Navigating Food Insecurity At College: Examining Student Experiences and Perspectives on Solutions

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Summary
There is a growing awareness of food insecurity experienced by college students, with recent studies documenting its presence on college campuses and offering recommendations for addressing it.1-3 The majority of studies are quantitative and offer limited insight into how students view food insecurity and what students think their universities can do about it. This mixed-methods study provides that perspective, which will inform the development of institutional interventions to better meet student needs.

Objective
To assess food insecurity among students and explore how students experiencing food insecurity make sense of, navigate, and recommend addressing it.

Methodology
A two-phase study was conducted in spring 2019 at a large public university.
Phase I: A campus-wide anonymous survey was administered using Qualtrics and elicited 1,283 responses (93.1% undergraduate; 6.9% graduate). The 79-item survey included questions regarding students’ personal background, finances related to college attendance, social supports, food sources, and food security status using the 6-item USDA-FSS Short Form survey.1 Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.
Phase II: Upon survey completion, participants were asked to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group to share their experiences with food insecurity. Thirty students self-identifying as food insecure indicated interest in participating, with 13 (84.6%) students with federal/state grants, Pell Grants, or student loans experience low or very low food security. Students identifying as LGBTQ+ were more likely to experience low or very low food security.

Phase I: Major Findings
• Statistically significant differences (p<.001) indicated the following group differences:
  • First-generation college students, students with jobs, and students identifying as LGBTQ+ were more likely to experience low or very low food security.
  • Students with federal/state grants, Pell Grants, or student loans were more likely to experience low or very low food security.
  • Food insecure students were more likely to be housing insecure.
  • Most common food sources for food insecure students included grocery stores (29%), dining hall (22%), fast food (17%), food from family or friends (10%), and free food sources (7%).
  • Top costs making food purchases difficult among food insecure students included: transportation (25%), housing (24%), school supplies/fees (15%), and health expenses (10%).
  • Top emergency food supports were grocery money from friends or family (48%), meals from friends or family (26%), credit cards (16%), and extra food from dining hall (16%).

Phase II: Themes
College Students as Underserving of Assistance
• Not knowing if need is valid or just part of being a college student
• Feeling underserving & not wanting to take resources from others
Encounters with Stigma
• Feeling embarrassed not to have food or to use resources (pantries)
• Not wanting to be pitied or judged by privileged students

Lack of Awareness on Campus
• Perceiving university as generally unaware of issue
• Suggesting need is overlooked due to recruitment priorities
• Viewing the university as overly concerned with its image

Student Identity Matters
• Viewing high-income, in-state, non-minority, and traditional college-age students as the norm & most supported
• Transfer and graduate students feeling particularly unsupported & less knowledgeable of campus resources

Self Reliance & Coping Strategies
• Not asking family or more financially secure peers for assistance
• Strategies to cope with hunger: sleeping, staying busy, replacing meals with snacks, drinking more fluids, eating one meal a day, taking food from work, attending events offering free food
• Strategies for cash: donating plasma, using credit cards, declining social invitations

Recommendations
• Raise awareness of issue among students, faculty, & staff
• Better communicate attendance costs
• Develop resource guide & develop financial literacy workshops
• Connect students with resource mentors
• Establish food pantry in discreet location serving healthy, fresh foods with grab-and-go options, vegetarian, & vegan options
• Create programs to donate dining dollars & food following events
• No-frills, low-cost dining option

Conclusion
The first step is to raise awareness through discussions about food insecurity. Participants want this conversation to begin so that they feel heard and supported. The results informed recommendations made to administrators by the Basic Needs Advisory Board.

References