“I fainted in class because I was hungry.”

Food Insecurity among New Mexico College Students

FY 26 Legislative Proposal

The New Mexico Higher Education Department is requesting a **retention and basic needs fund** for student success, which is included in the Executive Budget Recommendation at $8 million.

Introduction

In 2023, 10,000 students in 27 New Mexico colleges and universities participated in a study assessing basic needs security[1]. The data revealed significant levels of food insecurity and its affect on their mental health and academic performance.

The Data

- 58% of students reported being food insecure.
- 60% of food insecure students have a job.
- Almost 60% of students are financially contributing to someone else.

Open-ended survey questions allowed students to share their experiences with food insecurity. Common themes included:

- Anxiety over affording bills.
- Work study jobs and assistantships not paying enough.

Food Security

The USDA has 4 levels of food security: high, marginal, low, and very low food secure. If one is in the top 2 categories, one is considered food secure. If one is in the last 2 categories one is food insecure.

Low Food Security

(Formerly known as food insecurity without hunger)

Reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet without substantially disrupting food intake or normal eating patterns.

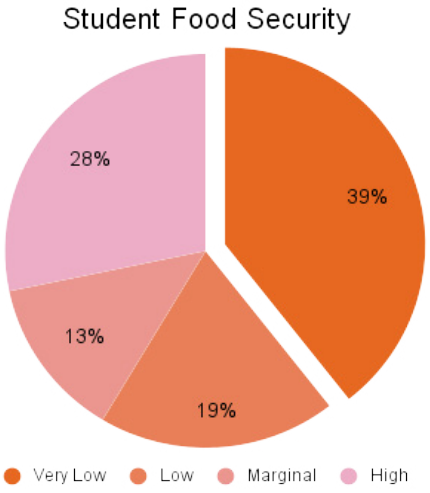
Very Low Food Security

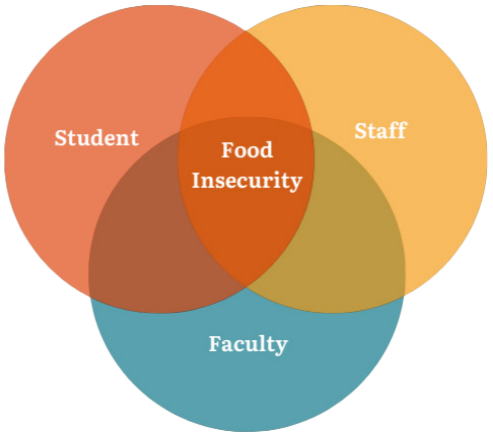
(Formerly known as food insecurity with hunger)

Multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake due to lack of money and other resources for food.

The majority of food insecure college students suffer from the most severe form of food security.

Source: USDA ERS - measurement. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutritionassistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/measurement/





“I had to miss class on more than one occasion to sell plasma so I could buy food.”

- NM College Student

“My income does not provide enough money to purchase enough food sometimes.”

-NM College Student

65,000 jobs annually in New Mexico will require a postsecondary credential by 2031, or 64 percent of all jobs.[2]

“I don’t make enough money to access healthy food. And my parents are also struggling with money and bills, so we usually don’t have much food at home, much less anything healthy. The fact [is] that I’m a broke 20 year old paying for my college myself along with working to support myself.”

- NM College Student

2 ,500 more students would graduate annually if food security was ensured.[3]

1. The research team were University of New Mexico faculty: Drs. Cargas, Coakley, Gonzales-Pacheco, Thomas, and Buro. Additional data analysis was provided by Jennifer Minich from ICASA at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology.
2. LFC Higher Education Budget Recommendation

NEW MEXICO BASIC NEEDS CONSORTIUM

“I was so hungry that I didn't have the energy to go to class”

Academic Performance

- **19%** of food insecure students had a GPA below 2.0.
- **Food insecure students were 3.5 times more likely** to consider dropping out[4].

Mental Health Impact

Students who suffer from food insecurity are more likely to struggle with mental health.

- Students with very low food security were **twice as likely to show symptoms of anxiety** compared to food secure students.
- Students with very low food security were also **twice as likely to show symptoms of depression** compared to food secure students[3].

“Without having a decent meal in the past few days, I failed an my exams and couldn’t take another because I couldn’t afford gas.”
- NM College Student

Return on Investment

- **Over $800 million** in state taxes is lost annually due to college drop outs. Investing in our students would have a profound return on investment[3].

Current Interventions

The New Mexico Basic Needs Consortium, was created by faculty and staff in our colleges and universities to tackle needs insecurity among everyone in higher education. They are collaborating to design SNAP outreach programs as well as improve pantries by collecting data on use and inventory. Many campuses have creative methods to provide free food but they are under resourced.

Food pantries are the primary response to food insecurity in higher education. However, many campuses lack these pantries and 71% of food insecure students don’t use them.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is another available resource, yet it remains significantly underutilized. Only 35.1% of food insecure students receive SNAP benefits. Increased outreach and education on eligibility could allow more students to benefit from SNAP. Nationally, 3 billion dollars of SNAP funds go unused by eligible college students.

“There were times after my SNAP benefits ran out where I was hungry enough that I chose to rest instead of doing homework assignments.”
- NM College Student

Recommendations

Funding Needed For:

Establishing Basic Needs Offices:
Basic needs offices should be established on all campuses to support students as well as staff and faculty by connecting them with essential resources. This includes providing assistance with SNAP and other benefit applications.

Low cost nutritious meals to students on campus:
Ensure affordable, nutritious meals are available in campus cafeterias to support student well-being.

Sustainable funding for campus pantries:
Fund existing pantries and establish pantries on campuses where there are none. The majority of campus pantries do not have consistent and reliable funding.

“School would take too much time, so I couldn’t work full time and pay bills and would only have enough for bills and gas. So, I skipped a few meals.”

- NM College Student

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3. See ROI Report basicneeds.unm.edu.
4. Mechler, H., Et al. (2024). Examining the Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Academic Performance: Implications for Diversity and Equity in Higher Education. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 26(1), 3-18.

NEW MEXICO BASIC NEEDS CONSORTIUM