

Exploring Hurdles That Keep College Students Hungry

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Introduction

Nearly one-third of college students experience food insecurity (Anderson & King, 2025; Nikolaus et al.; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021), which has wavered between a normalized *rite of passage* experience and an undeniable basic needs issue exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While a growing spectrum of campus- and community-based resources to address food insecurity (i.e., pantries, meal plan donations, #FreePizza social media posts) exist, it is not implied that student awareness and use of these resources is intuitive. Literature outlines the barriers that impede resource use within the general population; however, it is limited for students who are experiencing food insecurity, particularly as it relates to the socioecologic model (SEM) (McElroy et al., 1988).

Figure 1. SEM of Barriers to College Student Food Access



(Landry, Hagedorn-Hatfield & Zigmont, 2024)

As part of a larger, multi-phased study, the aim of the present research is to explore resource awareness, use, and barriers among college students by addressing the following questions:

- What is the prevalence of food insecurity among KSU students?
- What is the prevalence of food assistance resource use among students identified as food insecure?
- What are the perceived barriers to food assistance resource use among students identified as food insecure?

Learning Objectives

The learner will be able to recognize the spectrum of challenges that may prevent college students from using a campus- or community-based food security resource by:

1. Recognizing the prevalence of food insecurity using the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module.
2. Identifying food security resources and barriers to use at multiple levels of influence.

Methodology

In Spring 2024, an online (Qualtrics) survey was administered to students at a multicampus, public, four-year research university in the Midwest. A combination of validated and exploratory questions defined the 37-item instrument, which included the 10-item U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module (AFSSM) and its 2-item screener to calculate food security level and status.

In Fall 2024, students were invited to further discuss their food insecurity experiences. Administered both in-person and virtually via Microsoft Teams, the interview protocol probed for personal accounts of barriers that impacted resource use.

For this mixed-methods approach, collective analyses of descriptive statistics along with chi-square tests of independence were used to examine students' food security status, knowledge and use of resources, as well as barriers to use. Statistical analyses were conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 29). Guided by Landry et al (2024), barrier thematic coding at each level of the SEM was also conducted.



Results

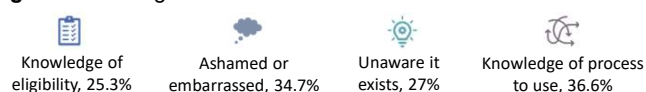
The survey was completed by 1,873 participants (response rate of 6.58%) and 1,138 responses met the inclusion criteria for analysis. Most participants attended main campus (79.8%) and were predominantly female (75.9%) and white (81.2%) – comparable to the institution's Spring 2024 enrollment data. Twenty-three students participated in interviews, also predominantly female (65.2%) and white (60.9%).

Over one-quarter (26.4%) of survey participants were identified as food insecure, 8.9% (low) and 17.5% (very low). A subpopulation of the sample that affirmed awareness of resources were further surveyed about their use of each.

Table 1. College Student Resource Awareness & Use

Resource	Awareness	Use
CARES Center	819 (45%)	78 (11.9%)
Food Pantry	989 (54.3%)	131 (20%)
Meal Swipe	604 (33.2%)	91 (13.9%)

Figure 2. Leading Barriers to Resource Use when Food Insecure



Analyses of perceived barriers to resource use, regardless of food security status, included its hours of operation misaligned with schedule (7%), comparing one's need to peers framed by scarcity (6.3%), unaware of its location (6%), prioritizing other expenses (2.3%), and enrollment status as a commuter student (2.2%). Testimony from interviews also revealed the barriers that students navigate in learning about and/or utilizing food assistance resources.

Figure 3. Testimonial SEM of Barriers to College Student Food Access



Discussion

With study participants reporting food insecurity that is approximately double the national rate, 13.5%, it is evident that this concerning public health issue has a poignant impact on college students (Rabbitt et al., 2024). Perceived barriers accounted for a difference of 6.8-10.4% between awareness and use while aligned with multiple levels of the SEM (Landry et al., 2024). Furthermore, demonstrated in the Stigma and Food Inequity Conceptual Framework (Earnshaw & Karpyn, 2020), reports of embarrassment of resource need and use highlights the psychological, emotional, behavioral impact of stigma associated with food insecurity as a cause loss of self-respect, belief of inferiority, and considerable shame in seeking assistance (Brondolo et al., 2012; Monahan, Shtrulius & Givens, 2005).

College students do not have an explicit safety net of protection from experiencing food insecurity. Collectively, higher education, public health, and nutrition play an essential role by answering the call to action to further study the accessibility to and effectiveness of resources, develop stakeholder-informed (i.e., students, faculty, staff) interventions, and shift the narrative of "norm" along the spectrum of basic needs challenges.

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Questions? Comments? Let's Connect:

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