

Food insecurity common across US higher education campuses

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Many university and college students across the U.S. report lacking access to a reliable supply of nutritious food, a concept known as food insecurity, which can affect their ability to learn, according to research presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

"Food insecure students were more likely to fail assignments and exams, withdraw from classes or the university, and had lower grade point averages than their counterparts," said Yu-Wei Wang, Ph.D., of the University of Maryland-College Park, who presented at the meeting. "Additionally, they reported missing out on professional development opportunities, such as internships, which may affect their future career ambitions."

A study by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice of nearly 86,000 students from 123 U.S. educational institutions found that 41% of university and 48% of two-year [college students](#) reported [food insecurity](#), according to Wang.

"With increasing wealth inequality and student loan debt in the United States, we need to address the food insecurity problem on college campuses and make sure it does not restrict a student's ability to succeed," she said.

Wang also presented data from a study in which she and her colleagues surveyed 4,901 students at the University of Maryland-College Park

during the fall 2017 semester and found nearly 20% of students said they were concerned about their ability to access [nutritious food](#) when asked about their experiences with food insecurity in the previous year (e.g., "Do you worry whether food would run out before you got money to buy more?" and "In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there was not enough money for food?").

Approximately 13% of students reported experiencing low food security (e.g., they could not afford to eat balanced meals or relied on a few kinds of low-cost food because they ran out of money to buy food), while 7% reported experiencing very low food security (e.g., they were hungry but did not eat, or cut the size of or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food). Of those students, 23 were chosen for in-depth interviews to better understand the issue, and were asked additional questions (e.g., "Could you tell us about the last time you did not have enough money for food?" and "Which specific issues with food access do you feel that you face as a student with children?").

Another study presented at the meeting, involving 91 students at the University of California-Santa Cruz, also found access to nutritious food to be a problem, according to Heather Bullock, Ph.D., of the University of California-Santa Cruz. Focus groups were organized with food insecure students to learn about their experiences of food insecurity on campus, barriers to food access, consequences for academic performance and recommendations for improving support services.

"Three core themes emerged from the focus groups," said Bullock. "Students confront multiple barriers to food security, including difficulty accessing benefits and stigma, they engage in complex, time consuming strategies to secure food and they suffer negative academic consequences, including reduced focus on class work."

Bullock also referenced findings from other researchers that among

almost 9,000 University of California system students surveyed across 10 campuses, 23% said they lacked reliable access to a quality, varied, nutritious diet and 19% had experienced reduced food intake due to limited resources at some point.

In both studies, food insecurity disproportionately affected certain groups of students: first-generation college students, racial/ethnic minority students, international students, those from immigrant backgrounds, those who identified as transgender/gender non-conforming and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

To cope, students reported cutting down on portion sizes, finding lower cost or free food, skipping class to attend free food events, sharing food with other students in need and participating in other activities, such as smoking or napping, to distract them from feeling hungry, said Wang.

The stigma of food insecurity negatively affected students' sense of self-worth and deterred them from accessing programs and services, said Bullock.

"Students reported poorer general health and experienced higher levels of depression, anxiety, distress, anger and loneliness than their peers who were not food insecure," said Wang. "Some students did not use resources they are eligible for because they felt embarrassed, ashamed or believed that other students were in greater need."

In the follow-up interviews, Maryland students suggested increasing access to healthy food on campus, enhancing awareness of food insecurity to reduce stigma, and providing financial support for those lacking access to food, according to Wang.

"Programs such as Campus Pantry, which provides emergency food to university students, faculty and staff in need are crucial to help curb

food insecurity," said Wang. "It is critical to increase awareness of food insecurity on campus to let students know they are not alone."

Last fall, the University of California-Santa Cruz opened a welcoming "basic needs" café where students can enjoy meals free of charge and connect with resources, according to Bullock. A pantry is also conveniently on site.

While college food pantries help address student food insecurity, it is not a long-term solution to the problem, according to Harmony A. Reppond, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan, Dearborn who also presented.

Reppond and her co-researchers organized focus groups among 20 food pantry directors across Michigan universities and found the most effective ways to connect food insecure students with food were campus partnerships among faculty, staff and student food gatherers (e.g., students donating leftover meals from meal plans, sports teams or student organizations).

"Campus food pantries are often spearheaded by faculty and staff because students are skipping meals and making difficult choices between whether to buy books or food," said Reppond. "Pantries are addressing immediate needs. To sustain [food security](#), campus food pantry directors cite the need to expand funding of existing policies at the state and federal levels, such as Pell Grants."

The research has sparked a federal response, including the College Student Hunger Act of 2017 and a 2018 U.S. Government Accountability Office report, according to Reppond.

"Our research helped Congress understand the plight of [food insecurity](#) among college students in Michigan and also guided legislative policies, such as the GAO report," said Reppond.

Reppond suggested that schools create an advisory committee with representation across campus to discuss food policy and advertise food pantry open houses for faculty, staff and students.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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