



JANUARY 2021

Food For Student Self-Fulfillment

Examining the Role of Food Insecurity on Campus
Supporting Student Eating Experiences

STUDENTS AND FOOD

39%

OF CANADIAN STUDENTS EXPERIENCE SOME FORM OF FOOD INSECURITY¹ BUT STUDENTS ARE USUALLY NOT THE MAIN TARGET OF FOOD INSECURITY RESEARCH OR RESPONSES, AND SO CAN SLIP THROUGH THE CRACKS.

FOOD INSECURITY IS EXPERIENCED IN A VARIETY OF WAYS², BUT DEFINED AS:

“the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraint”³

ACCORDING TO RESEARCH⁴, STUDENTS' FOOD CHOICE IS COMMONLY COMPLICATED BY:



TIME
MANAGEMENT



ACADEMIC
PRESSURE



HIGH SCHOOL
TRANSITION



SOCIAL
NETWORK

THE NATIONAL COLLEGES HEATH ASSESSMENT SURVEY⁵ OF UOFT STUDENTS CONNECTED EATING WITH:



WEIGHT



SLEEP



MENTAL HEALTH

INNOVATION HUB APPROACH: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON FOOD

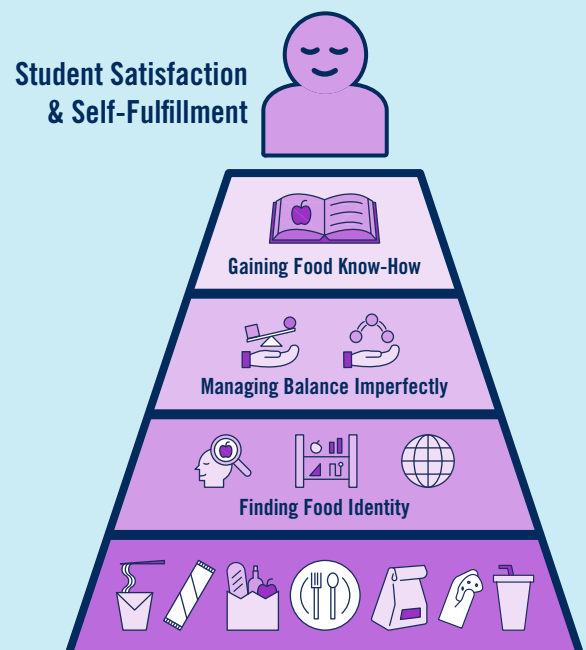
We take a person-centered, qualitative approach to food experiences of UofT students to better understand their eating experiences and issues of food insecurity.



We focused on individual student stories of food experience⁶, what they like, choose, find and what challenges they encounter.

WE FOUND:

When aligned with their basic needs, eating experiences can satisfy students' hunger and support their wellbeing, leading to their self-fulfillment.





FINDING FOOD IDENTITY

The identity of students, their individuality and background, plays a dynamic role in student food choices and vice versa. Who students are and, more aspirationally, who they want to be shape their food choices, and vice versa. As a result, accessing food is about aligning with the unique individual, cultural, familial, and financial identities of students, though this can be complicated. It is especially complicated in situations where students struggle to identify as in need of food support, such as a food bank, due to persistent stigma attached to being food insecure⁷.

INDIVIDUAL VARIETY

The unique identity of each student, what they can and cannot eat, has an equally unique relationship with food access on campus. Individual food preferences, restrictions and intolerances, personal health, cleanliness and safety needs can all impact positively but also complicate student food experiences. The availability of a variety of dietary options (i.e. vegan, vegetarian, dairy-free, allergy-safe, etc.) all support this individual uniqueness.

“I want to see non-dairy options. I want to be able to go to any food place and know that they have non-dairy so I could order and I know that they will have non-dairy or vegetarian options. And not just salad.”

FROM DIVERSE HOMES

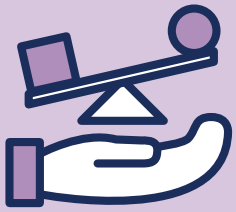
The cultural, familial and living situation of students is a big part of their identity and food experiences. A student's cultural and familial background are comprised of intertwined tensions that influence a student's perception and relationship with food. Whether a student lives at home with family, who might help prepare a student's meals, or if they live alone or with roommates influences the food experience that is available to and sought by students.

“I wish [UofT cafeterias] resembled dining halls in China more. Just a lot cheaper and better. Many Chinese students order their own things because for people not accustomed to Western food it's really hard.”

HUNGRY BUT STIGMATIZED

The starving student identity is commonly invoked; however, identifying as a person in need of emergency food resources, such as access to a food bank or financial support for food, is troublingly uncommon due to the complex stigma attached to it. Stigma becomes a barrier in students' help-seeking of food support, with added complexity due to the associations attached to being students at a prestigious higher education institution.

“It's just when I hear Food Bank, I think, ‘Oh.’ And that's what the student feels. ‘Oh, so I'm a low-income person’. How is it that students are low-income people—not that there's anything wrong with that, but they just feel like, ‘Wow, I come to higher education and I'm considered to be someone who should go to a food bank.’ Maybe it's the culture around it that needs to change.”



MANAGING BALANCE IMPERFECTLY

Students manage food and school as an imperfect balance during which they strive for, but do not always achieve, their ideal. They continually navigate the priority of school and its demands, both practical (i.e. class location, scheduling, workload) and emotional (i.e. stress, anxiety and other pressures of succeeding). At its worst, striving transforms into mere surviving—just trying to fill-up or skipping on food entirely.

QUEST FOR SUSTENANCE

Navigating to food locations (e.g. available and accessible cafeterias, restaurants, free food events, areas to eat home-prepared food) or food supports (e.g. microwaves or communal kitchens, food banks) that fit with being a student is a big part of their food journey. Wayfinding to food they need can be complicated given the priority of school, with classes to attend and coursework to fulfill. Many students experience troubles getting the food they need because they struggle getting to the food they need.

“The options are there just not centralized so to speak. You have to travel a bit which may impact you if you have class on the other side of campus some days.”

CRUNCH TIME

Despite having ideal food scenarios in their minds, students are willing to sacrifice their health and hunger in order to achieve their academic goals—and this is even more emphasized when they have periods of high academic demands, such as mid-term season, exam period or if they are on campus all day. Many come to think of food and school as an either/or situation, rather than food providing the wellbeing for further self-fulfillment.

“What happens when you have a class from 10-1 pm? That’s when you would eat lunch. So, you’re having a late lunch, cause after class you need time to walk somewhere to find a place to sit. Some of these classes are kinda in obscure locations. If you have a bad class schedule, then you’re just not going to be eating well.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Food is a means for students to support their academic fulfillment. When they experience the pressures of academics and are stressed, tired, anxious, they report turning to just filling up or, conversely, skipping food entirely. They express concern about overindulging and making food choices they will regret, but also that they try their best to balance these situations at other times.

“If I’m stressed, I tend to not eat a lot. If I’m not working out, I don’t eat a lot.”



GAINING FOOD KNOW-HOW

Students expressed wanting to know more about their food options, resources, and supports on campus. Gaining this know-how empowers them to seek options that fit their situation, satisfy their needs, and contribute to their well-being and life skills. While food events, education, and opportunities exist on campus, students may have difficulty accessing them due to a lack of information.

FOOD LITERACY

For many students, university can be the first time they must take on the greater responsibility of managing their food. Students may be living away from home for the first time and may not yet have skills in budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, or managing leftovers. Students explained that at times they were unsure of where to find support in learning these skills.

“The first time a student is living away from home, it’s not unusual to have a struggle with cooking beyond the basics. Some students are great. They’ve got it all figured out. Yeah, but learning to budget and grocery shop and just manage food expenses is a life skill that a lot of students don’t learn.”

MAPPING FOOD OPTIONS

Students are eager to learn about food locations and the nutritional and preparation information for the meals provided on campus. Students are also eager to voice their opinions and feedback surrounding the food options on campus. They share their food knowledge with their peers and social network, a trusted food information source, though they reported that they would also appreciate more information-sharing.

“I don’t think I’ve ever received any information on new food places opening up, I just kind of stumble upon it. But in terms of like...free food (if there is any free food), it’s probably offered by clubs or something through events that are posted on Facebook. [...] Umm, yeah, that’s pretty much it.”



RECIPES FOR SUCCESS

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Here we offer some guiding ideas for the design of eating experiences that emerged from our findings and that can help satisfy student hunger at the same time as supporting their wellbeing and their paths to self-fulfillment⁸. We provide the design principle as well as some examples of how the principles can be put into practice.



YOU CAN EAT HERE!

Barriers to accessing food and food-knowledge including time, proximity to food, cooking space, microwave availability, and lack of food option awareness limit students' abilities to obtain their ideal meals. Access to food is a major factor

- Food navigation supports, such as app or online info, signage, or campus food map
- Increased information sharing including:
 - What options are available for food preferences, dietary restrictions etc.
 - Locations of microwaves, communal/open kitchens, and hot water
- Notifications and sign-up options for free-food events
- Locations of areas where food is allowed/not allowed (I.e. can I eat in this library?)
- Nutritional information and price range
- Is this a food-friendly zone?



FOOD IS ALSO ABOUT LEARNING

Students may be living away from home for the first time and may not yet have skills in meal planning, budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, or managing leftovers. For students, securing their relationship and access to food is also a process of learning.

- Cooking classes and seminars
- Workshops on shopping, budgeting, and food management tips
- Nutritionists for everyone!



INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE KITCHEN

Despite the difficulties that they face in accessing their ideal meals, students are eager to learn, suggest solutions, and provide feedback. Being involved in their food options and preparation, food knowledge and skills can empower them and leads to their satisfaction, both in terms of their hunger as well as their self-satisfaction.

- Student run food places on campus
- Student ratings of campus food options
- Hold feedback/brainstorming sessions with staff and students – they seem eager to provide feedback and ideas!



A MEAL FOR EVERYONE

UofT prides itself on its diverse student body and in being located in large cosmopolitan city; the food students eat is reflective of this diversity as well. Students prefer diverse food options that take in account both healthy and diverse diet options in food availability on campus.

- Healthier options, but also other options (like fuel-intensive for studying)
- Varied diet options



BE BUDGET FRIENDLY

Financial constraints are one of the biggest contributing factors in food insecurity on campus. Students want budget-friendly meals on campus that are accessible.

- Rewards program for food locations (i.e. Food deals to help with budgeting and saving money)
- Free food events that are advertised
- Low cost brown bags with events



CHANGE UP THE RECIPE

Flexible options of food on campus increase accessibility to balanced meals on campus. Factors such as different timing options, food services catering timing of hours of operation to times of the year that affect students, and vending with accessible common drinks, are examples of flexible solutions for food on campus.

- Different timing options — quick pick-up
- Vending machines with accessible common drinks, like tea and coffee
- Food services catering timing to certain times of the year (i.e. food options opening/closing hours depending on exam season etc.)

¹ Silverthorn, D. (2016). Hungry for knowledge: Assessing the prevalence of student food insecurity on five Canadian campuses. Toronto: Meal Exchange. Retrieved from: <http://mealexchange.com> (survey includes Dalhousie University, Lakehead University, Ryerson University, Brock University and University of Calgary, but not University of Toronto)

² Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., & Dachner, N. (2016). Household Food Insecurity in Canada: 2011. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity.

³ Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

⁴ Sogari, G., Velez-Argumedo, C., Gómez, M. I., & Mora, C. (2018). College students and eating habits: A study using an ecological model for healthy behavior. *Nutrients*, 10(12), 1823; Deliens, T., Clarys, P., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., & Deforche, B. (2014). Determinants of eating behaviour in university students: a qualitative study using focus group discussions. *BMC public health*, 14(1), 1-12.

⁵ American College Health Association. (2017, January). Student Health and Well-Being at the University of Toronto: A report on the findings from the National College Health Assessment (NCHA survey). University of Toronto. <https://www.provost.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/155/2018/03/Report-on-Student-Health-Well-Being.pdf>

⁶ Much of the wider food insecurity research is aimed at the household level, but students fit less clearly into the category.

⁷ Meal Exchange. (2012, August). National Student Food Charter. Retrieved from: <http://mealexchange.com> 8 Many of our principles and practical solutions supported by other research; for more, see: Meal Exchange. (2012, August). National Student Food Charter & Vision of a Good Food System. Retrieved from: <http://mealexchange.com>; Maynard, M., Lahey, D, Abraham A. (2018). Campus food report card: The state of food on Ontario university campuses. Toronto: Meal Exchange. Retrieved from: <http://mealexchange.com>; Ryerson University Centre for Studies in Food Security. (n.d.). Centre for Studies in Food Security. Retrieved from: <https://www.ryerson.ca/foodsecurity/v>

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