

Hungry Minds: Student Awareness and Use of Food Pantries at 91 Colleges and Universities

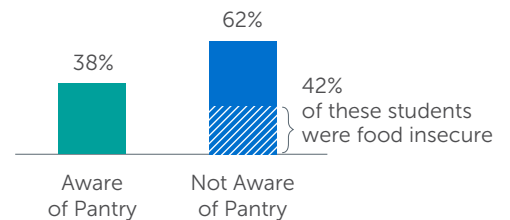
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Key Findings

- Ninety-one of the 104 colleges and universities (88 percent) who participated in the Fall 2021 implementation of the Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) had at least one food pantry or closet on campus.
- Of the 49,946 participants who attended a school with an on-campus food distribution center, only 38 percent knew of the resource, while 53 percent were unaware.
- Forty-two percent of those who were not aware that their institution offered a food pantry were food insecure.
- Nearly a third (31 percent) who knew of a pantry offered by their institution and were food insecure did not visit any food distribution centers, on- or off-campus, since January 1, 2021.

Does your school have a food pantry or food closet on campus?*



*Of those attending a college or university with one or more food distribution center(s)

When students are food insecure, they often encounter adverse health, social, and academic outcomes, including harm to cognitive functions, mental health, and academic performance. Additionally, compared to food secure peers, students struggling with food insecurity are 43 percent less likely to graduate from college with a two- or four-year degree.^{1,2}

With recent estimates of food insecurity among postsecondary students as high as 45 percent, many colleges and universities have responded by implementing on-campus food distribution centers (i.e., food pantries or closets) to better assist students struggling to meet their basic needs.³ These pantries often provide more than food to students, including personal hygiene products, toiletries, diapers, personnel trained to assist applicants with applying to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other benefit programs, and more.



Ninety-one of the 104 colleges and universities who participated in Trellis' Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) had at least one food pantry available to students. To better understand student awareness and utilization of this resource, this brief examines data from 49,946 students attending a school with one or more food pantries (as of November 1, 2021) and who responded to the corresponding question: "Does your school have a food pantry or food closet on campus?" Data from the 13 institutions without a food distribution center on campus were excluded from this analysis.



Awareness of Food Pantries

Of the 49,946 students attending a school with an on-campus food distribution center, 38 percent were aware of the pantry, 53 percent did not know of it, and nine percent indicated, incorrectly, that their campus did not have this resource. Sixty percent of those who answered, “I don’t know,” or “no,” (n=30,823) were food insecure, housing insecure, or homeless—indicating a lack of awareness of this benefit among students who may need this assistance the most. Additionally, 42 percent of these students were low or very low food secure.

Students with knowledge of an on-campus food pantry or closet were more likely to report certain life circumstances, including: (1) working part-time; (2) living on campus; (3) identifying as female; and (4) experiencing one or more forms of basic needs insecurity.

When institutions provide on-campus food distribution centers, it often signals that the school not only cares about student success, health, and well-being, but that struggles with food insecurity and hunger are (unfortunately) common during college. Offering food pantries and other resources to students can also help foster a sense of belonging and trust in the institution; in the Fall 2021 SFWS, students who knew of their institution’s food pantry were associated with a greater Net Promoter Score (NPS) and a higher likeliness of being a “promoter” than peers without knowledge of the resource (38 v. 32) (see p.3 for more on NPS).⁴

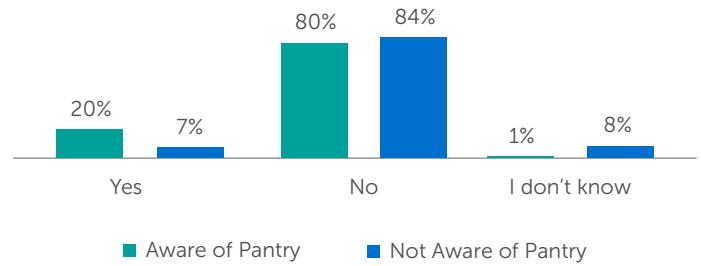
These students were also more likely to believe that their school makes food affordable, and that their institution has the support services to help address student finances.

Use of Food Pantries

While there are now food pantries on over 800 college campuses (compared to just 88 in 2012), barriers to access and utilization remain. For instance, food distribution centers, like food pantries, are frequently recognized as sources of social or internalized stigma.^{2,5} In a previous study conducted by Trellis Research (see [Studying on Empty](#)), many food insecure students expressed feelings of being undeserving or not “needy” enough to use community food programs or resources.

Generally, surveyed students who knew of an on-campus food pantry were more likely to report using a food pantry, on- or off-campus, than those who were not familiar with this resource (20 percent vs. 7 percent). Further, 14 percent of students familiar with this resource had visited an on-campus food pantry at least once since January 1, 2021. However, 5,833 students (approximately

Have you visited a food pantry, on or off campus, since January 1, 2021?*



*Of those attending a college or university with one or more food distribution center(s)

31 percent) who knew of a pantry offered by their institution and were food insecure did not visit any food distribution centers, either through their institution or a community program, in that same timeframe.

Conclusion

Results from Trellis’ Fall 2021 SFWS highlight the need for colleges and universities to increase their outreach, communication, and promotion of on-campus food distribution centers, like food pantries. Community college students, first-generation students, male students, student-parents, and those working full-time were all less likely to know about an on-campus food pantry at their institution.

While food pantries often serve the broad campus community, shame or stigma, whether internal or external, may prevent eligible students from accessing this needed resource. Colleges and universities can combat the stigma surrounding public benefits and other social services by housing food pantries and other social services in a “one-stop” resource and information hub, such as the [S.H.A.R.E. Center](#) at Palo Alto College in San Antonio, Texas. The S.H.A.R.E. Center provides students with customized programs and services to meet their academic, financial, and social needs, including emergency aid, mental health counseling, a food pantry, diaper bank, childcare services, and more.

While one-stop resource centers and other initiatives can reduce the barriers students face when accessing basic needs supports, more systemic issues—such as limited eligibility for SNAP—must be addressed through public policy change. As a result of guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), SNAP eligi-



bility has been temporarily expanded to include students who: (1) are eligible to participate in state or federal work study programs during the regular academic year; and/ or (2) have an expected family contribution (EFC) of zero dollars for the academic year (determined using Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) data).⁶ This expansion will be active until 30 days after the COVID-19 public health emergency has been officially lifted by the federal government (currently mid-July 2022). These exemptions are estimated to result in three million low-income college students qualifying for SNAP benefits who were not previously eligible, including 2.5 million undergraduate students and nearly 500,000 graduate students.⁷ Policy-makers should consider making these pandemic-related food benefits for college students permanent, especially the provision linking SNAP eligibility to EFC.

Measures

Food Pantry Awareness & Use

Q90: Does your school have a food pantry or closet on campus? [Yes, No, I don't know]

Q91: Have you visited a food pantry, on or off campus, since January 1, 2021? [Yes, No, I don't know]

Q92: Please select the type(s) of food pantries you have visited since January 1, 2021: [On-campus food pantry or food closet at my school, Off-campus food pantry or food bank (e.g., at a church, non-profit organization, regional food bank, etc.), Other]

Food Security

To measure food security within the prior 30 days, a short-form, six-question scale designed by the USDA was utilized.⁸ This short-form scale has been shown to identify food-insecure individuals and households with high sensitivity and specificity, and minimal bias. Under the short-form survey, individuals who give 2-4 affirmative responses have "low food security" and individuals who give 5-6 affirmative responses have "very low food

security"; both are considered "food insecure." Respondents with 0-1 affirmative responses are characterized as having "high or marginal food security" or food secure.

Table 1. USDA 30-Day (Short-Form) Food Security Scale
The food that I bought just didn't last and I didn't have money to get more (Often, Sometimes, Never True)
I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (Often, Sometimes, Never True)
In the last 30 days, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No)
[If answered Yes to previous question] How many days did this happen?
In the last 30 days, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No)
In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough food? (Yes, No)

Net Promoter Score

This survey included a customer satisfaction rating—Net Promoter Score (NPS)—to allow participating colleges and universities to better understand how students perceive their institution. NPS uses a 0-10 scale. Those respondents who score 9-10 are promoters, 7-8 are passives, and 0-6 are detractors. %Promoters - %Detractors = NPS. A positive NPS (>0) is generally considered good, with highest performers usually between 50 and 80.

Table 2. Net Promoter Question
How likely is it that you would recommend your school to a friend or family member?
<input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 <input type="checkbox"/> 8 <input type="checkbox"/> 9 <input type="checkbox"/> 10
Not at all Likely Extremely Likely

¹ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. (2021). Food insecurity during college years linked to lower graduation rate. Food/Nutrition. Retrieved from <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2021/food-insecurity-during-college-years-linked-to-lower-graduation-rate>

² Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>

³ Webster, J., Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Knaff, C. (2022). Student financial wellness survey report: Fall 2021. Unpublished manuscript.

⁴ Supiano, B. (2018, April 14). How colleges can cultivate students' sense of belonging. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-colleges-can-cultivate-students-sense-of-belonging/>

⁵ Swipe Out Hunger. (2022). College campus food pantries: Learnings from a 2021 survey. Retrieved from <https://www.swipehunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/College-Campus-Food-Pantries-Learnings-from-a-2021-Survey.pdf>

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). 2021. Supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP): Students. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>

⁷ Granville, P. (2021, February 2). Congress made 3 million college students newly eligible for snap food aid. Here's what must come next. The Century Foundation. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/congress-made-3-million-college-students-newly-eligible-snap-food-aid-heres-must-come-next/>

⁸ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2021b). What is food security? Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx>



About the Data/Methodology

The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) is a self-reported, online survey that seeks to document the well-being and student success indicators of post-secondary students across the nation. While not nationally representative, responses were weighted to reflect the total student composition at participating institutions. The survey opened on October 25, 2021 and closed on November 15, 2021. One hundred four (104) institutions participated in the survey—71 two-year colleges, 20 public four-years, and 13 private not-for-profit four-years. A total of 715,545 undergraduate students were invited to take the survey, of whom 63,751 responded, yielding a 9.0 percent response rate.

Recent Trellis Research publications

No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey.

Cornett, A., & Fletcher, C. (2022). No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/no-food-for-thought-insights-on-basic-needs-insecurities-and-mental-health-challenges/>

Student financial wellness survey report: Texas community colleges

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Knaff, C., & Webster, J. (2022). Student financial wellness survey report: Texas community colleges. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/student-financial-wellness-survey-texas-community-colleges-fall-2021/>

Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2020

Webster, J., Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Knaff, C. (2021). Student financial wellness survey report: Fall 2020. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SFWS-Report-Fall-2020.pdf>

Longitudinal fluidity in collegiate food security: Disruptions, restorations, and its drivers

Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2020). Longitudinal fluidity in collegiate food security: Disruptions, restorations, and its drivers. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Research-Brief_FSS_Longitudinal-Fluidity.pdf

Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students

Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>

About Trellis Company and Trellis Research Services

Trellis Company ([trelliscompany.org](https://www.trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation focused on helping people leverage the power of post-secondary education and learning to improve their quality of life and the communities where they live.

Trellis Research ([trelliscompany.org/research](https://www.trelliscompany.org/research)) provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of higher education affordability. With more than three decades of experience studying key issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and the financial barriers to attainment, our research team explores the roles of personal finance, financial literacy, and financial aid in higher education.

Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org or visit us on Twitter ([@TrellisResearch](https://twitter.com/TrellisResearch)).

The Student Financial Wellness Survey is a free national survey offered by Trellis Company that explores the connections between student finances, academic success, and more. Interested in participating in the Fall 2022 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started

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