

Are Students Food Insecure at Ithaca College?

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Background

Food insecurity is a public health issue that affects college students across the United States. A study published in the Sage Journal in 2018 revealed that about one-half of college students in the U.S. are food insecure. In many colleges and universities, this is not an issue that garners significant attention, including the consideration of the prevalence, manifestation, and causes of food insecurity. Private institutions in particular, which usually are costly, contain a majority of students who are expected to belong to a higher socioeconomic status. Therefore, these institutions may be considered free of such an issue. Food insecurity among IC students has been recognized in the past; student Sophia Tulp wrote an article, “Students struggle with food insecurity at Ithaca College” in 2018. While there is data available regarding the prevalence of food insecurity among college students, access to this data from private schools is limited and creates another barrier towards developing a solution. Several research questions guided the scope of the study:

1. How does food insecurity manifest itself among the Ithaca College student population?
2. What are the causes of food insecurity for the Ithaca College student population?
3. What are the potential solutions to food insecurity that will be successful for the Ithaca College student population?

In answering these questions, the study fulfilled its ultimate purpose to gain a greater understanding of food insecurity status of students in a midsize Northeastern private college.

Methodology

This research was conducted during the spring semester of 2019 through the course Development and Evaluation of Health Promotion Programs. In an effort to answer the research questions, a 19-item survey instrument was created using Qualtrics software regarding the causes, manifestation, and possible solutions of food insecurity. This data was collected using a range of question styles, including multiple-choice, dichotomous, rating scale, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. The survey was piloted, modified, and finalized prior to its distribution. The survey was distributed to a targeted randomly selected sample of 3,000 students using Qualtrics software. A total of 613 students filled out the survey.

Additionally, there were several distinct materials and personnel who were part of this research, including utilizing the materials of Qualtrics for data collection and Excel for data analysis. Furthermore, personnel included in this effort were Dr. Srijana Bajrachrya, who advised the creation and distribution of the survey as well as the data analysis process. In addition, the survey was designed in collaboration with Chris Kai-Jones and Lara Parrilla from the Cornell Cooperative Extension in Tompkins County. Finally, the survey was approved by the All-College Institutional Review Board at Ithaca College.

Results:

The results indicated that about 17% of surveyed students identified themselves as being food insecure, which constitutes a manifestation of food insecurity and its prevalence on campus.

The average percentage of students who regularly report signs of consistent food insecurity is approximately 7.14%. Data also showed that the majority of the Ithaca College students have never attended either pantry. Financial obstacles, lack of accessibility to healthy food, and lack of time for cooking were perceived as causes that contribute significantly to food insecurity.

The results also showed that Ithaca College students believe that there are several solutions to food insecurity on campus. The majority of students (73.6%) believed that there should be more on-campus access to healthy food options. Secondly, a large majority of students (73.6%) believed that the dining halls should have lower dining hall meal plan prices. Third, a significant proportion of students (68.3%) believe that students should be able to have the ability to donate their leftover or unused dining hall meal swipes for other students to utilize.

Recommendations:

Based on these results, a set of recommendations addressing each of these obstacles is provided for future student health programming at IC. This includes measures of providing budgeting and cooking classes to help students plan healthy meals, offering free ride programs to local grocery stores, and increasing the hours of operation of the Mobile Food Pantry and the on-campus food pantry.