

## Gauchos Got No Time for Bread and Ramen Only: Exploring Food Insecurity at UCSB

Name: Yu Zhang

Instructor Name: Baron Haber

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### **Introduction**

Imagine your stomach growling loudly at the end of a long day of lectures and sections, while the cold wind is blowing on your face. With your fingertips grazing a few crumpled facial tissues, a folded receipt of chewy bread from the Arbor at lunch, and a few cents, your pockets are empty. Then, you open the BofA application on your mobile phone and find out that no extra debit card money is available for you to reward yourself with a tasty and nutritious dinner after such an exhausting study day. You reluctantly get into a convenience store, buy the discounted bread to avoid the sense of hunger, and return to your dormitory for a few sips of tap water, then prepare to complete myriads of reading materials and assignments that are due this midnight. Even though the description seems relatively exaggerated, many Gauchos are familiar with this harsh reality, where the constraints of a limited financial budget and a demanding course load frequently require tough decisions about what, when, and if to eat. Campus food insecurity is a serious issue that affects the capacity of students to participate in college life, concentrate on their studies, and have a sense of belonging.

College students are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, defined as the

absence of consistent access to affordable and nutritious food. At the UCSB campus, 43 percent of undergraduate Gauchos in 2023 reported the predicament of experiencing food insecurity according to an Associated Students Basic Needs survey, which emphasizes how urgent it is to establish useful solutions to tackle this problem. In response to the depressing statistics, UCSB has developed several organizations and programs to deal with food insecurity, including Associated Students Food Bank, Isla Vista Community Gardens & Sueño Orchard, and Food Not Bombs. However, the question remains: What is the actual effect of these initiatives on campus engagement? Can Gauchos completely engage in their social and academic life after the implementation of these supports, or are they simply a band-aid solution with consolation? This paper will explore the connection between food insecurity and UCSB student engagement in aspects of academic performance, mental health, and social life, examining the initiatives and corresponding effectiveness of UCSB organizations in mitigating the food insecurity issue.

### **Methods**

In this essay, I employed a mixed-method approach to integrate quantitative and qualitative data collection. Firstly, I conducted a survey via Google Forms, which covered subjects regarding demographic information, the incidence of food insecurity experiences, and the use of on-campus resources like the Associated Students Food Bank. The purpose of this survey is to investigate the UCSB campus circumstance of food insecurity and the satisfaction level of food insecurity services to undergraduate Gauchos. The survey targeted diverse Gauchos across multiple departments, aiming to acquire a broad spectrum of feedback and perspectives. I distributed the survey on my Instagram and WeChat accounts and sent it to my residence hall floor group chat.

In addition to conducting the survey, three Gauchos with experiences in food insecurity issues participated in qualitative interviews that provided further insights into their perspectives. The first interviewee, Danh, is a Vietnamese student majoring in Financial Mathematics and Statistics. The second interviewee is Jay, a United States student majoring in Environmental Studies. My last interviewee is Catherine, a Chinese student majoring in Economics.

The *Daily Nexus*, a student-run newspaper at UCSB, is the archival source I primarily employed in the essay. The *Daily Nexus* is a valuable resource for student voices with interviews, opinion pieces, and investigative stories that provide firsthand accounts and observations on food insecurity at UCSB. Key phrases including “food insecurity,” “student engagement,” and “foodbank initiatives” were the focus of my investigation into the *Daily Nexus*, which offered a thorough understanding of student experiences and institutional actions. Subsequently, these resources illuminate the actual challenges encountered by students who are experiencing food insecurity as well as the initiatives of UCSB organizations that are addressing these problems.

Furthermore, this essay incorporates scholarly and peer-reviewed publications from authoritative journals, such as the Journal of College Student Development and the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, providing reliable information on food insecurity patterns in higher education institutions. These academic resources explore the multifaceted impacts of food insecurity on the social involvement, mental health, and academic achievement of college students, which provide thorough analysis and rigorous empirical evidence.

## **Discussion**

The issue of food insecurity on college campuses has a significant impact on the academic achievement of students. As demonstrated by poorer grade point averages, missing courses, and diminished attention to coursework, research continuously shows that food insecurity poses serious obstacles to students' progress (Wilcox et al., 393). Statistics from the *Daily Nexus* indicate that food-insecure students are more likely to have a lower GPA compared to their non-food-insecure peers (Evans). According to survey data I collected from UCSB students, 57.1 percent of informants reported that food insecurity has impacted their academic performance, which aligns with another statistic that 57.2 percent of informants state that food insecurity affects their concentration in class. These numbers demonstrate the apparent connection between limited access to food and reduced academic engagement, which is further clarified through individual experiences. In the interview with Danh, he emphasizes that “the exchange rate between US dollars and Vietnamese dong is approximately 1:25,300. That is super crazy. The fluctuation on exchange rate affects my monthly budgets, which directly influences my capacity for food choice.” His narrative demonstrates how food insecurity can worsen due to financial constraints linked to global currency values. In addition, he explains that “It is tough when you have to cut your expenses on food to save money, especially when you need to tolerate it during the daytime after wake up, and it did affect my concentration on lectures and willingness to participate in the study.” Even though the case of Danh lacks representativeness, the specific circumstances correspond to more general results from the research of Camelo and Elliot that reveal a negative correlation between food insecurity and academic performance across higher education institutions (Camelo and Elliott, 314).

Apart from the effects of food insecurity on academic performance, food insecurity has

substantial influence on the mental health and general wellbeing of students. Perceived stress and depression were the two mental health variables that had statistically significant associations with both short- and long-term food insecurity after controlling for the other independent variables (Diamond et al., 556). My survey results further validate this relationship, as 61.9 percent of respondents reported experiencing stress in their inability to obtain wholesome food and manage their food budget effectively. Thus, the argument of the impact of food insecurity on mental health is corroborated by the available data. In addition to general statistics, personal accounts that disclose cultural and individual barriers to obtaining help also support the connection between food insecurity and mental health issues. During the interview with Catherine, she disclosed that many Chinese students are reluctant to use on-campus food assistance services for fear of being judged. She explained that “To some extent, Chinese conventional values influence the decisions for Chinese students to get assistance. They tend to over concern the ‘self-esteem’ and biasedly see food assistance as a way of empathy to the vulnerable, but they do not want to admit they need that help.” Moreover, Catherine enumerated multiple cases of her friends who chose to starve instead of registering membership in Associated Students Food Bank, just because of so-called “dignity.” Beyond that, Bach, the new interim coordinator for the Associated Students Food Bank, said that “I have friends that are by definition food insecure but hesitate to come in” (Evans). To be fair, the perception of this internalized stigma worsens the feelings of isolation and brings additional hurdles for those students attempting to improve their situations, since they have psychological stress and cultural burdens regarding the food insecurity problem.

Additionally, food insecurity has profound effects on the social abilities and opportunities of students, diminishing their capacity to participate in campus events and social

gatherings. Food is a common theme for many social gatherings of students including club meetings with refreshments and group dinners, and it could be extremely challenging to engage in these gatherings when food insecurity issues are present, which exacerbates feelings of loneliness and exclusion of students. Based on my data collection survey, 57.1 percent of survey takers reported that they have avoided gatherings due to concerns about food availability, and 52.4 percent of survey participants responded that they had experience in reducing extracurricular hours due to food insecurity. These results reflect the quantitative extent of the effects of food insecurity. In the interview with Jay, he expressed that he has been hesitant to have meals with friends due to inflation and growing food prices, since he was experiencing food insecurity already. He said “It is not just about simply affording food anymore. Even the idea of eating out with friends has become stressful because I constantly have to consider what I can afford and what will affect my monthly budget for the remaining days,” which is consistent with survey results that several students acknowledged skipping social events because of the embarrassment of their budgetary constraints and the availability of food. Jay shared his personal experience of making an excuse to prevent himself from affording a costly fee for a TSA party, even though he was eager to participate and “jealous” of the group photo his friends posted on Instagram. Such encounters of forced seclusion not only hinder the ability of students to build lasting relationships but also detract from their entire university experience, hence it is imperative that campus programs identify and address these obstacles comprehensively.

UCSB has developed multiple programs to address food insecurity among the student population, with a concentration on providing affordable and nutritious food. A key component of these initiatives is the Associated Students Food Bank, which offers students free and wholesome food along with cooking supplies and personal hygiene items. In addition to this

program, students could cultivate and harvest fresh produce at the Sueño Orchard and Isla Vista Community Gardens, which promote sustainable food practices and community involvement. Beyond localized programs, other broad programs like CalFresh and EBT enable qualified students to get financial assistance for food and therefore lessen the cost of maintaining a healthy diet on the UCSB campus (Gerson and Duma).

The Associated Students Food Bank (A.S. Food Bank) at UCSB, situated next to the print shop on the top level of the University Center, allows students to visit once a day and take as many items as they require, with a diverse selection of free fresh vegetables, canned products, and other necessities. According to statistical data given by the A.S. Food Bank, 179,651 pounds of food were distributed to students during the 2021-22 academic year (Yuan et al.). The increase in the number of registered students and amount of food provision suggests a renewed need for food assistance, and this pattern emphasizes how crucial the A.S. Food Bank is in supporting students, especially in the aftermath of epidemic emergencies. In my designed survey, 90.5 percent of surveyed students declared that they are aware of the A.S. FoodBank, and 76.2 percent of respondents have visited the food bank, which illustrates the tremendous outreach work of A.S. Food Bank and indicates that a sizable section of Gauchos has used this service.

Despite the noteworthy contribution, the A.S. Food Bank is facing constantly emerging challenges. As stated in an Associated Students Basic Needs survey, 43 percent of undergraduate Gauchos reported experiencing food insecurity, underscoring the continued demand for assistance (Evans). Therefore, the A.S. Food Bank needs to seek steady and considerable funds to sustain the operation in regards to the increasing demand from the student body. Crystal Bach, the new interim coordinator for the A.S. Food Bank, has planned to increase the outreach and accessibility of the A.S. Food Bank to students who might not live on campus while

concentrating on working with other organizations like the A.S. Senate to further expand programs and acquire more funding and donations. Furthermore, matching with the aforementioned concept of perceiving the action of getting food assistance as a shame, the foremost objectives of the A.S. Food Bank in the 2023-24 academic year are eliminating the “stigma” and broadening the awareness of Gauchos who are still hesitant with using its services (Evans).

Beyond that, my survey statistics highlight complexities regarding satisfaction with the services received from the A.S. Food Bank. 47.1 percent of the survey takers who have used the A.S. Food Bank said they are satisfied with the assistance they have received, which indicates that many Gauchos view the A.S. Food Bank as a worthwhile component of the support network at UCSB. Nevertheless, another 47.1 percent of the survey respondents maintained a neutral attitude, which reflects that the A.S. Food Bank has space for further improvement. The neutrality in satisfaction levels could be attributed to multiple factors, including an inadequate selection of food options that might not satisfy a range of dietary requirements, limited operating hours that present difficulties for students with busy schedules, and privacy concerns that deter students from using the service. The disparity in the measurement of the satisfaction level of the A.S. Food Bank emphasizes the necessity of ongoing assessment and enhancement of this service to guarantee that the A.S. Food Bank can successfully address the food insecurity issue while meeting different requirements of UCSB students.

### **Conclusion**

According to both quantitative and qualitative information, food insecurity at UCSB is a



complicated problem with profound impacts on students' lives in terms of academic, mental, and social wellbeing. Food insecurity manifests through poor academic performance, elevated mental anxiety, and social loneliness, as evidenced by collected firsthand accounts and peer reviewed publications. Food insecurity is intricately intertwined with the wider campus life of students, as seen by the intersection of financial constraints and cultural biases. The demand for more thorough and culturally appropriate forms of support is highlighted by the ongoing struggles of students to procure wholesome goods.

Numerous Gauchos have undoubtedly benefited substantially from UCSB's efforts, particularly the A.S. Food Bank, which has become a vital resource for tackling on-campus food insecurity. However, as demonstrated by the varying levels of satisfaction and the viewpoints expressed during interviews, there is potential for considerable developments in outreach, accessibility, and customized services for the A.S. Food Bank. As evidenced by the *Daily Nexus* publications and insights from Catherine's interview, the step to address internalized "stigma," in addition to increasing programming options for students troubled in getting help, is crucial.

Going forward, UCSB and other higher education institutions that are aware of the food insecurity issue should continue funding and refining their approaches to tackling this serious issue, building on past achievements while being responsive to the shifting requirements of students. Enhancing awareness campaigns, working with authoritative organizations, and integrating more consistent feedback mechanisms can all contribute to constructing a more resilient support network. By cultivating a supportive culture that encourages Gauchos to utilize existing food services, an outstanding atmosphere where students could flourish academically, psychologically, socially, and personally can appear.

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