

# Food Insecurity Among College Students: Addressing the Wellbeing of an Overlooked Population to Reduce Disparities

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## Background

Food insecurity, or continuous uncertain access to adequate food at a household level, is experienced at a higher rate among college students than the overall U.S. population.<sup>1,2</sup>

This insecurity can harm student health and consequently impact academic outcomes, potentially risking the ability to graduate and impacting institutional performance metrics such as enrollment, retention, and 6-year graduation rates.<sup>1,2</sup>

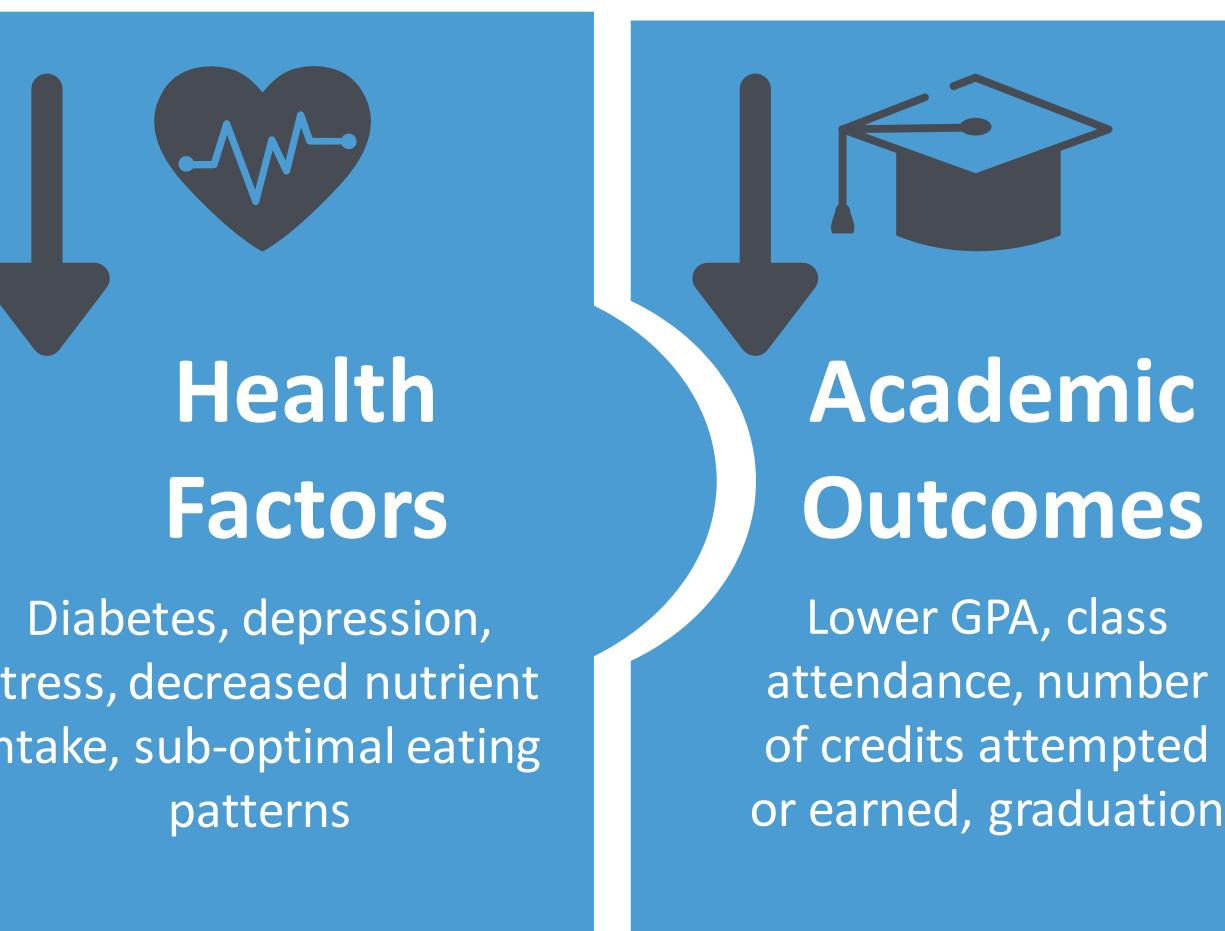
## Objective/Purpose

**Focus Groups and Key Informant Interviews:** To collect qualitative data through focus groups with undergraduates to understand barriers and facilitators to utilizing student services offered on campus and discuss strategies to overcome barriers

**Student Services Staff Survey:** To survey student services staff at colleges and universities across North Carolina on measures taken at their school to address student food insecurity and assess their knowledge of SNAP eligibility for college students

## References

- Bruening, M., van Woerden, I., Todd, M. et al. Hungry to learn: the prevalence and effects of food insecurity on health behaviors and outcomes over time among a diverse sample of university freshmen. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 15, 9 (2018). <https://doi.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1186/s12966-018-0647-7>.
- Jacobs, K. (2020). *Strategies to Address Student Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education* [PowerPoint Slides]. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



## Methods

### Focus groups

We conducted one focus group with undergraduates receiving financial aid who had used specific on-campus services and two focus groups with undergraduates receiving financial aid who had not sought these services. Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed. Findings informed the electronic survey of student services staff.

### Key Informant Interviews

6 UNC staff members who work with students in some capacity related to basic need were interviewed by study team members. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then analyzed for themes.

### Student Services Survey

An electronic survey was sent to 753 student services staff at colleges and universities across North Carolina, and 107 responses were received from 53 community colleges, 10 private HBCUs, 25 private PWIs, 11 public HBCUs, and 8 public PWIs.

## Focus Group Findings

Through the focus group discussions, key findings emerged. These themes are illustrated in the table below:

On-campus food	Finances	Housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited and inaccessible hours of operation at dining halls</li> <li>Overpriced meal plans that go to waste</li> <li>Too small and overpriced to-go boxes</li> <li>No options for quality groceries and lack of options at vending machines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong desire for opportunities to increase financial literacy</li> <li>Hard to navigate finances and financial aid while transitioning to UNC</li> <li>Financial Literacy Consortium topics not well-suited to low-income students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On-campus housing overpriced for dorm size and condition</li> <li>Desire for more housing during breaks</li> <li>Desire for a program coordinating emergency housing with families in community</li> </ul>
Counseling and Psychological Services	Emergency Fund	Carolina Covenant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well-advertised and serves as an immediate short-term solution</li> <li>Mixed feelings on usefulness of resource, deters students from seeking these services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived to be good only for natural disaster-level problems</li> <li>Not very well advertised and not good for persistent critical need</li> <li>It was made more available to students impacted by hurricanes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amazing opportunity that has helped students during emergencies, covered therapy, provided waiver for health insurance and paid for meal plans</li> </ul>
Carolina Cupboard	Personal Support	Internal Fortitude
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Abundance of food and good product selection</li> <li>Poorly placed, difficult to access, limited hours of operation</li> <li>Uncomfortable for some students to use this resource as it is student-run.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support from faculty and staff who are understanding of their unique positions and challenges is helpful</li> <li>Admissions staff has also provided real, personal support</li> <li>Support from friends and family make students want to succeed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students' internal drive the biggest factor toward their success</li> <li>Wanting a better life for their future families is a major driver toward keeping on even in the face of adversity</li> <li>The pressure of sometimes being the first from their family to attend a school like UNC can be a motivator</li> </ul>

## Emerging Results

Students identified tips and tricks for navigating food insecurity on and off campus.



### On Campus

- Take Tupperware to dining halls
- Join student groups that host meetings with food
- Share meal swipes with other students
- Carolina Closet provides clothing for interviews
- Find PDF textbooks online



### Off Campus

- Meal prepping and using inexpensive food options
- Off-campus job at restaurants that provide meals
- Strict budgeting and restricted spending
- Comparison shopping to get the best deal

Students **recommended potential strategies to improve student basic needs services**, including increased transparency in aid application processes, extending the hours of service at the campus food pantry, and relocating services to be more accessible on campus. Student support staff across institutions **reported the need for resources related to SNAP benefits** to support their students as very few reported knowledge of student eligibility or application procedures.



## Conclusion

Few staff working with students are knowledgeable about SNAP, although it can be an important nutrition support for students. Resources need to be provided for staff to best meet the needs of the students and improvements to existing services are required. The needs of students and staff vary across institution type and future work should consider the unique needs of each. The information gleaned from the focus groups with students and surveys with student services staff will allow us to identify shortcomings within the system and promising strategies to test with a larger study. Through this second phase, evidence-based strategies will be identified for adoption in colleges and universities across North Carolina. The results of our study and recommendations will be shared with UNC System administrators.