

Higher Education Students' Perspectives on Using an Urban On-campus Food Pantry During COVID-19: A Qualitative Study



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INTRODUCTION

- The rate of food insecurity (FI) in those pursuing higher education is three times higher than the national average.^{1,2}
- Many institutions have established food pantry (FP) programs in response to widespread campus FI.
- The pandemic has amplified financial stress for students and has altered many on-campus policies.
- Little is known about higher education students' use of food pantries during COVID-19.

OBJECTIVE

To explore the motivators and barriers that influence higher education students' use of FPs during COVID-19.

METHODS

Study Design, Setting, Participants:

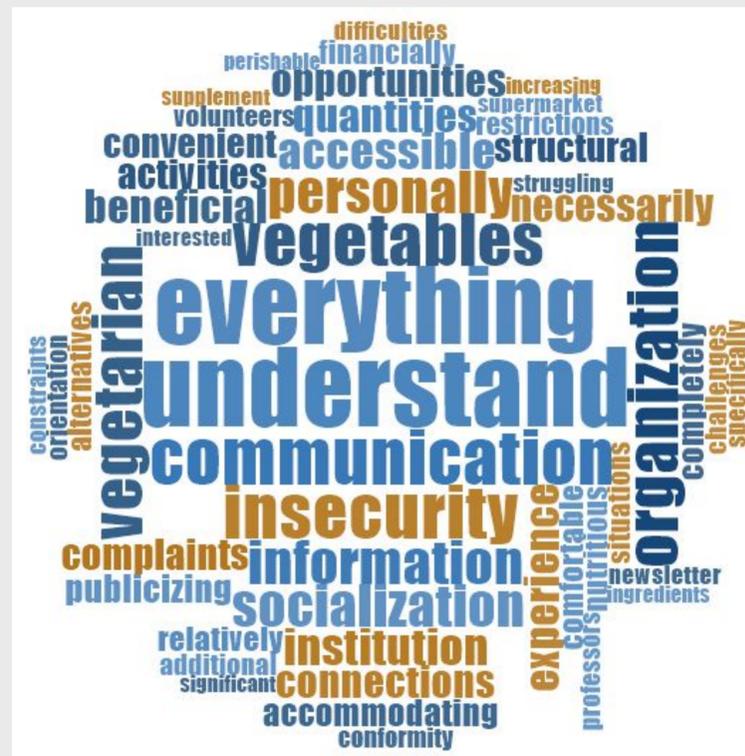
- 18 unmarried/single undergraduate and graduate students at a private university in New York City who used an on-campus FP were interviewed by using a semi-structured script from April to October 2021.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis:

- Taking an inductive approach, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo v12.
- Four researchers collaboratively developed the codebook and used thematic analysis to identify themes and subthemes.

RESULTS

- While FP use was initially motivated by financial incentives and pre-pandemic FP experience, these motivations were reinforced by positive interactions with volunteers, satisfaction with food items, and COVID-19 safety protocols.
- However, students encountered several barriers that limited FP use, including eligibility concerns, logistical and communication issues, and lack of food variety.
- In addition, feelings of stigma, level of FI awareness, and familiarity with the US food system were major determinants of FP use.
- Notably, students with pre-pandemic FP experience identified assistance more quickly, expressed more complex feelings, and demonstrated a deeper understanding of FI than novice FP users.



SAMPLE QUOTES

"I actually think the online service is really, really good because it is a lot easier to communicate"

"Honestly it kind of brings me some anxiety ... remembering times when I was a child suffering with food insecurity and like having to go to the food pantry ... But overall, I'm really glad that this exists."

"Because I've met a couple of guys, who are also from India and they also didn't know about the pantry service. So maybe the awareness is not there"

"I'm totally fine because before coming to ___ (the private university), at my previous university, we also had a food pantry. So I understand how it works and I'm OK about using them"

"But why? They explained that the gym exists [at orientation], they could also explain this [on-campus food pantry]"

"I can't imagine about having more [food] because I'm already uncomfortable using what there is [at the food pantry]."

CONCLUSION

- The motivators and barriers of FP use during COVID-19 were influenced by students' pre-pandemic experiences with FI.
- This study reveals that the on-campus FP requires systemic support to reduce FI stigma and increase food access.
- Furthermore, these findings indicate the need for more holistic institutional and governmental support for FI in higher education.

Citations:

1. Bruening M, Argo K, Payne-Sturges D, Laska MN. The Struggle Is Real: A Systematic Review of Food Insecurity on Postsecondary Education Campuses. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2017;117(11):1767-1791. doi:10.1016/j.jand.2017.05.022

2. USDA ERS - Food Security and Nutrition Assistance. Accessed February 12, 2021. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/>

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