

Food Security at a Private, Midwestern University during COVID-19

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SNEB Nutrition Educator Competency

2.1 Nutrition Across the Lifecycle

Background

Food insecurity, or inconsistent access to healthy and safe food, impacts an estimated 42% of college students.¹ Food insecurity is associated with higher stress and anxiety levels, poor nutrition and other health outcomes, as well as poorer academic outcomes.²⁻⁴ Students facing financial pressures may consider food to be a more flexible area of spending, and have reported skipping meals due to lack of resources.⁵ Low income students are also more likely to drop out of college.⁵ First generation, low-income, and students of color are at increased risk of food insecurity.⁵ Food insecurity is a serious issue for many college students.

The purpose of this study was to assess food insecurity at a private, Midwestern university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Fall 2020 at a private, Midwestern university with approximately 5,400 students, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited by email. Food insecurity was assessed using the USDA's Household Food Security Survey, and administered online to 393 students, aged 18-53 years. The USDA coding system was used to calculate a total score and to classify participants with high, marginal, low, or very low food security. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and a t-test was performed to determine whether a difference existed between scores for participants who were/were not first-generation.

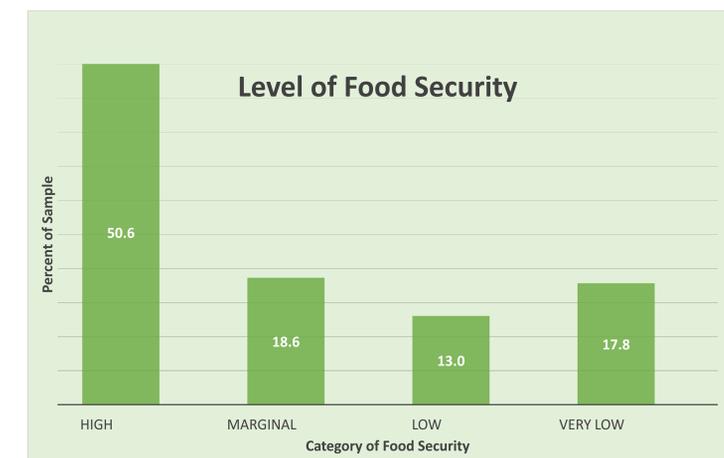
Table 1. Participant Demographics

Characteristic	
Age (Mean + SD)	20.69 ± 4.07
Race or Ethnicity*	
White or Caucasian	338 (86%)
Hispanic or Latina/o/x	36 (9%)
Asian or Asian American	21 (5%)
Black or African American	13 (3%)
Other races	15 (4%)
Gender	
Woman or Female	300 (76%)
Man or Male	87 (22%)
Other	6 (2%)
Year in School	
1 st year undergraduate	96 (25%)
2 nd year undergraduate	81 (21%)
3 rd year undergraduate	74 (18%)
4 th year undergraduate	93 (24%)
5 th year or more, undergraduate	16 (4%)
Graduate	31 (8%)
Enrollment Status	
Full time student	378 (97%)
Living Arrangement	
Campus or university housing	155 (39%)
Fraternity or sorority residence	24 (6%)
Parent/guardian/other relative's home	81 (21%)
Off-campus or non-university housing	132 (34%)
First-Generation Student	
Yes	113 (29%)

*Participants were able to check all that applied

Results

A total of 393 students completed the survey. The sample was predominantly white (86%), majority female (76%), and 113 (29%) were first-generation students. Based on the USDA classification, 69% were food secure (high or marginal), and 31% were food insecure (low or very low). First generation students had significantly greater food insecurity ($M = 3.22 \pm 3.40$) than non-first generation students ($M = 1.67 \pm 2.63$), [$t(169.27) = 4.37, p < .000$].



Conclusions

Food security among participants was higher than many pre-COVID-19 estimates for college students. One possible explanation is that more students may have been living at their permanent residences due to remote learning. First-generation students continue to be at high risk for food insecurity. Nutrition educators should collaborate with university administrators and other stakeholders to provide resources to increase food security among students.

References

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