



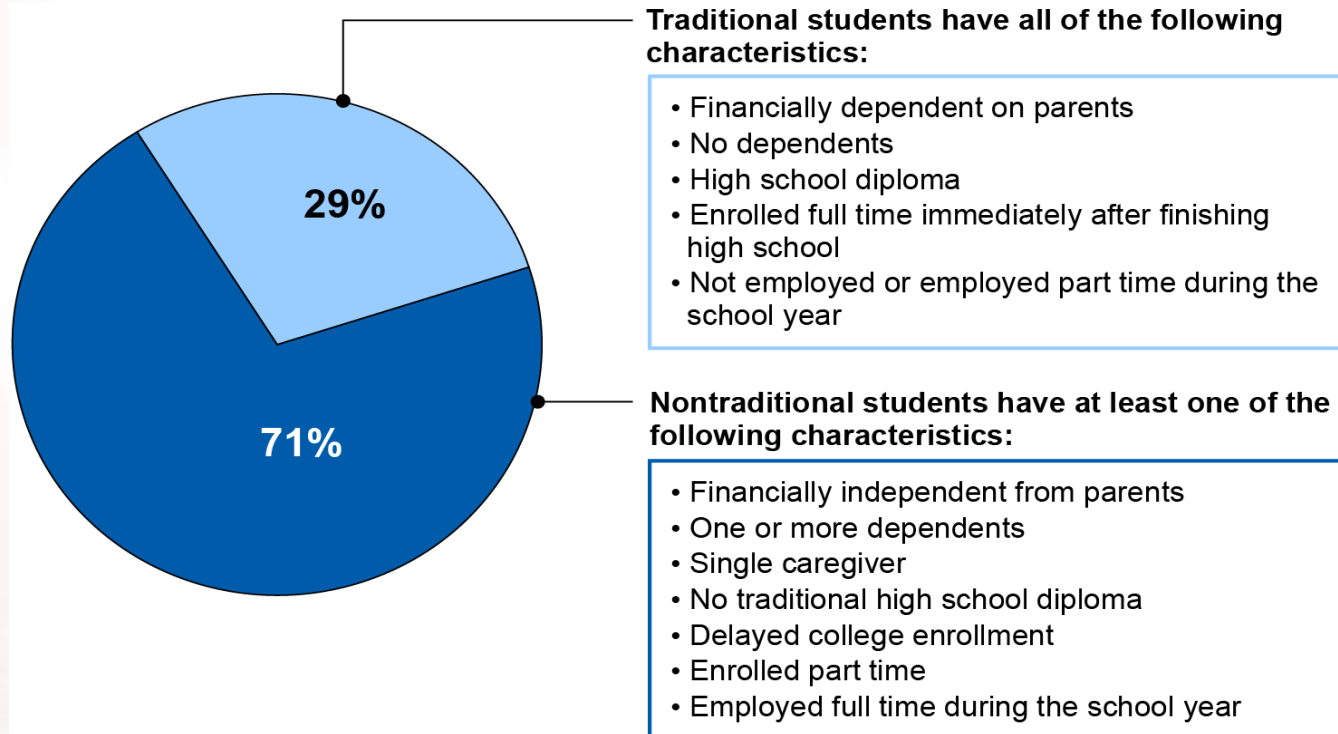
Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits (GAO-19-95)

Summary of Findings for the Student Financial Aid Research Network

June 2019

Background: College Student Demographics

Percentages and Characteristics of Traditional and Nontraditional College Students in 2016 (most recent NPSAS data available)



Source: U.S. Department of Education 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data. | GAO-19-95

Note: Categories of traditional and nontraditional students are based on the Department of Education’s definition. All results are within a +/-2 percentage point margin of error.

Background: Food Insecurity

- Food insecurity—the condition assessed in the food security survey and represented in USDA food security reports—is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.
 - **Low food security:** reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
 - **Very low food security:** Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.
 - Individuals with low or very low food insecurity are considered food insecure.
- Hunger is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.

Background: College Student Eligibility for SNAP

- A 1980 federal law generally prevents college students enrolled at least half time from receiving SNAP benefits.¹
- There are several exemptions to this restriction so that college students enrolled more than half time and have a legitimate need can access SNAP.
- Assuming that they meet SNAP household asset and income eligibility criteria, a full-time college student may be exempt from the student restriction, for example, if they are a single parent, receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), work 20 hours per week, or are enrolled in certain employment & training programs, among other exemptions.

¹Food Stamp Act Amendments of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-249, Title I, § 139, 94 Stat. 357, 370. The statutory language restricts access to SNAP benefits for individuals enrolled half time or more in an institution of higher education. 7 U.S.C. § 2015(e).

Research Objectives

- (1) What is known about the extent of food insecurity among college students and their use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)?
- (2) How are selected colleges addressing student food insecurity?
- (3) To what extent do federal programs assist college students experiencing food insecurity?

Q1 Methodology

- (1) What is known about the extent of food insecurity among college students and their use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)?
- Conducted an in-depth review of studies published between 2007 and 2018 that contained original, direct estimates of food insecurity rates among college students.
 - Analyzed 2015-2016 data from the Department of Education's (Education) National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to:
 - estimate the prevalence of risk factors for food insecurity among college students nationally; and
 - estimate SNAP participation among potentially eligible college students.

Finding 1: Studies Identify a Range of Food Insecurity Rates, but Results Cannot Be Generalized

- GAO's review of 31 studies provided some information regarding food insecurity among college students, but all of the studies have limitations and none provide estimates of food insecurity for this population in general.
- Estimates of food insecurity among college students included in the 31 studies GAO reviewed ranged from 9 percent to well over 50 percent, with 22 studies estimating food insecurity rates of over 30 percent.
- These results reflect the studies' different samples and methods, and the estimates from the studies included in GAO's review are not generalizable to the college student population as a whole.

Finding 1: Analysis of Risk Factors Associated with Food Insecurity

- GAO included seven risk factors for food insecurity in its analysis:
 - 1) having a low-income,
 - 2) being a first-generation college student,
 - 3) receiving SNAP,
 - 4) being a single parent,
 - 5) having a disability,
 - 6) being homeless or at risk of homelessness, and
 - 7) being a former foster youth.

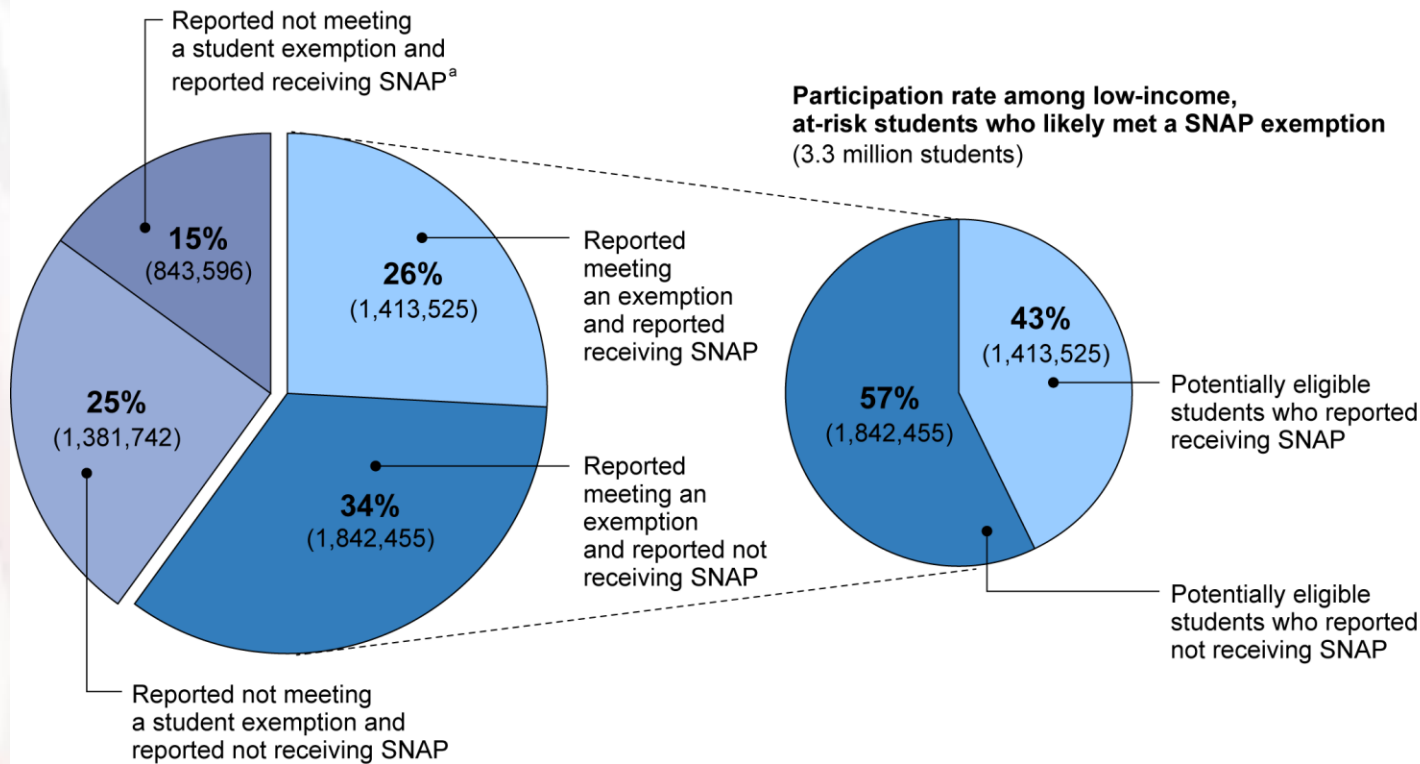
Finding 1: Most Low-Income Students Had Multiple Risk Factors Associated with Food Insecurity in 2016

- While having a low income is itself the most common risk factor for food insecurity among college students, GAO's analysis found that the majority of low-income students experience additional risk factors for food insecurity.
- The three most common risk factors for food insecurity among low-income students were:
 - being a first-generation college student (**31 percent**);
 - receiving SNAP (receiving SNAP can be considered a risk factor in that it may reduce, but not entirely eliminate, food insecurity) (**31 percent**); and
 - being a single parent (**25 percent**).

Finding 1: Fifty-Seven Percent of Potentially Eligible Low-Income Students Did Not Receive SNAP in 2016

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation among Low-Income College Students At-Risk of Food Insecurity in 2016

Total low-income, at-risk student population
(5.5 million students)



^aStudents who did not meet an eligibility exemption but reported receiving SNAP (1) may be receiving SNAP as members of their parents' household, (2) may have attended college less than half time and therefore were not subject to the student SNAP restrictions, or (3) may have met one of the student exemptions GAO was unable to capture in its analysis.

Source: GAO analysis of 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data. | GAO-19-95

Q2 Methodology

(2) How are selected colleges addressing student food insecurity?

- Conducted site visits to four states: California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Michigan to understand how selected colleges and states addressed student food insecurity.
 - 12 college visits, and 2 additional colleges contacted by phone
 - Public 2- and 4-year colleges
 - Met with students and staff

Student Voices

- I don't tell my family that I'm struggling with food because everyone I know is struggling with money—I don't want to stress them out. It's not a comfortable conversation to have. I haven't lived with my parents in years, I wouldn't even know how to ask them for help.
- I did not have much money when I started school, and immediately had to choose whether to buy food or a \$200 book for class. I chose to buy the book.

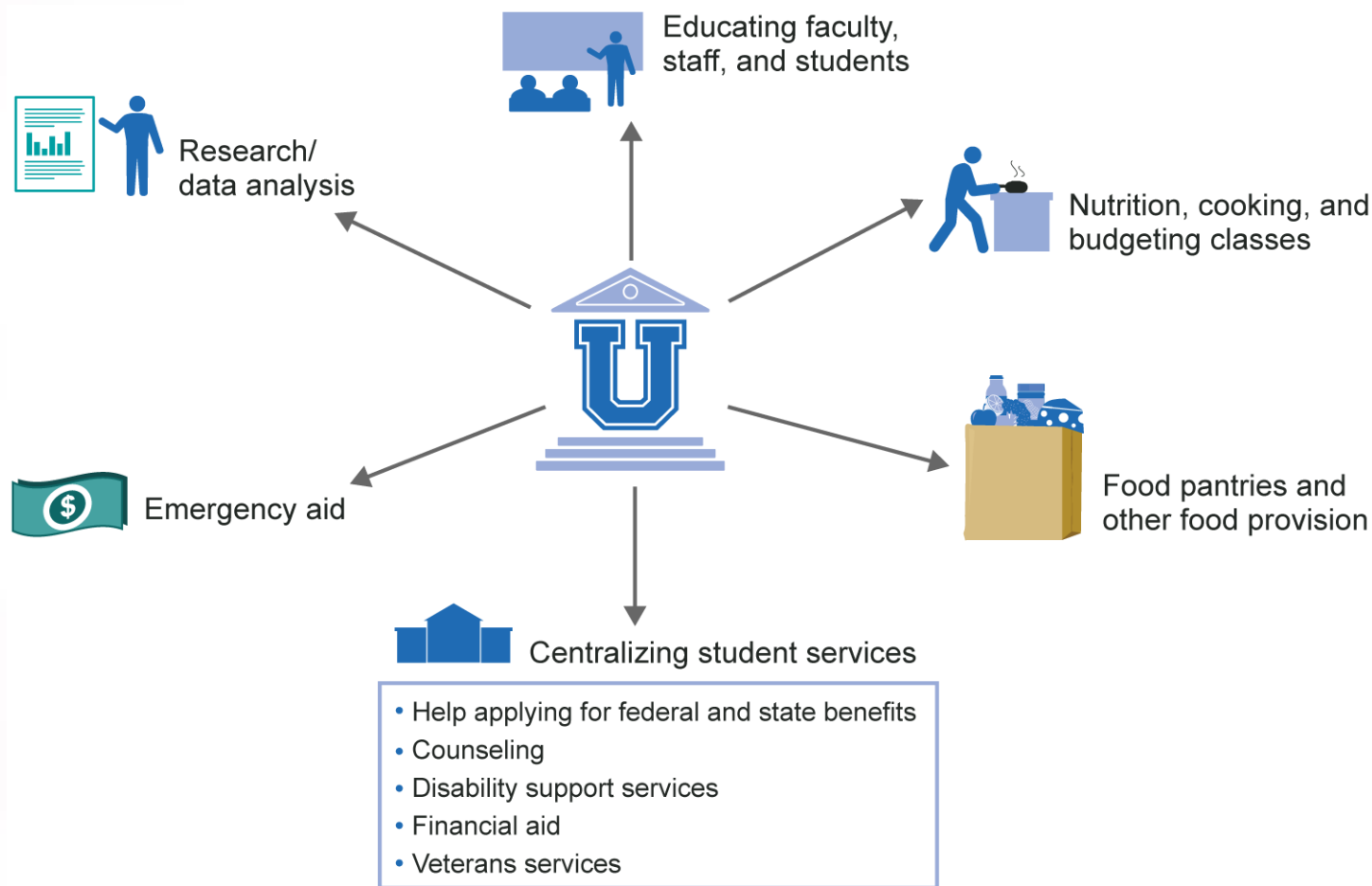
Source: GAO discussion groups with students at selected colleges taking steps to address food insecurity among students. | GAO-19-95

Student Voices (cont.)

- The reality is that I skip meals, often I don't eat lunch. I don't want to get lunch here on campus because it's too expensive. I get headaches, have trouble concentrating. I also have a disability that is worse if I don't eat.
- Students may think: 'I'm educated, [SNAP] is not a program for me and therefore don't apply for [SNAP]. So many students, including graduate students, plan their evenings around events with free food—but the same people [who are] trying to figure out how to get free food every night also think they don't need [SNAP].'

Source: GAO discussion groups with students at selected colleges taking steps to address food insecurity among students. | GAO-19-95

Finding 2: Initiatives by Selected Colleges to Address Student Food Insecurity



Source: Information from 14 selected colleges GAO contacted. | GAO-19-95

Finding 2: College Initiatives to Address Student Food Insecurity

- The 14 selected colleges GAO contacted are addressing student food insecurity in three main ways:
 - 1) by educating faculty, staff, and students;
 - 2) by providing students free food and emergency assistance; and
 - 3) by centralizing and coordinating student services and helping students apply for federal and state benefits.

Finding 2: Educating the Campus Community

- All of the 14 colleges GAO contacted educate their students about the resources available to address food insecurity in a variety of ways, such as by providing information during student orientations, on flyers and pamphlets, or through social media and text messages.
- Eight of the 14 colleges GAO contacted hold trainings or distribute information to faculty and staff about the on-campus and community resources available to students.
- At several of the selected colleges, faculty members include blurbs about basic needs-related resources, such as campus food pantries, in their syllabi.

Finding 2: College Food Pantries

- Each of the 14 colleges GAO contacted had a food pantry, with 7 having started their pantry in the past 5 years.
- The college food pantries GAO visited varied in terms of their size and location, which can depend upon the space available on campus.
 - Some pantries GAO visited consisted of only a couple of shelves of non-perishable items, while others spanned multiple rooms containing refrigerators and freezers.
- Directors at four of the selected food pantries said that student need was great enough to support expanding the food pantry, but that they had been unable to expand because space on campus is at a premium.

Finding 2: Photos of Campus Food Pantries

Pictures of Food Pantries from GAO Site Visits to Selected Colleges



Sources: Photographs from colleges and GAO. | GAO-19-95

Finding 2: Centralized Student Services

- Of the 14 colleges GAO contacted, 8 had centralized some or all of their student services—including financial aid, academic counseling, payroll, food pantry, veterans’ services, and women’s resource center, among others.
- Officials at 8 of the 14 colleges told GAO their campus has established a coordinated benefits access program or is actively screening students for potential eligibility for, and helping them enroll in, federal and state benefit programs like SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.²

Q3 Methodology

(3) To what extent do federal programs assist college students experiencing food insecurity?

- Interviewed officials from Education and the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which administers SNAP.
- Emailed state SNAP agency directors in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to ask about any action their state agency is taking to address student food insecurity.
- Reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, agency guidance and program documents about college student eligibility for SNAP.

Finding 3: Some State SNAP Agencies Are Assisting Potentially Eligible Students to Access SNAP Benefits

- About one-third of state SNAP agencies reported they were taking actions to inform college students about SNAP and help them access SNAP benefits. These state SNAP agencies reported assisting college students in various ways, including:
 - 1) by developing guidance or training for state and college officials on student eligibility rules,
 - 2) by conducting outreach at local colleges, or
 - 3) by providing students with options to qualify for a SNAP student exemption by participating in employment and training (E&T) services.

Finding 3: Examples of State SNAP Agency Approaches – Guidance, Training, and Outreach

- Minnesota’s state SNAP agency reported that it conducts technical assistance training on student eligibility issues for its caseworkers twice a year.
- Missouri’s state SNAP agency reported that it began a partnership with the state’s community college association to increase students’ awareness of their potential eligibility for SNAP.
- Rhode Island’s state SNAP agency reported that its outreach partner holds regular “office hours” at state community college campuses to answer questions about SNAP, screen students for potential eligibility, and assist with application completion.

Finding 3: Examples of State SNAP Agency Approaches – Guidance, Training, and Outreach (cont.)

- Two of the states GAO visited partially fund their state higher education grants for low-income college students with some of their federal TANF block grant dollars. Because these grant recipients receive TANF benefits, they are eligible for the corresponding SNAP student exemption.
 - The California state SNAP agency issued guidance in February 2017 to all of its county offices to explain that this SNAP student exemption applies to any student who receives the state’s higher-education grant for low-income students.
 - In Massachusetts, the state SNAP agency issued similar guidance in August 2017 to state SNAP staff who determine eligibility for benefits.

Finding 3: Examples of State SNAP Agency Approaches – Employment & Training Program Services

- As of April 2018, seven states have determined that certain programs at community colleges qualify enrolled students for one of the student SNAP exemptions because they are programs for low-income households, aimed at employment, and run by a state or local government.
 - Students in these designated community college programs who attend at least half time and do not meet one of the other student exemptions can be eligible for SNAP under this provision if they meet all other eligibility criteria.
- Twenty-four state SNAP agencies reported that they have implemented a third-party partnership with at least one community college to deliver SNAP E&T program services on campus. Under these state SNAP E&T partnerships, the state SNAP agency works with community colleges to enroll SNAP recipients in programs that are designed to increase the employability of the participant. Students in these programs would also meet the employment and training SNAP student exemption.

Finding 3: FNS Does Not Share Key Information That Could Help Colleges and States Assist Students Experiencing Food Insecurity

- GAO found two limitations with FNS's efforts related to SNAP for college students:
 - 1) **Some college officials and students at 9 of the 14 colleges GAO contacted either did not know about or found it difficult to understand the SNAP student rules and FNS has not developed targeted information to distribute to colleges and students.**
 - Further, GAO found that FNS's existing information about SNAP student rules on the FNS website is not easy to find and contains legal and technical language that is not always easy to understand.

Finding 3: FNS Does Not Share Key Information That Could Help Colleges and States Assist Students Experiencing Food Insecurity (cont.)

2) Some state SNAP agencies had limited information about approaches that they could take to help potentially eligible college students who may qualify for a student exemption.

- State SNAP agency officials in four of the five states, as well as officials in three of the four FNS regional offices that GAO interviewed, told GAO that they would like more information from FNS about how to implement the approach some state SNAP agencies are taking to help college students who may qualify for an employment and training exemption to access SNAP.

What GAO Recommends

- GAO made two recommendations to FNS:
 - 1) The Administrator of FNS should make information on their website regarding student SNAP eligibility requirements easier to understand and more accessible, as a resource for colleges and state SNAP agencies.
 - 2) The Administrator of FNS should coordinate with its regional offices to collect and review information about existing SNAP flexibilities and examples of approaches state SNAP agencies are taking to assist eligible college students to access SNAP benefits, and share such information with state SNAP agencies.



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The full GAO report is available on GAO's public website at:
<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-95>



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