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Breaking the Silence of Struggle: Experiences  
of Students Facing Food Insecurity

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## **Breaking the Silence of Struggle: Experiences of Students Facing Food Insecurity**

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### **Abstract**

*Recent research related to food insecurity on college campuses has significantly increased public awareness of this issue. Though many quantitative studies conducted in the past decade have confirmed that food insecurity is a prominent issue among college students, little qualitative research is available to illuminate the stories of students facing food insecurity or describe the nuances of the issue. This study addressed this need for qualitative exploration, and addressed a call from previous qualitative researchers for more research specifically focused on social implications of food insecurity among college students. Individual interviews were conducted with a sample of three students facing food insecurity at a large, public institution in the Midwest. Participants shared their experiences with food insecurity in a variety of academic and social contexts, as well as their experiences with seeking food assistance. Findings indicated that participants faced a range of barriers to achieving food security, resulting in negative experiences related to their academic performance and physical, emotional, mental, and social health.*

*Keywords:* food insecurity, college students, hunger, food pantry

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### **Introduction**

Though food insecurity has long been a focus of research and public attention in K-12 schools, food insecurity among college students has only recently

emerged as a topic of research. Recent research has significantly increased awareness of this issue among higher education professionals and administrators, demonstrated by the sheer number of institutions designing services to alleviate hunger on campus. Hundreds of colleges and universities have responded to this issue by launching food assistance programs, evidenced by the College and University Food Bank Alliance's (2019) list of affiliated campuses. Today, the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) lists over 700 member institutions on its website, compared to only 200 members in 2015 (CUFBA, 2019). Members of CUFBA include institutions providing food assistance resources to members of the university community.

Although public awareness of food insecurity among college students is increasing, understanding of this issue largely rests on quantitative data and ambiguous figures, perpetuating student food insecurity as a nameless, faceless, and silent issue (Henry, 2017). Researchers have noted a deficiency in qualitative exploration, advocating for its use to investigate the underlying causes of food insecurity among students, as well as the role of social barriers in preventing students from seeking assistance (Henry, 2017; Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016). This study was designed to address this call for qualitative exploration, utilizing individual interviews to shed light on the stories of students facing this issue. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe the experiences of students facing food insecurity at a large, public institution in the Midwest and investigate how social barriers prevent students from seeking assistance. The findings of this study may benefit institutions by providing administrators with a deeper understanding of the nuances of this issue, which will aid in effectively addressing food insecurity on college campuses. The following research questions (RQ) directed data collection and analysis in this study: 1) What are the experiences of food insecure students? 2) What social barriers and perceptions inhibit these students from accessing assistance?

### **Food Insecurity in Existing Literature**

The United States Department of Agriculture (2019) measures food security on a four-part scale. An individual or household with *high food security* demonstrates no indication of food-access problems or limitations, and *marginal food security* if there are only one or two reported indications of food-access problems (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). In a condition of marginal food security, there may be anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food, but there is little indication of changes in diet or food intake. If economic or other factors result in a reduction in "quality, variety, or desirability of diet," but not necessarily a reduction in food intake, an individual is in the category of *low food security* or *food insecurity* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019, para. 3). Finally, *very low food security* is characterized by

a disruption in eating patterns and reduced food intake (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019).

An estimated one in eight Americans were food insecure in 2017, equating to approximately 40 million people (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Food insecurity is a complex issue that does not exist in isolation. People impacted by food insecurity are also likely to be impacted by issues such as lack of affordable housing, social isolation, medical costs, and low wages, not to mention the potential long-term impact that an unhealthy diet may have on overall health and well-being (Decker & Flynn, 2018; Feeding America, 2019).

### **Prevalence of Food Insecurity Among College Students**

The most readily available research related to food insecurity among college students is quantitative research designed to measure the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses. Researchers from the Hope Center can be credited for what is perhaps the largest survey of college student needs to date, surveying nearly 86,000 college students from 90 two-year colleges and 33 four-year colleges in 2018 (Goldrick-Rab, Baker-Smith, Coca, Looker, & Williams, 2019). Their findings indicated that 45% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to taking the survey and 56% of respondents were housing insecure in the last year (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Studies conducted on a smaller scale have found similar results. Findings from a survey of four public Illinois universities indicated that 35% of respondents identified as food insecure (Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016). Results of this study revealed a strong correlation between low levels of food security and federal grant eligibility, as well as low food security and low grade-point average (Morris et al., 2016). A survey of students at a large mid-Atlantic university yielded results suggesting that 15% of students surveyed identified as food insecure, while another 16% of students surveyed were at-risk of food insecurity based on economic factors and housing instability (Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Caldeira, Vincent, & Arria, 2018). While these studies demonstrate a wide variety in rates of food insecurity (15%-45%), even the lower end of this range warrants significant action and further investigation.

### **Negative Implications of Food Insecurity on Student Well-being**

Students facing food insecurity have self-reported poor physical health and poor nutrition (Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Hickey et al., 2019). In a study conducted at the University of Alberta in Canada, researchers sought to measure the extent of food insecurity faced by clients of the university food bank (Farahbakhsh et al., 2017). Fifty-eight of the food bank's 284 clients were surveyed, with

findings indicating that clients demonstrated a poorly balanced diet, eating few fruits and vegetables, and reporting a low daily intake of other nutrients such as calcium (Farahbakhsh et al., 2017). Prolonged food insecurity has been linked to chronic disease, resulting from a lack of sustenance or a lack of access to nutritious food (Decker & Flynn, 2018).

Beyond negative implications for physical health, available research strongly suggests that food insecurity inhibits academic performance (Henry, 2017; Hickey et al., 2019; Paola & Debate, 2018). In a qualitative study conducted at a large public university in California, students facing food insecurity discussed a diminished ability to concentrate in the classroom as their focus shifted to hunger (Meza, Altman, Martinez, & Leung, 2019). Additionally, students discussed how food insecurity negatively affected their sleeping patterns, which further impacted their energy for academic pursuits during the day (Meza et al., 2019). A qualitative study conducted at the University of North Texas found that students facing food insecurity felt decreased motivation to attend school and engage in activities, as well as decreased academic performance (Henry, 2017). Beyond these implications for academic performance, students who had experience with food insecurity self-reported low self-esteem, stating that food insecurity had adverse impacts on mental, social, and emotional health (Henry, 2017; Meza et al., 2019).

### **Limitations of Existing Research**

Previous researchers on this topic have commonly cited limitations in accurately representing their target populations. Payne-Sturges et al. (2018) cited a possible selection bias caused by students who dropped out of school due to economic hardships or other reasons that may be related to food insecurity. This idea suggests that students most severely impacted by food insecurity and related issues may be the most difficult population to fully understand, as it would require collecting data from students no longer present at an institution.

At the time literature was reviewed for this study, only two peer-reviewed qualitative studies were found specific to food insecurity among college students. This lack of qualitative research specific to college students has also been identified by past researchers, who have called for qualitative research to illuminate the nuances of food insecurity as it impacts college students (Henry, 2017; Morris et al., 2016). After finding that many students did not perceive themselves as deserving of or qualified for food assistance, Henry (2017) specifically called for further research into the social stigma of food insecurity and student perceptions of assistance.

## Theoretical Framework

Abraham Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Nancy Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory provide the theoretical framework used to explore food insecurity in this study. Maslow's widely-cited theory establishes five levels of needs which influence human motivation, often represented in a pyramid diagram including needs related to physiology, safety-security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Physiological needs precede safety-security needs in the hierarchy, but the characteristic uncertainty of food insecurity is a threat to both physiological and safety-security needs. Based on Maslow's theoretical framework, ensuring physiological and safety-security needs are met will increase students' ability to focus on achieving the intended outcomes of a college education, which naturally are situated within the higher-level needs of belongingness, esteem, and potential for self-actualization (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory was incorporated into this research because Schlossberg's concept of transition closely reflects the concept of "tipping points" outlined by Henry (2017), which appeared to be a common experience of students facing food insecurity. These tipping points were usually "a combination of events that prevented students from being able to manage for themselves," such as the breakdown of familial relationships, newly developed medical conditions, loss of employment, transferring schools, and divorce, among other experiences (Henry, 2017, p. 12). Similarly, Schlossberg defined transitions as "event[s] or non-event[s] result[ing] in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world," necessitating a corresponding change in an individual's behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). As a result of having to navigate several developmental tasks, college students often face a number of critical transitions, but Henry's (2017) findings further illustrate the possible negative outcomes of these transitions if students are not adequately supported. Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory can provide a framework for higher education professionals to assist students in developing strategies to work through these transitions by analyzing an individual's situation, characteristics, and support systems. Applied at the institutional level, Schlossberg's theory articulates the importance of providing support at the physical setting of a transition and providing institutional resources for students working through transitions.

## Summary

The scholarship outlined in this literature review was used to determine the methodology and specific goals of this study. The review of literature determined that sufficient research exists to confirm that food insecurity is

impacting college students in numerous ways. Additionally, previous researchers have called for qualitative exploration. Therefore, it was determined that this study should focus on illuminating the nuances of this issue through a qualitative approach, utilizing Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory as a theoretical framework.

### **Research Design**

The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of students facing food insecurity and investigate how social barriers inhibit students from seeking assistance. The following research questions guided data collection and analysis: 1) What are the experiences of food insecure students? 2) What social barriers and perceptions inhibit these students from accessing assistance?

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included a convenience sample of three students who self-identified as food insecure. Participants were recruited through a variety of advertising efforts in collaboration with multiple campus departments, including the campus food pantry and the financial aid office. Advertising materials provided potential participants with a brief overview of the study, information about food insecurity sourced from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and instructions to contact the researcher with questions or to arrange a 30-minute interview. The sampling frame criteria was limited to current students, regardless of classification or enrollment status, who self-identified as food insecure. A \$5.00 gift card to an on-campus coffee shop was advertised as an incentive for participation. Students who participated were each given a gift card, as well as a document detailing campus and community resources related to food assistance and overall wellness. The Institutional Review Board granted approval for the researcher to interview between three and five students.

### **Procedures and Data Analysis**

Participant interviews were conducted in the spring of 2019, after the study received approval from the Institutional Review Board. A locally developed, semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to gather participant responses. A semi-structured interview format was chosen to provide the researcher with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions to elicit richer data (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The protocol consisted of approximately 15 open-ended questions, which were used to collect information about each participant's experience with food insecurity, food assistance on and off campus, and perceived social barriers to seeking assistance. The development of the protocol was heavily influenced by Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, Maslow's

(1943) Hierarchy of Needs, and Henry's (2017) call for additional research focused on social implications of food insecurity. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was pilot tested with two graduate students to enhance its credibility and slight modifications were made. After each participant interview, the researcher used an online service to transcribe the audio recordings, followed by a thorough review to ensure accuracy. Following transcription, the researcher conducted an open coding process to develop themes in the data.

### Findings

Interviews were conducted with three students, including one part-time sophomore who began at the institution as a first-year freshman, one sophomore transfer student, and one graduate student. The data was organized into three themes. Two themes, *Barriers to Achieving Food Security* and *Impact of Food Insecurity on Overall Well-Being*, directly relate to research question one (RQ1) regarding the experiences of students facing food insecurity. No themes emerged relative to research question two, concerning social barriers preventing students from seeking assistance. However, a third theme emerged, *Social Implications and Perceptions of Food Insecurity*. This theme expands on research question one regarding the experiences of food insecure students. The three broad themes and 11 corresponding categories that emerged from the interviews are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Corresponding Categories</b>
<b>Barriers to Achieving Food Security</b>	Transitions and unexpected life circumstances
	Lack of resource awareness
	Inability to increase financial support
	Physical barriers to food
<b>Impact of Food Insecurity on Overall Well-Being</b>	Reduced state of physical health
	Diminished mental health
	Reduced sense of autonomy and worth
	Obstruction of academic progress
<b>Social Implications and Perceptions of Food Insecurity</b>	Struggling to connect with others
	Feeling discomfort in addressing the issue
	Persisting and conflicting stereotypes

#### Barriers to Achieving Food Security

When asked about their first experiences with food insecurity, participants identified a range of circumstances that triggered food insecurity or prevented



them from achieving food security. These circumstances provided the basis for categories that can be described as *Barriers to Achieving Food Security*. Categories are explained in more detail below.

### **Transitions and Unexpected Life Circumstances**

Responses confirmed that food insecure students have often experienced life transitions triggering a state of food insecurity. Outside of unexpected medical bills, other events triggering food insecurity that were mentioned could be considered common transitions for college students to experience. For example, all three students discussed taking on additional bills and responsibilities as college students but absorbing these responsibilities with a minimal increase in income or no increase of income. For two participants, the level of financial support offered by family members also decreased when the participants began college. One participant stated that unexpected medical costs was a major triggering factor of food insecurity. Due to unexpected medical circumstances, the student was forced to put large portions of their paycheck straight toward repaying medical bills.

### **Inability to Increase Financial Support**

The undergraduate participants discussed difficulties in securing employment, while the graduate participant discussed the financial implications of policies prohibiting them from working outside their assistantship. Neither of the undergraduate participants had reliable transportation, meaning their job prospects were limited to employers on or near campus. One of these students recalled:

Financial things here have been very stressful. I didn't know exactly what [the financial aid office] needed from me, then at the last minute we realized it was all wrong and I lost my Pell Grant. And then I wasn't able to use work study...Then I found out that I am not eligible for any transfer scholarships because I transferred from another four-year institution. After transferring, I'm thinking, maybe I just shouldn't have even come here.

With minimal financial aid to reduce the cost of attending college, this student considered finding a job, but had concerns that they would not find a job within walking distance and that their grades would suffer. The other undergraduate student initially funded their education and related expenses through their father's GI Bill benefits, which ran out at the ending of their first year. Following this, the student struggled to find scholarships and grants to make up the cost.

### **Lack of Resource Awareness**

Both undergraduate participants were largely unaware of available resources. While the graduate student was aware of the on-campus pantry, they recalled struggling with food insecurity for months before learning of any assistance programs. “Not knowing that there was a food pantry on or near campus, and not being aware of other resources are the main things that kept me from reaching out.” A university counselor told this student about the new on-campus pantry (opened January 2019), and this student began utilizing the pantry soon after becoming aware. This student also expressed that food insecurity among graduate assistants is more common than they expected, indicating they knew several students with similar experiences. When asked about assistance programs, one undergraduate participant seemed to believe that government programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), were the only options, or that participating in SNAP was a prerequisite to receiving any other kind of food assistance, which is false.

### **Physical Barriers to Food**

Both undergraduate students discussed how a lack of reliable transportation not only limited their employment options, but also limited their grocery shopping and dining options. Additionally, while both students had experience being on the most inexpensive meal plan, both students explained how their class or work schedules sometimes made it difficult to access campus dining options. For one of these students, medical conditions and sensitivities to certain foods further limited access.

### **Impact of Food Insecurity on Overall Well-Being**

When asked about the impact food insecurity has had on their lives, participants discussed multiple dimensions of health beyond the physical. This information provided the basis for categories that can be described as *Impact of Food Insecurity on Overall Well-Being*. Categories are explained in more detail below.

### **Reduced State of Physical Health**

Two participants discussed how food insecurity impacted their physical health by reducing their energy level and drive for physical activity. A lack of regular, consistent access to food also decreased the ability of these individuals to establish regular eating patterns. One participant said they often found themselves binge-eating when they do have enough to eat, which leads to sickness or enhances feelings of hunger later. Another participant said that in

addition to struggling to afford quality food, they struggled to purchase hygiene products and had to adjust to a “low hygiene life,” which had both physical implications and implications for self-esteem. Finally, each student indicated that the food they had access to did not reflect their idea of nutrition. One student cited a concern about nutrition as a reason for not seeking assistance. “I’m so thankful for [food pantries] and I support them, but it’s usually more of what I’m already eating and what I already feel is hurting my body.” While this student’s fear that assistance programs lacked healthy choices kept them from utilizing assistance, the student who did utilize food assistance shared this concern. This student was thankful for access to pantries but said true food security would mean having the ability to decrease reliance on pre-packaged or highly processed foods.

### **Diminished Mental Health**

While each student suggested food insecurity had negative implications for mental health and induced feelings of anxiety, one student shared how food insecurity intersected with a mental health diagnosis. “Whenever I was diagnosed with depression, I had to be able to afford my medication. That definitely impacted my level of food security, because I had to afford my medication first.” This student went on to say that though medication alleviated certain symptoms of depression, the impact of perpetuated food insecurity magnified negative mental health symptoms. The student discussed how this experience caused them to constantly question whether they were doing the right thing by choosing medication over consistent access to quality food.

### **Reduced Sense of Autonomy and Worth**

When asked what food security looks like, each participant discussed the concept of choice. Food security was described as “ability to afford fresh fruits and vegetables,” “being able to cook meals from my culture,” and freedom to buy what is needed instead of what is on sale. Each participant discussed how a lack of choice caused them to feel a lack of independence and autonomy. When they initially confronted their food insecurity, participants recalled feelings of anger and embarrassment directed at themselves, asking “how could I let myself get in this position” and “what’s wrong with me?” Each participant discussed how this led to a reduction in self-esteem and personal confidence, subsequently impacting their desire to connect with peers and friends. This was further addressed in questions regarding social implications of food insecurity. Though sense of worth was more often discussed in connection with peer interactions, one student discussed how those managing food assistance programs may unintentionally diminish the dignity of those seeking assistance. This participant said that when they use an assistance program, they want to be “treated like a person” rather than someone in need:

I don't want to be asked if I need this or that. Yes, I need it—you do too. We all do, I just have to come here to get it. But that doesn't diminish my value. I want to be asked my name, my major, and my story.

This student clarified that this belief was influenced by past experiences with food assistance programs, prior to their time at the institution. However, it significantly impacted the student's willingness to seek food assistance resources on campus.

### **Obstruction of Academic Progress**

Regarding the impact of food insecurity on academic success, each participant offered a unique perspective. The graduate student participant explained how food insecurity reduced their ability to focus in class. They stated, “when I don't have good nutrition, or when I have skipped meals, it's hard to focus in class and study because I'm hungry. That's what I'm focusing on—hunger, not a lecture in class.” The transfer undergraduate participant indicated they experienced increased academic stress, but said the stress fueled them to focus on achieving better grades. They were hopeful that better grades would lead to additional scholarships, which would eventually reduce the financial burden and resulting food insecurity. The part-time undergraduate participant discussed how food insecurity and financial instability caused them to switch from full-time to part-time status their second year. This student was beginning the process of transferring after securing a grant that is specific to a different institution. While the student was happy this grant would decrease the financial burden, they were also concerned that transferring would further delay academic progress and degree completion.

### **Social Implications and Perceptions of Food Insecurity**

While none of the participants indicated that social barriers or perceptions prohibited them from accessing food assistance (RQ2), they had much to say about how food insecurity had impacted their social lives. This resulted in the development of an unexpected theme, *Social Implications and Perceptions of Food Insecurity*. Rather than describing how social barriers prevent students from accessing assistance, this theme includes information about the social impact food insecurity may have on a student, regardless of whether or not they are utilizing food assistance. This theme further addresses research question one regarding the experiences of students facing food insecurity.

### **Struggling to Connect with Others**

All three participants discussed how peers connected by going to coffee, going out to eat, going out for drinks, or otherwise spending money. Each participant recalled times when friends invited them to an outing, and they had to decline due to financial concerns. All three students said they had used homework, family matters, sickness, and work as common excuses for not participating in outings, even though inability to pay was the true reason each time. One student felt it was easier to distance themselves completely rather than try to connect with others.

Throughout the interviews, students discussed the difficult social choices that accompany food insecurity. For example, in addition to weighing the benefits of working versus focusing on academics, or paying for important medications or groceries, students also discussed being confronted with difficult choices in terms of peer interactions. One participant questioned, “do I tell them I literally have two dollars and I can’t go anywhere, or do I go with them and not get anything and watch them eat, trying not to make them uncomfortable?” Participants also discussed having difficulty discerning when to reach out to family. Each participant listed family as a source of support, though two explained that their families also faced economic hardship. “My family is a great support to me...but I feel like I should be able to fend for myself and try not to be troublesome to family.”

### **Feeling Discomfort in Addressing the Issue**

Each student explained that they felt a sense of connectedness when they encounter other students who are experiencing food insecurity. However, food insecurity can more often be likened to “the elephant in the room.” When asked if food insecurity is ever discussed in peer groups, participants said their peers often responded awkwardly if they have not experienced food insecurity personally. One participant discussed the initial process of telling friends and roommates about their experience with food insecurity. Though friends appeared to be supportive and understanding, the student said they continued to feel social pressures of spending money to connect to some friends, while other friends withdrew. Similarly, other participants sometimes feared that their stories would be met with pity, withdrawal, or even disbelief. Despite feeling discomfort in sharing their stories, participants all agreed that sharing stories of people experiencing food insecurity is the best way to increase understanding in people who have not personally experienced food insecurity. One participant noted:

A lot of people’s stories go untold. Even if they’re told, they’re not heard, and people just kind of don’t think they’re ever going to meet someone with food insecurity...Other than just telling [people]

someone's story, there's really nothing you can just say...Helping people understand these stories is [how we] humanize the issue.

One participant said they wanted to be interviewed for this research because they knew telling their story would help someone else, somewhere experiencing this issue—even if they personally never heard anything about the interview or research again.

### **Persisting and Conflicting Stereotypes**

Throughout each interview, the concept of stereotypes of college students and food insecurity were repeatedly discussed. One participant felt that other people questioned why they were not skinnier if they were experiencing food insecurity. Two participants discussed how other people assumed that if you could afford college, afford an apartment, or live in the residence halls, you must be affluent and have no barriers to basic need fulfillment. This stereotype exists in stark contrast to the even more pervasive “broke college student” trope. Reflecting on this idea, one participant stated:

I guess there's always that joke that if you're in college, you're broke. So some people hear you talk about this and say “yeah, everybody's broke.” Okay, that's what you're telling me, but I see all these people around me and it feels like no one understands me. So what's wrong with me?

Similarly, another participant felt that conversations about food insecurity most often came up in the context of jokes about ramen noodles, “feeling starved” after back-to-back classes, or binge-eating when an opportunity for free food was presented on campus. These harmful stereotypes appear to not only diminish the reality and severity of the issue for students, but also cause students experiencing food insecurity to question the validity of their experience.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study confirm the importance of providing support to students through times of transition (Henry, 2017). While participants discussed unexpected transitions that are not necessarily common for all college students, each one also discussed very common transitions such as learning to manage their own finances, adopting new responsibilities, and a shift in extent of familial support. Therefore, we cannot assume that only students facing extreme life circumstances are vulnerable to food insecurity.

In the case of unexpected circumstances such as medical issues, participants reiterated the fact that food insecurity does not occur in a vacuum devoid of

other stressors (Feeding America, 2019). Students experiencing food insecurity are likely experiencing concurrent stressors. Efforts should be made to increase student awareness of not only food assistance services, but also other resources to manage stress and mental health. This might include counseling resources, wellness programs, and other financial services available. While one student was aware of the new food pantry on campus, but did not pursue assistance for personal reasons, the other two students said simply not being aware of assistance was a major barrier. Participants' experiences with life transitions supports Schlossberg's (1981) theory that identifying supports and strategies that holistically address an individual's situation is crucial for working through transitional periods.

While social barriers were not as impactful as other barriers in preventing students from seeking assistance, perhaps the most troubling thing to hear from students experiencing food insecurity was how it impacted their sense of worth and ability to connect with others. Students spoke in detail about the difficult choices they were confronted with each day. This demonstrates that students who have come to the realization that they need food assistance may have been struggling inwardly with the issue for much longer. These students may have been struggling with feelings of shame and personal responsibility for their circumstances beyond what is emotionally healthy. Additionally, students indicated that the culture of spending money in order to connect with people can be a major burden on students facing food insecurity. This pattern of difficult choices and food insecurity as a barrier to relationship-building was a stark demonstration of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, as lack of basic need fulfillment inhibited fulfillment of belongingness and self-esteem for the participants of this study.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The ultimate solution to student food insecurity is creating an environment where food insecurity is less likely to exist. Food banks and resources may alleviate hunger, but only concerted policy response aimed at the root causes of food insecurity can truly decrease the financial burden of higher education and allow students to focus on being successful, rather than being hungry (Farahbakhsh et al., 2016). However, it is important to address the immediate need of hunger while still advocating for large-scale policy change. Students who shared their stories in this study highlighted the importance of on-campus services in combatting food insecurity among students. Responses from all students demonstrated the importance of having centralized, accessible, and well-advertised assistance programs specifically geared toward college students. Additionally, findings confirmed that residential students cannot be excluded from food assistance, and assistance programs should be well-advertised to the residential community.

While on-campus solutions are ideal, it is crucial to ensure that these services are effective rather than simply present. To combat a lack of resource awareness, assistance programs on college campuses should be thorough in marketing efforts, ensuring that any student on the campus would encounter the message of assistance somewhere. One student specifically stressed the importance of bringing information about resources directly to students, rather than expecting students to know and find the exact resources they need through search engines or on-campus advertising. Marketing in common spaces or at major events is not enough, as this study demonstrates that students facing food insecurity may feel discouraged from engaging with peers and social events. Colleges should work with stakeholders across campus departments to identify outreach possibilities, such as working with faculty to provide information about assistance in course syllabi, providing information at orientation, and placing fliers or donation collection boxes in as many campus spaces as possible to raise awareness. Marketing materials should emphasize that food insecurity is an issue commonly faced by college students. If possible, pantries should also advertise what kinds of foods and services they are able to offer so that assumptions do not prevent students from seeking needed assistance.

Campus solutions should also be implemented with nutrition in mind. Even for the student utilizing food assistance programs, access to healthy, quality food proved to be a concern. While campus food pantries are often limited to non-perishable items, this research demonstrates that it is important to not only increase access to food, but to work to stock quality items. Beyond providing sustenance for survival, quality food can energize students and improve the likelihood of achieving higher-level needs. Food pantries and distribution programs receiving donations should emphasize the need for quality, nutritious foods. Each student said they would not describe themselves as extremely knowledgeable about nutrition, but still emphasized concerns with the nutritional value of available foods. Because pantries are often extremely dependent on donations, donor education and communication should stress the need for quality food, and particularly items with more utility and nutritional value for the recipient (e.g. a box of multigrain pasta has more nutritional value and utility than a package of Ramen noodles, and the pasta would be more expensive for a student to buy independently of the pantry). Departments leading food assistance efforts should also understand how food insecurity may impact other aspects of life and wellness, and be prepared to refer students to other services.

Finally, higher education professionals should develop strategies to address the social implications of food insecurity. This could take the form of short videos to post on social media outlets that educate students on different aspects of the



issue, vignettes that appropriately share stories of students experiencing food insecurity, or simple events that start a dialogue around the issue that works to deconstruct harmful stereotypes. Beyond increasing awareness of resources, professionals should work to increase awareness of the issue and break the silence that isolates food insecure students.

While confronting this issue, it is paramount that any programs related to food insecurity emphasize the dignity of students. Students seeking assistance should be able to do so free from judgment. If a student says a pantry is unable to meet their specific needs, students should feel welcomed to share their needs and suggestions rather than feel guilt for being picky, and professionals should be knowledgeable of additional resources in the event that their program cannot adequately serve the student.

### **Directions for Future Research**

While this study addressed a need for more qualitative research on food insecurity among college students, findings indicated that each student comes to this issue with a unique situation and story. Qualitative research should continue to capture the stories of students, bringing a face to the issue of food insecurity and providing guidance to increase the accessibility and effectiveness of services. Future studies should seek to interview more students, employing strategic marketing efforts both to increase awareness of the issue and to extend the opportunity to interview.

Additionally, future qualitative researchers should consider how interview time constraints may limit the ability to collect rich data. While this study aimed to limit the length of interviews to 30 minutes, one interview lasted nearly one hour as the student wanted to continue sharing their experiences and ideas. Future qualitative studies—and particularly those utilizing interviews—should be designed in a way that gives students space to share their stories fully. Future researchers should consider designing ethnographic or longitudinal studies that enable these stories to be captured authentically and completely. Such studies could provide insight into the impact food insecurity may have on students over time, including the overall impact on degree attainment and career readiness. To increase understanding of social stigma and implications of food insecurity, additional research should be undertaken to explore the perceptions of students who identify as food secure. This research may be used to identify effective methods of reducing social stigma and increase understanding of food insecurity among college students.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that students who could provide the most current insight into social barriers are a difficult population of students to reach. If the

social stigma described by Henry (2017) exists in the research setting, students experiencing severe levels of food insecurity may have felt hesitant to participate in the study. Additionally, since advertising was done primarily through specific campus resources like the campus food pantry, students not accessing these resources may have not heard of this study. Future researchers attempting qualitative studies should take this limitation into account and ensure the scope of recruitment is broad. Besides posting recruitment information in food pantries or campus support systems, future researchers should consider utilizing social media, campus commons spaces, and even academic courses to share information.

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