

**Research Articles and Essays****Disability and Food Insecurity in Higher Education**

Elmira Jangjou<sup>1</sup> & Sydney Evans<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, the University of Iowa

<sup>2</sup> Division of Interdisciplinary Programs, the University of Iowa

**Abstract**

As more individuals with disabilities seek postsecondary education, they often find their already challenging experiences further complicated by food insecurity. This qualitative study illustrates the experiences of students with disabilities who visit a campus food pantry to illuminate how essential this resource is for this population.

*Keywords:* disability, food insecurity, higher education

Though many classify obtaining a college degree to be crucial for future economic success, affording a higher education remains a challenging feat for many individuals (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Many students find it difficult to make ends meet and often have to sacrifice their basic needs to continue their schooling (Broton & Cady, 2020; Broton, Weaver, & Mai, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Henry, 2020). This is when individuals must satisfy their basic needs (e.g., sufficient nourishment) in order to pursue higher-level skills (Maslow, 1943). As the demands of higher education require higher-level skills, such basic needs insecurity can jeopardize students' overall academic success (Broton, 2017; Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015; Phillips, McDaniel, & Croft, 2018). For this reason, the prevalence of basic needs insecurity among postsecondary students remains a critical issue in need of extra attention (Meza, Altman, Martinez, & Leung, 2019).

Food security, which refers to individuals' physical and economic access to sufficient and nutritious food in a way that fully addresses their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2019) is recognized as a human right (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). Despite this understanding, many households continue to face various challenges when it comes to affording and accessing food. According to Hadley and Crooks (2012), "the ways in which households respond to food insecurity have implications for health and wellbeing including effects on nutritional status, chronic disease incidence and management, infectious disease exposure and mental health" (p. 80). Limited access to resources may also compel individuals or households to forgo medical

treatments in lieu of affording food, and high medical expenses may force them to eat a diet that is not compliant with their medical condition, thereby leading to food insecurity (Hadley & Crooks, 2012).

Populations that are already underserved on college campuses are disproportionately affected by food insecurity (Cady, 2014). In addition to its negative impact on students' academic performance (Maroto, 2013; Maroto et al., 2015; Patton-López, López-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014), food insecurity can result in various physical and mental health issues. Research shows that food insecure adults are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, such as mental health issues (Chilton & Booth, 2007; Pourmotabbed et al., 2020) and chronic disease (Gregory & Coleman-Jensen, 2017; Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010). Several studies have found evidence of college students' poor nutrition and its related physical and mental health consequences (Broton et al., 2018; Bruening, Brennhofner, Van Woerden, Todd, & Laska, 2016; Bruening, Van Woerden, Todd, & Laska, 2018; Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Henry, 2020; Hughes, Serebryanikova, Donaldson, & Leveritt, 2011; Patton-López et al., 2014).

An increasing number of students with disabilities are pursuing higher education each year (Madaus, 2011). In terms of legislation, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 played a pivotal role in allowing individuals with disabilities to access postsecondary education. This legislation aimed to prevent discrimination against students with disabilities in the college admission process, and required higher education institutions to implement necessary accommodations and auxiliary aids that would improve this population's overall access to

programs and facilities on campus (Madaus, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 19 percent of undergraduate and 12 percent of graduate students reported having a disability in the 2015-2016 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability “as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). This population’s pursuit of higher education has increased despite the fact that they themselves are disproportionately at risk of food insecurity, with personal disability recognized as one of the strongest known indicators of household food insecurity. In other words, individuals with disabilities experience a higher risk of food insecurity compared to the wider U.S. population (Coleman-Jensen & Nord, 2013; Hiranandani, 2014).

Federally-funded safety net programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), were formed in response to the issue of food insecurity in the United States. Regardless, few students are able to make use of these resources due to the complex and limiting eligibility criteria as well as a general lack of information (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Broton et al., 2018; El Zein, Mathews, House, & Shelnut, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, Baker-Smith, Coca, Looker, & Williams, 2019; Henry, 2020). Although federal law imposes several limitations on the availability of SNAP benefits for postsecondary students attending more than half time, there is a long list of exemptions for this “SNAP student rule” (Broton & Cady, 2020, p. 248).

Students who are unable to work because of a disability, for instance, are exempted from these limitations, meaning that they are typically able to take advantage of federally-funded safety-net programs. However, students who are not aware of these exemptions would not receive SNAP benefits, resulting in a higher risk of food insecurity.

There are various ways that education institutions have attempted to address students' basic needs, with campus food pantries offered as an essential short-term solution. This resource is particularly critical for students with disabilities. In order to receive related accommodations, students need to self-disclose their disabilities. Self-disclosure is voluntary in postsecondary education, and research shows that the rate of self-disclosure is low among postsecondary students (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2010; McGregor et al., 2016; Newman & Madaus, 2015). This fact increases the importance of university food pantries, which serve everyone on campus, including students, faculty, and staff, without any eligibility criteria. Therefore, students with disabilities can take advantage of this resource on their campus without reporting their disabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by resilience developmental theory (Masten, 2001), and aims to further understand postsecondary students with disabilities' food insecurity conditions in higher education. According to this theory, no matter what past negative experiences individuals have had with significant risk exposure, they tend to show resilience when they maintain a positive adaptation, allowing them to cope successfully with any challenges they may face (Luthar, 2006;

Masten, 2015; Rutter, 2012). This means that individual characteristics and personality traits (e.g., autonomy and problem-solving skills), as well as having a social support network (e.g., parental support) has the potential to reduce the effects of adverse experiences and even lead to positive outcomes (Benard, 1991; DuMont, Ehrhard-Dietzel, & Kirkland, 2012; Greene, 2002; Masten, 1994).

Resilience theory has been implemented in the field of higher education. Studies have found students' levels of resilience are positively associated with successful college adjustment. (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Fassig, 2004). Moreover, in addition to their social capital, the qualities of resilience and self-efficacy are critical to “high-risk” postsecondary students' retention and graduation (Avery & Daly, 2010, p. 46). Resilience theory is therefore useful when exploring the coping strategies of postsecondary students with disabilities who try to overcome the barriers to accessing sufficient food, the ways they have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent loss of access to campus food pantries.

### **Current Study**

Although students with disabilities are a growing population on college and university campuses, there is little, if any, research on the experiences that these students have with basic needs insecurity and their subsequent coping mechanisms. The initial purpose of this study was to assess the overall experiences that student clients had with campus food pantries at a Midwestern public university. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. However, of the fifteen students that the principal investigator interviewed, four individuals were

students with disabilities. Their stories revealed the importance of paying attention to the experiences of food insecure students with disabilities. With this in mind, the current study focuses on the four postsecondary students with disabilities and illustrates their experiences using an on-campus food pantry with the purpose of shedding light on the diversity of their experiences and how important such resources are in the lives of these students. As this research was conducted in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the immediate impacts of the pandemic on the students will also be discussed in further detail. The central research questions guiding this study are: 1) *What are the factors that affect postsecondary students with disabilities' access to sufficient food?* And 2) *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect their food access in the early days of this pandemic?*

This study provides valuable information on the ways that students with disabilities can benefit from on-campus food pantries. In addition, we hope these findings raise awareness about the special needs of these students and compel higher education institutions to address the food insecurity of this vulnerable population and promote inclusivity in postsecondary education. Related implications of the study can also be used to inform the policies and practices of postsecondary institutions tasked with serving students with disabilities and providing inclusive education.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

A purposeful sampling method was used to select the participants after obtaining

approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The food pantry staff sent invitation emails to all students who had visited the food pantry from Summer 2016 to Spring 2020. Over a two-month period (March 2020 to May 2020), fifteen students participated in this study. According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s definition of disability, of the fifteen students interviewed, four individuals were students with disabilities. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity and confidentiality of participants. Charlotte was “visually impaired.” Dave, a male undergraduate student, faced mental health issues, which resulted in receiving treatment at a psychiatric hospital. The other two students, Milo and Jaime, had chronic illnesses that required special treatments and nourishment. Table 1 presents the self-reported information of these four student clients.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of the Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Charlotte</b>	<b>Jaime</b>	<b>Milo</b>	<b>Dave</b>
<b>Age</b>	26	26	48	23
<b>Sex</b>	Female	Female	Female	Male
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	Caucasian/White	Caucasian/White	Caucasian/White	Caucasian/White
<b>Student Status</b>	Graduate	Graduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate
<b>Full-time Student</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Year of Study</b>	Second	First	Graduated	Third
<b>First-gen Student</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Residency Status</b>	In-State	In-State	In-State	In-State
<b>Employment Status</b>	Unemployed	Part-time	Part-time	Part-time



## Procedure

The principal investigator conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the data. To respect social distancing guidelines, interviews were held over the phone or through Zoom Video Conferencing. Interviewees filled out a demographic information form concerning age, sex, ethnicity, student status, residency status, and employment status as part of the interview. To ensure consistency among the semi-structure interviews, the interviewer followed an interview guide including open-ended questions about the students' experiences with the university food pantry. Additionally, if a participant mentioned the pandemic during the interviews, they were also asked follow-up questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced their lives. Interviews were audio taped with the interviewee's permission and later transcribed verbatim (using Rev.com.) for data analysis.

## Data Analysis

We conducted a qualitative study to better understand the experiences of postsecondary students with a campus food pantry. Due to the ability to capture students' voices and perspectives (Mulligan & Brunson, 2017), qualitative research methods are ideal for studying food insecurity among college students (Henry, 2017, 2020; Meza et al., 2019; Stebleton, Lee, & Diamond, 2020; Watson, Malan, Glik, & Martinez, 2017). To analyze the data, thematic analysis was applied to generate the codes and themes of the interview in order to provide insight into the participants' experiences with food insecurity. Thematic analysis allowed us to better understand

students' experiences by connecting their narratives and finding common data categories (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To increase the internal validity of our analysis, we applied investigator triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach required the two investigators to analyze the same interview data independently, compare their findings in team meetings, and finalize the study themes.

We also adopted Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) method, consisting of six phases to carry out a trustworthy thematic analysis. In the first phase, we familiarized ourselves with the interview data by going through the transcripts repeatedly and determined what data pertained to students' experiences related to food access. The second phase involved generating initial codes in Dedoose (a web application for qualitative and mixed-method data analysis) by the principal investigator and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets by the research assistant. Phases three to five, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, are documented in Microsoft Word and Excel files. In these cycles of coding, pattern and axial coding enabled the research team to combine the initial codes and generate themes (Saldaña, 2015). Codes and themes concerning the research questions of this study were discussed during research team meetings to reach consensus on the findings. The principal investigator also used a personal journal to document additional ideas and impressions. The final phase was producing a report of the findings. These six phases enabled us to establish trustworthiness during the thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

## Results

In thematic analysis of the interview data from the four students with disabilities, four major themes related to food access were revealed, namely: financial, social, environmental, and dietary factors. Each theme will be discussed in further detail in the following sections. Impacts as they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic are also included.

### **Financial Factors**

#### *Employment Issues*

All four students reported having financial difficulties that motivated them to reach out to the food pantry. These financial difficulties stem from a variety of issues, including unemployment. Some students reported that employment issues (e.g., the loss of a job or limited job opportunities) jeopardized their financial stability. In certain cases, these issues were directly related to the student's disability. Dave, for instance, indicated that, as a result of his problematic relationship with his father, he began contemplating suicide and subsequently received treatment at a psychiatric hospital. As this hospitalization prevented him from working and consequently earning money, he looked to the university's food pantry to access food and keep him in school. Dave explained,

When you can't work and you're in that kind of space, you need a food source. And you know, even I know I'm not the worst off, but as a student here that yeah, it's been a very important part of keeping me going, keeping me in school. Yeah, keeping me alive in general, really.

Jamie and Milo also shared their struggles with unemployment, which put them at high risk of food insecurity. It is also important to note that Dave and Milo claim to have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***High/Unexpected Expenses***

High expenses, including medical and unexpected expenses, also limited students' financial stability. Milo, a single mother, incurred high medical expenses due to a chronic illness, which she shares with her daughter; coupled with Milo's job insecurity, these expenses resulted in both food insecurity and homelessness. While sharing how she learned about the campus food pantry, Milo clarified, "I was paying so much money in Lyme doctors. I had no money to go to the grocery store and so forth. So, I was always trying to find free things."

After being diagnosed with a disability, Jaime was forced to adjust to life-altering changes, while Charlotte faced financial challenges due to some unexpected expenses. For these reasons, the students who took part in this study were highly vulnerable to high and unexpected expenses, subsequently making them largely dependent on the campus food pantry for their nutritional needs.

### **Environmental Factors**

#### ***Accessibility of the Campus Food Pantry***

Our findings indicate that the location and accessibility of the campus food pantry were considered critical factors to the students who took part in the study. Having the food pantry on

campus was especially convenient for students, particularly Charlotte who was “visually impaired” and could not drive. She elaborated further on her reasons for utilizing the campus food pantry, stating,

I think just because it's on campus and it's local like me it's you know, it's it's near me and I'm actually like visually impaired so I don't drive, so it's just easier to access it on campus versus like the one on [G.] Court.

Though the food pantry was generally beneficial to the students, there were a few barriers that the students faced while accessing its services. Charlotte, Milo, and Jaime, for instance, had difficulty locating the food pantry during their first visit. Transportation was another factor that prohibited the students from easily accessing the campus food pantry. Jaime, for instance, talked about her frustrations with finding free parking near the food pantry locations. Carrying items from the food pantry to their home was also challenging for some students. Ironically, Jaime, who was herself challenged when it came to carrying items home, disclosed that she learned about the campus food pantry when her physically disabled friend asked for her help carrying the bags they had retrieved from the pantry.

The interviewees also reported encountering problems when it came to the food pantry's operating hours. Since the students were busy working, attending classes, and studying, it was often difficult for them to keep track of the food pantry's changing schedule. Charlotte personally experienced these frustrations, adding,

I think they change every semester I wanna say so that can be kind of, you know

difficult to remind ourselves to like check to see when they're open and then over breaks they have a lot less available obviously 'cause like running by [inaudible] students so, students tend to go home over breaks, but I would say that probably was like a bigger issue especially around like, you know, a longer break like, um, like winter break was you know a month basically or so or thinking about longer than that but that was a little bit trickier. Yeah, and I would say if you go later in the week, they have less options just based on like stocking and that kind of thing so I guess the timeline of when you go you don't always have as many options but that obviously like makes sense.

As a result, the students had limited access to the food pantry due to shifting operating hours and experienced frustration when it came to finding certain items at later points of the day. Jaime and Dave also shared Charlotte's frustrations with this issue.

## ***2. The COVID-19 Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic was another notable environmental factor that influenced students' access to food, particularly when it came to campus food pantry closures. When the university shut down due to the pandemic, the food pantry ceased operations, at which point students lost access to essential food provisions. These closures compelled students to look for other resources. Jaime, for instance, talked about visiting a community food pantry, adding that her chronic health-related concerns were heightened due to the pandemic. She explained,

I'm trying to avoid going out too much because I'm a chronic illness person, so

I'm just like kind of self-isolating, I guess. I'm definitely spending more money on food. ... I've stopped going to the [Crisis Food Bank] because when you go there to pick up a premade box, they're still like a whole bunch of people in a really long line and I was just like around too many people still and exposed to too many germs.

### **Dietary Factors**

#### *Size and Number of Meals*

Many of the students reported skipping or eating small meals due to a lack of time, limited access to food, or other factors that that were related to the pandemic. While sharing how many meals she eats per day, Charlotte indicated,

I don't really have a lot of time in the mornings to like, get that usually taken care of um, and so I usually don't eat breakfast and I eat like kind of like a mid like not exactly brunch but like I usually eat something around like 10 or 11 and then I probably don't eat again until like, like six maybe and then sometimes if I'm like particularly hungry that day, I'll eat when you get it (inaudible) like nine like something like the smaller meal, um, so yeah, I would say I usually eat like two.

#### *Dietary Restrictions*

Some students also faced certain dietary restrictions that complicated their needs. Milo, for instance, was unable to take full advantage of the campus food pantry because the available

items did not always coincide with her dietary needs. For this reason, she predominantly used the food pantry to meet her hygienic needs. Milo elaborated on her dietary restrictions by adding,

When I look at my daughter and I, our situation in and out of homelessness for all these years, and our health, having a Lyme disease and having poor health, it is mandatory that we have a good diet on low sodium, vegetable fruit-based, Mediterranean, good protein in our diet.

Jamie also had some dietary restrictions that were not met by the campus food pantry; this limitation, she says, compelled her to personally address her special needs by shopping at the grocery store.

### *3. Cooking Opportunities*

The participating students also indicated that their dietary factors were related in some way to cooking opportunities. Each of the students shared that, even though they enjoyed cooking, there were certain situations that prevented them from taking advantage of its nutritional benefits. As Milo was homeless, for instance, she did not have access to a kitchen or kitchen utensils. These limitations prohibited her from cooking, which was problematic considering her special dietary restrictions due to her disease. She added,

When I went in [the food pantry], I was looking for the snack foods, but they usually didn't have it. They usually just had the canned items or boxed kitchen, making the kitchen type things or stovetop. So, I went in there basically just from



a hygienic need.

The students also pointed to having a limited amount of time to dedicate to cooking. Though it is worth noting that Jaime mentioned that staying home because of the pandemic has provided her with some extra time to cook, which has helped her save money. She stated, “I’m home so I don’t have to worry about having like as many convenient foods or options and I can like cook more.”

## **Social Factors**

### ***Receiving Social Support***

The participating students received emotional, instrumental, informational, and financial support from various resources, including social services (e.g., SNAP), community and campus food pantries, family, and friends. For example, the campus food pantry was a source of both emotional and instrumental support for Dave when he was struggling and feeling lonely. He shared, “When I was going through a hard time, feeling neglected by the school as a whole, [the food pantry], you know, kept me fed and in school in a lot of ways.” Gaining information about the various resources that were available was another form of social support. Jaime, who was motivated to seek out the campus food pantry based on the suggestions of her mother and friends, highlighted the advantages of having parents with a college education, reporting,

My mom mentioned that when she was in graduate school, she had food stamps

and so I've done both of those things and it's been like, one last thing to worry about like having to clip coupons and scrimp on my food budget. I can just like eat and not have to worry about like, how much I'm eating.

### ***Providing Social Support***

It is also notable that the students who received social support also tended to bestow it to others in a myriad of ways. One way they provided social support to their fellow students who faced financial difficulties involved advocating for the campus food pantry and informing them about its existence. Students were eager to share their experiences with the food pantry when they encountered students who were struggling with basic needs insecurities. In so doing, the students also tried to raise awareness about the challenges that they themselves faced because of their own identities. As Jaime shared,

I tend to be like a pretty open person and general like, I'm an LGBT person with disabilities which are two things that you don't necessarily know by looking at me, but that are like very important parts of my identity and things that I think if I share them it increases visibility and awareness.

Milo also tried to educate others (particularly leaders and people in positions of power) about the difficulties that homeless students face.

### ***Frustration with Social Support***

Unfortunately, some of the students also reported feeling frustrated when attempting to

make use of certain sources of social support. Charlotte, for instance, reported having difficulty renewing her SNAP benefits, which resulted in her becoming more reliant on the campus food pantry as her primary source of food. Milo also described how she attempted to reach out to various resources (both on and outside of campus) but was ultimately denied in almost all cases. She shared her frustrations accordingly,

So, I don't know what it is about us, but our Lyme disease has definitely cursed us from getting any type of community support eligibility grants, housing, we have been denied up and down for having Lyme disease all these years in [this state].

### **Discussion**

Though higher education has become relatively more accessible to students with disabilities, these students face several institutional challenges once they are enrolled (Madaus, 2011). One such challenge that continues to persist is food insecurity, which research suggests is particularly prevalent among individuals with disabilities (Coleman-Jensen & Nord, 2013). Our findings confirm previous research studies that speak to students' diverse experiences with food insecurity and the subsequent need for a multi-faceted approach to promote food security in higher education (Broton et al., 2018). As a result of their personal contexts and needs, the students in this study faced numerous hardships unique to their situation. The thematic analysis of the interview data for the participants revealed four major themes related to food access: financial, social, environmental, and dietary factors. Existing research suggests that financial hardship motivates students to visit campus food pantries (Broton & Cady, 2020; El Zein et al.,

2018; Henry, 2020). We also found similar evidence for students with disabilities in our study. Students who faced unemployment, as well as those who incurred high medical expenses due to their health conditions, were particularly challenged with financial instability. These findings are consistent with Henry's (2020) study, which also identified a correlation between high medical expenses and food insecurity at the college level. Homelessness and restricted access to a kitchen or kitchen utilities posed additional limitations to one of the participants' food access. It is important to note that food-insecure students are at high risk of experiencing housing insecurity too (Broton & Cady, 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Henry, 2020). We also learned that hospitalization in a psychiatric institution could result in a loss of income and, consequently, heightened food insecurity. This finding is especially critical, as students with psychological and psychiatric disabilities are among the largest groups of students with disabilities in institutions of higher education (Madaus, 2011).

A significant barrier to accessing food at the college level emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Our study found that closure of the campus food pantry was a barrier to food access due to the pandemic and subsequent closures. In response to the pandemic, many universities, including the university at which this study was conducted, closed their campuses (Foresman, 2020). These closures happened simultaneously as students and families were facing unemployment (Wolfers, 2020). A study conducted in the spring of 2020 found that 60% of students reported basic needs insecurity during the pandemic, and 64% of students who were employed before the pandemic reported job insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Some students in our study also faced unemployment due to the pandemic.

Beyond the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, students with disabilities (including those who dealt with some form of visual impairment) generally benefit from the convenience of having the food pantry available on campus. However, some students in this study had dietary restrictions that complicated their nutritional needs and limited their options at the food pantry. As individuals tend to forgo maintaining a diet that is compliant with their medical condition in cases of financial instability and existing competing demands (Hadley & Crooks, 2012), it is essential that campus food pantries consider students' dietary restrictions.

As it is captured in the existing literature, the students in this study identified a lack of money and time as major barriers to food security (Broton et al., 2018; Henry, 2020; Maynard, Meyer, Perlman, & Kirkpatrick, 2018). Similar to the findings of El Zein et al. (2018), our students also faced challenges when it came to the limited and generally inconvenient hours of the campus food pantry. This finding stems from the fact that housing and food insecure students are typically more likely to work longer hours than their peers (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Patton-López et al., 2014). Therefore, it can be challenging for working students to figure out a time to visit the campus food pantries and to keep track of their changing and limited schedules.

In sum, the students in this study faced various barriers to address their basic needs, including food. They implemented various strategies to cope with these challenges, including visiting food pantries, taking advantage of federally-funded safety net programs, and seeking help from family and friends, to express resilience, maintain an optimistic viewpoint, and overall moderate the harmful effects of their financial instability (Benard, 1991; DuMont et al., 2012;

Greene, 2002; Luthar, 2006; Masten, 1994, 2015; Rutter, 2012). As many of these strategies are short-term in nature, there is an essential need for policies that embrace such long-term objectives as affordable higher education for all students, particularly those already challenged with disabilities.

### **Limitations**

It is worth noting that the initial goal of this study was to investigate the overall experiences of postsecondary students with a campus food pantry. The study's focus shifted to the unique experiences of students with disabilities after the researchers had completed the data collection and after the analysis of the interview transcripts had been initiated. As such, since the research team did not make any particular attempts to attract or include this population, the current sample does not necessarily represent this population. Moreover, due to the small size of the sample, it would not be possible to generalize the results to campus food pantry clients with disabilities. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic also imposed additional limitations. Considering the closure of the university and how vulnerable the targeted population for this study was, it is possible that the students in more severe situations did not have internet access to receive or respond to the email.

### **Implications**

Considering the diversity of experiences that students had with food insecurity, it is clear that a multi-faceted approach is needed (Broton et al., 2018). Although the short-term solutions for students' basic needs insecurity (e.g., campus food pantries and emergency funds) are helpful, more systematic and institutional changes are required. In order to facilitate students'

graduation, “a cultural shift that sees financial, family, and health issues as integral to academics, recognizes poverty as a societal problem rather a personal failing, and unites college and community in partnerships to provide support” is needed (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018, p. 3). As the participants in this study illustrate, students’ food and housing security as well as their physical and mental health all affect the student’s academic enrollment and success.

Our results suggest that future research would benefit from a more nuanced investigation of how prevalent the issue of food insecurity is among postsecondary students with disabilities. Additional research that further examines the role of various interventions, including university-affiliated resources, is also needed to deepen our understanding of the ways in which contextual factors may influence students with disabilities’ experiences with food insecurity and their related coping strategies.

### **Conclusion**

An increasing number of students with disabilities are pursuing higher education each year (Madaus, 2011). This trend continues despite the fact that this population is disproportionately at risk of food insecurity, with personal disability recognized as one of the strongest known indicators of household food insecurity. Despite the small sample size of this study, the individuals who were interviewed offered key insight into the challenges and barriers they faced when attempting to access and obtain food at the postsecondary level. Their responses indicate that additional research on the food insecurity of post-secondary students with disabilities is needed to more fully understand how to improve food access and availability. In

addition, funding and support are also essential to the wellbeing and success of students with disabilities.



### References

- Avery, C. M., & Daly, A. J. (2010). Promoting equitable educational outcomes for high-risk college students: The roles of social capital and resilience.
- Banyard, V. L., & Cantor, E. N. (2004). Adjustment to college among trauma survivors: An exploratory study of resilience. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(2), 207-221.
- Benard, B. (1991). Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school, and community.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic Analysis. In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2).
- Broton, K. (2017). The evolution of poverty in higher education: Material hardship, academic success, and policy perspectives. *Doctoral dissertation. University of Wisconsin–Madison.*
- Broton, K., & Cady, C. L. (2020). *Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention*: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Broton, K., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2018). Going without: An exploration of food and housing insecurity among undergraduates. *Educational researcher, 47*(2), 121-133.
- Broton, K., Weaver, K., & Mai, M. (2018). Hunger in higher education: experiences and correlates of food insecurity among Wisconsin undergraduates from low-income families. *Social Sciences, 7*(10), 179.

- Bruening, M., Brennhofer, S., Van Woerden, I., Todd, M., & Laska, M. (2016). Factors related to the high rates of food insecurity among diverse, urban college freshmen. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 116(9), 1450-1457.
- Bruening, M., Van Woerden, I., Todd, M., & Laska, M. N. (2018). Hungry to learn: the prevalence and effects of food insecurity on health behaviors and outcomes over time among a diverse sample of university freshmen. *international journal of behavioral nutrition and physical activity*, 15(1), 9.
- Cady, C. L. (2014). Food insecurity as a student issue. *Journal of College and Character*, 15(4), 265-272.
- Chilton, M., & Booth, S. (2007). Hunger of the body and hunger of the mind: African American women's perceptions of food insecurity, health and violence. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 39(3), 116-125.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., & Nord, M. (2013). Disability is an important risk factor for food insecurity. *Amber Waves*, 6(5). Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2013/may/disability-is-an-important-risk-factor-for-food-insecurity/>
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2019). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2018* (ERR-270). Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=94848>
- DuMont, K., Ehrhard-Dietzel, S., & Kirkland, K. (2012). Averting child maltreatment: Individual, economic, social, and community resources that promote resilient parenting. In *The social ecology of resilience* (pp. 199-217): Springer.

- El Zein, A., Mathews, A., House, L., & Shelnut, K. (2018). Why are hungry college students not seeking help? Predictors of and barriers to using an on-campus food pantry. *Nutrients, 10*(9), 1163.
- Farahbakhsh, J., Hanbazaza, M., Ball, G. D., Farmer, A. P., Maximova, K., & Willows, N. D. (2017). Food insecure student clients of a university-based food bank have compromised health, dietary intake and academic quality. *Nutrition & dietetics, 74*(1), 67-73.
- Fassig, E. I. (2004). Attachment and resilience as predictors of adjustment to college in college freshmen.
- Food and Agriculture Organization. (2010). *The Right to Adequate Food*. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/right-to-food/resources/resources-detail/en/c/49338/>
- Foresman, B. (2020). Here are the U.S. Universities that Have Closed Due to Coronavirus. *EdScoop*. Retrieved from <https://edscoop.com/universities-closed-due-coronavirus-2020/>
- Gabel, S. L., & Miskovic, M. (2014). Discourse and the containment of disability in higher education: an institutional analysis. *Disability & Society, 29*(7), 1145-1158.
- Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the price: College costs, financial aid, and the betrayal of the American dream*: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Looker, E., & Williams, T. (2019). College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Coca, V., Kienzl, G., Welton, C. R., Dahl, S., & Magnelia, S. (2020). *New Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity and Student Well-being*. Retrieved from <https://hope4college.com/realcollege-during-the-pandemic/>

- Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). *Still hungry and homeless in college*: Wisconsin HOPE Lab Madison.
- Greene, R. (2002). Human behavior theory: A resilience orientation. *Resiliency: An integrated approach to practice, policy, and research*, 1-28.
- Gregory, C. A., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2017). *Food insecurity, chronic disease, and health among working-age adults*. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84467/err-235.pdf>
- Hadley, C., & Crooks, D. L. (2012). Coping and the biosocial consequences of food insecurity in the 21st century. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 149(S55), 72-94.
- Henry, L. (2017). Understanding food insecurity among college students: Experience, motivation, and local solutions. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 41(1), 6-19.
- Henry, L. (2020). *Experiences of Hunger and Food Insecurity in College*: Springer.
- Higbee, J. L., Katz, R. E., & Schultz, J. L. (2010). Disability in higher education: Redefining mainstreaming. *Journal of Diversity Management (JDM)*, 5(2).
- Hiranandani, V. S. (2014). Disability, poverty and food sovereignty: Advancing the human security and development agenda. *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal*, 73-84.
- Hughes, R., Serebryanikova, I., Donaldson, K., & Leveritt, M. (2011). Student food insecurity: The skeleton in the university closet. *Nutrition & dietetics*, 68(1), 27-32.
- Luthar, S. S. (2006). Resilience in development: A synthesis of research across five decades.

- Madaus, J. W. (2011). The history of disability services in higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 154(1), 5-15.
- Maroto, M. E. (2013). *Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and relationship to GPA, energy, and concentration*. Morgan State University,
- Maroto, M. E., Snelling, A., & Linck, H. (2015). Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and association with grade point average. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6), 515-526.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review*, 50(4), 370.
- Masten, A. S. (1994). Resilience in individual development: Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity: Challenges and prospects. In *Educational resilience in inner city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 3-25): Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American psychologist*, 56(3), 227.
- Masten, A. S. (2015). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*: Guilford Publications.
- Maynard, M. S., Meyer, S. B., Perlman, C. M., & Kirkpatrick, S. I. (2018). Experiences of food insecurity among undergraduate students: "You Can't Starve Yourself Through School". *Canadian Journal of Higher Education/Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, 48(2), 130-148.
- McGregor, K. K., Langenfeld, N., Van Horne, S., Oleson, J., Anson, M., & Jacobson, W. (2016). The university experiences of students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 31(2), 90-102.

- Meza, A., Altman, E., Martinez, S., & Leung, C. W. (2019). "It's a Feeling That One Is Not Worth Food": A Qualitative Study Exploring the Psychosocial Experience and Academic Consequences of Food Insecurity Among College Students. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 119(10), 1713-1721. e1711.
- Mulligan, J., & Brunson, E. (2017). The "Anecdote" Insult, or, Why Health Policy Needs Stories. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Retrieved from <http://medanthroquarterly.org/2017/03/07/the-anecdote-insult-or-why-health-policy-needs-stories/>
- Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by postsecondary students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(4), 208-219.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847.
- Patton-López, M. M., López-Cevallos, D. F., Cancel-Tirado, D. I., & Vazquez, L. (2014). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 46(3), 209-214.
- Phillips, E., McDaniel, A., & Croft, A. (2018). Food insecurity and academic disruption among college students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 55(4), 353-372.

- Pourmotabbed, A., Moradi, S., Babaei, A., Ghavami, A., Mohammadi, H., Jalili, C., . . .
- Miraghajani, M. (2020). Food insecurity and mental health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Public health nutrition*, 23(10), 1778-1790.
- Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and psychopathology*, 24(2), 335-344.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*: Sage.
- Seligman, H. K., Laraia, B. A., & Kushel, M. B. (2010). Food insecurity is associated with chronic disease among low-income NHANES participants. *The Journal of nutrition*, 140(2), 304-310.
- Stebleton, M. J., Lee, C. K., & Diamond, K. K. (2020). Understanding the Food Insecurity Experiences of College Students: A Qualitative Inquiry. *The Review of Higher Education*, 43(3), 727-752.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *Digest of education statistics 2018*. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/ch\\_3.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/ch_3.asp)
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2020). A Guide to Disability Rights Laws. Retrieved from <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>
- Watson, T. D., Malan, H., Glik, D., & Martinez, S. M. (2017). College students identify university support for basic needs and life skills as key ingredient in addressing food insecurity on campus. *California Agriculture*, 71(3), 130-138.
- Wolfers, J. (2020). The Unemployment Rate is Probably Around 13 Percent. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/upshot/coronavirus-jobless->

[rate-great-depression.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap](#)



Disability and Food Insecurity in Higher Education

<https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/1055> is licensed under a [Creative](#)

[Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Based on a work at

<https://rdsjournal.org>.



