

# Student Food Insecurity

## A 2015 Study from the University of California



**Global Food Initiative**  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

### Food insecurity a growing concern

The primary aim of this study was to quantify the prevalence of food insecurity among students in the University of California (UC) system. UC has an enduring commitment to ensure and encourage access to a high quality education for the state's low-income and minority high school graduates. President Janet Napolitano has made a strong commitment to achieving this goal – despite an expanding pool of qualified candidates, growing diversity, shrinking state assistance, and a challenging financial climate for low-income families – and she has succeeded. A steadily rising proportion of UC undergraduate students (42% in 2013-14) are from low-income families in California (income below \$50,000 per year).

Now it is time to attend to one of the unforeseen consequences of enrolling low-income students at UC and at other colleges and universities. Information has emerged suggesting significant food insecurity<sup>a</sup> among students. Given that food insecurity may widen disparities in academic achievement, overall health, and future success, it is imperative that UC understand and address student food insecurity. President Napolitano directed part of her Global Food Initiative to gathering data on student food insecurity. An online survey was administered in the spring of 2015 to a randomly selected sample of students (n=8,932; 14% response rate) from the 10 UC campuses. A full report can be accessed at: [npi.ucanr.edu](http://npi.ucanr.edu).

“Education is crucial to better oneself, but it can be so expensive. It is becoming increasingly difficult to pay for school, and pay for living expenses such as food. I am constantly feeling overwhelmed.”

—Student quote



### Four in ten UC students food insecure

Approximately 42% of students UC-wide reported experiencing food insecurity in the past 12 months. This prevalence is much higher than the 14% reported for the general U.S. population, but is similar to that reported recently in smaller studies at other U.S. colleges. Nearly half of students who experienced food insecurity reported disrupted eating patterns and/or reduced intake—indicative of more severe forms of food insecurity.

More undergraduates (48%), as compared to graduate students (25%), were food insecure. Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black students experienced a higher prevalence of food insecurity (59% and 60%, respectively) compared to other ethno-racial groups (44%)—similar to trends in food insecurity nationally.

### Food insecurity new to most students

Students who were food insecure in the past 12 months were more likely to have experienced food insecurity as a child (43%), compared to students who were currently food secure (8% food insecure in childhood). Of those students who were currently food insecure, however, nearly 60% did not report being food insecure as children.

### Food-insecure students struggle academically

Food-insecure students were more likely to receive financial aid, but also were more likely than food-secure students to report lower grades and suspend studies due to financial hardship.

### Food-insecure students prioritize cost of food over health

The most frequently reported consequence of not having enough money for food was buying the cheapest food knowing that it was not the healthiest (reported by 69% of food-insecure students). Students asking family or friends for money (39%) and experiencing difficulty studying because of hunger (29%) were also common.



<sup>a</sup> Food insecurity in the past year was quantified using the US Department of Agriculture's six-item module. Food insecurity is defined as an uncertain or limited ability to get adequate food due to lack of financial resources, resulting in reduced diet quality, variety or desirability and, over time, reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns.

## Food-insecure students more likely to seek free food and purchase fast food

Although all students, regardless of food security level, patronized grocery stores, non-fast food restaurants, and warehouse/superstores, significantly more food-insecure students reported getting food from fast food restaurants (21%) and at on- or off- campus free food events (17%) compared to food-secure students (10% and 8%, respectively).

“Being a low-income student means my parents cannot allocate much of an allowance to me, so I have to be frugal with my money. In fact, very, very little of my monthly allowance goes to indulgence and entertainment—everything is to necessities.” *-Student quote*



## Recommendations to address student food insecurity

There are multiple causes of food insecurity, including individual, social, economic, and institutional-level factors. Tackling student food insecurity will therefore require a cohesive and multi-pronged approach not only to address the immediate needs of students but also to mitigate the underlying causes.

### 1. Address immediate student needs

UC has long recognized public education as the most fundamental solution to inequality. UC campuses represent six of the top seven public universities doing the most in the nation to help low-income students obtain an education. UC is already beginning to address student food insecurity on its campuses. In January 2015, UC sponsored the California Higher Education Food Summit, where students came together to develop strategies to better address student food insecurity. In March 2015, President Napolitano awarded each campus \$75,000 to create a Food Security Working Group. In January 2016 at the second Summit, working groups created 2-year food insecurity plans, which have been approved by President Napolitano. Campus plans vary, but commonalities include short-term financial aid allocation, provision of vouchers for campus dining as well as gift cards to food retailers, donating unused prepaid meals from meal plans, improving referral to federal nutrition assistance programs, and creating or expanding campus food pantries.

“Because my family is relying on me for financial support as well, I have to be as financially independent as I can without burdening my family. I prioritize their needs over mine, so I tend to neglect my own diet.”

*-Student quote*

### 2. Enhance university support

Institutional solutions are required, such as increasing state allocations to postsecondary education, reducing the cost of UC attendance (including tuition, campus-housing and meal plans), establishing rent control for housing surrounding campuses, and improving access to low-cost, on-campus healthy foods. Mirroring the longstanding and successful federal school lunch program, campus meals could be universally free and included as part of tuition. In addition, restructuring and expanding student financial aid, loan and work-study programs, and raising the minimum wage for students hired for fewer than 20 hours per week would better ensure students a healthy and affordable UC experience.

### 3. Make student food insecurity a state and federal policy priority

Only about 17% of students surveyed received federal nutrition assistance in the past, which suggests that more may be eligible than are now getting benefits. Over half of students who were currently food insecure indicated that they were not food insecure as children, suggesting that food insecurity also affects students from higher income backgrounds. Eligibility for CalFresh among young adults is fairly restrictive and many students may not apply as they are not familiar with the process, aren't sure they will qualify, or are concerned about stigma. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the state Department of Social Services, and the county welfare offices, who jointly administer CalFresh in California, should make it easier for students to enroll. California AB 1930 reflects the Legislature's priority in supporting low-income students into and through college by identifying ways that students can qualify for CalFresh. Consideration should be given by Congress and USDA to modifying current restrictions on students' eligibility for CalFresh benefits, particularly for students from low-income families.

