

Food for Thought: Understanding Food Security on Wingate's Campus

Sarah Busby, NC Campus Compact HungerCorps VISTA

INTRODUCTION

If you were to be stopped on the street and ask what hunger means to you, you might say that hunger means that a few hours have passed since lunch and you are ready for your next meal. For one out of nine Americans¹, however, hunger has huge implications for their everyday lives beyond just taking a snack break. For these individuals, hunger is a long-term, consistent problem for them and their families. These Americans are not in some distant part of the U.S. – some of them probably live down the street. In fact, some might do such a good job of hiding their hunger that you may not suspect them of needing assistance with food.

A lack of food partly contributes to the challenges that face food security in the U.S. Food security is a principle that states that everyone, everywhere, should have consistent access to affordable, safe, and healthy food. Those who can maintain consistent access in this manner are considered food secure; those who cannot achieve this security are considered food insecure².

College students are at a particularly high risk for food insecurity. In addition to the cost of tuition, room and board, and lab fees, students must shoulder the cost of meal plans, textbooks, educational supplies including computers and notebooks, gas, and many other miscellaneous costs in addition to providing for their basic needs. According to the Urban Institute, 11.2% of all students attending four-year colleges in 2015 experienced food insecurity³, although that number can differ widely across college campuses. It is partly because of this disparity across college campuses that I decided to survey students at Wingate University.

There are several reasons that I wanted to analyze food insecurity on Wingate's campus. Wingate University is a private institution in one of the most important agricultural counties in the state of North Carolina. In addition, campus residents' food plans are included in the cost of room and board, so all residents have virtually unlimited access to the dining hall at Wingate University. On the surface, one would not expect food security to be a major issue here. However, approximately 39% of undergraduate students who choose to attend Wingate are

¹ Feeding America, <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>

² International Food Policy Research Institute, <https://www.ifpri.org/topic/food-security>

³ Urban Institute, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/92331/assessing_food_insecurity_on_campus_3.pdf

eligible for the Pell Grant, a federal payment – not a loan – for those who cannot afford to attend college without some financial assistance⁴. In addition to these grants, Wingate students routinely receive additional scholarships and aid from the university and other organizations. Because of this, Wingate University is one of the most financially friendly institutions in the state, and it has a large population of nontraditional (having significant family and financial responsibilities outside the classroom⁵) and first-generation students on campus. This would suggest that financial issues, including food insecurity, could be a large – yet unexplored – issue for students on campus. The specific issue of food insecurity had not been investigated at Wingate before the implementation of this survey. In addition, the university is situated in



Above: Sarah Busby and Allison Tietz giving a lecture to local agriculture students from East Union Middle School.

eastern Union County, which faces its own challenges. Our friends and neighbors in eastern Union County experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than western Union County. A large portion of eastern Union County is also a food desert. Living, working, and attending school here can be challenging for most, let alone a college student who already faces significant responsibilities.

I am an NC Campus Compact Hunger Corps VISTA working at Wingate University in the Collaborative for the Common Good. An AmeriCorps VISTA is someone who engages in a year of service in a community with the goal of eradicating poverty and improving equity⁶. My focus is addressing food insecurity in eastern Union County through a variety of projects. My projects have primarily focused on nutritional education for children and adults in this community. In addition, Dr. Wright, my supervisor and head of the CCG, had created my position to take specific steps to directly reduce food insecurity. My background is in public

⁴ Federal Student Aid, <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/pell>

⁵ Stephen G. Pelletier

https://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall_adultstudents.pdf

⁶ Corporation for National and Community Service,

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorps-programs/ameriCorps-vista>

health, and I played an important role in a startup food pantry at my undergraduate university, so food security is one of my areas of expertise. I was – and still am – passionate about directly providing food to those who struggle with maintaining consistent access to sources of nutritious food.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURVEY

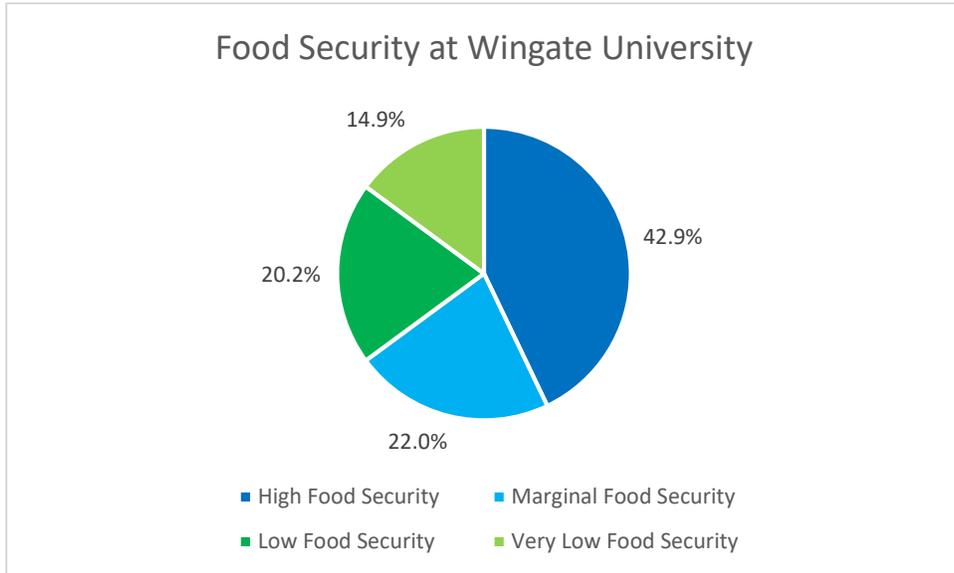
The survey used on Wingate’s campus was directly taken from the USDA’s U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module⁷, an anonymous ten-question survey that asks people ages 18 and up about their access to and choices surrounding food. Responders to the survey indicate whether or not these statements or questions apply to them and how often they do apply. Based on the number of “affirmative” responses given – affirmative meaning that the survey taker does experience the hardship described – the survey taker receives a certain score. A score of zero indicates high food security; a score of 1-2 indicates marginal food security; a score of 3-5 indicates low food security; and a score of 6-10 indicates very low food security. The latter two categories, low and very low food security (scores 3-10) denote food insecurity. In addition to the questions on food insecurity, additional questions were included focusing on demographic information. These questions were included to find common traits among those who identified themselves as food insecure. All questions are listed below in the appendix. This survey was reviewed and approved by Wingate University’s Research Review Board, and it was then made available to all undergraduate, graduate, and online students at Wingate University.

After the survey was to be disseminated and completed, a focus group was planned. The goal of the focus group was to obtain personal stories from some of the individuals who had completed the survey in order to gain specific insight into food insecurity among Wingate University students. Information obtained from the focus groups were to be used in storytelling and calling for more programs focused on food insecurity to be implemented both on and off campus.

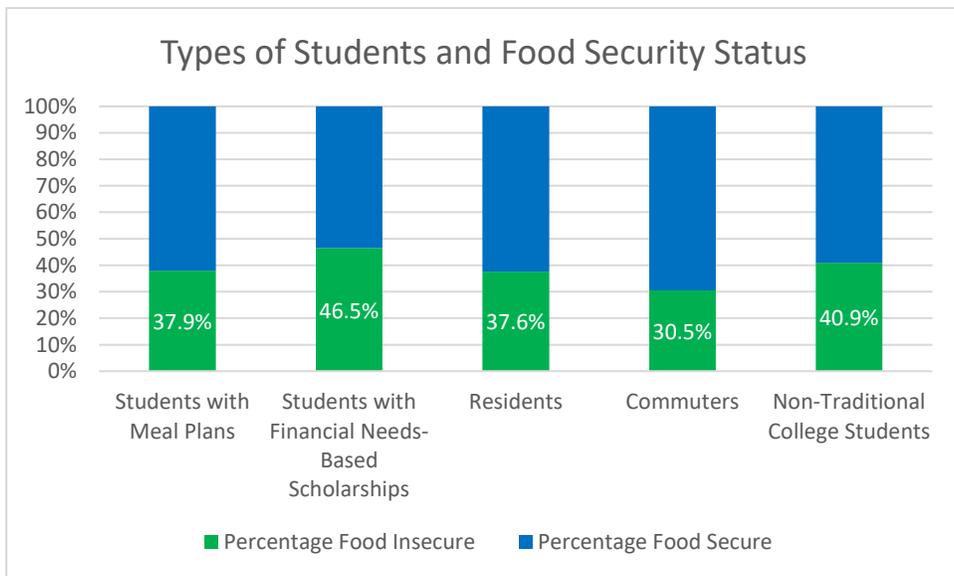
⁷ USDA, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8279/ad2012.pdf>

RESULTS

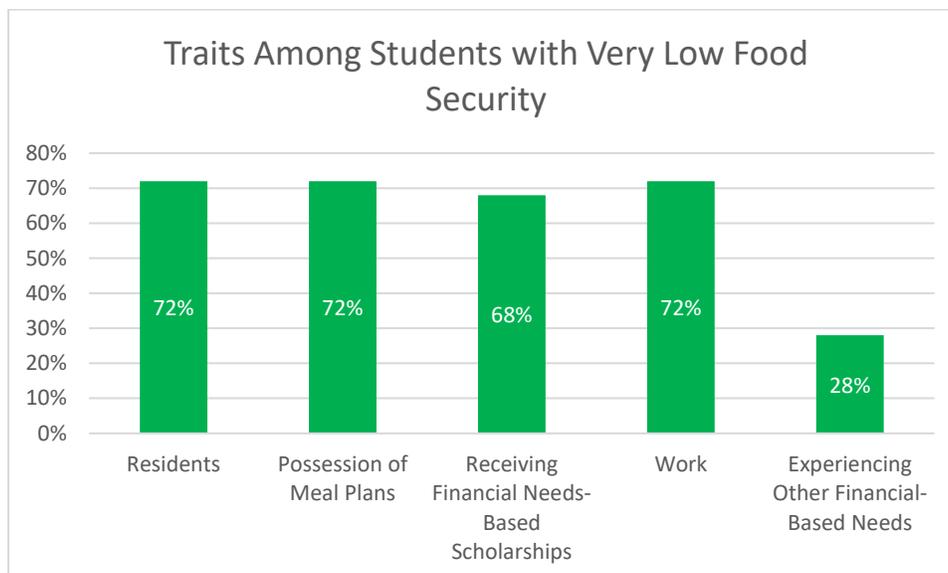
A total of 168 completed responses were recorded, meaning that 168 students completed the survey. The categories of food security can be found below. Since the categories of low food security and very low food security combine to form the total population of food insecure students, the total percentage for food insecurity on campus comes to 35.1%.



Analysis of the results of the survey showed that many different types of students experienced food insecurity. The categories with the largest percentages of food insecure students are listed below.



Of the 168 people who took the survey, 14.9% (25 responders) belong to the very low food security category at Wingate. Among this group of students, several common traits began to emerge. Those traits are shown below.



There is plenty of additional data that came from this survey; however, the data shown here was chosen because it presents a strong image of what food insecurity looks like at Wingate University.

Included in the original design for the Wingate University Student Food Security Survey 2020 was the creation of a focus group in which survey participants would be asked follow-up questions to gain specific insight into food insecurity among Wingate University students. Understanding the background of those who identify as food insecure and learning about the additional financial-based needs of these students was of particular interest in this focus group. However, due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the focus group portion of this research project was suspended.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The results of this survey will directly impact the food security efforts of Wingate University's Collaborative for the Common Good (CCG). The results have already impacted some of the CCG's projects. We are currently working in collaboration with the Union County Government to form a food council that will address concerns with our food system, including food security across Union County. Among the CCG's efforts from this past year are a

community garden which provides seasonal produce to seniors and college students in Wingate and Monroe; an after school program in association with the Union County Master Gardeners focusing on gardening, nutrition, and health; and a mentoring program in Title I schools in eastern Union County with lessons that focus on nutrition education. The CCG has some plans for the near future that include building a food pantry on campus near the community garden that will be accessible at all hours and stocked with food that comes directly from the garden. Additionally, the CCG and the NC Campus Compact HungerCorps VISTA will work closely with the Union County Cooperative Extension to further develop the community garden into a usable space for all residents of Wingate, including college students. In the next year, an effort to alleviate student food insecurity will be made by hosting events and providing resources specific to the needs of Wingate University students. Some potential ways to reach students include holding cooking demonstrations with garden produce in residential areas on campus, working in collaboration with local churches and institutions to stock the outdoor pantry, adding programs such as Swipe Out Hunger which provides food insecure students with additional meals at the dining hall, and providing students with nutritional information regarding what food sources are available on campus. In addition, the food security survey may be added to the Bulldog Poll in the future so that a broader range of students are quizzed on their food security. This will allow the CCG and other campus authorities to see how food security at Wingate changes over time and with the addition of these new resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

The process of creating and disseminating this survey was a group effort. I would like to thank Dr. Candace Lapan of Wingate University's psychology department and Dr. Catherine Wright of Wingate University's religion and philosophy department for advising and editing the survey, as well as assisting in the dissemination and utilization of the survey.

The Union County Community Portrait (UCCP) can be found [here](#). If you have trouble accessing the UCCP, or if you have questions on the survey itself or the results it produced, please contact Sarah Busby at s.busby@wingate.edu.



APPENDIX

Figure 1: Food Security Survey Questions

Food Security Survey Questions – Food Security

1. I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.
2. The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more.
3. I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.
4. In the last 12 months, since last January, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
5. How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?
6. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?
7. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?
8. In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?
9. In the last 12 months, did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?
10. How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

Food Security Survey Questions – Demographic Information

1. What year are you at Wingate University? (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, grad student)
 2. Are you a full-time or a part-time student?
 3. What kind of student are you? (resident, commuter, online)
 4. At any point during the last year, did you have a meal plan with Wingate University Dining?
 5. Do you receive any need-based financial aid, including the Pell Grant?
 6. Do you work a job outside of attending classes (including work-study and graduate assistant positions)?
 7. How much do you work each week?
 8. Are you a traditional college student (enrolled in college directly after high school, under the age of 23, receiving parental financial support, no major life or work responsibilities)?
- Do you experience other financial-based needs (e.g. housing insecurity, homelessness, childcare needs, etc.)?