating a portion of existing wellness or retention budgets to these efforts is not only appropriate but essential, particularly when considering the link between food insecurity and academic performance, mental health, and student retention outlined in Chapter 2.

In addition to internal funding, some institutions may leverage external funding opportunities to establish and maintain food security programs. Fundraising, but institutional and grassroots, can play a critical role in developing and maintaining food security initiatives. Fundraising strategies may be short-term and aimed at establishing foundational (or seed) funding. They may also be designed as long-term campaigns that contribute toward the operational continuity of food programs. Examples of short-term strategies could include targeted giving campaigns during campus days of giving, fundraising events such as food drives or hunger awareness weeks, and crowdfunding efforts driven by student organizations.

Long-term recurring funding efforts require greater institutional coordination but may offer more sustainable support with a coincidingly lower effort on administrators. Development offices should be encouraged to incorporate food security initiatives into their broader alumni engagement and donor outreach strategies. Alumni, especially those who may have utilized food security or financial assistance during their time as students, may be particularly receptive to

targeted appeals for donations that support students' basic needs. Naming opportunities for campus pantries, donor recognition programs, or sponsorship of recurring food giving initiatives can incentivize larger gifts and foster ongoing relationships with institutional benefactors. For larger universities and colleges with an endowment, larger donations can also be placed in a subdivided account that will pay out continuous returns year over year, allowing for perpetual funding.

Institutions can also engage in creative, student-led ventures to generate revenue for food security programs. Campus thrift sales, clothing swaps, student art auctions, used textbook resale programs, and plant sales organized by environmental science or agriculture departments are all examples of low-cost, community-driven fundraising models. These initiatives not only generate income but also raise awareness around the issue. Additionally, they offer opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, student leadership development, and community engagement, making them valuable as well as financially beneficial.

Another, often underutilized resource, is the application for government and nonprofit grants. Federal and state agencies, such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) or state departments of human services, often provide funding for food insecurity-related initiatives through grant programs. Similarly, private foundations, particularly those focused on education, public health, or social justice, frequently support initiatives for campus-based interventions. Institutional grant writers and research offices should be actively involved in identifying and pursuing these streams of funding. Collaboration with student affairs professionals and faculty members engaged in equity work can significantly strengthen these efforts.

While many student governments have expressed a strong interest in addressing students' basic needs, reliance on student government allocations as a primary funding source is ultimately unsustainable. These funds are subject to annual budget cycles and reflect the shifting priorities of elected student leaders. Due to the short terms of student governments and the variability of agendas, maintaining consistent support for food programs across multiple years is more difficult than other funding streams. While student government resources may be valuable for initial pilot programs or short-term expenses, the long-term viability of food security initiatives must be grounded in institutional commitments and stable, recurring funding mechanisms.

Institutions of higher education must take an active, multi-pronged approach to securing and maintaining funding for food security programs. These institutions are best equipped to address these kinds of initiatives from the various funding streams and resources they already have access to. Students, major programs, and professional staff are uniquely equipped to form fundraising initiatives that would far outperform any private or off-campus resource gathering.

Staffing

One of the greatest assets available in the fight against food insecurity is the number of students, staff, alumni, and community members who are eager and willing to contribute their time towards such a meaningful cause. College campuses are uniquely positioned in achieving food security goals by capitalizing on individuals' desires to promote the well-being of their peers while also fostering a campus culture of service and engagement.

The willingness of students to participate in community service is a significant opportunity for this cause. Many student organizations, such as Greek life, have existing requirements for members to engage in service activities as a condition of their membership. Organizations such as academic clubs, major-specific honors societies, and co-curricular

programs also encourage or mandate their members to participate in acts of service. Academic courses could further incentivize engagement by offering extra credit or fulfilling service-learning requirements through their volunteer work. Institutions of higher education should intentionally tap into these systems to encourage participation, even encouraging mandates to department heads or club directors.

By partnering with campus organizations, academic departments, and service programs, institutions can establish a reliable volunteer base for all food security initiatives. Coordinating with these groups not only provides a steady flow of motivated volunteers but also forms values of civic responsibility and social justice within campus culture. These partnerships can be mutually beneficial, as they offer students meaningful, hands-on experiences while simultaneously advancing institutional goals and student welfare.

In addition to volunteers, food security programs must also include trained student leaders to provide continuity, oversight, and overall program development. Volunteer work, while necessary, requires a clear leadership structure to ensure consistent operations and the maintenance of quality. Institutions should consider creating paid student positions through student welfare offices for this purpose. Paid roles might include volunteer coordinators, program managers, grant writers, and outreach specialists. Offering compensation for these positions not only acknowledges the labor involved but expands participation and career development.

Some professional staff on campus may have these kinds of programs within their current job description. Although students should be the primary drivers of these programs, professional staff are essential to long-term program stability. Staff members can provide training to student staff, interrupt when situations arise beyond a student staff's abilities and strengthen food

security initiatives over time. Unpaid alumni and community members can also be engaged as long-term volunteers, mentors, and donors, which would further expand the network of support for these programs.

Community

Although it can sometimes feel as though institutions of higher education are isolated within their own bubbles, they are deeply embedded within the social, economic, and even political fabric of their communities. As major employers, holders of land, cultural hubs, and centers of research, institutions of higher education often hold significant influence at the local, regional, and sometimes even state levels. This standing can and should be strategically leveraged to advance goals related to food security on their campuses.

The trust and visibility from the public makes institutions of higher education powerful advocates for change. University leadership, through existing relationships with government, can engage in policy advocacy and resource mobilization to support food security initiatives. For example, institutions can lobby for increased funding for student support services, expanding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for college students, or the development of regional food access infrastructure that benefits both campuses and their surrounding communities. These efforts carry weight when it is backed up by research generated within the school or when hinging on the effects on student success and health.

Colleges and universities are perfectly positioned to foster partnerships that would enhance their food security efforts. By opening the floor for collaborations with local food banks, farms, school districts, nonprofit organizations, and public health departments, institutions can extend the reach and sustainability of their programs. These partnerships can allow for the flow of surplus food, coordination of transportation and distribution, and the creation of community-

based food systems that work. In this way, these places can serve as anchor institutions, that is entities that use their economic and social capital to benefit the broader community while simultaneously advancing their own objectives. As noted later, this is the case at the University of Oregon's ECM Student Food Pantry, run in collaboration with local religious organizations, the local food bank (Food For Lane County), and the UO itself.

Institutions can act as common places to bring together stakeholders from across sectors to address food insecurity through a shared dialogue and collaborative planning. Hosting summits, public forums, and work groups focused on food justice positions institutions as both a leader and a partner to the community. These initiatives not only enhance the institution's reputation with the community but also create opportunities for students and faculty to engage in applied learning and community-based research.

Additionally, many institutions contain internal assets, like agricultural departments, culinary institutes, and public health schools, that can be mobilized to support campus food systems. Whether through community gardens, nutrition educational workshops, or food recovery programs, these academic units can play a central role in both delivering direct service and systems change.

In leveraging their influence and resources, institutions of higher education carry the capacity to shape local and state priorities around their food access. Doing so not only fulfills their moral obligation to student well-being but also contributes to broader equity goals. The fight against food insecurity does not stop at the end of campus, it requires a coordinated and community-minded approach, one where these institutions can act as both a beneficiary and a catalyst for change.

Existing Infrastructure

Institutions of higher education possess a wide range of physical and operational facets that can be leveraged to advance internal food security goals. From existing expansive dining systems to vacant or underutilized facilities, colleges and universities carry a unique ability to deploy existing resources in support of student wellness without requiring massive capital investments. By reorienting how the existing infrastructure is used, and embedding food security as an institutional priority, campuses can more efficiently and effectively respond to student hunger.

An estimated 22 million pounds of food is wasted annually on college campuses[61] making campus dining services an easy entry point for food security programming. Most institutions that have on-campus residences operate full-scale food service systems that may include dining halls, cafes, catering, and/or meal plan programs. Even institutions with a large commuter base typically contain food outlets for the convenience of students and staff. These services operate at a high volume, which in turn presents opportunities to minimize waste and redistribute surplus materials. Food recovery programs, where unused prepared food is collected and repurposed, have proven feasible and impactful when implemented in collaboration with student organizations or nonprofit partners (such as local food banks).

In addition to food service operations, institutions should assess their available space and facility usage to identify areas that can support food security programming. Many campuses may have vacant offices, underutilized classrooms, unused storage rooms, or empty wings of residence halls and academic buildings. These spaces could be repurposed as food pantries,

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[61] Poulin, A. (2025, March 20). *Breaking Up with Food Waste on College Campuses - UF/IFAS Food and Resource Economics Department*. UF/IFAS Food and Resource Economics Department. https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/fredept/2025/03/05/breaking-up-with-food-waste-on-college-campuses/

distribution centers, or food storage hubs. While physical space is not a prerequisite for the establishment of food security resources, it often becomes a key determining factor in a program's scope and sustainability. Institutions that can dedicate consistent, accessible, secure, and private space to food access efforts signal a commitment to addressing students' basic needs and allow for programming to sustain and grow over time.

If permanent space is not available, there are still options to implement mobile or temporary solutions. Programming like pop-up pantries, food distribution events, and food recovery hours with existing campus homes can serve as transitional strategies while long-term infrastructure is developed. These more flexible models can also serve campuses with limited real estate or shared facilities, ensuring that limitations do not become a prohibitive barrier to their action.

Moreso, campuses often contain logistical and operational capacities that can support the efficiency of food security programs. Delivery vehicles, cold storage facilities, institutional procurement systems, and event planning staff can be repurposed and shared across departments to support these initiatives. Integrating food security into broader institutional workflows (such as sustainability, student affairs, community engagement offices, etc.) ensures that programs benefit from existing networks and systems, thereby reducing redundancies and improving timelines.

When applied together, the infrastructure already present on most campuses provides a strong foundation for developing or expanding food security systems. Rather than simply starting from scratch, institutions can reimagine their existing assets into tools to fight for the betterment of their students. This approach not only makes initiatives more financially and operationally

feasible but also promotes a culture of accountability and resource-sharing in service of student wellbeing.

The University of California Davis's Approach

The University of California, Davis (or UC Davis) has emerged as a national leader in addressing student food insecurity through a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach that treats food access as a necessity for student success. At the center of this effort is Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center, which coordinates a variety of services such as the ASUCD Pantry, CalFresh (or SNAP) enrollment help, produce distributions through the "Fruit & Veggie Up!" program, satellite pantries across their campus, and the pay-what-you-can AggieEats food truck. The design of these programs holds accessibility, stigma reduction, and long-term stability at the forefront by pairing immediate emergency access with longer term sustained benefits. Utilization of these programs has grown rapidly in the past few years. In the 2022-23 school year approximately 6,000 students made 48,000 visits to the ASUCD Pantry, compared to just 2,000 students and 15,000 visits in the 2018-19 academic year, a threefold increase in both users and total visits.[62] The addition of AggieEats has extended this reach further, offering hundreds of meals per day in high-traffic areas on campus, reaching students who may not otherwise engage with these food access programs.[63]

UC Davis can distinguish itself not only through its vast services but through its commitment to evaluation and evidence-based practice of food security programming. Research conducted across the University of California system, including UC Davis, has shown that frequent pantry use is associated with significant improvements in depressive symptoms, sleep

[62] *Measuring meals*. (2023, August 8). UC Davis. https://www.ucdavis.edu/health/news/measuring-meals
[63] Aggie eats. (2025, May 30). Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center. https://aggiecompass.ucdavis.edu/aggieeats

sufficiency, and self-perceived health, directly displaying the connection between food access and well-being.[64] Other studies have found that food insecure students who used campus pantries more often reported higher daily fruit and vegetable intake, suggesting that utilization improves diet quality as well as overall stability.[65] These findings reinforce the institution's model of moving students from emergency food access interventions towards sustainable solutions, through CalFresh enrollment assistance. By embedding benefits navigation into the food access system, UC Davis helps ensure that students secure monthly support with a strong correlation with reducing household food insecurity.[66]

Beyond just programming for their students, UC Davis contributes substantially to the national research on food security and related issues through its World Food Center and Western Institute for Food Safety and Security. These programs serve as hubs for advancing scientific understanding of food systems, agricultural sustainability, and nutrition safety. Faculty and student researchers have been at the cutting edge of topics ranging from crop resilience to evaluating hunger interventions, positioning the university as both a service provider and a research leader in combating food insecurity scientifically. This dual role amplifies these programs while contributing to the broader knowledge base.[67]

While UC Davis represents a particularly exemplary case of how universities can integrate direct services, policy alignment, and research to combat food insecurity, it is important

[64] Martinez, S. M., Chodur, G. M., Esaryk, E. E., Kaladijian, S., Ritchie, L. D., & Grandner, M. (2022). Campus food pantry use is linked to better health among public university students. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, *54*(6), 491–498. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2022.03.001
[65]Chodur, G., Singh, S., Riordan, E. E., Kalaydjian, S., & Martinez, S. M. (2023). Campus food pantry use may improve daily frequency of fruit and vegetable intake among California university students experiencing food insecurity. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, *124*(2), 225-232.e1. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2023.09.009
[66] Basic Needs Annual Report. (2025). In The Regents of the University of California. University of California. https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/mar25/b3attach.pdf
[67] World Food Center. (n.d.). https://worldfoodcenter.ucdavis.edu/

to note that no single institution's approach should serve as a unilateral guide for all. Food insecurity is shaped by unique economic, cultural, and policy contexts, meaning that what succeeds in one setting may not always translate into another. Each institution must design its own strategies that reflect their student population, available resources, and capacity. UC Davis offers valuable lessons and a compelling model, but the ultimate solutions to campus food security will require localized adaptations that address the complex realities that students face across diverse higher education environments.

Chapter 4: Practices for Implementations

The nitty gritty on how institutions of higher education can get their boots on the ground and make meaningful change in the lives of their students. This chapter is meant to be a guide on how an institution of higher education should begin addressing food insecurity.

United Front

In many institutions of higher education, multiple departments, offices, and individuals are independently engaged in food security efforts. Staff in dining services may be developing sustainability initiatives to reduce their food waste. Advisors in student affairs might be working with students on financial stability and SNAP support. Offices supporting veterans may provide resources tailored to former service members going through hardship, while student health services may address the physical symptoms of sustained malnutrition. Although each of these contributes meaningfully to student well-being, their efforts are often uncoordinated and developed in isolation from one another.

The fragmentation of their efforts dilutes the overall impact of these initiatives. Without a centralized structure to align goals, share data, and coordinate their strategies, departments could duplicate efforts, overlook gaps, or unintentionally create barriers for students navigating support systems. Moreso, isolated programming can make it difficult for students to know where to seek help, especially when eligibility, messaging, or availability varies between offices and programs.

To address this, the very first thing institutions should do is prioritize the creation of a campus-wide coalition dedicated to food security. Such a coalition should bring together stakeholders from across departments (some ideas on where to look would include dining services, sustainability, student affairs, health and wellness, financial aid, academic advising, veteran services, faculty and student leadership, and identity-base programs, among others). This

coalition can serve as a strategic planning body, providing an operational framework that fosters collaboration, develops unified goals, and ensures the institution's response to food security is holistic.

A campus-wide coalition also provides a framework for regular communication, shared accountability, and long-term institutional memory (that is, allowing those of all years to work together to allow for the continuity of programs). By establishing common metrics and this shared vision, the coalition can monitor progress, evaluate programs, and adapt to changing student needs. Furthermore, centralized coordination enables more effective allocation of resources, pursue grant funding, and advocacy within broader institutional and governmental contexts.

Importantly, this coalition must include student voices in its leadership and decision making. Students, as the primary stakeholders, bring essential lived experience and insight to the work of the coalition. Their participation ensures that proposed solutions are grounded in the realities of those most affected and strengthens the legitimacy of the group's initiatives.

Ultimately, a campus-wide coalition is not only about organizational efficiency, but about providing structure imperative for institutions that are serious about addressing food insecurity. By breaking down walls and fostering coordinated action, institutions can transform disjointed efforts into a comprehensive, unified strategy that maximizes their impact.

For Students by Students

The development and implementation of food security initiatives on campuses are most impactful when they are led and shaped by the students themselves instead of professional staff. Students, as the primary beneficiaries of these programs, can understand the complex barriers,

challenges, and specific needs associated with food insecurity. Their direct involvement ensures that programs remain responsive, relevant, and tailored to the populations they aim to serve.

While professional staff play a role in providing administrative support, continuity between student turnover, and compliance oversight, it is essential that students are centered in the planning and operations of most food security initiatives. Empowering students to take leadership roles fosters a sense of ownership and accountability that small menial work alone cannot replicate. Moreover, programs designed and implemented by students are more likely to garner peer trust and participation, as they are seen as more authentic.

The Student Basic Needs Coalition (SBNC), in an interview, shared this same commitment towards the empowerment of students in taking hold of their basic needs and advocating for them at the administration level. The SBNC is a non-profit dedicated towards the establishment of student clubs on college campuses around the country to facilitate the acquisition of sustainable food security, housing security, and financial security for students. Through their work they have empowered over 2,000 peer navigators at 72 institutions in 25 states to access over $10 million in food assistance in just the first half of 2025 alone.[68] In this interview they shared the following message:

> Students are not only the ones most affected by food insecurity; they are also the key to solving it. When institutions invest in student-led outreach, they tap into the power of peer connection and trust. A message about available support is more impactful when it comes from someone who has been through the same experience. It becomes more relatable, more credible, and more likely to result in action.
>
> We have found that when students lead the conversation around basic needs, stigma decreases, participation increases, and the broader campus culture shifts. Peer navigators bring lived experience, empathy, and authenticity to their work in a way that traditional institutional outreach often cannot replicate. They are advocates, role models, and agents of change. Empowering students to lead also

[68] Coalition, S. B. N. (n.d.). *Student Basic Needs Coalition - Empowering Students*. https://studentbasicneeds.com/

> builds their skills in leadership, public service, and organizing, which strengthens both individual lives and the future of higher education.

Student-led initiatives also have profound educational and developmental benefits. Participating in the design, management, and execution of food security programs offers students hands-on experience in project management, leadership, community organizing, grant writing, and nonprofit administration. These skills are highly transferable and can significantly enhance students' academic and professional trajectories. Furthermore, early engagement with social justice work can inspire students to pursue careers dedicated to public service, policy reform, nonprofit management, and advocacy, thereby extending the impact of campus food security initiatives beyond the institution itself.

Involving students in substantive ways promotes a model of participatory governance that aligns with the broader educational mission of higher education institutions. When students are treated as key stakeholders and decision-makers, they gain practical insights into institutional structures and develop a stronger commitment to civic engagement and democratic practice. This experience not only enriches their personal growth but also strengthens the social fabric of the campus community.

To foster meaningful student involvement, institutions should create formalized structures that prioritize student leadership. This can include establishing student advisory boards, creating leadership roles within food pantry operations, offering capstone or internship opportunities related to food security, or integrating food security initiatives into student government portfolios. Providing students with opportunities for compensated work or academic credit further legitimizes their contributions and ensures that participation is accessible to a diverse range of students, including those who may be balancing employment and academic commitments.

Ultimately, food security programs that are for students by students embody the values of empowerment, inclusivity, and shared responsibility. They not only address immediate needs but also contribute to the cultivation of future leaders who are committed to advancing social equity both within and beyond their campus communities.

Program Types

There is no one size fits all approach to solve food insecurity in higher education. Institutions differ in size, student demographics, funding structure, and campus culture, all of which influence the feasibility and appropriateness of specific interventions. As a result, the development and implementation of food security programs must be tailored to the context of each campus. What succeeds at one institution may not always translate to another without adaptation.

This is where the work of a well-structured campus coalition becomes most essential. Drawing on institutional knowledge, student feedback, operational capacity, etc. the coalition should evaluate which types of interventions align with current needs and their available resources. Strategic planning should also account for timing, scalability, and long-term program sustainability, ensuring that each effort builds toward a comprehensive and resilient food security system.

The following outlines a range of food security initiatives that institutions may consider, organized from those that are generally considered to be least complex to implement to those that require greater investment (both monetary and in workload) or infrastructure.

Local Grocery Store Guide

The most accessible and cost-effective strategy listed for addressing food insecurity is the development of a grocery store guide. These guides serve as a practical resource, equipping

students with essential information about nearby grocery stores including those that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits, have competitive pricing, and are accessible via public transit. Included can also be smart shopping tips, and how to create a balanced list and stick to it. By making the grocery shopping experience as accessible as possible to new shoppers, this initiative empowers students to make more informed decisions that will align with their nutritional needs and financial constraints.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's "Eat. Move. Save." program exemplifies the effectiveness of this approach. Their online Grocery Store Game provides a virtual walkthrough of a grocery store with helpful tips in budgeting, nutrition, and shopping strategies. This program emphasizes practical tips like reading nutrition labels, understanding unit pricing, and utilizing coupons and loyalty programs to maximize savings. Additionally, it addresses common marketing tactics employed by retailers, enabling students to navigate the grocery store more critically and informed.[69]

Implementing a similar guide within other institutions can be tailored to reflect the unique characteristics in the surrounding community. Key components may include identification of SNAP and WIC-authorized retailers, price comparison and budgeting tools, transportation accessibility, and cultural and dietary considerations.

By integrating these elements, the guide becomes a multifaceted tool that fosters long-term skills in financial literacy and nutritional awareness. Moreover, its development and dissemination can serve as an opportunity for collaboration, engaging stakeholders from student affairs, health services, and outreach programs.

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[69] | *Eat. Move. Save.* | *UIUC*. (n.d.). https://eat-move-save.extension.illinois.edu/

Uplifting of Off-Campus Resources

For institutions of higher education that do not have the operational capacity to address student food insecurity on their campus, there is an opportunity to uplift and provide resources for preexisting community-based resources. By channeling institutional efforts (like fundraising, volunteer coordination, financial contributions, and more) toward established off-campus food assistance programs, universities can work to foster symbiotic partnerships that extend their reach and efficacy in combating food insecurity among students.

A particular example of this approach is the ECM Student Food Pantry a few blocks off campus from the University of Oregon. The pantry operates through a partnership involving Episcopal Campus Ministry (who first established the pantry), Food for Lane County, Grace Lutheran Church, and the University of Oregon's Basic Needs Program. The University of Oregon contributes to this program in both financial support and staffing resources, which reinforces the pantry's capacity to serve college students in the greater Eugene area. The pantry offers supplemental food supply for students, including canned fruits and vegetables, frozen and fresh produce, bread, rice, pasta, cereals, and everything else students may need to contribute towards a well-balanced diet.[70]

Partnerships like this exemplify how universities can effectively leverage and augment existing community resources to address food insecurity on their campus. By investing in and collaborating with off-campus organizations, institutions can avoid duplicating services, instead enhancing the capacity and sustainability of established programs. This approach not only broadens the support network available to students but also fosters stronger community ties and a more comprehensive response to food insecurity challenges among their student bases.

[70] *Food | Basic Needs Program*. (n.d.). https://basicneeds.uoregon.edu/food

Cooking and Nutrition Classes

Equipping students with the practical skills of budgeting, cooking, meal preparation, and nutritional literacy is a strong strategy in addressing food insecurity within higher education institutions. Instead of providing access to food, these programs empower students with the knowledge and abilities to make informed dietary choices which will foster long-term self-sufficiency and contribute to their overall wellbeing.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (also known as UNC Chapel Hill) uses this approach through a multifaceted integration of academic coursework, student-led initiatives, and off-campus partnerships. The Department of Nutrition offers a whole curriculum that encompasses courses (both undergraduate and graduate) such as NUTR 240: Introduction to Human Nutrition, NUTR 405: Fundamentals of Food and Nutrition Policy in Public Health, and NUTR 600: Human Metabolism: Macronutrients.[71] With these classes that students are provided with a solid foundation in their nutrition and health.

Complementing these academic offerings, the Culinary Medicine Club at UNC (which was established in 2021) serves as a student-led organization dedicated to making nutrition more approachable. The club hosts workshops, cooking demonstrations, and dinners, aiming to bridge the gap between nutritional science and practical application.[72] By engaging students in more hands-on experiences, the club fosters an environment where participants can learn to prepare nutritious meals within their budgetary constraints, thereby directly addressing aspects of food insecurity.

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71 Nutrition Major, B.S.P.H. < University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (n.d.). https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/programs-study/nutrition-major-bsph/

72 Culinary Medicine Specialist Board. (2023, January 23). University of North Carolina Chapel Hill : CulinaryMedicine.org. CulinaryMedicine.org. https://culinarymedicine.org/culinary-medicine-partner-schools/partner-medical-schools/university-of-north-carolina-chapel-hill/?srsltid=AfmBOors5VCFOwyH40pJp_7cVkKcZqhIzDlY2bJTCqiELaBLs0D_fUH8

Further, the Carolina Hunger Initiative extends the university's commitment to combatting food insecurity through their educational outreach. This initiative offers free online cooking and nutrition education classes, focusing on purchasing healthy, affordable foods and preparing meals at home. These classes are designed with accessibility at the forefront, providing valuable resources to students and community members.[73]

The integration of cooking and nutrition classes within institutions of higher education, as demonstrated by UNC's approach, can play a critical role in addressing food insecurity and malnutrition. By combining academic instruction, student-led clubs, and community outreach, institutions of higher education can empower students with the necessary skills and knowledge to make informed dietary choices, which promotes long-term health and self-sufficiency.

SNAP Support

Navigating the complexities of public assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the special supplemental nutrition program with Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) can be a daunting task for students especially. The application processes are often intricate, filled with bureaucratic hurdles, and can be particularly challenging for individuals who are unfamiliar with the systems. To mitigate these barriers, institutions of higher education can play a pivotal role by providing dedicated support to assist students.

The University of Texas at Austin utilizes this approach through its UT Outpost program, which is administered by the Office of the Dean of Students. This initiative offers SNAP benefits advising, where a team of student support staff can assist students in understanding eligibility

[73] *Carolina Hunger Initiative - Carolina Hunger Initiative*. (2025, August 17). Carolina Hunger Initiative. https://carolinahungerinitiative.org/

criteria, gathering necessary documentation, and helping complete and submit the application process. Appointments can be scheduled for personalized guidance, ensuring that students receive the exact individualized support needed to effectively navigate the SNAP or WIC process.[74]

By integrating these support services, institutions of higher education not only facilitate the access to nutritional assistance but contribute to the overall well-being (and ultimate academic success) of their students. Providing expert guidance can substantially demystify the application process, reduce the stigmas associated with aid, and empower students to utilize available resources confidently. Moreover, these initiatives underscore the institution's commitment to addressing food insecurity and promoting equity within their student body.

It is programs like this that try to get at the root of SNAP underutilization of students who would benefit from that form of assistance. SNAP support, in this way, can be seen as the uplifting of off-campus programming while also providing students with the most flexibility in food procurement. According to the Hope Center, 69% of college students who are eligible for SNAP are not enrolled.[75] These programs could significantly reduce that number while costing the institution very little.

As with a program like this, it would be irresponsible to not share why this program may not function the same at every institution or in its fullest capacity. Although SNAP can be widely beneficial for students, it is also limited in its capacity to provide nutritional assistance to some students in some states. International students (those on F-1 or J-1 visas), undocumented students, and students who are on certain high scholarships or student loan allotments may be

[74] Office of the Dean of Students - Student Outreach and Support - UT Outpost. (n.d.). https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sos/ut-outpost.php

[75] *Closing the college SNAP gap*. (n.d.). The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. https://hope.temple.edu/policy-advocacy/closing-college-snap-gap

ineligible for SNAP.[76] Some of these students are at the highest need of this support, making SNAP support not a one-size fits all approach to long term sustainability of food security programming. In addition to these factors, SNAP viability is up to federal administration changes and could be extended or minimized depending on who is in office and their policy goals.

A significant portion of students fall into a middle ground where they experience food insecurity but do not qualify for SNAP. Eligibility for SNAP is tied to strict income thresholds and work requirements that often fail to account for the realities of student life, such as limited work hours due to academics or financial support that looks sufficient on paper but does not meet actual living costs (such as those received in scholarships). As a result, many students still struggle to afford groceries after paying for textbooks, housing, and other expenses. This gap leaves many students ineligible for the most stable form of food access, forcing them to rely on inconsistent support systems.

Establishing dedicated SNAP and WIC support services within higher education institutions serves as a critical strategy in student food insecurity. Through personalized assistance and resource navigation, institutions of higher education can work to ensure that students have equitable access to essential nutritional programs, fostering a supportive and more inclusive academic environment.

Emergency Funding

Emergency funding, whether through subsidies or no-cost loans, can serve as a critical intervention to address immediate student needs within institutions of higher education. Although analyzed through a food security lens, this can be widely applied to preventing homelessness, mounting car troubles, and putting off medical interventions. These funds function

[76] *SNAP eligibility | Food and Nutrition Service*. (n.d.). https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility

as safety nets, preventing temporary hardships from escalating into prolonged academic distributions or attrition.

The University of Alabama uses this approach to emergency funding strategies through their Student Care and Well-being (SCWB) office. SCWB administers multiple programs designed to provide quick support to students facing financial emergencies. Notably, their "Got Meals?" program, which allowed students to apply for meal allotments during times of need, with allocations limited to twice per semester. This initiative ensures that students experiencing food insecurity have immediate access to meals, mitigating hunger in immediate sight[77].

In addition to direct food assistance, SCWB also offers financial support through the Tide Together Student Support Fund[78] and the Acts of Kindness Emergency Relief Fund.[79] These funds provide short-term financial aid to students encountering unexpected hardships, such as medical emergencies, housing crises, or any other unforeseen expenses. Eligibility for these programs only requires students to demonstrate a qualifying event or emergency that has resulted in financial hardship.

The Student Government Association (SGA) at the University of Alabama offers a 30-day interest-free emergency loan up to $500 for full-time students. This initiative provides another layer of financial support, allowing students to address their immediate needs without the burden of accruing interest on a credit card or predatory payday loan.[80]

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[77] Home - Student Care & Well-Being | The University of Alabama. (n.d.). https://bamacares.sl.ua.edu/
[78] The University of Alabama Online Giving. (n.d.). The University of Alabama. https://give.ua.edu/tidetogether
[79] The University of Alabama Online Giving. (n.d.-b). The University of Alabama. https://give.ua.edu/actsofkindness
[80] Financial Assistance - Student Care & Well-Being | The University of Alabama. (n.d.). https://bamacares.sl.ua.edu/assistance/financial-emergency/

By implementing this infrastructure, institutions of higher education can have a proactive commitment to their students' well-being. Emergency funding programs not only alleviate immediate financial pressures but can also contribute to the broader objective of fostering a more equitable and supportive academic environment. Institutions seeking to enhance their student retention and success should consider the adoption of similar models, tailored to their unique student populations and resource capacities.

Food Recovery Programs

Food recovery programs within institutions of higher education can serve a dual purpose in addressing student food insecurity and promoting environmental sustainability efforts on campus. By repurposing surplus prepared and unprepared food from dining facilities, these initiatives not only provide nutritional support to immediate students in need but will significantly reduce overall food waste. These efforts also require some of the lowest overall investment, as it can be done without any additional costs to the university, freeing up some institutional funds dedicated to food security.

The University of California, Los Angeles (also known as UCLA) has honed in on this approach through its own student-run organization, Bruin Dine. Bruin Dine, which has been operating since 2018, operates by collecting the unserved food from campus dining halls and redistributing it to students and staff that experience food insecurity. These food recovery events occur three times a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) during weeks 1 through 10 of each academic term. These events take place removed from the main dining halls at 10pm, where diners are encouraged to bring their own containers and utensils.[81]

[81] *Bruin Dine | Basic Needs*. (n.d.). https://basicneeds.ucla.edu/services/bruin-dine

The effects of this program are multifaceted. In the 2023-2024 academic year alone, Bruin Dine recovered 8,455 pounds of food and served over 5,900 free meals to the UCLA community.[82] This has not only provided the essential nourishment for students facing food insecurity but has also been a major contributor towards UCLA's sustainability initiatives. The impact of this program also upholds California Senate Bill 1383, which mandates that 20% of edible food be recovered and redistributed.[83]

The implementation of food recovery programs within institutions of higher education can yield similar results. This form of food security intervention involves a rethinking of how existing resources and infrastructure are utilized, and how they can be optimized to achieve predetermined goals. Food recovery programs, however, are not without any investment, and will require a thoughtful response in implementation. From a professional coordinator, marketing, student volunteers, and pausing dining operations while this occurs, there is a level of matched contribution to be shared from various campus partners to achieve this mission. This investment is not without benefit, beyond simply food security, this program can serve as an educational platform in promoting awareness and engagement among the student body.

On-Campus Pantry

The pinnacle of combating student food insecurity is offering free and accessible food directly on campus. When properly resourced and implemented, on-campus food pantries can meet students where they are at, minimizing the physical and psychological barriers that often prevent these students from seeking assistance. These services not only work to address the basic

[82] BruinDine Letter. (2025). In *UCLA Basic Needs*. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6508fc8793db9d26ceab8952/t/67ac54e54157af460ea61078/1739347173577/BruinDine+Letter.pdf
[83] *State Law SB 1383: Food recovery requirements*. (n.d.). San Francisco Environment Department (SFE). https://www.sfenvironment.org/SB-1383

nutritional needs of students, but also act as tangible institutional commitments to equity, student success, and educational dignity. However, while on-campus pantries are often a good choice, they are not universally feasible or appropriate for all institutions. Thus, institutions of higher education must consider spatial, financial, and demographic realities when determining the best approach for their students.

The strengths of an on-campus pantry are varied. Most directly, they remove the logistical burdens such as transportation time and costs, which can be especially critical for students without cars or those juggling multiple jobs and class schedules. According to research by the Hope Center at Temple University, convenience is often one of the most decisive factors on whether students utilize support services.[84] Locating this kind of food assistance where and when students already are on campus can vastly increase its usage. Additionally, on-campus pantries can offer an opportunity to destigmatize food support by seeing it as a normal student resource, like a library. Pantries that provide a shopping-style environment allow students to shop for themselves (or ones that offer online ordering with private pick-up) reduce the shame that often accompanies accessing charitable resources. An example of this approach on a large campus can be seen at Rutgers University, which offers both a permanent pantry and rotating mobile units. This enables them to reach students across multiple campuses. By combining the appointment-based pickups with drop-in hours, they can provide very high convenience to students, making them have a very high utilization rate.[85]

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[84] *The Hope Center's 2025 federal policy priorities*. (n.d.). The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. https://hope.temple.edu/policy-advocacy/hope-centers-2025-federal-policy-priorities

[85] *Food & Mobile Pantry | Off-Campus Living & Community Initiatives - Division of Student Affairs | Rutgers University-New Brunswick*. (n.d.). https://ruoffcampus.rutgers.edu/basic-needs/food-assistance/food-and-mobile-pantry

On-campus pantries also allow for institutional creativity. Because every college or university has different population sizes, cultural dynamics, space constraints, and budget capacities, the pantry model is highly adaptable. Smaller institutions may favor discreet food-box pickup systems, while larger universities may support full-scale "campus grocery" models stocked with fresh produce, proteins, and culturally appropriate items. Some campuses have experimented with student-led cooperative models, embedded nutrition education, or even integration into academic programs and internships. When implemented intentionally, these pantries can serve as living laboratories for student innovation and community engagement.

Despite these listed benefits, on-campus pantries come with some considerable challenges to consider, with the largest being space and cost. Dedicating square footage in already crowded buildings for food storage and distribution may be logistically impossible on some campuses, especially for urban or smaller (single building) institutions. Similarly, the financial burden of staffing, sourcing, and maintaining an on-campus space (especially one in compliance with all food safety regulations) can be highly prohibitive. While some pantries are entirely volunteer run, or supported through external partnerships with food banks, sustaining these programs long-term requires some administrative buy-in and a stable funding source.

This is why it is essential to carefully consider and run through student demographics, as an on-campus space is not always the most efficient or necessary intervention to combat food insecurity. Community colleges, for example, often serve students who live far off-campus and may already have access to some food pantries closer to their homes. For these campuses, it may be more strategic to build partnerships and uplift community-based organizations, provide transit vouchers when accessing food resources, or develop centralized resource navigation systems that connect students to these resources. Investing in off-campus food infrastructure (like investing in

community-based programs or subsidizing community-support agriculture (CSA) boxes in communities that have them) can often yield even higher returns and broader reach than creating an entirely new facility.

Ultimately, the value of adding an on-campus pantry to an institution's food security repertoire must be carefully evaluated in an individual context. While they are ideal for accessibility and agency, their success depends on implementation of intentional design, sustainable funding, and realistic assessment of need. If implemented without these factors in consideration this resource may be more likely to fail to meet student needs and be less sustainable. When implemented as a part of a larger ecosystem of support, on-campus pantries can play a transformative role in ensuring student well-being, academic success, and equity.

On-Campus SNAP Eligible Grocery Outlet

For larger institutions with a robust dining system and campus infrastructure, adapting or creating a grocery outlet that accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as SNAP) and/or Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits presents a powerful opportunity to support food security in a more dignified, choice-based manner. Unlike a food pantry, which often operates through donations and food banking, a SNAP-eligible grocery store allows students the ability to purchase a broad range of items in a more normal retail setting using benefits they already receive. While this is not a model that is universally applicable, it can be particularly beneficial for campuses that already operate convenience stores or markets.

This approach was utilized at Oregon State University’s Cascadia market, which shows how this model can be implemented successfully.[86] Located in the International Living-Learning

[86] *Cascadia Market*. (2025, June 12). Food @ OSU. https://food.oregonstate.edu/cascadia-market

Center (dorm hall) on campus, this market functions like a small grocery store, offering fresh produce, pantry staples, frozen foods, and culturally inclusive items. Importantly, this market is SNAP-eligible, as well as accepting meal points and cash, allowing students a variety of payment options to prevent any stigmatization. This method eliminates a lot of common barriers to food access, such as transportation and time constraints, while giving students the autonomy in what they eat.

The benefits of this model extend beyond being a simple convenience. It affirms students' roles as consumers rather than purely recipients of charity, normalizing food support and integrating it into everyday life. A SNAP-eligible outlet can also bridge the gap for students who may be hesitant to use food pantries due to stigma or who do not qualify for aid but are still low-income. Moreover, students with dietary restrictions, religious food practices, or specific nutritional needs, access to a full grocery selection instead of the limitations of a food pantry. In cases where a campus already operates a market or grocery store, the process of becoming SNAP-certified can be a cost-effective adaptation rather than a ground-up build, especially when demand justifies the change.

This model is not universally applicable to all institutions. Smaller colleges, commuter campuses, or institutions without existing retail space may find it financially or logistically unfeasible to establish a standalone grocery outlet. SNAP authorization also requires compliance with USDA criteria for inventory, hours of operation, and signet, all of which may pose challenges for campuses without permanent or staffed retail locations. In addition, a SNAP-eligible grocery store is only useful if a substantial portion of the student body is enrolled in SNAP, a condition more likely at larger public universities than at private or remote rural institutions with lower student enrollment in government programs. For these reasons, schools

considering this model need to assess student demand, existing infrastructure, and program sustainability.

While not an all-encompassing solution, on-campus SNAP-eligible grocery outlets present a solution for addressing student food insecurity. By capitalizing on existing dining or retail spaces and aligning with federal benefits, institutions can create sustainable, scalable solutions that increase student access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods. For the campuses that can implement them, these markets not only meet a pressing material need, but they also model what equitable and student-centered food systems can and should look like.

How to Implement Programs

Any single or variety of these (or others not listed) may be adopted at an institution of higher education depending on funding, size, space availability, etc. The growth of these programs does not need to be done all at once and can be developed over a period deemed appropriate by the coalition. Temporary solutions may be imposed before permanent ones are established. Depending on utilization the coalition may even choose to scale back some efforts to make the existing efforts as effective and high quality as possible for those using them. No matter the context, the actions of programming should always be created in the interest of students and should never interfere with a student's ability to access fulfilling and nutritious food.

No matter what program is chosen, the implementation of it is essential to establish a real and lasting solution. When looking at these programs it is critical to analyze them and make sure they are holistically supporting the needs of the students. This would involve watching accessibility, both physical and mental, ensuring privacy, and other factors. It is also necessary to keep a consistent review of campus food security levels and judge whether they have been impacted by the efforts of these programs, and what campus at large is saying about them. This

helps to prevent the echo chamber effects of hearing only good things by those who are using the programs.

Audit Processes

The success of food insecurity (or any) program depends not only on its initial implementation but on its sustained effectiveness and responsiveness to student needs. A program that is not regularly and critically evaluated risks becoming stagnant, inefficient, or misaligned with its core mission. As such, the establishment of a rigorous audit process is essential to ensuring that food security initiatives remain accessible, equitable, and impactful over time.

Audit processes should be conducted from an outside lens, whether by an existing oversight body, a coalition of community partners and students, or periodic internal evaluations. The purpose of the external lens is to bring objectivity to the assessment process and to safeguard against blind spots or internal complacency. External audits can help bring student experiences to the surface, ones that might be overlooked in self-reporting, particularly among already marginalized populations that face unique barriers to access.

An effective audit framework must include both qualitative and quantitative measures. Quantitative data can include items like usage rates, inventory tracking, service frequency, (self-reported) demographic information, and resource distribution patterns. These metrics help determine whether a program is reaching its intended population, managing resources efficiently, and operating at the appropriate scale. Qualitative data, like student feedback, student groups, and satisfaction surveys, provides essential insight into the lived experiences of users. These are intended to highlight the barriers to access, feelings of stigma, or unmet needs that may not be visible on solely numeric data.

Equity must remain a central focus of this audit process. Evaluators must consider not only whether a food security program is being used in its intended capacity, but who is using it and who is not. Data should be analyzed to identify whether certain populations, such as first-generation students, BIPOC students, LGBTQ+ students, working students, students with disabilities, or student parents, are underrepresented in service usage. If so, targeted outreach, culturally responsive resources, or operational adjustments may be necessary to ensure that all students have equitable access.

Transparency is also critical to the integrity of the audit process. Findings should be regularly reported to campus leadership and made publicly available to the student body, always accompanied by actionable plans for addressing any identified shortcomings. These findings can also be subject to rolling review, where the data is published each month of utilization rates and non-identifiable data to allow the general population to find trends and see the importance of these programs. Not only does this build trust between students and the institution but also fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

Ultimately, food security programs must be treated as dynamic systems, those capable of growth, refinement, and adaptation. A well-designed audit process ensures that programs do not simply exist but evolve in ways that continue to meet the urgent and changing needs of the student populations they are meant to serve.

Food Security Programming at the University of Oregon

The University of Oregon uses a combination of programs to address student food insecurity, using a combination of on-campus services and off-campus partnerships. These efforts are meant to reflect the understanding that food access must be addressed within and

beyond campus, using excess institutional capacity to provide resources and uplift those existing in the community.

The most prominent fixture of the UO's work in food security is the uplifting of off-campus resources. The ECM Student Food Pantry, which operates as a partnership between the UO, Episcopal Campus Ministries, Food For Lane County, and Grace Lutheran Church, provides some supplemental groceries to all college students in the Eugene area.[87] It is located close to campus, and the university uplifts the pantry by supplying some staff, student volunteers, and variable financial contributions, ensuring its sustained operation and accessibility. This model of support uplifts pre-existing organizations that have an embedded network of food access.

The university plays a direct role in public benefit navigation through assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Basic Needs program runs SNAP support events each term, whether with directed assistance at filling out online or paper applications, or through enrollment events that feature case managers from the Oregon Department of Human Services who can conduct on the spot interviews and accept or deny applications in real time. These events are meant to be an outlet for students to receive on the spot support in real time with trained staff members. By helping students through the (often difficult) application process of SNAP lowers barriers and allows for students to access stable, federally funded food assistance that extends beyond the reach of just institutional programming.

In food recovery, the university has implemented the Leftover Textover program.[88] This initiative alerts students when surplus food from catered events is available on campus and where, reducing food waste and food insecurity. Students receive text notifications that direct them to pick up prepared foods that would otherwise be discarded. While smaller in scale, only

[87] *Food | Basic Needs Program*. (n.d.). https://basicneeds.uoregon.edu/food
[88] *Leftover Textover | ERB Memorial Union*. (n.d.). https://emu.uoregon.edu/leftover-textover

applying to larger catered events, this program leads the university onto the right track for low-cost strategies that align not only with food security, but with sustainability commitments.

To complement these initiatives, there is also direct on-campus programming, such as the Produce Drop. This is held weekly during the academic term in the central student union building, supplying fresh fruits and vegetables to students in a public and common campus location. Unlike the pantry model, Produce Drops are highly visible and normalized on campus, framing fresh produce as a community resource rather than an emergency intervention strategy.[89]

These offerings demonstrate a somewhat effective yet low-cost strategy to food security. By uplifting community partners, facilitating federal resource gathering, recovering excess food, and supplying fresh food distribution, the university addresses student needs in a variety of strategies that highlight effectiveness while minimizing expenses. While obvious gaps remain, the breadth of these programs positions UO as a meaningful case study in how higher education institutions can leverage existing infrastructure to move towards a more equitable student experience.

While the efforts of the University of Oregon represent a strong start, significant opportunities remain to expand and deepen their food security programming. The Leftover Textover program, for example, could be extended beyond catered events and include consistent food recovery from dining halls, on-campus cafes, and retail food vendors, ensuring that surplus prepared meals are redirected to students rather than being discarded. Similarly, while the ECM Student Pantry is an important community partnership, its off-campus location and religious affiliation creates barriers for some students. To mend this, relocating or duplicating the services into a more centrally located, on-campus location would improve visibility and ease of access.

[89] *Food Equity | ERB Memorial Union*. (n.d.). https://emu.uoregon.edu/food-equity#produce

Further, institutionalizing the mission of food security as part of UO's sustainability and equity commitments would move beyond ad hoc solutions toward systemic change. By broadening its scope to address these gaps, the UO could shift from a low-cost and supplementary approach to one that places student's basic needs at the center of its mission.

Looking forward, the university could establish a campus-wide coalition dedicated to food security, which will bring together students, staff, faculty, and community partners to create a coordinated response to student hunger. This coalition could support the creation of a local grocery store guide that helps students navigate affordable options off campus while uplifting community-based resources already in place. Expanding educational opportunities through cooking and nutrition classes that would empower students to make the most of limited budgets and access to food. In addition, the university could strengthen SNAP and WIC support services, ensuring students not only apply successfully but know how to maximize their benefits. Finally, redeveloping current underutilized campus locations (such as the now abandoned Museum Café) to be used as instruction space, a soup kitchen, or utilizing excess ingredients to establish a pay-what-you-can café. When taken together, these initiatives would move beyond reactive programming toward a sustainable, student-centered food security infrastructure.

Chapter 5: A Future Without Student Hunger

Reframing the Narrative

In popular culture, the "starving college student" has often been portrayed as a kind of comedic rite of passage, a shared struggle of college students that is means to build character. For example, countless memes on social media depict college students surviving on nothing but ramen noodles and red bull, a joke so widespread that ramen has become almost a shorthand for the collegiate lifestyle. Sitcoms and teen dramas, from *Friends* to *Riverdale*, frequently lean on the gag of students eating poorly as a source of humor and relatability. These portrayals frame hunger as quirky or even endearing, proof of a student's dedication to make it through their higher education program. Yet beneath the laugh track, this narrative reflects a true structural inequity. Millions of college students face food insecurity, not as a passing phase but as a daily barrier to their education and overall wellbeing. By trivializing the issue, pop culture has reinforced the notion that going hungry is simply a part of the college experience, when in reality it is a systemic failure that institutions must confront.

Food insecurity on college campuses is neither a niche issue nor a rite of passage, it is a systemic barrier to student success. It is a deeply rooted, persistent, and structurally reinforced barrier to achieving real success, one that disproportionately impacts already marginalized students and necessitates institutional attention. The image of the starving college student has long served as a punchline in popular media and culture, often with some form of dismissive humor. However, this framing truly minimizes the severity of the issue and excuses inaction by normalizing the suffering of students as a quintessential part of the college student experience.

The entirety of this thesis has worked to establish that food insecurity is not a fringe condition only experienced by a few unlucky students, it is the result of a systemic inequity in

our systems of higher education. Historically, food access has been shaped by racialized land use policy, income inequality, uneven economic development, and a public benefits system that fails to reflect the realities of today's student population. In higher education, this manifests in underfunded systems of support, inflexible aid structures, and institutional culture that too often separates academic success and basic needs. Hunger on campus is not accidental anymore, it is the logical outcome of policy gaps, budgetary priorities, and a failure to see food as a central part of student life.

Reframing this narrative begins with admitting that food insecurity is a public health crisis, issue of equity, and a threat to the core of higher education. Institutions are not neutral in this and are capable of reframing the conditions under which their students thrive or struggle. This work has sought to move the conversation from cultural tropes to strategic action. Through analysis of the historical context, institutional responsibility, and the array of implementation strategies, this thesis provides a roadmap for colleges and universities to reject the starving college student narrative and replace it with one of support.

By shifting this mindset of scarcity and survival to one of investment and justice for their students, institutions can fulfill their ethical obligations while also improving their retention, engagement, and academic success. To reframe this narrative is not to rename the issue, but to act decisively in its outcome. This implementation is not about charity or equity, but about design and ensuring that no student must choose between their education or their next meal.

The Moral and Strategic Imperative

The question of whether institutions of higher education should act on food security is not asking for kindness but asking to fulfill their obligations. Colleges and universities are not charities; they are accountable institutions with a duty to safeguard the wellbeing of the

communities they serve. When students come into these institutions they bring with them financial pressures, family responsibilities, cultural identities, and very real and physical needs. Institutions that pride themselves on cultivating academic excellence cannot simply ignore the fact that their students cannot learn, grow, and succeed as adults when they are hungry. Addressing food insecurity is not an act of generosity, it is a necessary fulfillment of the institutional mission.

There is a clear strategic benefit to treating food security as a central component of student support. As discussed in Chapter 2, students experiencing food insecurity are more likely to struggle with chronic health conditions, suffer from diminished academic performance, and are at a greater risk of dropping out. These outcomes are not only damaging on a personal level, but they impact key institutional metrics in retention, success, and alumni engagement post-grad. Investing in food security programs is not only ethical, but also an economically sound decision for institutional health. Fewer dropouts, fewer crisis interventions, and more successful graduates mean stronger outcomes and reputational gains.

Chapter 3 outlined the specific advantages that institutions already hold in confronting this issue, such as a robust infrastructure, existing food service operations, transportation networks, and built-in community partnerships. These assets give campuses a unique ability to implement solutions effectively and at a correct scale. Likewise, as shown in Chapter 4, many of the most impactful programs (like food recovery, peer to peer resource navigation, and volunteer-based organizing) require minimal investment but generate high returns in student wellness and institutional credibility.

Institutions also hold a powerful position in culture within their communities. They are not just sites for learning, but employers, research centers, entertainers, civic anchors, and moral

leaders. When they act decisively to reduce instances of hunger and take a stand to support student well-being, they set a precedent for what is possible in broader public policy. By leveraging their influence, higher education institutions can inspire change not only on their campus, but across sectors.

Food insecurity is a failure of structure, but it is one that institutions have the power to interrupt. The path forward requires the recognition of institutional responsibility not ending at the classroom door. The moral and strategic imperative are the same: build systems that feed, retain, and uplift every student who enrolls.

Tiered Strategy for Implementation

One of the most common institutional roadblocks to addressing food insecurity is the perception that the issue is too large, too complex, and/or is too expensive to tackle. While these concerns are not unfounded, they often serve more as justification for inaction than as legitimate limitations. The truth is: every campus can do something. Whether an institution has extensive dining infrastructure or no kitchen at all, a multibillion-dollar endowment, or a limited operating budget, there are entry points for engagement. The work does not need to be perfect to begin, it merely needs to be put into action.

This thesis has emphasized that there is no one-size-fits-all model for food security programming. Institutions differ in size, demographics, financial structure, and geographic location. What works at a flagship state university campus may not be appropriate for a small rural liberal arts college or a suburban trade school. For that reason, this section offers a tiered model, an adaptable map that allows institutions to scale their efforts based on available resources, student needs, and existing infrastructure. Each tier includes examples of practical

interventions, from the immediately implementable to the more resource-intensive, reinforcing that meaningful action is within reach universally.

Tier 1: Immediate Low-Cost Action

For campuses with limited funding or capacity, there are still impactful steps that can be taken and implemented with little time. These interventions require minimal investment and rely largely on organization, coordination, and access to information. One of the simplest yet most effective strategies is the creation of grocery store guides. These guides provide students with critical information about nearby food retailers, including whether they accept SNAP or WIC benefits, their proximity to public transit, typical price points, and shopping tips for those unfamiliar with budgeting or nutrition. This intervention offers immediate empowerment and accessibility, especially for students who are new to managing their own needs.

Another important action in this tier is uplifting and partnering with off-campus food resources. Rather than trying to build entirely new systems, institutions can help students tap into existing community food pantries or nonprofit organizations. Universities can contribute to these efforts by advertising their services, helping coordinate transportation, referring students directly, and advertising volunteer opportunities. Supporting pre-existing community resources helps strengthen the broader food access ecosystem while extending institutional reach without requiring structural change.

Finally, SNAP application support is a vital but often overlooked area of intervention. Many students who qualify for SNAP never apply due to the complexity of the process, lack of information, or even the social stigma. Institutions can bridge this gap by offering peer or staff assistance in determining eligibility, completing forms, and navigating state requirements. Even

a small investment in trained student navigators or part-time staff can lead to significant gains in benefit utilization and food access.

Tier 2: Mid-Level Interventions

Institutions with moderate capacity (whether that be in funding, staffing, or student organization) can take on more programmatic interventions that require some infrastructure but provide lasting benefits. Cooking and nutrition classes, whether embedded in curriculum or delivered as workshops, are one such strategy. These classes equip students with practical skills needed to budget, shop, and prepare meals on limited incomes. In doing so, they reduce reliance on convenience foods and cultivate long-term food and nutrition literacy.

Food recovery programs are another tool within this moderate tier. Most dining operations produce edible surplus food that is often discarded. By developing a system for collecting, storing, and redistributing that food to students in need, institutions can simultaneously reduce waste and hunger. These programs are especially effective when student volunteers or offices of sustainability are brought into the planning process, further embedding food security as a facet of campus culture.

Emergency meal funds also fall within this category. These programs provide students with short-term support in the form of meal swipes, vouchers, or grocery store gift cards during moments of acute and sudden need. In practice, they are often administered through student affairs or basic needs offices and can prevent students from having to make difficult choices when money is tight. Because they are flexible and targeted, emergency funding models can fill critical gaps without requiring ongoing large-scale operational budgets.

Tier 3: High Investment, High Reward Interventions

For institutions with greater financial, spatial, and administrative capacity, there is a clear opportunity to implement systemic, sustainable interventions that become embedded in the campus infrastructure. Establishing on-campus food pantries is one of the most visible and direct ways to combat student hunger. These spaces not only provide regular access to healthy groceries, but they also normalize the use of student support services when designed with student dignity in mind. This will ultimately work to combat the stigma that is often present in accessing these resources by viewing them as an average part of the student experience. On-campus pantries can be scaled to meet institutional size and may offer anything from non-perishables and fresh produce to culturally specific staples and hygiene products.

In some cases, institutions could go even further by creating or adapting on-campus retail spaces to function as SNAP-eligible grocery outlets. These spaces then allow students to use their federal benefits in a familiar retail setting, reducing stigma and increasing choice. By offering fresh produce, proteins, and other essentials, these outlets meet nutritional needs while removing transportation and time barriers that often prevent students from accessing traditional stores.

The largest investment in this category is the process of institutionalizing food security work through formal coalitions and paid student leadership with the creation of any of these intervention options. As outlined in Chapter 4, programs thrive when students are involved not just as manual labor, but as decision-makers, outreach workers, and peer navigators. Establishing permanent paid positions, advisory boards, and cross-departmental coalitions ensures continuity, accountability, and an institutional culture that centers student well-being. These models also

generate leadership development opportunities for students and help integrate food security into the larger educational mission of the institution.

A Long-Term Vision

A national implementation of the strategies outlined in this thesis would result in one of the largest transformations in how society views student wellness and success. In this future, food access would be integrated as a core element of student support infrastructure, not peripheral to academic life but essential to it. Institutional systems would be designed to ensure that no student will ever be forced to choose between education or their basic human needs. This vision requires a hard look at food insecurity, not as an individual concern, but as a structural responsibility on every institution of higher education.

Under this kind of model, university dining services would no longer operate in isolation from sustainability and student welfare initiatives. Surplus food would be systematically recovered and redistributed. Campus resource centers would include dedicated staff or peer navigators trained to support students in applying for public benefits, like SNAP. Food pantries, grocery guides, and cooking classes would be normalized aspects of campus operations, embedded within student life services, and accessible to all. Most importantly, these programs would not be limited to large or urban campuses but would be adapted to serve all different types of institutions, including those in rural environments, smaller schools, or those under-resourced. Such efforts would reflect a commitment not merely to temporary relief, but to long-term, equitable access to nutrition as a fundamental right.

This institutional shift would be accompanied by a necessary transformation of culture. The narrative of the "starving college student" as an undefeatable aspect of higher education would be decisively rejected. In its place would emerge a more accurate and humane

understanding that students' basic needs must be met to support their academic performance, mental health, and retention. Food security would be understood not as charity, but as a foundational component of educational success. Institutions would be expected to actively remove barriers to food access to part of their mission to promote student equity and success.

Addressing food insecurity at the institutional level also advances broader equity goals. Hunger on college campuses does not affect all students equally. Students who are low-income, first-generation, members of racial or ethnic minority groups, disabled, LGBTQ+, or parenting are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. These disparities are not by coincidence, they are the result of systemic barriers with roots in racism, classism, xenophobia, ableism, and other forms of structural oppression. By designing food access initiatives that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and aware of potential barriers for access, institutions can take meaningful steps toward closing gaps of opportunity and promoting a more just educational environment.

Further, embedding food security into the institutional structure aligns with the values of academic equity, civic responsibility, and public health. As educational institutions continue to serve as gatekeepers to social mobility, their role in shaping not only intellectual but material outcomes for students becomes increasingly clear. Ensuring food security is a practical and ethical obligation that promotes long-term achievement, personal development, and institutional sustainability.

A substantial remediation of student food insecurity is both an achievable and essential goal. It requires a shift in institutional priorities, the allocation of appropriate resources, and a recognition that hunger undermines the core mission of higher education. A future without student hunger is not theoretical, it is an attainable outcome for institutions who are willing to align their operations with the core principles of equity, dignity, and support for all students.

A Call to Action

The elimination of student food insecurity must be cognized as both a moral responsibility as well as a strategic concern for institutions of higher education. While the long-term vision should remain as a future in which food security is so universally guaranteed it no longer warrants a discussion, present realities require intentional and immediate intervention. Until that future comes to fruition, institutions, policymakers, and campus communities must engage with the problem as it exists today, persistent, systemic, and consequential.

Institutional leaders must acknowledge that hunger on their campuses is not an outlandish policy concern, but an active barrier to student retention, health, and academic achievement. Addressing food insecurity cannot be deferred until the “ideal” conditions emerge, doing so perpetuates the current harm and undermines the credibility of the institution. Even small, incremental changes can have measurable impact, and every action taken now contributes to the cultural and structural shift necessary to make long-term change actualized.

Student activists play a very critical role. Their advocacy, grounded in lived and seen experience, brings urgency and visibility to an issue that might otherwise remain hidden in institutional blind spots. By organizing, testifying, and demanding concrete commitments from their institutions, student leaders ensure that food security remains as a matter of public accountability.

In the same sense, policymakers must also act decisively. Expanding SNAP eligibility for students, funding campus-based basic needs programs, and embedding food access metrics into higher education policy are essential steps toward addressing the structural roots of the problem. Without support from lawmakers, many institutional efforts will remain limited in scope or vulnerable to budgetary changes.

There is no single perfect moment to begin this work, only a recognition that every day without action is a day when students are forced to learn under the conditions of deprivation. As this thesis has established, solutions are available, adaptable, and ultimately achievable. The question is no longer whether institutions and their partners can address student food insecurity, but whether they will choose to do so.

The work to come requires commitment, collaboration, and the courage to reject the normalization of student hunger. As author and activist Grace Lee Boggs wrote, "*If we want to see change in our lives, we have to change things ourselves.*"[90] Institutions must now choose to transform, not only their policies and programs, but their priorities, so that no student's potential is diminished by the absence of something as fundamental as food.

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[90] Grace Lee Boggs (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). https://www.nps.gov/people/grace-lee-boggs.htm

Appendix

Stylized Cycle for Food Security Implementation

Blueprint for the University of Oregon Following Listed Strategy

As discussed before, food insecurity affects nearly 40% of students at the University of Oregon. Rising living costs, limited public assistance, and Oregon's comparatively high grocery prices make it difficult for many students to consistently access nutritious food. While UO already supports programs like the ECM Student Food Pantry, Leftover Textover, and weekly Trillium Produce Plus Produce Drops, these resources are fragmented, off-campus, or underdeveloped. To address this, UO can adopt a coordinated and multi-tiered strategy that shifts from purely reactive programming toward a sustainable and equity-centered approach.

The primary goals of this plan are to: ensure that no UO student goes hungry, integrate food access into the university's equity, sustainability, and student success priorities, and to position UO as a model for higher education food security initiatives nationwide. Achieving these goals requires a phased strategy that begins with low-cost immediate actions and builds toward longer-term structural solutions.

In the short term, UO should focus on measures that can be implemented quickly and at minimal cost. Establishing a campus-wide coalition on food security will provide a unified structure to coordinate efforts across departments, reduce duplication, and advocate for more resources. This coalition must prioritize student leadership as well as lived experience to ensure programs remain relevant and accessible. At the same time, the university can create a grocery store guide that identifies affordable shopping options, SNAP/WIC retailers, and public transit routes, helping students make informed choices about their food. Finally, UO should expand SNAP enrollment assistance by training peer navigators and hosting regular drop in events, addressing the significant gap between eligibility and actual participation among college students.

Following these, some middle ground strategies should expand the reach and access of existing programs. Scaling up food recovery initiatives such as Leftover Textover to include dining halls, cafes, and retail vendors would redistribute surplus food to more students while reducing campus waste. Partnering with academic departments to offer cooking and nutrition classes would equip students with the skills to budget, shop, and prepare meals more effectively. UO can also expand emergency meal funding offered through the Ducks Feeding Ducks program to ensure students experiencing acute need can still access meals even during crisis.

In the long term, UO must commit to building sustainable infrastructure that makes food access a permanent fixture on campus. Relocating or recreating the ECM Food Pantry on campus would make this resource even more accessible and destigmatized. Similarly, UO could repurpose underutilized space, such as the former Museum Café, into a pay-what-you-can dining space, using excess ingredients from the UO dining halls. These efforts should only be accompanied by institutional commitments, including embedding food security within UO's equity framework, dedicating professional staff, securing recurring funding, and conducting annual audits of program outcomes and effectiveness.

Leadership for these initiatives should come from the Basic Needs Program and the Office of Sustainability, working in close collaboration with community partners like Food for Lane County, Urban Farm, and nonprofit organizations. Evaluation will be essential, combining usage data with student feedback to measure effectiveness, reduce stigma, and refine the services offered over time.

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