

Examining Food Insecurity Among Post-Secondary Students in BC

What We Heard Report

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Provincial Health
Services Authority



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

Territorial Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Title and Rights of BC First Nations who have cared for and nurtured the lands, air and waters for all time, including the [xʷməθkʷəy̓əm \(Musqueam\)](#), [Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw \(Squamish Nation\)](#) and [səlílwətaʔ \(Tsleil-Waututh Nation\)](#) on whose unceded, occupied, and ancestral territory BCCDC is located. As a provincial organization, we also recognize and acknowledge the inherent Title and Rights of BC First Nations whose territories stretch to every inch of the lands colonially known as “British Columbia.”

BC is also home to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit people from homelands elsewhere in Canada. We recognize the distinct rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, and BCCDC is beginning its work to uphold a [distinctions-based approach](#) to Indigenous data sovereignty and self-determination. All Indigenous Peoples who live in BC have rights to self-determination, health and wellness, and respectful use of their data in alignment with Indigenous data governance principles, including but not limited to [OCAP®](#).

BCCDC is working to address the consequences of colonial policies which have had lasting effects on all Indigenous Peoples living in the province. Consistent with the [Coast Salish teaching of *thee eat*](#) (truth) gifted to PHSA by Coast Salish Knowledge Keeper Siem Te Ta-in, we recognize that ongoing settler colonialism in BC undermines the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples who live in BC and significantly contributes to health inequities and data gaps.

This project focused on the perspectives of food security leads at BC post-secondary institutions. Although some participants noted initiatives intended to support Indigenous students, we did not engage directly with Indigenous initiative leads, organizations or students, and did not collect sufficient information to explore these efforts separately or in detail. As such, this report should not be interpreted as a comprehensive account of how post-secondary institutions are addressing food insecurity among Indigenous students.

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Executive Summary

Key Messages

- **Food insecurity is a significant and growing issue** impacting post-secondary students' health, wellbeing and academic success across British Columbia.
- **Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) are responding** with a wide range of programs and initiatives; however, efforts are often fragmented, resource-constrained and focused on addressing immediate needs.
- **Institutional prioritization is inconsistent.** Campus leads emphasized the need for student food insecurity to be more widely recognized, prioritized, and supported at institutional and system levels.
- **Gaps in data, research and evidence** limit the ability to understand student experiences, assess impact and inform responses.
- **Collaboration and partnerships are critical.** There is strong interest in increased coordination within institutions, with community partners and across PSIs in BC.
- **There is clear opportunity for a provincial network.** Coordination would support ongoing connection, shared learning and multi-institutional collaboration among post-secondary food security leads, while acknowledging capacity, resourcing and sustainability considerations.

Food insecurity among post-secondary students is a significant and growing concern in British Columbia (BC), with implications for student health, wellbeing and academic success. The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) undertook this project to better understand:

- how public post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in BC are responding to student food insecurity,
- the current state of research and evidence, and opportunities for future networking and collaboration between PSIs.

This “What We Heard” report draws on findings from both interviews and surveys with campus food security leads at 12 public PSIs across BC, and a review of recent literature focused on post-secondary students' experiences of food insecurity in BC. The survey and interview participants shared perspectives on institutional responses, research, networking and collaboration.

Campus leads consistently identified food insecurity as a serious and increasingly urgent issue affecting students' physical and mental health, wellbeing and academic outcomes. Participants described a wide range of initiatives currently being employed at their PSIs, including food banks, food pantries, subsidized meals and groceries, community gardens, emergency funding and referrals to wrap-around supports. These efforts reflect substantial efforts, often led by student leaders, institutional staff and teams working within limited capacity and resources.

Despite this, participants highlighted that food insecurity is not consistently recognized or prioritized at the institutional level. Many campus leads described fragmented, reactive efforts, focused primarily on addressing immediate needs rather than underlying drivers of student food insecurity. Gaps in data, research and evidence were also frequently highlighted, including inconsistent monitoring of food insecurity, limited qualitative research on student experiences, and few mechanisms for sharing findings within or across institutions.

Collaboration and partnerships were widely viewed as essential to addressing student food insecurity. Participants highlighted the importance of both internal, campus-level collaboration, and external partnerships with community organizations. There was strong interest in increased collaboration across PSIs and in more coordinated approaches at institutional, local, and provincial levels. While participants acknowledged capacity and resource constraints and concerns around sustainability, many expressed interest in a provincial network or other structure to support ongoing connection, shared learning, and collaboration among PSI campus food security leads.

Overall, this “What We Heard” report reflects both the scale of work underway across BC PSIs and the ongoing challenges that shape institutional responses to student food insecurity. The findings highlight opportunities to strengthen coordination and collaboration, while recognizing the practical realities faced by PSIs and campus leads working to address food insecurity among post-secondary students in BC.

Background and Context

Food Insecurity Definition

Food insecurity exists when factors outside an individual's control negatively impact their access to enough foods that promote wellbeing(1). Economic, social, environmental, and geographical factors influence this access.

Food Insecurity Among Post-Secondary Students

Food insecurity among post-secondary students in Canada is very high, estimated between 20 to more than 50%(2-4). It is associated with negative impacts on students' physical and mental health as well as academic success(4-7).

Nourishing Minds Conference 2025

In April 2025, the BCCDC Food Security team participated in a conference hosted by Vancouver Island University (VIU) called [Nourishing Minds](#)(8). The conference focused on addressing student food insecurity across Canadian post-secondary institutions (PSIs) and brought together students, faculty, institutional leaders, government, and community partners from across the country.

This project built on connections initiated through the Nourishing Minds conference, where interest was expressed in further exploring how PSIs across BC are addressing student food insecurity.

Project Team, Roles and Analytic Process

The project was led by the Food Security program of the Prevention and Health Promotion team at the BCCDC, part of the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA).

The project was designed and led by two BCCDC staff members with backgrounds in public health and food security, with input from partners and contributions from practicum students. Interviews were conducted by the two staff members, and data coding and qualitative analysis were carried out by one staff member, with discussion and reflection between the two project leads.

The professional backgrounds, experience, and positioning of project team members within public health and food security informed the overall framing of the project, the focus of data collection, and interpretation of findings. Reflexive discussion throughout the analysis process supported careful consideration of how themes were identified and developed.

Project Purpose

This project aimed to:

1. Better understand the current state of student food insecurity in public post-secondary institutions in BC, with a focus on student lived experiences of food insecurity and institutional responses to addressing the issue.
2. Connect with campus leads for food security and identify opportunities for future collaboration and networking across PSIs to more effectively address the issue of student food insecurity.

Approach

Questions

1. How are PSIs in BC responding to student food insecurity? What strategies, programs, and initiatives are being employed?
2. What campus-based research has been or is being conducted to explore students' experiences with food insecurity on post-secondary campuses in BC?
3. What does the literature tell us about how post-secondary students in BC are experiencing food insecurity?
4. Are campus leads interested in connecting with other PSIs to learn from and collaborate with each other around the issue of student food insecurity? What could this look like?

Methods

The questions were explored through two separate, but related projects outlined in detail below:

- Survey and Interview Engagement (Questions 1, 2 & 4)
- Literature Review (Questions 2 & 3)

Survey and Interview Engagement

Food security leads at 25 publicly funded PSIs in BC were identified and invited to participate in a virtual interview or online survey. We defined food security lead or campus lead as a person(s) in the post-secondary community whose primary role is or includes food insecurity response, including institutional and student union/association roles. Campus leads were identified through PSI or student union/association websites, phone calls and referrals by others on campus, and were invited to participate in the project by email. The interview guide (Appendix 1) and survey (Appendix 2) included identical questions related to institutional responses, research and networking, with interviews including follow-up and probing questions.

Seventeen participants from 12 of the 25 invited PSIs took part in the project. Eight interviews were conducted with 12 participants from seven institutions, and five survey responses were collected from five institutions. Participants represented both staff roles within PSIs ($n = 11$) and student unions or student associations ($n = 6$). Institutional role participants were primarily affiliated with student affairs, student services, health and wellbeing, sustainability, research and external relations. Student union and association participants held roles related to health and wellness promotion, food security, advocacy/external relations, and governance.

The participants represented all five Health Authority Regions in BC (Fraser Health, Interior Health, Island Health, Northern Health and Vancouver Coastal Health) and a variety of institution types such as colleges, institutes and universities.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N=17)

Characteristic	Category	n
Affiliation	Institutional	11
	Student Union/Association	6
Participation method	Interview	12
	Survey	5
Primary role focus	Health & Wellbeing/Health Promotion	5
	Student Affairs/Student Services	2
	Food Security	2
	Sustainability	1
	External Relations/Governance	4
	Research/Faculty	3

The survey data was coded in Microsoft Excel and interview data was coded in NVivo 15. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun & Clarke, 2006(9).

Literature Review

The literature search was conducted by both staff members, with analysis and synthesis completed by one. The literature review [see Appendix 3] sought to answer the question: *Among students attending public post-secondary institutions in BC, what are the reported lived experiences of food insecurity in the past 10 years?*

The review included both academic and grey literature. The literature review was limited to studies with qualitative methodology or mixed methods approaches that reported qualitative findings, specific

to post-secondary student populations in BC and published between 2015 and 2025. Quantitative-only studies were excluded to ensure the review focused on students' lived experiences of food insecurity through studies that explore meaning, context and underlying lived realities.

The search resulted in a total of three published academic articles and five grey literature articles that fit the search criteria. Most studies employed mixed methods approaches combining surveys with interviews, focus groups and/or literature review. References to other PSI projects and results were found for which reports were not accessible online, suggesting that unpublished research exists.

Key Findings – What We Heard

Findings from the survey and interview engagement and literature review were summarized and categorized into the following themes and subthemes:

Table 2. Key Findings – Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Institutional Responses to Student Food Insecurity	Framing and Understanding of Food Insecurity at PSIs
	Responsibility for Addressing Student Food Insecurity
	Programs, Initiatives, and Strategies to Address Student Food Insecurity
	Partnerships, Collaboration, and Coordination
	Success Stories: What’s Working Well
	Key Challenges, Needs and Opportunities
2. Research Gaps in PSI Food Insecurity	Existing Research on PSI Food Insecurity in BC
	Informing Institutional Responses to Food Insecurity
3. Networks and Cross-Campus Collaboration	Current and Past Networks and Collaboration across BC Institutions
	Opportunities and Considerations for Future Networking and Cross-Campus Collaboration

Theme 1: Institutional Responses to Student Food Insecurity

Across PSIs in BC, food security leads identify food insecurity as a serious and increasingly urgent issue, with significant academic, health and wellbeing implications for students. PSIs in BC are addressing student food insecurity through a wide range of programs, but efforts are largely fragmented, reactive, and focused on immediate needs rather than systemic causes. Many students face serious and growing food insecurity driven by increasing housing and education costs, and limited earning capacity. Yet, institutional leadership and students themselves often underestimate or normalize the issue, compounded by stigma and misunderstandings about what it means to be “in need”.

Responsibility for addressing food security work varies widely across PSIs with departments, student unions and grassroots groups, often relying on passionate individuals in temporary roles or working off the “side of their desk”, leading to inconsistent and unsustainable programming. There is interest in collaboration, but currently siloed working, limited resources, and turnover hinder coordinated, long-term strategies.

Framing and Understanding of Food Insecurity at PSIs

Survey and interview participants described food insecurity as a serious issue among BC post-secondary students. One campus lead shared, *“It's very well known how big food insecurity is on campuses, not only [our institution]. It's the case with most Canadian universities, if you look at the data.”* Current prevalence data was not available for most institutions, and participants cited or estimated rates of student food insecurity ranging from 20-50%, with many participants noting that food insecurity is widespread, increasing and worsening among students. Another participant said,

“[T]here's been a 6,000% increase in the number of students using food security initiatives since 2022.” (data based on this individual's PSI)

Participants noted there were significant impacts of food insecurity on student health and wellbeing and academic outcomes; including physical, social, and mental health, compromised nutrition, and other basic needs (such as housing), hunger, financial stress, reduced academic performance and engagement. They also described impacts of student food insecurity on institutions, particularly related to student satisfaction, experience and retention. Two campus leads explained,

“I had a student say they couldn't wait to graduate and get on with their real life because all they could afford to eat was popcorn.”

“[W]e want student retention, that's part of our strategic plan. Just underlying it is food insecurity. And I think people just need to see that.”

Food insecurity was often framed as driven by high costs of living, limited income, competing basic needs such as housing and increasing costs of post-secondary education. Food was often described as

a “flexible” expense which students were forced to compromise in the face of more fixed expenses such as rent and tuition payments. Two participants described the circumstances:

“[W]hen housing becomes unaffordable, and they have to make decisions... in many cases, food becomes their tradeoff. Then so they eat less or they are skipping meals because they have to pay the rent.”

“[The c]urrent affordability crisis is impacting students in many ways, the cost of rent in our region is high. We hear from students who are missing meals, eating subpar meals to instead pay tuition or textbook costs.”

Front line staff described post-secondary students’ unique experiences and barriers to food access in terms of time, capacity, income and employment such as busy and inconsistent schedules, multiple demands and commitments, high and rising cost of tuition and textbooks, and barriers to employment (particularly for international students) and transportation (particularly for students in rural communities). One participant explained, *“International students are hit hardest. [H]igh tuition with caps on hours they are able to work leaves them vulnerable.”*

While some demographic groups were identified as priority populations (e.g., graduate students, international students, Indigenous and racialized students, students with families or dependents), participants emphasized that food insecurity can impact anybody, *“[F]ood [in]security spans all across the different demographic groups of students.”*

Despite strong recognition of the issue from frontline staff and program operators, leadership at many PSIs were described as underestimating the scale and urgency of student food insecurity. Leadership were considered as disconnected or unaware of students’ realities and not adequately prioritizing food insecurity. A campus lead highlighted,

“[Institution leadership] all believed that the only students that were facing food insecurity were international students... [T]hey had their head in the sand, and they didn't think that there was any possibility that a domestic student could be having any issues with food insecurity.”

Stigma and normalization of food insecurity as “part of student experience” were identified as major barriers to both students accessing supports and institutions prioritizing the issue. A participant said,

“[T]he misinformation about food insecurity is honestly a huge barrier for students. A lot of students don't see themselves as being like truly food insecure and therefore needing these resources because they're brought up with the normalization that surviving off of ramen in post secondary education is just the norm.”

Responsibility for Addressing Student Food Insecurity

Responsibility for addressing food insecurity across PSIs is inconsistent, sitting within diverse units, departments and portfolios within institutions and student unions and associations. Institutions often had little public information on food insecurity available on their website and it was challenging for our project team to determine the appropriate person or unit to contact for this project.

Some institutions have no roles dedicated to addressing student food insecurity on campus, instead the responsibility falls to passionate individuals, temporary roles and volunteers. One campus lead expressed, *“Unfortunately, the [institution] has done nothing in ways of helping students for food insecurity. So, it's basically the student society.”* Often, responsibility was taken on by student unions and associations when institutions did not have dedicated staff or personnel assigned to the issue.

In other PSIs, multiple entities or people who engage in food security work on campus in different capacities. For example, some institutions have both student union and institutional roles or portfolios addressing food insecurity. However, there is rarely a central, coordinated role or entity responsible. The types of roles, portfolios, departments, and units working to address student food insecurity are diverse, with some focused on student-facing, front-line service operations and others, less commonly, focused on coordination, research, advocacy, and/or strategy.

Some campus leads noted that positions, mandates, and roles are often shifting, with responsibility for food insecurity being transferred to new units, roles being created, changed, or eliminated, and in the case of student positions, high turnover as students graduate or move on. These changes result in inconsistency and loss of institutional knowledge and relationships. Some participants highlighted the need for dedicated, consistent roles with clear mandates and responsibility for addressing student food insecurity written into job descriptions. One participant stated,

“[The institution] does need to do this work as well. We can't only rely on the student association. And that does require funding, resources, people dedicated to it, having it in people's job descriptions.”

Programs, Initiatives and Strategies to Address Student Food Insecurity

Across the 12 PSIs, survey and interview participants described numerous and diverse responses to student food insecurity, including programs, initiatives and strategies. Many types of food-based and non-food based approaches were shared. From one campus lead, *“The [institution] Students Union food pantry and campus food cupboards provide immediate relief for students in crisis.”* Most responses focused on addressing immediate student food needs through emergency food provision (e.g., food banks, food pantries, food shelves).

While some institutions employed a single approach (e.g., food bank, food pantry), most institutions employed multiple approaches. For example, one institution's student union offered:

- various emergency food provision services (e.g., traditional food bank, food shelves),
- affordable/free food programs (e.g., breakfast program, community fridge),
- educational resources (e.g., pamphlets on eating a nutritious diet on a budget), and referrals to wrap around services through the community and institution (e.g., emergency funding, counseling, financial literacy classes).

Programming at various institutions varied from tightly knit networks of supports (with referrals, information provided, collaboration between programs) to, more commonly, ad-hoc, fragmented or disconnected programs operating in siloes across campus. Two campus leads explained,

“[We are] emphas[izing] creating a network of support across departments rather than siloed efforts.”

“[T]here are too many different teams working on the same problem.”

Most responses were led by student union or institutional staff but often staffed by volunteers. A few also described grassroots responses (e.g., departmental food shelves) led by staff, faculty or student groups. For PSIs with multiple or satellite campuses, programs tended to be inconsistent across campuses with most programming efforts focused on the main campus, and minimal, isolated programming on satellite campuses. One campus lead stated,

“[W]e've allowed for more flexibility in the amount of [emergency] food funding they're able to receive if they identify as students from those satellite campuses. That's kind of just to make food security access more equitable, because we do recognize that the food pantry is primarily based on the [main] campus, and it might not reach those satellite campuses as well.”

Another participant said,

“[At one satellite campus], we have like a food bank, but it's like a food shelf within our student union office. And then [on another campus], we've forgone the food shelf and have just gone with what we call lunch once a month... that is organized partially by the staff there.”

Campus leads described many kinds of programs and initiatives at their institutions, including innovative ways to reduce stigma and make food more accessible and affordable to students. However, most efforts are focused on addressing immediate food needs through charitable, reactive models, and to a lesser extent, on strategic partnerships, wrap around services, and connections/integration with other supports. Structural solutions aimed at system levels such as policies to improve food affordability, coordinated institutional strategies, or efforts to address root causes such as housing costs, tuition, and campus food vendor contracts were limited, inconsistent or absent at most PSIs. A campus lead voiced,

"I think looking at the bigger systemic issues is what's missing. Looking at the bigger like how are we addressing this more holistically and recognizing like sustainability, climate change impacts, Indigenous ways of knowing? I don't know if that is as front and centre as like let's get food to people."

None of the 17 participants across 12 PSIs were aware of a dedicated campus food security strategy. Food insecurity is only indirectly addressed through broader strategies or frameworks on related issues like affordability, wellbeing, or climate action/sustainability. One campus lead said,

"[U]nless there's a very clear precedent or a very clear framework, which it seems to be absent for food security, there is no accountability."

Some participants acknowledged that food-based programs served as stop-gap measures and emphasized the need for system-level responses to address underlying root causes of food insecurity. A campus lead explained, *"At the end of the day, [these programs are] kind of a Band-Aid solution when the problem is the lack of affordability."* While another stated,

"To solve a multifaceted issue like food security, the solution needs to be multifaceted as well. There needs to be an advocacy wing to it, there needs to be a research wing to it, and there needs to be an initiative and like executional- bringing change wing as well."

Advocacy for student food security was widely viewed as important, but limited capacity and restrictive institutional hierarchies meant staff often cannot engage in advocacy, leaving most advocacy work to students and student unions to push for affordable food options, funding and policy changes at both institutional and provincial levels. Participants generally saw government level advocacy as outside their mandate, and departments also faced limitations when advocating upward, resulting in a reliance on students and, sometimes, external organizations. One participant described,

"I think on the advocacy side... many of our schools are doing food security off the side of our desk or it's like part of a portfolio like mine. And so, I would love to be doing more advocacy, but... in the day-to-day, that advocacy gets lost."

Another participant said,

"[A]dvocacy was a big responsibility of the Students Union... I don't think the university does any particular advocacy, for example, at the government level or anything like that. I guess it's out of the purview or mandate. But for the Students Union, it's literally part of the mandate to advocate for student issues, and food security ends up being one of those things."

A few participants described the effectiveness of student activism when well-resourced, and others gave examples or showed interest in more coordinated, cross-campus advocacy efforts. One participant explained,

"I'm pretty well networked with the BC3... [O]ur four institutions hold over half of the students that are enrolled in post-secondary in British Columbia... Through our memorandum of understanding, if we all agree on something, we can just act on it together... Mostly around shared advocacy work."*

* [BC3: the three largest public post-secondary institutions in BC]

Further comments by the same campus lead,

"[W]e made [the ask] at the end of November, like in the last week there during lobby week. And that had some pretty good reception from a lot of MLAs... I'm very optimistic that that ask will get implemented."

Others expressed frustration with the constant need to advocate at the institutional level and provided examples of unsuccessful campaigns to garner institutional support. One campus lead indicated, *"The university sort of- it was not successful. The university denied [our request for funding]."*

Partnerships, Collaboration and Coordination

Participants described internal collaboration and external partnerships as key to addressing student food insecurity, though coordination levels varied widely across various PSIs.

Internal collaborations included various campus departments, student unions/associations, faculty and staff, Indigenous programs, volunteers and student groups, and sometimes institutional foundations or food services. These partnerships focused primarily on delivering and supporting programming and student supports, but also fundraising, research/course-based projects or advocacy. Internal partnerships and collaboration were frequently described as informal, though some examples of emerging, formalized collaboration and coordination were shared (e.g., formal cross campus Food Security Committee). Common challenges to internal collaboration included bureaucratic processes and silos, staff turnover, and limited resources and capacity. One participant explained, *"[There are] siloed efforts. Every team is working on different solutions."*

External partnerships focused on food banks, nonprofits, local businesses, donors, community groups, and regional networks, who provide essential resources (including donated food), deliver or support additional programming, and support advocacy. A campus lead described their situation,

"[W]e graciously are able to receive donations on a weekly basis from [the local food bank], and their donations also support the bulk of the work we do besides our own funding... [T]hat partnership is extremely helpful."

Participants expressed strong interest in deepening collaboration both internally on campus and externally with community partners or other institutions, frequently discussed in terms of increasing

access to funding, donated food, infrastructure and program resources. A campus lead at one PSI explained,

“[A]n initiative that's been ongoing is that we have a Food Security Committee... to do more food security requires people who have time to do it, and I have time to do it. So that's... another reason why we've been able to sort of get up and running again. There was a bit of a pause for a while- is because there's just the people to do it.”

Despite identified need for more coordinated, sustainable, cross-campus and community-based partnerships, silos, insufficient resources/capacity, institutional barriers, and staff turnover pose barriers to coordinated, long-term partnerships and strategies.

Success Stories: What's Working Well

Student leadership and advocacy were identified as key catalysts for change and action. Participants described student activism as particularly effective when students have capacity and support to organize and engage decision-makers. Student leadership was also framed as critical to designing and implementing solutions on campuses. A participant stated,

“[W]hat's working is student activism, when it's done well and when they have the capacity to do it... [T]here's more students speaking up when they're dissatisfied and they're going to the President... So, I'm hopeful that student voices will get stuff done. And I think that's been quite effective, because people listen to students.”

Another campus lead described that at their PSI,

“Three student teams were each given \$5,000 to develop food insecurity solutions over five weeks. One of the projects is continuing with additional grants and is exploring long-term sustainability.”

Participants also highlighted the success of innovative approaches to reduce stigma and improve quality of food support programs, noting that dignified access to fresh, nutritious food (e.g., from community gardens) improved student experiences. Low-cost or subsidized meal and grocery options were also highlighted as reducing stigma by normalizing access and providing affordable, nutritious food. Other programs such as hands-on education, community meals, and peer staff and outreach were also framed as reducing stigma and strengthening a sense of community. One participant discussed their campus community garden:

“I think a really successful thing that we have that we give out is stuff like growing from our campus community garden. As students really love getting like fresh stuff that's grown, especially like when it comes from our campus community garden... Cause a lot of times you get stuff [from food banks], like it's about to go bad.”

While another participant said,

“Students have expressed positive experience with the [at cost food market] in terms of food affordability and community building.”

Participants shared that multi-faceted approaches and collaborations were critical to meeting student needs, increasing reach and scale of responses, and gaining and sustaining momentum and buy-in. PSIs who had a campus-wide committee for food security pointed to its success in increasing collaboration, coordination, impact and momentum. A campus lead stated,

“The other thing I think works really well is that we have this food security committee that's been up and running for a number of years now. And it really cuts across the whole Institute... folks are just keen to, you know, help and contribute in the ways that they can... [I]t feels like there's a lot of momentum within the committee right now, which is really awesome.”

Key Challenges, Needs and Opportunities

A lack of consistent institutional prioritization of the issue of student food insecurity emerged as a central challenge. One campus lead put it this way, *“There are tons of barriers. And yeah, I would say the main one is, I think people need to prioritize this.”* Another participant named the institution specifically, *“The [institution]... I'm trying to put this in like a nice way. It is not their priority to help students facing food insecurity.”*

While some institutions have formally identified food security as a priority, participants described a gap between high-level endorsement and tangible support, like dedicated funding, staffing or infrastructure. One participant spoke to this, *“But one thing is, it's institutionally endorsed or... we got the blessings from the top, but we don't really get the any formalized type of support from a funding perspective, from a human resources perspective.”*

Competing institutional pressures, such as financial constraints and shifting priorities, were also identified as key barriers to institutional prioritization. Other barriers included lack of awareness of the issue and normalization of food insecurity as an expected part of post-secondary student life, which reinforce under-recognition and deprioritization of the issue. As a result, food security initiatives require ongoing advocacy to maintain visibility and support, underscoring the need for sustained, institution-wide commitment and action. A campus lead said,

“For a long time, we've sort of like been like, oh, those are just like student issues. That's what happens at this phase in life. But it's really coming to a peak, to a point where we really need to be part of the solution here, not just, you know, make yourself more ramen or whatever- whatever the message used to be.”

Other participants pointed to ambiguity of roles and lack of mandates for PSIs to act on food insecurity. Some noted that the complexity and systemic root causes of student food insecurity (e.g., broader affordability crisis, housing, investment in post-secondary education) are seen as outside the “sphere of influence” or mandate of PSIs. Resulting in some campus leadership deferring to provincial and federal government responsibility. A participant spoke of this issue, *“[O]ne thing that I also recognized during my advocacy efforts was that the university ends up blaming the lack of funding from the government eventually as well for some of these issues.”* This tension highlights an opportunity to clarify institutional roles and advocate for policy-level solutions while continuing to address immediate student needs.

Despite efforts to reduce stigma, participants overwhelmingly pointed to stigma as a major barrier to addressing student food insecurity. Many students do not identify themselves as food insecure or avoid accessing supports due to shame, guilt, or fear of taking resources from others, demonstrating the need to increase dignified food access on campuses. A frontline staff described the situation,

“[T]here is unfortunately still stigma for students accessing food support. So even just from like a frontline staff perspective, I’ve heard comments such as students feeling guilty about accessing these services because they aren’t in enough quote unquote “need”, or they feel that other students may benefit from these services more than them, and so there is a bit of fear of taking away resources from other students.”

Across PSIs, limited staff capacity, resource constraints, and staff turnover were identified as major barriers to the sustainability of efforts to address student food insecurity. One participant said, *“We can’t be at five campuses every single week with only like the three staff that we have.”* Many programs have a small number of staff or student leaders, with competing, urgent priorities and heavy workload contributing to burnout and disruption when roles change or funding cycles end.

Even when effective initiatives are established, participants described challenges in maintaining consistency over time, resulting in uncertainty for both program delivery and student access. These constraints highlight the need for stable resourcing, formalized roles, and structural support to sustain efforts. Another participant explained,

“I cannot mention with absolute guarantee that all of these [initiatives] still exist - which is an issue as well. Because all of these are dependent on funding, priority of the year and things like that. Even if the team actually doing the work wants to keep doing it.”

Finally, many participants described institutional responses as fragmented across departments, student groups and services. Siloed efforts, bureaucratic processes, and a lack of structures to support collaboration were described as limiting innovation, scale and effectiveness of responses, pointing to the need for clearer governance structures and mechanisms to support collaboration and coordination. A campus lead called for,

“A whole-system approach and having the entire institution on the same page would help better address the issue.”

Theme Summary

Key Challenges

- Most institutions lack current data and are often unaware of the realities of food insecurity among their students.
- Food insecurity is often seen as “part of the student experience”, creating stigma and preventing students from accessing support and institutions from prioritizing this as an issue.
- Gap between high-level endorsement by PSIs and tangible support like dedicated funding, staffing, or infrastructure.

Identified Opportunities

- Dedicated and permanent people or units with clear mandates to address food insecurity are needed to coordinate actions across campus.
- Advocacy for policy-level solutions that address the systemic root causes of student food insecurity, like broader affordability and the housing crisis.
- Well-resourced student leadership groups who can advocate for change and run peer-led initiatives.
- Access to more dignified and low-cost food services and supports.

Theme 2: Research Gaps in PSI Food Insecurity

Campus-based research can provide important insight into the prevalence, drivers, and impacts of food insecurity among post-secondary students in BC. Findings from the literature review and supported by the recent survey and interviews show a substantial proportion of students experience food insecurity, driven largely by high living costs, limited income, and broader affordability pressures. However, there are gaps in the existing research. Data collection varies across institutions, there is limited qualitative research capturing students' lived experiences, and there are few avenues for sharing findings within or across institutions. Participants in the interviews highlighted the need for more coordinated, accessible and sustained research and data collection to build an evidence base to inform institutional responses, resource allocation, and policy advocacy.

Existing Research on PSI Food Insecurity in BC

While some campus-based research and institutional projects provide valuable insight into student food insecurity, the overall evidence is limited. Student food insecurity monitoring across PSIs is inconsistent, and most data available focuses on the program-level rather than institution- or system-wide. One interview participant shared: *"[W]e did have a practicum student who came last semester and who created a survey for us for food insecurity at our campus. So, we are rolling that out probably next semester."* Some institutions collect campus level prevalence data by including food insecurity-related questions in annual campus-wide student surveys. However, the types of questions used to assess food insecurity vary widely, and several institutions do not collect prevalence data at all. As a result, there are no overall prevalence rates for post-secondary student food insecurity, and no ability to compare rates across institutions.

There is little published qualitative research that examines students' experiences of food insecurity, including the impact on health, academic outcomes, wellbeing, or its structural drivers. Where such information exists, it has often come from one-off research projects, frequently led by students as part of their coursework or practicums.

Only a small number of structured qualitative research initiatives were identified from the literature review, including two student-led Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) projects focused on student food insecurity. Additionally, the literature review found that most academic and grey literature on post-secondary student food insecurity in BC originates from a small number of research-intensive universities (See Appendix 3).

The literature review highlighted that students struggled with food insecurity and how it impacted their physical and mental health and wellbeing. The review also shed light on students' feelings of shame and stigma in accessing campus food programs. Students who accessed food programs also did

not feel that the programs provided culturally appropriate and nutritious foods to meet their needs. See Appendix 3 for a full summary from the literature review.

Survey and interview participants noted that research findings and evaluation results are rarely centralized, documented, or shared widely within and among PSIs. Most institutions do not have a designated repository or knowledge-management system for food security-related research, reports and evaluations. As a result, institutional memory is limited and duplication of effort can occur. One interview participant explained, *“[W]e don't have any consolidated database of ... the outcomes of these initiatives. I tried my best to have data collected for my initiative. I couldn't find anything for previous initiatives.”* Several participants indicated they were unaware of previous research or evaluation work conducted at their own institution.

Student-led research at PSIs was highlighted as a missed opportunity. One participant explained, *“[T]here's a bunch of student [projects] that are run by classes, but I'm not quite sure if they're available for people to access. That's also another issue...there's a lot of great student work, but they don't have a platform to sort of share their results other than in their class.”* Many of these projects produced valuable insights but had no platform for broader dissemination beyond the classroom.

Participants also reported relying heavily on external research and resources. A participant said, *“It really sucked when [national organization] went away. Because they created really good stuff... [J]ust their general statistics were really great, because when we are talking to outside parties, like they have absolutely no idea of what it is to be a student - in this climate.”* Materials from national and provincial organizations are able to contextualize student food insecurity to support internal decision-making. In the absence of external resources, one participant suggested, *“I think going forward I would like it to have more research attached to it... to get some data on the need, based on more than just usage.”* Participants expressed strong interest in collecting more robust data but cited time, staffing, and funding as major barriers.

Opportunities discussed by participants include strengthening research infrastructure and capacity, improving data consistency and accessibility, moving from program-level to system-level evaluation. Also, an interview participant expressed interest in, *“Potentially sharing data to be able to make larger and targeted asks to policymakers, also demonstrating trends across our institutions.”* This would allow for increased cross-institutional collaboration to enhance evidence-informed responses moving forward.

Informing Institutional Responses to Food Insecurity

PSIs in BC currently rely on a mix of data, informal insights, and operational knowledge to shape their food insecurity responses. Insights and data from student feedback and program-level data are most

frequently used, rather than comprehensive, institution-wide or system-level data. One participant explained,

“No, [the institution] has not conducted formal research on student food insecurity specific to our campuses. While we collect informal feedback through wellness programming and events... there is no published qualitative or quantitative study focused on students’ lived experiences. Our current understanding relies on provincial and national research, as well as anecdotal evidence from student engagement.”

Efforts to address food insecurity are primarily informed by student voice, gathered through formal and informal feedback, and through ad hoc, program-level evaluation and experience surveys. These types of projects typically focus on evaluating food assistance programs rather than food insecurity more broadly (e.g., food bank usage surveys and surveys of free or subsidized meal, grocery or produce market programs), and usually collect data on user characteristics, satisfaction, frequency of use, perceived benefits, and immediate needs. A participant said,

[The food bank survey] kind of goes into like who are the people who are accessing it, what are they needing, that sort of stuff. And then just, yeah, like getting more information about them so that then we can tailor things.”

Research is most commonly used to inform program design and audience focus, assess needs and plan services, seek funding or resources, raise awareness of the issue, and to advocate. Research and data are used less often to evaluate institutional-level or structural solutions to student food insecurity, or to assess campus food insecurity trends.

Theme Summary

Key Challenges

- Inconsistent monitoring of student food insecurity across PSIs.
- Little research is qualitative and offers a broader view of student experiences of food insecurity.

Identified Opportunities

- Having a centralized place to access and share data and evidence.
- Having stronger research infrastructure and capacity.
- Move from doing program-level evaluations to systems-level.
- Increasing collaboration across institutions to improve evidence-informed responses.

Theme 3: Networks and Cross-Campus Collaboration

Campus leads show a strong interest in connecting with other institutions, particularly to share knowledge and improve campus food programs. However, current networking is limited and largely informal. Participants indicated that a successful network requires defined objectives, coordination, and dedicated resources to ensure it provides meaningful value and remains sustainable over time.

Current and Past Networks and Collaboration across BC Institutions

Participants described current and past collaboration on student food insecurity across BC PSIs as minimal and inconsistent, *“We’re kind of all out on our own little islands, unfortunately.”* Many reported little to no formal connection to peers and counterparts at other institutions. Staff commonly expressed feeling isolated in their work, *“I feel like we’re all very disconnected, but we’re all very passionate.”*

Existing interactions are largely ad hoc or one-off, including occasional information or resource sharing, short-term grant funded projects, and conferences, rather than structured networks. These connections were siloed and largely dependent on individual champions, personal connections, or short-term grants, rather than supported through a coordinated and sustained provincial structure. One participant explained, *“I’m already very lucky because I’ve been involved in this work for a long time in BC. I have people that I can literally call and be like, what are you doing in this area?”*

Student unions appear to be the most connected to other campuses through the BC Federation of Students, *“[Institution] is a part of the BC Federation of Students, and so they have meetings a few times a year where each student union does a report. And so... there was a lot of connection that way and not just on food insecurity, but that topic did come up.”* There is also a formalized advocacy coalition between four major universities that share information and advocacy. However, these connections are constrained by frequent student leadership turnover.

Several networks focused on student food insecurity, including regional and national networks, have dissolved, *“[The network] kind of just... disappeared when the leaders left.”* This demonstrates the need for a stable host or coordinating body.

Opportunities and Considerations for Future Networking and Cross-Campus Collaboration

Campus leads showed strong interest in establishing more formalized networks and increasing collaboration across PSIs in BC. One participant felt this approach would be a *“no brainer”*, while another said, *“100%. Yeah. I think there has to be more of [connection and collaboration].”*

Key interests and potential purposes of a structured provincial network include shared learning and information sharing, professional development, identifying common metrics, collaborating in

advocacy, funding opportunities, and projects. Models such as a community of practice (CoP) and open resource sharing were often suggested. One participant explained, *“So, it's hard to get funding. So, if we can get funding as a consortium of universities. Wouldn't that be great?”* While another said, *“[We would be interested in] participating in some type of network to begin with. So, this would be for information sharing and perhaps we could end with collaboration on some projects.”*

Some participants were hesitant about starting a new network due to limited capacity and concerns about the challenges and sustainability of existing networks. One participant explained, *“I would need to be very clear about what it was. I'm already part of probably like 6 networks and like a leader of a number of those. Um, I guess what would be sort of the point?”* Participants emphasized a new network would need dedicated capacity, a clear purpose and structure, and long-term infrastructure. Another participant said, *“But the sustainability of it...Because a lot of these organizations are like volunteer led or have like one staff to do everything. It can be difficult to sort of keep these communities of practice going.”* Participants emphasized establishing an anchor organization with dedicated coordination and leadership to support this.

Theme Summary

Key Challenges

- Collaboration across institutions is limited, inconsistent, siloed, and reliant on individuals or short-term funding.
- Concerns about capacity constraints and sustainability based on current and past food insecurity collaborations.

Identified Opportunities

- Creating a formal and sustained province-wide network with a clear purpose:
 - Share learnings and resources
 - Track common metrics
 - Collaborate in joint advocacy and funding opportunities

Limitations

This report reflects the perspectives of campus food security leads who participated in interviews and surveys. It may not capture the diversity of views and experiences across all public PSIs in BC. Participation was voluntary and the sample size was small, which may affect how broadly these findings apply.

Participant engagement focused on their perceptions of institutional responses, research, and collaboration related to student food insecurity. While understanding student perspectives is critical to addressing student food insecurity, direct engagement with students was outside the scope of this project. As a result, findings reflect institutional/campus leads for food security rather than students' lived experiences.

Although some participants described initiatives that support Indigenous students, the project did not include direct engagement with leaders of these initiatives, other Indigenous organizations, or Indigenous students, and did not collect enough information to examine these efforts separately or in detail. This report should therefore not be interpreted as a comprehensive understanding of how PSIs are addressing food insecurity among Indigenous students.

The literature review included qualitative and mixed methods studies conducted in BC over the past 10 years. The available evidence is limited and largely drawn from a small number of research-intensive institutions, which means these findings may not apply across different campuses and over time. Taken together, these limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this report.

Conclusion

Food insecurity was consistently identified by campus food security leads as an urgent issue affecting student health, wellbeing and academic success. While participants described substantial efforts across PSIs to address student food insecurity, they also emphasized the need for food insecurity to be more widely acknowledged, prioritized and acted on.

While the participants in this study indicated the urgency to address the pressing issue of food insecurity among the post-secondary student population, it is unknown how the needs of the post-secondary student population in BC compare to the general population of young adults. One study based on 2018 data found a lower prevalence of food insecurity among post-secondary students as compared to non-students of a similar age (15% and 19% respectively) (10). More recent data show that 27% of the population of adults age 18-24 in BC in 2024 were living in households experiencing food insecurity (11). More research is needed to examine the needs of different populations and how best to address those needs.

Participants in this project noted gaps in research and evidence to inform practice, as well as ongoing challenges, such as capacity and resource constraints, that limit the sustainability of efforts and the scale of impact. Food insecurity needs to be addressed more broadly through policy at the systems-level to address the drivers of food insecurity more generally, both structural and economic including the high cost of housing and other living costs and adequate financial aid for students.

Collaboration and partnerships were frequently identified by participants as important. Participants expressed strong interest in increased collaboration with internal and external partners, including other PSIs. They also identified a need for more coordinated approaches at the institutional, regional and provincial levels. Despite recognized constraints and anticipated challenges, participants noted opportunities for greater collective impact and expressed strong desire for a provincial network or other structures to support ongoing connection, shared learning, and collaboration among PSI food security leads in BC.

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Appendix 1. Interview Engagement Questions

Post-Secondary Student Food Insecurity in BC Interview Questions for Campus Leads

Introductions

1. What is your name and role within the institution, and can you very briefly share how your role relates to student food insecurity on campus?
 - a. What department or unit do you sit within? (ex: student affairs, different parts of institution, etc.)

Context

2. Can you briefly describe your institution (e.g., size of student body, campus location(s), research vs teaching institution) and the student population of your campus (e.g., are there many commuters vs living on campus, local students from community vs from around the country/world, students with families, recent high school graduates, later in life students, etc.)?
 - a. Specifically, could you share any data or insights you have related to food insecurity among students, such as how prevalent it is and which student groups are most affected?

Programs

3. What programs, policies, or initiatives currently exist at your institution to support student food security?
 - a. Who leads the work/programs? (e.g., student-led, community/external partners, etc.)
 - b. Who are your partners in this work (e.g., internal cross campus collaborations/coordination, external relations, etc.)
 - c. Are there any non-food based programs or initiatives (e.g., financial supports, wrap-around services, advocacy) that support student food security on campus?
4. What informs or guides your campus's food security efforts? (e.g., institutional frameworks, student voices, evaluation, partnerships, research findings)
5. What do you see as the major challenges/barriers to addressing student food insecurity on your campus?
 - a. What do you think is working to address the issue of student food insecurity on campus?
What do you think is needed?

Research

6. Has your institution conducted any research related to student food insecurity on campus?
- a. Specifically, are there any campus-based projects or studies that explore(d) students' lived experiences with food insecurity? *We are particularly interested in qualitative work that focuses on how students experience food insecurity
 - b. Are you aware of any research that focuses on students' experiences with food insecurity from other post-secondary institutions in BC?

Networks

7. Are you currently connected to or collaborating with other post-secondary institutions on student food insecurity?
- a. Would you/your institution be interested in connecting with other BC post secondary institutions to share learnings and collaborate on student food insecurity?
8. If yes, how would you envision connecting or networking with other institutions?
- a. What would you hope to gain from connecting or collaborating with other post-secondary institutions about student food insecurity?
9. Do you give permission for your professional contact information (institutional email address) to be shared with other post-secondary institutions for future networking/collaborating purposes?
10. Is there anyone else that you think we should connect with, at your own institution or at another institution, for this project?

Closing

11. Is there anything we haven't talked about yet that you would like to share?

Appendix 2. Survey Engagement Questions

1. CONTEXT/BACKGROUND

1.1 Please provide the name of your institution.

1.2 What is your job title and which department/unit do you work in?

1.3 Please briefly describe how your role relates to student food insecurity on campus.

1.4 Briefly describe your institution and the student population on your campus (e.g., size of student body, campus location(s), research vs teaching institution, are there many commuters vs students living on campus, local students from the community vs from around the province/country/world, many students with families, recent high school graduates, later in life students, etc.)

1.5 What is the current situation regarding student food insecurity on your campus? (e.g., available data/statistics, prevalence, groups most impacted)

1.6 What programs, policies, or initiatives currently exist at your institution to support student food security? (e.g., emergency food assistance, financial support, wrap-around services, advocacy, etc.)

1.7 Who leads this work? With what partners? (e.g., student-led, community/external partners, etc.)

1.8 What informs or guides your campus's food security efforts? (e.g., institutional frameworks, student voices, evaluation, partnerships, research findings, etc.)

1.9 What do you see as major challenges/barriers to addressing student food insecurity on your campus?

1.10 What do you think is working well to address student food insecurity on campus? What do you think is needed to better address the issue?

2. RESEARCH

2.1 Has your institution conducted research on student food insecurity on your campus? If yes, please explain/describe and/or include any relevant links. (We are particularly interested in qualitative research that focuses on students' lived experiences with food insecurity).

Are you aware of any research about student experiences of food insecurity from other post secondary institutions in BC? If yes, please explain/describe.

3. NETWORK

3.1 Are you currently connected to or collaborating with other post-secondary institutions on the issue of student food insecurity?

- Yes
- No
- Not currently, but have in the past

3.2 If yes, please briefly describe the collaboration.

3.3 Would you/your institution be interested in connecting with other BC postsecondary institutions around the issue of student food insecurity?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

3.4 If yes, how would you like to connect/network and what would you hope to get out of connecting with other post-secondary institutions?

3.5 Do we have your permission to use or share your professional contact information (i.e., institutional email address) for potential networking or collaboration opportunities with other post-secondary institutions in the future?

- Yes, I consent to the sharing of my professional contact information for networking or collaboration purposes.
- No, I do not consent to the sharing of my professional contact information.

3.6 Please provide your full name.

3.7 Please provide your email address.

Appendix 3. Literature Review Summary Report & References

Background

Food insecurity among post-secondary students is very high (estimated between 20-50%) (1). The BCCDC food security team participated in a conference at Vancouver Island University (VIU) called Nourishing Minds in April 2025. The project builds on connections initiated through the Nourishing Minds conference, where interest was expressed in further exploring how post-secondary institutions across BC are addressing student food insecurity.

The purpose of this project was to better understand the current state of student food insecurity on public post-secondary campuses in BC, with a focus on students' lived experiences of food insecurity and institutional responses to addressing the issue. The project included two parts: (1) a literature review and (2) a series of interviews and surveys engaging with key individuals at post-secondary institutions in BC. This is a summary of the findings from the literature review.

Methods

The literature review included both published academic and grey literature and sought to answer the following question: *among students in public post-secondary institutions of BC, what are the reported lived experiences of food insecurity in the past 10 years?*

To search the academic literature, Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, Medline (Ovid), Embase (Ovid) and Web of Science databases were utilized. For searching the grey literature, searches were through Google, Google News, and scanning of post-secondary institution websites (e.g., UBC). For both published and grey literature, citation mining was also employed. Interview and survey participants from part 2 also mentioned some research, which were also reviewed.

Combinations of search terms "food insecurity" OR "campus food insecurity" OR "food security" AND "post-secondary students" OR "university students" OR "college students" AND "British Columbia" OR "BC". In some cases, additional search terms included "lived experience" OR "qualitative" OR "student perspective".

The literature review was limited to studies with qualitative methodology or mixed methods specific to post-secondary student populations in BC and studies published between 2015 and 2025.

Results and Discussion

A total of three articles in the academic literature and six articles in the grey literature were identified that fit the search criteria. It was anticipated that the number of published articles focused on student

experiences of food insecurity would be limited. Reference to other projects were found but the reports were not able to be accessed online suggesting that there is more work that has been completed but have not been made public.

Most studies employed mixed methods approaches with surveys, interviews, focus groups, and literature review.

Some key themes were seen across the studies reviewed. Students identified experiencing physical, mental, academic, and social impacts of food insecurity (2-4). Many students were not familiar with the food resources available on campuses. Students who were seeking assistance experienced shame and stigma in accessing food services (2-5). Further, students had difficulty obtaining quality nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods. Many felt that foods available on campus for sale were expensive, poor quality, and not healthy or nutritious (4, 6-8).

Students experienced food insecurity because of the high cost of living, the high cost of food, lack of housing, having limited income, and experiencing barriers to employment (3-5, 7-9).

“It’s really hard to access affordable healthy food on campus. Not only rent is expensive but also healthy food access is expensive too.”(10)

“The first thing that goes through [my mind] when I have financial troubles, it’s always just like, ‘Well, I can eat less.’ Because you know everything else you need...you need textbooks. But food, you know, you can eat a little less, you won’t die.” (LGBTQ2IA+ student)(4)

The studies pointed to comprehensive short-term and long-term approaches to addressing student food insecurity. In the short term, student financial aid and decreasing barriers to student employment could put more money into students’ pockets. Increasing food program visibility, accessibility, while ensuring dignified access to quality and culturally diverse foods could lead to more students accessing food as needed (2, 5-6, 9-10).

A number of longer-term solutions to address the root causes of student food insecurity were also outlined in the studies, including a number of policies to enhance access to food and finances, more partnership development, institutional support, and targeted support for student groups experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity, like graduate students, Indigenous students, and international students (5-9).

Conclusion

There are few qualitative research studies published that bring voice to students' experiences of post-secondary food insecurity in BC. With the number of students experiencing food insecurity continuing to climb, it is important to understand student experiences to identify short and longer-term solutions that will address student needs. Further research is needed to identify ways that the issue of student food insecurity can be addressed through a systems approach.

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