Student Food Insecurity
Exploring Unequal Access to Higher Education at the University of Saskatchewan
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Introduction
University is a time marked by financial hardship for many. Over the past 15 years, the cost of tuition at Canadian universities has steadily increased, while government funding has declined. Students are struggling to meet the costs of education and student debt is higher than ever in the past. “Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” In contrast, food insecurity occurs when one or more of these conditions are not met. The likelihood of an individual reporting food insecurity increases as income adequacy declines. Experiences of food insecurity may adversely impact student mental and physical health, as well as educational outcomes. Post-secondary education is a prerequisite for at least seventy percent of new jobs in Canada and students are struggling to meet the costs of education and student debt is higher than ever in the past. “Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” In contrast, food insecurity occurs when one or more of these conditions are not met. The likelihood of an individual reporting food insecurity increases as income adequacy declines. Experiences of food insecurity may adversely impact student mental and physical health, as well as educational outcomes. Post-secondary education is a prerequisite for at least seventy percent of new jobs in Canada and thus is one of the most important contributors to upward economic mobility. It is important to investigate how prevalent food insecurity currently is among students and which students are the most vulnerable to this problem.

Methods
A mixed methods study design was chosen in an effort to bridge some of the gaps noticed in previous research and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex problem. This study took a sequential mixed method design that was quantitative at its core, reinforced through qualitative exploration of perceived barriers to food security on campus. More specifically, phase one of the study was a survey administered to a simple random sample of approximately one quarter of the entire student body. The survey consisted of approximately thirty questions. The overall survey was adapted from a similar survey created by Dr. N. Willows’ research team at the University of Alberta, which describes the food security status, food insecurity coping strategies, characteristics, and experiences of student clients of the Campus Food Bank at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The survey data gathered in the first phase was used to identify the prevalence and severity of food insecurity among the student body, as well as investigate correlated risks between demographic characteristics and living circumstance with food insecurity. The results of the survey influenced the second phase of the study in which student support providers were invited to elaborate on and contextualize the first phase results. The inclusion of these qualitative interviews add richness and complexity to the research.

Results
Phase 1: A 35 question survey was administered to a simple random sample of 4500 University of Saskatchewan students. A response rate of 30.2% was received. Embedded in the survey was the 20 question Canadian Community Health Survey measurement of food security status. Results of the survey indicate that 39.5% of post-secondary students attending the University of Saskatchewan report some level of food insecurity in the previous twelve months. Of those students 11% reported marginal, 21.1% reported moderate, and 7.5% reported severe food insecurity in the previous twelve months. Correlations between several student demographic and household characteristics and an increased odds of experiencing food insecurity were observed, including students who are parents (OR = 1.63, CI=1.087-2.457, p=0.018), international students (OR = 2.51, CI=1.740-3.620, p=0.001), and students living without support (OR = 0.641, CI=0.507-0.812, p=0.001). During times of food shortages students responded that they accessed a wide variety of coping mechanisms (shown in figure 1).

Figure 1: Coping Strategies Students Used During Periods of Low Food Security (n=1274, responses = 2899)

Phase 2: Interviews with student support providers revealed several themes related to student food security on campus including: (1) factors that may influence food insecurity among students at the University of Saskatchewan (2) the potential implications of food insecurity on student learning and health (3) coping mechanisms used by students during times of low food security and (4) strategies that may help reduce food insecurity at the UoS.

Perceived barriers to student food security included the rising cost of tuition and living expenses, the physical isolation of the campus from food retail outlets, separation of students from their social support networks, demanding student schedules, as well as intersecting levels of oppression for some students.

Discussion
There is a need to understand ‘how’ and ‘why’ students became food insecure in order to address the problem. According to the literature, the scope and experience of post-secondary student food insecurity is not well understood.

Phase 1: Compared to the general public students appear to be at a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity, with University of Saskatchewan students reporting food insecurity levels at more than three times the Canadian national average of 12.0%. Certain demographic characteristics were associate with higher rates of food insecurity, such as being a student who is a parent, an international student, being a newcomer to Canada or living without support (living alone, with roommates or in residence without a meal plan). Studies suggest that university students appear to be at risk of food insecurity as a product of their socioeconomic and demographic attributes. These factors may be jeopardizing some students’ health and academic success.

Phase 2: Several themes emerged relating to perceived barriers to student food security, as well as the potential implications of food insecurity on student health and learning outcomes. The perceptions and observations expressed during the interview process were similar to what has been seen in other research. Interview results revealed that some students were more at risk for experiencing food insecurity compared with others, having potential implications on student health and learning outcomes. The current supports in place at the University of Saskatchewan do not adequately meet the needs of students.

Future Considerations: This research project aims to act as a guide or index for other universities wishing to engage in similar research. Ultimately the results of this research may help to influence university and broader policy to address potential health inequities in postsecondary students.

Key References

Figure 2: Word Frequency Diagram from Interviews with Student Support Providers