

## ABSTRACT

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD INSECURITY ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

by

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As higher education continues to see a changing student population, there is clear evidence that food insecurity is a real concern on college campuses. The need to increase food availability and access on campuses is even more critical to the retention and educational experiences of students.

This study sought to understand the scope of food insecurity at one four-year public institution and whether there were implications on academic outcomes for college students who face it. Given the noteworthy changes in student demographics, it was important to determine whether nontraditional students are subject to an increased vulnerability to food insecurity, making college attendance and academic success more difficult.

Data collection consisted of using a multi-method approach by administering a survey questionnaire and conducting semi-structured interviews. An online survey was distributed to a random sample of 2,700 undergraduate students. In total, 314 students participated in the survey. Eight students participated in interviews about their experience with food insecurity.

Overall, 47.9% of survey respondents scored in the category of being food insecure at some point within the past 12 months. Nontraditional college students are more likely to experience food insecurity at higher rates compared to other student populations. Students who

experienced food insecurity had lower overall GPAs, were twice more likely to fail and withdraw from a course and four-times more likely to take an incomplete grade in a course.

The results of these tests indicated nontraditional food insecure students experienced academic outcomes differently compared to traditional food insecure students. The impact of food insecurity on GPA was marginally different between traditional and non-traditional students. Moreover, nontraditional food insecure students were 1.5 times more likely to fail, take an incomplete and withdraw from a course compared to food insecure traditional students.

This study also examined the lived experiences of students who encountered food insecurity. Nine broad themes emerged from the analysis of interviews. These themes include coping strategies, physical and mental strain, compounded financial challenges, stigma, campus support, commitment toward degree completion, adverse academic implications, high food costs and the feeling of isolation or lack of socializing.

An important recommendation drawn from these findings is for higher education institutions to consider establishing a variety of food relief initiatives that address the issue of student hunger and challenges policies preventing students from getting the support they need.