

# Q and A on Food Insecurity as a Barrier to Academic Success at CUNY

March 2019 | A Report by Healthy CUNY and CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy



## 1. HOW IS FOOD SECURITY A PROBLEM FOR CUNY STUDENTS?

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as having limited access to adequate food due to a lack of money or other resources. Hunger is the most serious short-term consequence of food insecurity. Food insecurity can contribute to health problems such as obesity, depression, poor nutrition, difficulty concentrating, and stress.<sup>1,2</sup>

Food insecurity among college students is a growing concern for higher education and health professionals. Several recent studies show that both two- and four-year college students are more likely to be food insecure than the general U.S. population, with college prevalence ranging from 14 percent to 59 percent.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

Among the conditions that put college students at risk of hunger or food insecurity are poverty, rising tuition costs, limited food and economic management skills, living independently, being a single parent, housing insecurity, and being employed.<sup>6,7,8</sup> While few U.S. studies have focused on the relationship between food insecurity and academic success among college students, two studies have shown that food insecure students were more likely to have lower GPAs than their food secure peers.<sup>9,10</sup>

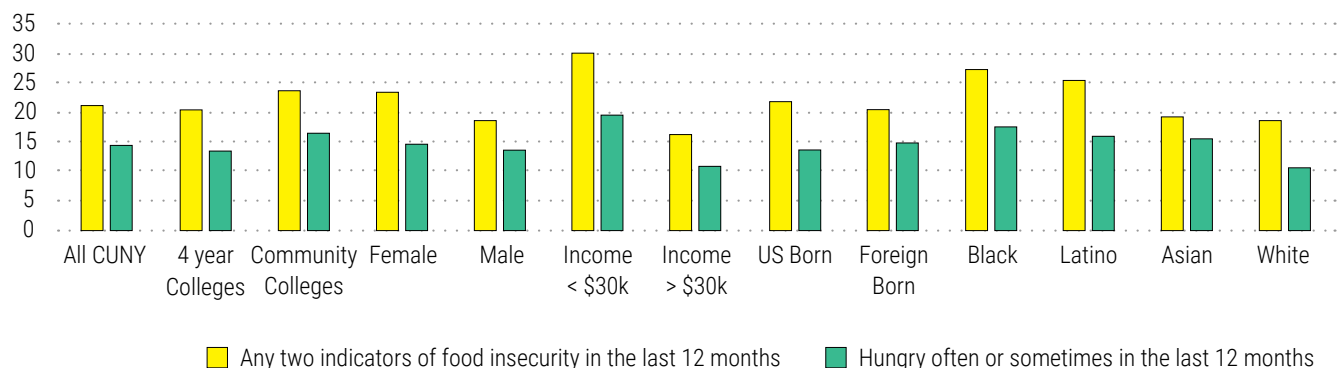
Why are so many CUNY students hungry or food insecure? Several factors account for high rates of food insecurity among CUNY students. First, there are many low-income students at CUNY. In 2017, 52.9 percent of CUNY community college students and 37.1 percent of senior college students lived in households with annual incomes less than \$20,000 a year.<sup>11</sup> The rising cost of college tuition, housing, transportation and other basic necessities has forced many college students to choose between tuition, books and the subway fare to school on the one hand, and food and housing stability on the other. This is a choice no decent society should impose on its students.

## 2. HOW MANY CUNY STUDENTS ARE AFFECTED BY FOOD INSECURITY?

Based on the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey of a representative sample of CUNY community college and 4-year college students, it is estimated that 52,550 undergraduates report that they often or sometimes experienced two or more of 4 of the USDA indicators of food insecurity in the last 12 months: worried they would run out of food before they could afford to buy more; cut or skipped a meal because they didn't have enough money for food; unable to eat balanced or nutritious meals because of lack of money; or gone hungry due to lack of access to food. In addition, an estimated 35,440 students reported they have gone hungry often or sometimes in the last 12 months, the most serious USDA indicator of food insecurity. As shown in Table 1, levels of food insecurity and hunger varied by student characteristics.

Table 1 shows that about one in 5 CUNY undergraduates experience food insecurity as defined in this report. About one in seven report that they have often or sometimes been hungry in the last 12 months. Community college students, female students, students living in households with incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, and Black and Latino students have higher rates of any food insecurity and hunger than their respective peers shown in the table. Compared to U.S. born students, foreign-born students have slightly lower

Table 1 Percentage of CUNY undergraduates reporting any two indicators of food insecurity or hunger, 2018



levels of any food insecurity but slightly higher levels of hunger. Of concern, 2.4 percent of CUNY students reported that their children or dependents had often or sometimes gone hungry in the last 12 months, a heavy burden for these parent students and their children.

### 3. HOW DOES FOOD INSECURITY AFFECT ACADEMIC SUCCESS?

Food insecurity is prevalent for CUNY students and for their communities and families. Hungry students and those who worry about how to pay for their next meal have trouble focusing on school work. Several recent research studies show that food insecurity is inversely associated with grade point average (GPA).<sup>12</sup> Other studies found that food insecurity was significantly associated with college deferment and an increased likelihood of college withdrawal.<sup>13</sup>

Healthy CUNY interviews with students provide additional insights into how food insecurity influences learning. One senior college student explained that when she's hungry it's hard for her to think and function properly. "The feeling you get, nausea, dizziness – sometimes I would rather take a nap not to feel the hunger pains". Another described how she coped with hunger: "I often would stress-eat or go to the cheapest food place for unhealthy food. Many times, last semester after skipping breakfast I simply fell asleep during multiple classes and my grades were lower than expected."

A community college student explained the tough choices she had to make to address her own and her children's food insecurity:

*"Since I started school it has been very difficult for me to buy lunch and breakfast when I get to school. I only use the cafeteria when I have to study or do homework, not to buy food, because food at school is kind of expensive and they don't have various healthy choices. Sometimes I use the Metrocard money (CUNY provides) to buy milk for my kids because I don't receive enough SNAP (food stamps)."*

Of those interviewed in the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey, 8.6 percent of respondents —an estimated 21,000 CUNY undergraduates—reported that hunger or food insecurity had sometimes or often interfered with their school work in the last 12 months. Compared to their food-secure peers, students experiencing any food insecurity were 1.4 times more likely to experience any of four academic problems during the last 12 months. Students who reported having gone hungry in the last 12 months were twice as likely to have failed out of a degree program as students who had not experienced hunger (6.8 percent versus 3.4 percent).

### 4. WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE ON CUNY CAMPUSES TO HELP STUDENTS WITH FOOD SECURITY CONCERNS?

Many CUNY campuses offer a variety of services that help students to improve food security. Single Stop provides free comprehensive social, legal and financial services to students at CUNY's seven community colleges and at John Jay College,

a four-year CUNY college. **Single Stop** counselors on participating campuses assist students to find resources that can help overcome barriers that prevent them from attending and completing school, such as having to take on work responsibilities to meet food and housing needs. Single Stop counselors interview students and provide them with information about which federal, state or local benefits they are eligible to receive and then assist them to enroll. Among the food programs for which Single Stop screens and enrolls CUNY students are SNAP (food stamps) and the Women, Infant and Children program (WIC), a program that provides pregnant women, new mothers and their young children with free healthy food.

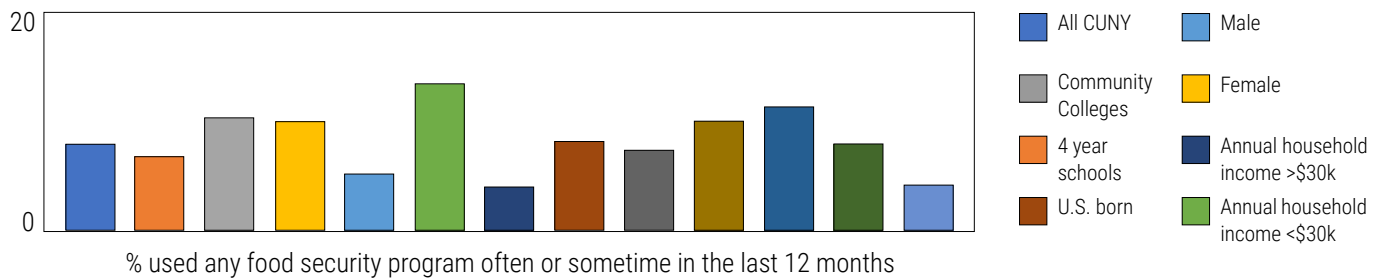
Between 2009 and 2015, CUNY Single Stop sites served and provided access to benefits, legal services, financial counseling, or tax refunds for 75,000 students, with the total such benefits valued at \$178 million. A preliminary assessment conducted at LaGuardia Community College found that students who received Single Stop services have a higher retention rate than those in a comparison group. By 2020, CUNY hopes to extend the Single Stop program to more senior colleges. Single Stop provides an important model for integrating services across the many domains that influence students' academic success and well-being.

**Food Pantries** at 15 CUNY campuses provide free food to food insecure students and their families and assist people to obtain food benefits such as SNAP. Campus food pantries are designed to meet the immediate food needs of students on campus by providing a variety of non-perishable food items. Five campus-based pantries with refrigeration also offer limited fresh produce, meat and dairy products. Currently, 13 campus pantries are affiliated with the Food Bank for New York City, a citywide food security nonprofit agency. Most pantries are located and administered within Single Stop offices or partner with campus and community organizations, concerned faculty and student clubs. The Food Bank provides training for pantry coordinators and guidelines for food safety and nutrition and access to subsidized, wholesale and donated food items. In addition to emergency food help, campus food pantries provide nutrition education, and connect students to public benefits (SNAP, WIC) and community resources. Campus food pantries serve students who need immediate assistance and may be reluctant to use community-based emergency feeding programs in their home neighborhoods.

Other food-related CUNY services include emergency loans to assist students to address crises, voucher or discount programs at campus cafeterias, and campus-based farmers' markets or food-growing farms.

In 2018, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute partnered with Hostos Community College and John Jay College to prepare students to become food security advocates, students who could connect their peers with campus and community-based food programs and also lead campus and social media campaigns to reduce stigma against getting help for food insecurity. In one semester, food security advocates reached more than 1200 students about campus services and raised awareness of the problem on their campuses.

Table 2 CUNY Students Use of Food Security Programs, 2018



## 5. HOW DO CUNY STUDENTS USE CAMPUS FOOD SECURITY SERVICES?

The Healthy CUNY 2018 survey found that 23 percent of respondents were aware that their campus had services to help them address food insecurity while 77 percent were unaware or unsure of the availability of these services on their campus. Food insecure students were no more likely to know about these services than their food secure peers. The survey also found that 8 percent of undergraduates had often or sometimes used food security programs in the last 12 months, an estimated 19,554 students. Table 2 shows that students' use of food security services varied by their social characteristics.

This table reveals that, not surprisingly, the same groups that showed higher rates of food insecurity in Table 1 report higher than average use of food security programs. This includes community college students, females, students from households with lower incomes, and Black and Latino students.



## 6. WHAT OBSTACLES MAKE IT HARD FOR CUNY STUDENTS TO GET HELP FOR REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY?

Healthy CUNY surveys and focus groups provide some insights into the obstacles that CUNY students encounter in seeking food assistance.

As noted, very few students report using SNAP, WIC, food pantries, Single Stop, campus cafeteria meal vouchers, or Health Bucks, a subsidy for fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets that are distributed by the New York City Department of Health. In the survey, the most frequently cited reasons for not getting services are that students do not think they need help or that they are eligible, or they don't know where to get help. Few students reported they were embarrassed or ashamed to get help.

A few quotes illustrate other reasons students report they did not get benefits:

*"I don't like the types of food that are given for free, i.e., canned goods or boxed foods."*

*"I don't know exactly where the food pantry is because I never asked."*

*"I keep trying to apply for SNAP and always get denied."*

*"I am immigrant, cannot get assistance. I can pay taxes but cannot get benefits that American citizens qualify for."*

In the future, it would be useful to understand better how CUNY students themselves define food security and what makes them feel entitled to get help.

Interviews with food pantry and Single Stop staff suggest other barriers. Many food pantries do not have adequate staff, space, food supplies or funding to meet the demand. Some are open only a few hours a week and most report running out of food. In addition, current SNAP policy in New York State requires students to work more than 20 hours. Some states have found ways to modify this rule.

## 7. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS CUNY CAN REDUCE THE EXTENT OF FOOD INSECURITY OR MINIMIZE ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS?

Healthy CUNY, the university-wide initiative to promote student health for academic success, has proposed that CUNY, New York City and New York State commit to ending food insecurity among CUNY students over the next five years, by 2023, a goal that we believe is ambitious but achievable. To realize that goal, Healthy CUNY suggests:

1. CUNY should develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan to reduce food insecurity by increasing the number of Single Stop programs and food pantries, expanding education and outreach programs, and enlisting the food service vendors at CUNY cafeterias in developing voucher programs and low-cost healthy meals to increase access to healthy affordable food for all CUNY students. Every campus should also prepare students to serve as food security advocates. CUNY's budget request to New York State for 2019-2020 is an important step in this direction.
2. New York City and State should provide the funding needed to ensure that these programs can serve all students in need. New York State should provide the resources needed to achieve the laudable goal the Governor promoted in his 2018 State of the State speech that no college student in New York State should be hungry.
3. New York State should follow the lead of other states such as Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois and New Jersey to modify federal rules to extend the opportunity to enroll in SNAP to college students who work less than 20 hours a week or go to school part-time, and to count college enrollment itself and work-study hours as meeting the requirement for job training.

While CUNY has made progress in reducing food insecurity, more can be done to ensure that no CUNY students are still hungry. CUNY students work to succeed at school and life. For many CUNY food insecure students, it is the fact that they are in school that puts them at risk of food insecurity and hunger—of having to spend money on books, tuition or subway fare rather than food. CUNY, New York City and State could make no better investment in our city's health and economic future than to end food insecurity on our college campuses. Achieving this goal will bring the lifetime health and economic benefits a college degree confers to more New Yorkers.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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