The 5th Annual Assessment of Food Security and Basic Needs at Santa Clara University 2024-2025

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**Although the contributions were made in different ways, overall, the first two authors contributed equally to this final report.*

Introduction

Consistent access to basic needs such as nutritious food and stable housing is foundational to academic success and well-being in higher education. However, these needs are not met for millions of college students in the United States. A recent study of 74,000 college students found that 59% of students are facing food or housing insecurity [Hope Center SBN Survey]. The stereotype of the "hungry college student" perpetuates the reality that many college-aged individuals face. Lack of access to regular, nutritious, and affordable food has impacted college students' ability to perform academically and socially and to maintain mental well-being.

The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) defines food security as the state where all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (HLPE 2020). High food security exists when an individual has consistent, unrestricted access to sufficient food. In contrast, low food security is characterized by disrupted eating patterns and a reduction in food intake due to limited access or resources [USDA]. On college campuses, food insecurity has been linked to increased stress and lower academic performance (Peña et al., 2018, Sofiah Ahmad et al., 2021).

This report draws on a participatory study with undergraduate students and campus basic needs staff to generate and analyze qualitative and quantitative data. The team collected data from surveys and interviews conducted at Santa Clara University to evaluate rates of student food insecurity at a private higher education institution. Specifically, an analysis of sociodemographic disparities of student food and housing insecurity was completed. By analyzing the intersection of demographic characteristics and food security status, the research team can identify key contributing factors to student food insecurity at SCU and therefore suggest solutions for the Student Basic Needs Committee to enact.

Context

Recent changes in federal policy have exacerbated food insecurity for students. In March 2023, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rolled back eligibility and monthly benefits, resulting in thousands of college students losing access to food assistance. In 2024 and 2025, several budget proposals include extreme cuts to SNAP and other public assistance programs like housing support and rental assistance, threatening the support system for low-income individuals.

Housing security is another dimension of basic needs, including access to safe, stable living conditions. The housing crisis impacts many students in higher education, with almost half of the respondents in the 2024 Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey reporting some form of housing insecurity. This may include being unable to pay rent or utilities. In students, housing insecurity has been linked to an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression (Coakley et al., 2022).

Despite available resources, a significant obstacle in addressing food and housing insecurity, as well as utilizing basic needs resources, is stigma. Fear of judgment from other students or fear of being mistreated can prevent students from accurately reporting incidents or seeking necessary resources. In a study at the University of Florida, although 66% of students were aware of food security resources, only 30% of food-insecure students used them (El Zein, et al., 2022). Reducing stigma, increasing resource awareness, and alleviating food and housing insecurity among students are significant challenges. However, despite the challenges, in 2022 SCU established the Student Basic Needs Committee.

The Student Basic Needs Committee is a group of individuals from the Santa Clara community dedicated to raising awareness, offering resources, and researching food justice/ security on and off campus. The Jesuit Culture of Care guides the committee and aims to identify underlying issues that contribute to securing students' basic needs. The committee aims to create actionable, equitable, and effective solutions for students experiencing insecurity related to basic needs. The Student Basic Needs Committee has worked closely alongside the Agroecology, Climate Resilience, and Food Justice Lab since 2020. The Agroecology, Climate Resilience and Food Justice Lab (ACRAF) is a Santa Clara University-based research lab that works in collaboration with the Environmental & Common Good Initiative.

Methods

Santa Clara University is a private, mid-sized Jesuit college in Silicon Valley. The university's total population is 9,178, with 6,115 undergraduates and 3,063 graduate students. As of 2025, 57% of the student body identifies as students of color, coming from the United States and 43 other countries. Of the undergraduate student body, 53% live in student housing. In 2017, Santa Clara University was ranked number 31 of 2,395 universities for household income, averaging $193,100 annually (Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Santa Clara 2017). Although the university reflects high mean incomes, many students at SCU are experiencing both food and housing security struggles. The SCU Student Basic Needs Committee alongside the ACRAF Lab have conducted an annual survey of the student body since 2020 in order to assess levels of student basic needs security.

The survey is open to all students currently enrolled at SCU in order to receive a representative sample size of the Santa Clara University population. The survey includes questions regarding resource awareness, food security, cultural representation, housing assistance, and stigma. Student researchers within the ACRAF Lab collect the data, complete both quantitative and qualitative analysis, and then cooperate with the Student Basic Needs Committee in order to find solutions.

Goals and Research Questions

1. What is the current extent of food and housing insecurity among students at SCU?
2. What correlations do we observe between student demographics and basic needs security status?
3. What strategies did SCU implement to address students' basic needs insecurities?
4. How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times?
5. What are several potential transformative approaches to addressing food security at SCU?

Annual Student Basic Needs Survey at SCU

The Agroecology, Food Justice, and Climate Resilience Lab (ACRAF) at Santa Clara University administers an annual survey for both graduate and undergraduate students to complete, assessing food and basic needs insecurity. The annual survey has been sent out during the Fall Quarter of each school year since 2020, and nearly identical questions have been disseminated each year to establish comparability across the years. During the Fall Quarter of the 2024-2025 school year, the lab received 898 student responses to the survey questions. The goal of the survey is to gauge an understanding of how demographic characteristics, resource awareness, and income levels intersect with food insecurity. By analyzing these intersections, the lab was able to generate a comprehensive understanding of basic needs insecurity at the university. The survey questions were assembled to accurately score individual food and housing insecurity levels, based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) adult module for food security (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020) and the Hope Lab campus-wide basic needs surveys (Goldrick-Rab, 2020a, 2020b). The purpose of the survey was to collect qualitative responses from students, and the goal of the research team was to convert those responses into numerical scores of either 0 or 1 to assess food insecurity based on the USDA guidelines. An example of this process can be found when students answered "Never true" about experiencing the worry of running out of food before they got money to buy more in the last 30 days would receive a 0 for that question; however, if a student responded with "Often true", they would receive a 1. Once each of the questions was converted from qualitative responses into a numerical score, the research team was able to add up the scores of each individual and determine food security levels. The food security levels ranged from a very low, low, marginal or high basic needs security status. Once each student participant was given a food security level score, the research team was then able to conduct a comparable analysis of different metrics.

To evaluate the intersectionalities between components within the survey, the research team analyzed the data and compared it to previous responses. Utilized Google Sheets to create visual representations. By creating these visualizations, the research team was able to isolate particular demographic characteristics, income levels, food security levels, etc. in order to examine how they interact and discover trends. Specifically, pivot tables and a variety of graph types (including stacked bar and column charts) were created for the purpose of compiling the found data into visually coherent formats. By analyzing the visual representations crafted from

the survey responses, the research team compiled survey data in conjunction with responses gathered from student interviews in order to display a comprehensive analysis of student basic needs security at the university.

Student Voices - Interviews

In addition to the annual survey, the ACRAF lab conducts individual, semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the annual survey. The objective of the student interviews is to further our understanding on how students interact with resource availability, how students feel about the SCU food systems, and how students navigate stigma and potential prejudice associated with food and housing insecurity. Additionally, the interviews help the research team gain an understanding of what culturally relevant foods are available at SCU and how accessibility to those foods may impact students' experiences. The research team needs to gain a thorough understanding of the food resources utilized by the student body (including the Bronco Food Pantry) and, based on that, to determine how we can increase awareness among students about these resources.

Student researchers sent interview invitations to survey participants who responded with interest towards participating in the follow-up interview via email. The email outlined the purpose of the interview and detailed the background of the study. Each interview participant completed a demographic questionnaire, along with an IRB-approved consent form before the interview. Within the 2024-2025 interview cycle, student researchers conducted 9 interviews from February to April 2025. The interviewees include undergraduate and graduate students with varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, income levels, and first-generation and international student statuses (see *Table 1*).

The interview lengths varied between 17 and 45 minutes, during which student participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts regarding food systems and security at Santa Clara University. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed for coding purposes. The codes used are brief phrases that describe a specific quote identified in an interview. For example, if an interviewee makes a statement about feeling shame or embarrassment regarding their food budget or food availability, the code "Stigma", described as: "Interviewee provides insights on stigma, how it affects them, what it means to them, etc" would be associated with the statement. By using this coding process, the student researchers are able to identify common themes and subjects the interviewees mentioned. Once all interviews were coded, the research team was able to conduct an analysis of which codes were most frequent, and therefore which subject areas are most important to the SCU student body. Examples of the most frequent subject matters that appeared during the interviews included food costs, Benson food choices, and cultural relevancy. Students regularly mentioned the importance of having culturally relevant foods and affordable foods available at SCU, and how many felt that these two issues have gone unaddressed.

Past interview on the interviews that were conducted from 2022/23 and 2023/24 cycles with the same methodology as the 2024-2025 interviews. Comparisons between the cycle quotes and demographic information were observed, see tables 1-3.

Table 1: **Interviewees from the 2022-2024 (2 yrs) and 2024 - 2025 Cycle**

Characteristics	**2022-2024 (n=19)**	**2024-2025 (n=9)**
Sex		
Male	6	2
Female	13	6
Race/Ethnicity		
White or Caucasian	3	1
Southeast Asian	4	2
Other Asian or Asian American	0	4
Hispanic or Latinx	8	1
Black or African American	3	0
Middle Eastern or Arab	1	0
Mean Age, years	22.2	20.3
School		
College of Arts and Sciences	12	5
Leavey School of Business	1	1
School of Engineering	3	1
School of Law	2	0
School of Education Counseling Psychology	1	1
Household Income		
Less than $25,000	9	2
$25,000-$49,999	1	1
$50,000-$99,999	2	1
$100,000-$124,999	1	2
$150,000 and above	4	1
Prefer not to say	2	1
First Generation Student		
Yes	N/A	2
No	N/A	6
International Student		
Yes	N/A	1
No	N/A	7

*Note: 2 interviewees did not fill out the demographic survey in the 22-23 and 23-24 cycles
*Note: One interviewee did not fill out the demographic survey in the 24-25 cycles
*Note: First-generation and international student status was not collected for the 23-23 and 23-24 cycles

Survey and Interview Question Updates

Although the annual survey and interview questions have remained relatively consistent over the past five years, some adjustments have been made to address current issues. For example, in the 2023-2024 survey cycle, questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic were still included. Because many SCU students at the university during the 2023-2024 school year were significantly impacted by the pandemic, questions surrounding COVID's impact on one's access to food was eminent. However, in the 2024-2025 cycle the student researchers decided to eliminate the COVID-19 questions because the pandemic's impact was no longer pertinent for current student's food security related issues. For example, during the 23-24 cycle of the annual survey asked "Have you experienced any of the following impacts of COVID-19 in the last 12 months?", and students were prompted to answer with one of the following: "A close friend or family member was sick with COVID-19", "I was sick with COVID-19", "A close friend or family member died of COVID-19", "Other impact, briefly explain", or "None of the above". The following few years after the pandemic originally began in 2020, it was valuable to the lab's research to gain an understanding of how COVID-19 potentially impacted student's financial, familial, or academic situations.

The COVID-19 questions were decidedly removed for the most recent cycle of the survey, along with a few other minor changes. One of the most significant additions student researchers added to this year's survey was questions regarding stigma. Questions regarding stigma, anxiety, or embarrassment were a crucial addition for the lab, as researchers noticed the subject to be a regular topic that students would mention during interviews. Students were prompted to answer questions about stigma with "strongly agree"," somewhat agree", "neither agree or disagree", "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree". Some examples of the new questions regarding stigma include the following: "To avoid any prejudice, I carefully choose who I talk to about the difficulties I have accessing enough food." or "I do not reveal that I have difficulty accessing enough food to anybody to avoid being judged." Addressing prejudice, judgment and shame were crucial elements to the lab's research, as understanding the impact on mental health is an important element to understanding how food insecurity affects college students.

Results

2024 Student Food Security Survey

After reviewing the data collected from the 2024 survey, food insecurity among Santa Clara University students remains a considerable issue. According to the USDA definition, any individual who scores in the "very low" or "low" range is considered food insecure, and 314 respondents (36.73% of total) to the survey scored as having either "very low" or "low" food security (see *Figure 1*). The previous survey analysis from the 23-24 school year revealed that 35% of SCU student respondents fell into the food insecure category, thus suggesting little progress has been made in the recent academic year.

Although over 10 intersections between different components of the survey were analyzed by student researchers, only a select few of the graphs are displayed below. The few graphs displayed below are those that suggest the most surprising or severe discrepancies identified. Additionally, some figures below demonstrate the differences between the 2023 and 2024 survey responses to display changes observed over a year.

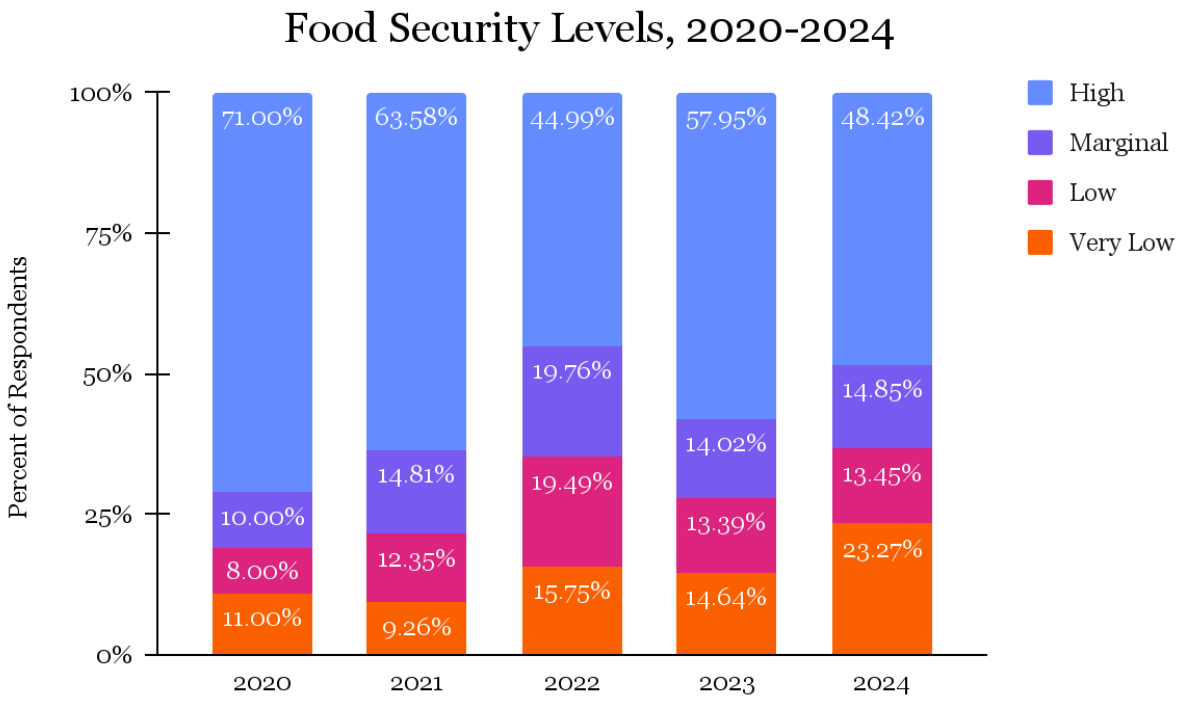

***Figure 1*. Food security levels of respondents for the fall quarters of 2020 (n=484), 2021 (n=166), 2022 (n=749), 2023 (n=799), and 2024 (n= 855).** Food security status was calculated using the U.S. FDA Food Security Scoring Module and The Hope Center's Scoring Guide. Sources: Student Basic Needs Survey 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024.

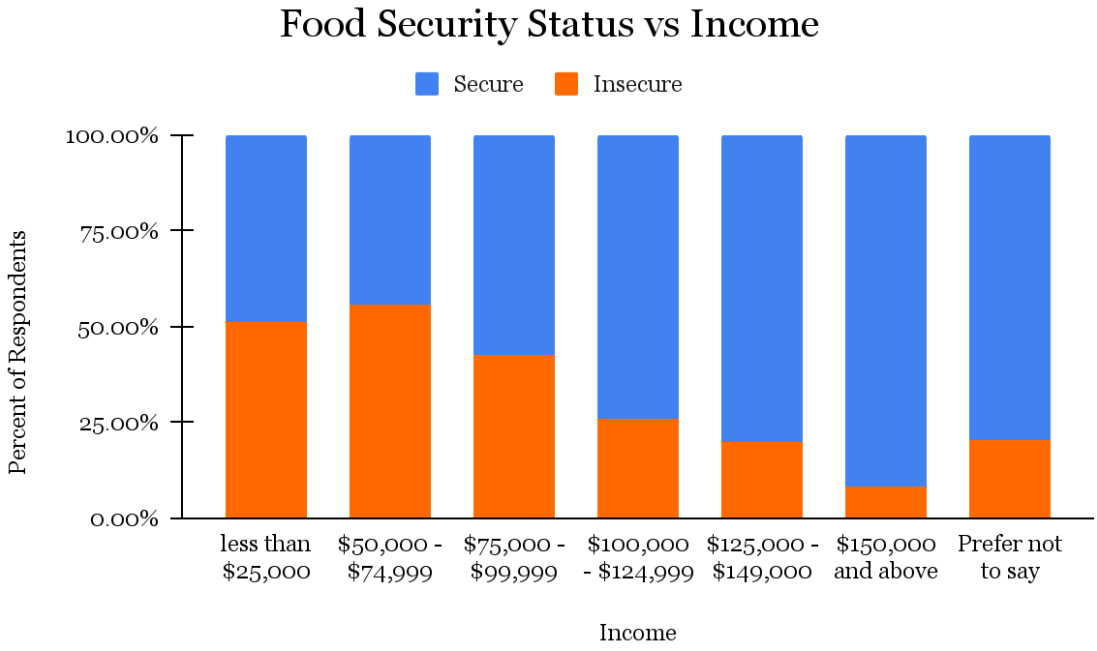

***Figure 2*. Food Security Status of respondents during the 2024 fall quarter by income (n=855).** Respondents of food insecurity varied across household income: less than $25,000 (n=92), $25,000 - $49,999 (n=84), $50,000 - $74,999 (n=55), $75,000 - $99,999 (n=20), $100,000 - $124,999 (n=17), $125,000 - $149,000 (n=7) $150,000 and above (n=15), Prefer not to say (n=24).

As in past survey studies, findings over the past 5 years have revealed a strong relationship between food security and household income status. For example, over half (51.4%) of respondents who selected having an income of "less than $25,000" reported a score resulting in the "very low" or "low" category. Compared to those who selected having an income of "150,000 and above" only 8.11% of respondents were found to be food insecure. This intersection between income and food insecurity is not a surprising find within the survey, but instead further highlighting the importance of having access to affordable food for university students.

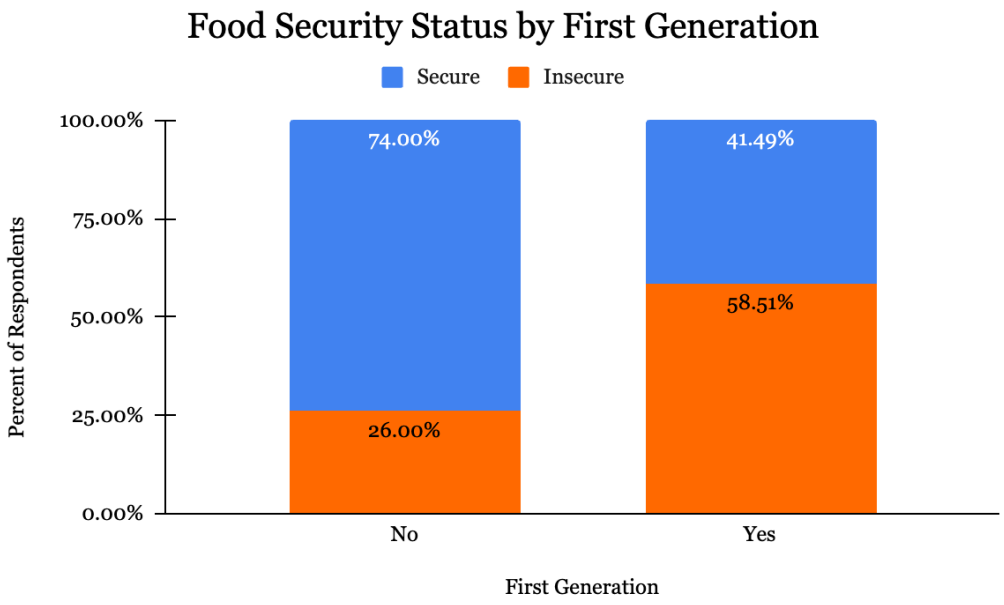

Figure 3. **First generation college student status' relationship with food security status during the 2024 fall quarter (n=855).** Self identified first generation college student (n=282), non-first gen (n=537).

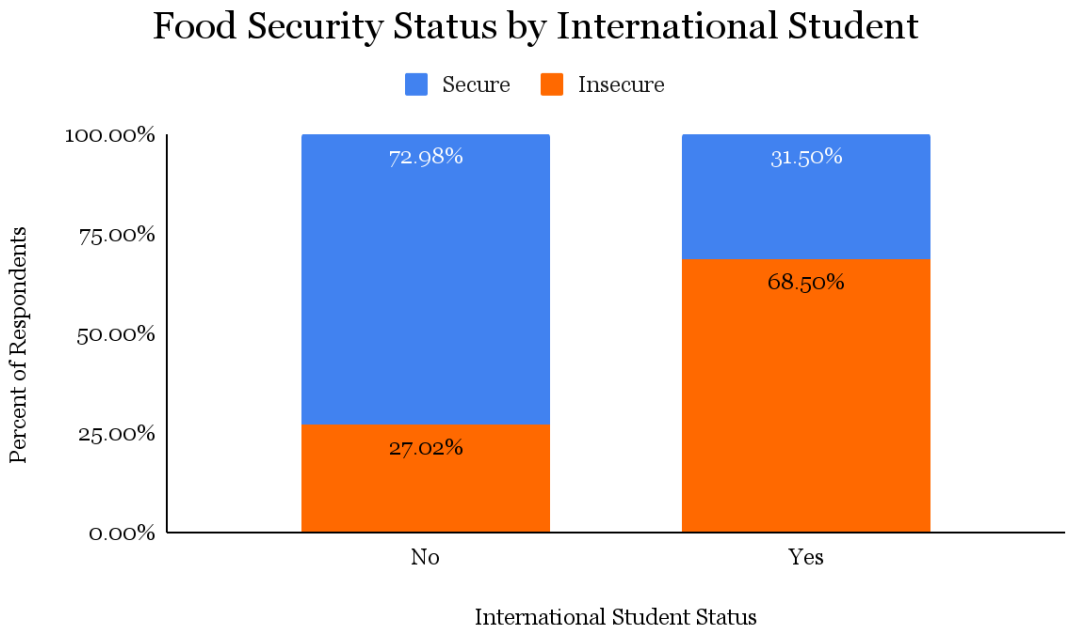

Figure 4. **International student status' relationship with food security status during the 2024 fall quarter (n=855).** Self-identified international student (n=200), non-international student (n=655).

In addition to income, other intersecting factors with food insecurity demonstrated a high correlation worthy of investigation. Two key intersections focused on during this year's analysis was between first generation students and food insecurity, and international students and food insecurity. Within this year's survey 282 student respondents (32.41%) were first generation college students (18% of SCU students in the 24-25 academic year are first generation students), and 200 (22.83%) of the student respondents were international students, see *Figures 3 and 4*.

The survey data demonstrates that of the first generation students, 58.51% (165 students) scored as food insecure. Of the international students, 68.5% (137) of respondents have a result of being food insecure. Compared to non-first-generation students and non-international students, this discrepancy suggests the need for food security intervention for these two groups.

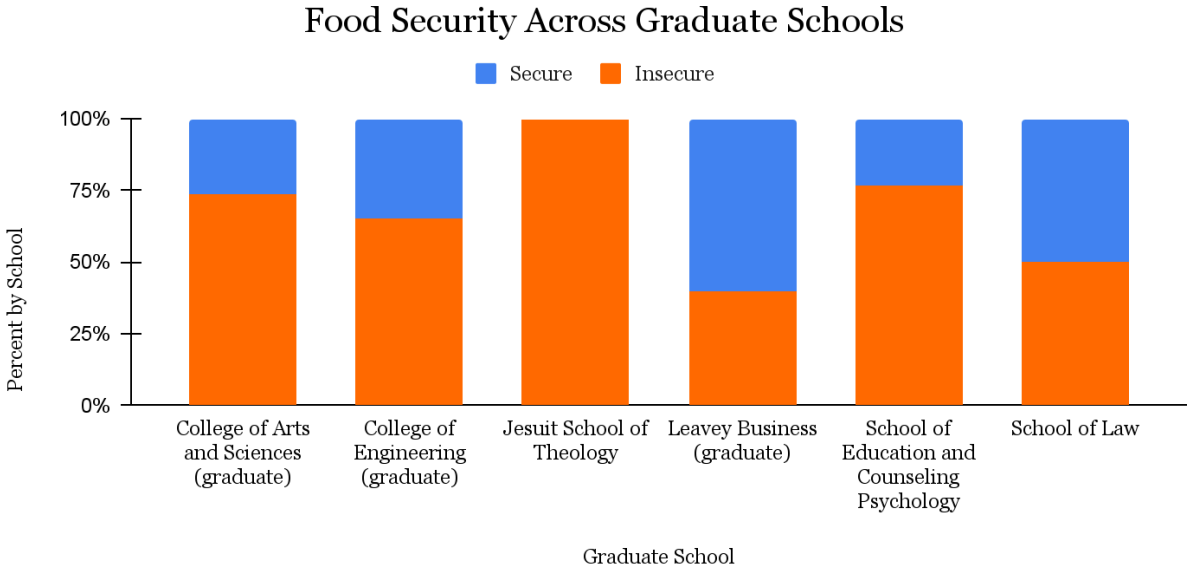

Figure 5. **Food Security Status of SCU graduate student respondents during Fall 2024 (n=176).** Response counts vary across schools: College of Arts and Sciences (n=53), College of Engineering (n=40), Jesuit School of Theology (n=5), Leavey Business School (n=30), School of Education (n=17), School of Law (n=28).

In addition to income levels, first-generation, and international students, graduate student status displayed an unpredictable discrepancy in food insecurity. Graduate students are often left out of conversations about the "hungry college student" stereotype, leading to their food insecurity being underestimated. Santa Clara University offers a wide variety of graduate-level programs, including Business, College of Arts and Sciences, and Engineering graduate programs, as well as the School of Law, the School of Education and Counseling, and the Jesuit School of Theology. To the student researchers' surprise, graduate students reported high levels of food insecurity (see *Figure 5*). For example, 76.47% of students in the graduate program in the School of Education and Counseling are food insecure, and 100% of students in the Jesuit

School of Theology are food insecure (note: only five students from the Jesuit School of Theology participated in the survey). The food insecurity issue among graduate students may be explained by their limited time and by financial or energy constraints resulting from the high level of academic work.

Fall 2024 Student Housing Security Survey

In addition to analyzing demographic data with food insecurity levels, the student researchers identified demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, first-generation status, income, etc) that may have contributed to housing security within the SCU student population. Of the 898 total student respondents, 31.29% at both the graduate and undergraduate levels are housing-insecure. Below is an overview of the findings.

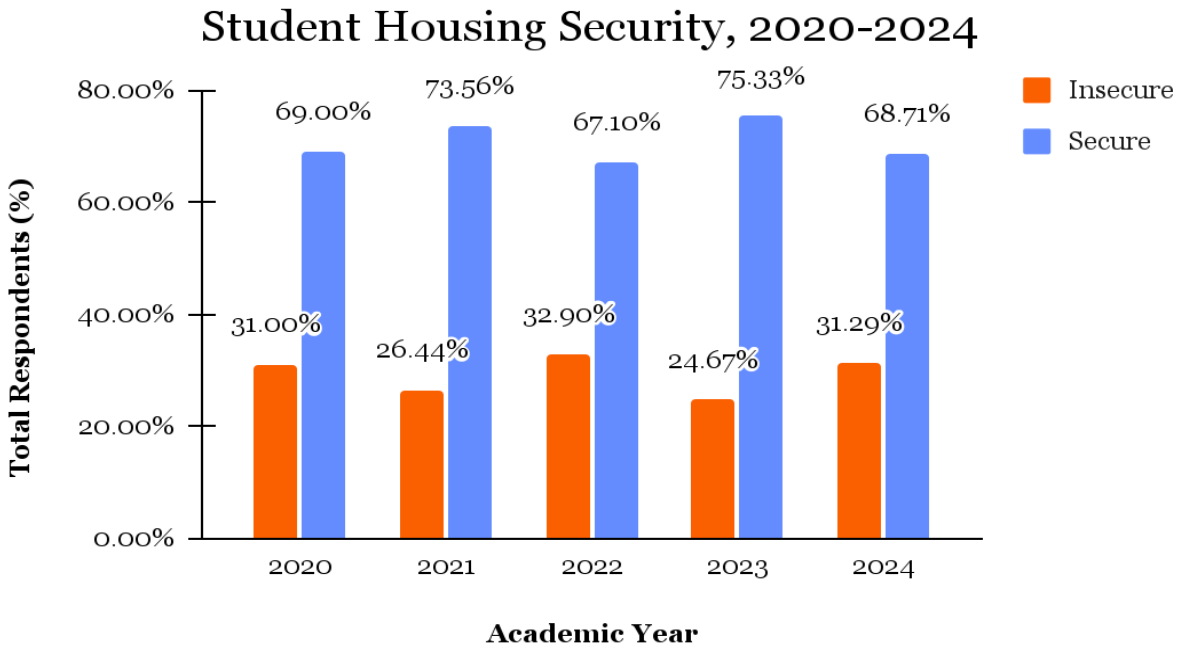

***Figure 6*. Student housing security of SCU students for the past year up until Fall 2024. Survey collected during the Fall quarter at SCU.** 2020 (n=558), 2021 (n=261), 2022 (n=775), 2023 (n=827), and 2024 (n= 898).

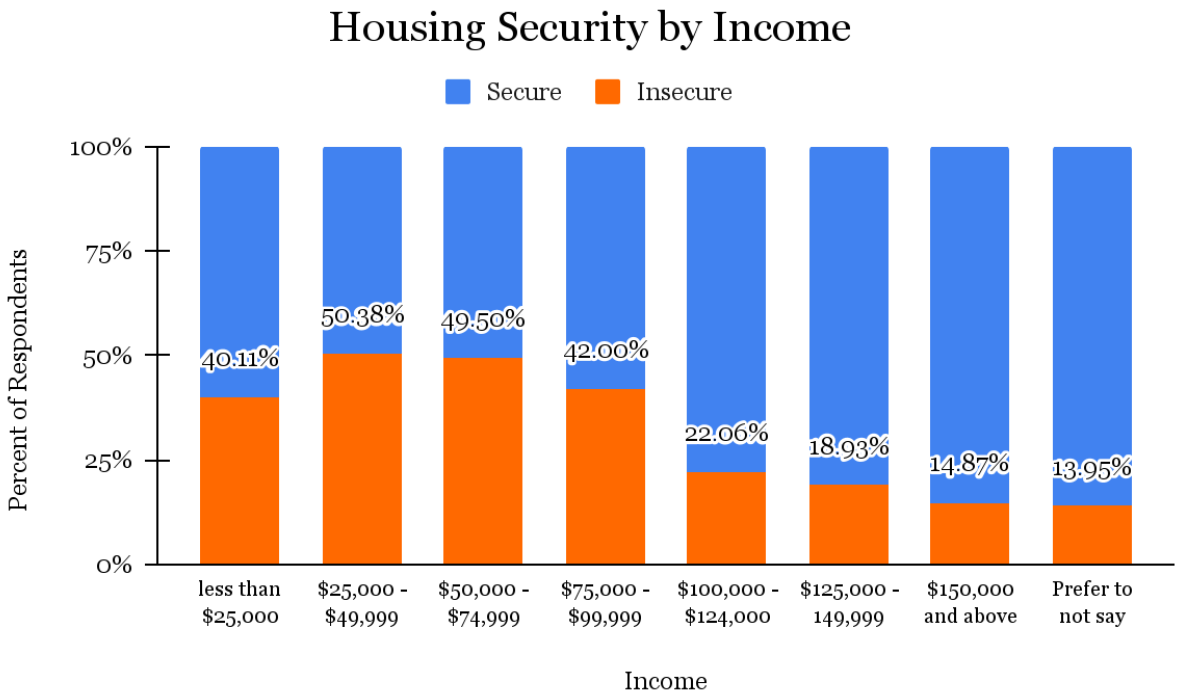

Figure 7. **Housing security status among students by household income at Santa Clara University.** Respondents of housing insecurity varied across income: Less than $25,000 (n=75), $25,000-$49,999 (n=66), $50,000-$74,999 (n=50), $75,000- $99,999 (n=21), $100,000-$124,999 (n=15), $125,000-$149,999 (n=7), $150,000 and above (n=29).

Similar to food insecurity, the most compelling and significant discrepancies observed during analysis were the intersections between housing security and first-generation students, international students, and graduate students. The results of each demographic characteristic are displayed below.

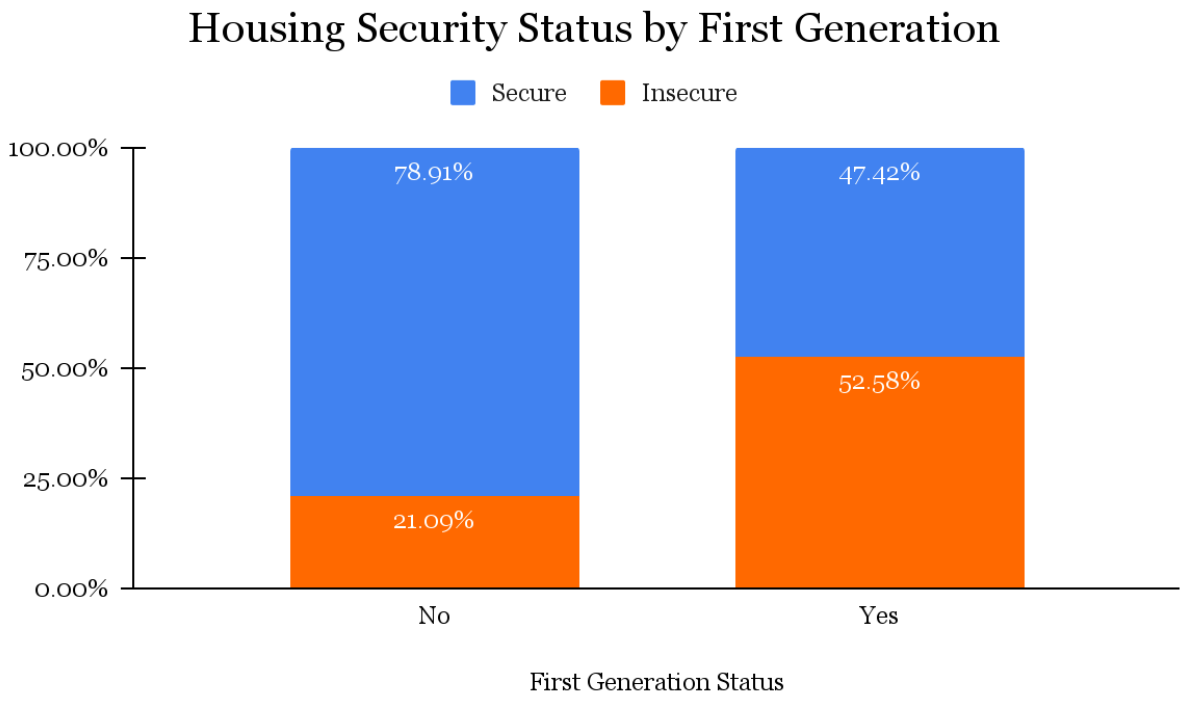

***Figure 8*. Housing Security Status of SCU first-generation student respondents during the 2024 fall quarter.** Housing-insecure first-generation students (n=153), housing-secure first-generation students (n=138).

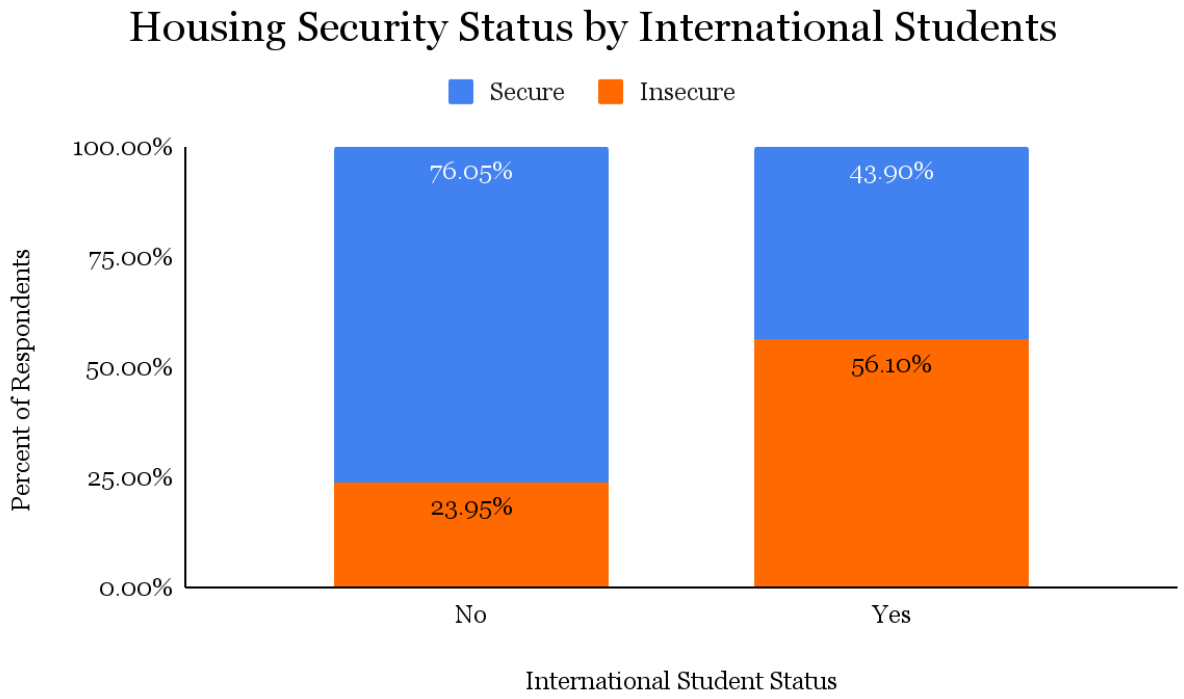

***Figure 9*. Housing Security Status of SCU international student respondents during the 2024 fall quarter.** Self identified international student (n=205) and non- international students (n=693).

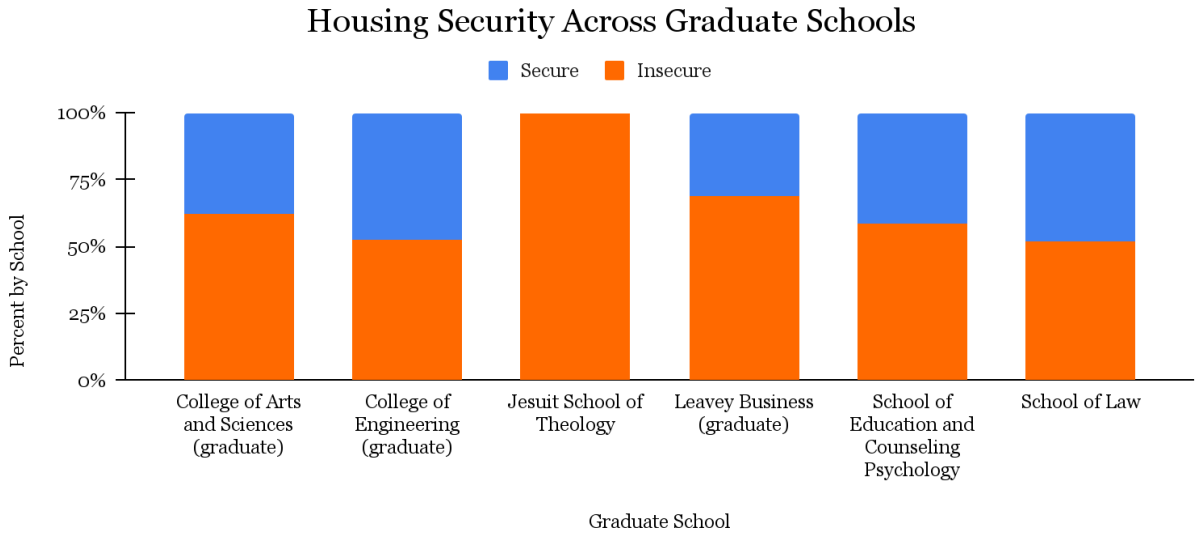

***Figure 10*. Housing security status of SCU graduate student respondents during the past 12 months (n=176).** Response counts vary across schools: College of Arts and Sciences (n=53), College of Engineering (n=40), Jesuit School of Theology (n=5), Leavey Business School (n=32), School of Education (n=17), School of Law (n=29).

Qualitative Findings from Interviews

This section will use findings from our analysis of 9 student interviews from the 24-25 academic year cycle to help elucidate the conclusions of the survey and examine the evidence suggested in response to RQ4: How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times? Additionally, we will explore student perceptions of what could make for an ideal food system on campus, which includes more diverse food options, better resource availability, and more expansive service hours.

After completing the annual survey, a small number of SCU student body participants agreed to a semi-structured interview, exploring and discussing their unique perspectives on food costs, choices, and sovereignty. Student researchers interviewed 9 students from both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Several major themes emerged, including food costs, Benson food, cultural relevance, ideal food systems, and time/energy constraints. Student participants also emphasized the struggles they have had receiving aid from administrative offices, efforts with accessing resources, and grievances with the SCU points system.

Food costs for on-campus resources and dining services were a common conversation topic that students brought up during their interviews. Students are consistently trying to navigate ways to obtain nutritious foods within their budgets. The food costs code segment memos revealed that students desire for the university to make more affordable and accessible healthy food resources, and that affordable foods should not be limited to unhealthy options in the dining hall.

The on-campus dining hall, Benson Memorial Center, was a common discussion topic for students during interviews. Students regularly mentioned their frustrations with the food options and hours of operation. One key example of these frustrations include the following quote from an SCU student, Latinx/Hispanic male, age 18,"I have also heard stories about how the granola that is supposed to be allergen-free is not because it runs out and then they grab some from the non allergen free place and just place it in there. And so while it doesn't have to influence my eating habits in the same way, I have heard about how other people have to work more to eat because they can't trust Benson to be safe and so they have to go off campus to find food options." The Benson Food code segment summarizes that many students believe the dining hall lacks global diversity, has very limited hours, and often includes mislabeled foods and allergens. These frustrations raised the suggestion that the on-campus dining hall services are not fully equipped to provide students with healthy, culturally relevant and safe foods at all times, which are all contributing factors to food insecurity.

Culturally relevant foods as a separate code was very prominent alongside the discussion about Benson food options. Many students feel a significant lack in expansive and diverse food options. By representing the students' grievance with the lack of culturally relevant food options, the MaxQDA code memo suggests that a key incremental change SCU should consider in the upcoming school years is to offer more authentic and expansive foods. In order to not exclude or

isolate any students from any background, it is imperative that SCU offers foods from a wider range of traditions and cultures.

During the interview process, each student was asked to design and explain their ideal dining hall at SCU. Many students shared their thoughts on how they would create the culturally relevant food options, the points system, and even how they would better implement composting options, and food security resource dissemination around campus. One student, an Asian female, age 18, included the following statement during their interview,"And even though I do have the basic plan, I feel like I still have a lot of money left over towards the end. So I think paying for it is not the problem, but I think that the prices are quite high. Like, even though. Because like the amount of points that you have is the amount of money that you pay for the dining plan. So it's. It is already. It is like your money. And I feel like you do not get the quality of the food for the amount that you pay for." The code memo of the Ideal Food System suggested that most students emphasize the need for more resource visibility, culturally diverse foods, and even having food service providers go under review to ensure affordability and student agency.

Although the student research team decided the five most compelling food segments are the few listed above, other code segments including Points System and Resource Awareness were frequently mentioned during the interview process. For example, students regularly suggested how they would rework SCU's dining hall points system where students were able to transfer points to one another more freely. Also, students during the interview process frequently mentioned that food security resource awareness around campus was scarce. The points system and resource awareness and availability are key components to ensuring that all students, regardless of financial status are able to access nutritious foods and avoid food insecurity at Santa Clara University.

Comparing 2024-25 to the Previous Two Years

The 2023–24 and 2024–25 interview cycles highlight many of the same themes such as food affordability, cultural relevance, dining options, and resource accessibility, but the tone and focus have shifted over time. Students in 2023–24 often emphasized structural frustrations with the dining system, such as the point-based model limiting meal variety, the lack of cafeteria-style options, or the high costs that made eating three meals a day unsustainable. By contrast, 2024–25 respondents speak with a stronger sense of inequity and distrust. Instead of only noting inconvenience, they describe safety issues like raw chicken and allergen cross-contact, insufficient weekend access, and a lack of cultural inclusion as deeper failures of the system to meet student needs. The framing has moved from frustration with logistics toward a critique of fairness, health, and institutional accountability.

Cultural representation also emerges in both periods, but the narratives differ. In 2022–23, students critiqued the food as "versions of American food" or lacking flavor compared to their cultural expectations. By 2024–25, students still note the limited cultural options, but their comments point more toward missed opportunities for inclusion and community-building. The idea that Benson once advertised a "submit your recipe" program but never implemented it reflects a disconnection between promises and practice. Meanwhile, students in 2024–25

reference models like Facebook's rotating cultural menus or UC Davis's dining innovations as aspirational benchmarks, suggesting that their vision of an "ideal food system" has grown more outward-looking and comparative.

Another shift is in discussions of cost and stigma. Students in 2022–24 acknowledged that meal points ran out too quickly or that food was too expensive, sometimes forcing them to ration meals. In 2024–25, critiques deepen into a moral framing, with students calling out the hypocrisy of a wealthy university charging so much for basic meals, especially while promoting food insecurity initiatives. International students in 2024–25 also bring in a global perspective, comparing U.S. food costs to affordability back home, which adds weight to their sense of inequity. Similarly, while stigma appeared in earlier cycles as a feeling of being "othered" when accessing pantries, the 2024–25 voices describe stigma in more detail: embarrassment, pride, taboos about discussing need in an affluent campus culture, and the sense of being invisible among wealthier peers.

Finally, awareness of resources has expanded but remains uneven. In earlier years, students talked about seeking groceries off campus, using the pantry, or wishing for cafeteria flexibility. By 2024–25, students mention Slack channels for free food alerts, CalFresh workshops, and integration of food security into some academic spaces. Yet they also stress how these resources are "not visible" enough, and how reliance on word of mouth creates inequities for students without strong social networks. This shows an ongoing challenge: although institutional programming has grown, student perception and accessibility have not fully caught up. Below, see *Tables 2 and 3*, which highlight exemplary quotes from student interviews. The tables reflect content students regularly brought up during interviews. Although different subject matters were more commonly discussed in some years versus others, discussion of cultural relevance, resources and housing have been consistent subject matters over the years.

***Table 2*: Top 7 most frequently occurring codes from the 2024-25 (n=9) academic year.**

Code	Exemplary Quotes	Frequency Count
Benson Food	*"I think also, weekends were a tough part for me while I was on the dining plan because, you know, stuff isn't really open until, like, 4 or 5pm And I remember going to Benson on, like, Saturday mornings and just being like, there's really not a lot of options. And that definitely impacted, like, how I felt I could fuel myself, like a day of studying or something."* (21 y/o White female)	**32**
Cultural Relevance	*"However, when I have eaten in Benson, there's not much Filipino culture, but I do see that they have a variety of... I know they have tacos over there and they have burgers. However, I do wish that there was more variety in Asian culture. I could see that they're trying, but I don't see as much representation from my identity."* (22 y/o Asian female)	**24**

Ideal Food System	*"I don't know if you know about Facebook's dining experience, but every day, they have a different cultural heritage of food that they make. And I think that's so cool. I feel like just trying out different cultural foods will just promote inclusivity and diversity. I don't know how feasible that would be, but at least that would be my dream, like dining hall, just trying different foods from the Middle East or Asian countries or the European countries. I feel like that would be really awesome to see in the future."* (22 y/o Asian female)	**22**
Resource Awareness	*"I do think that basic needs may have been brought up in that space even minimally. And so I was made aware of this, these offerings existing. But I certainly, like, did not know where to find the resources. I was lucky to have relationships with upperclassmen so that if I did need those resources, and I'm lucky that I don't, but if I did, I would be able to ask people about where I could find them. But I also know that for other people, it is hard to make connections with those upper grades, especially when they're first getting to this campus."* (22 y/o Asian female)	**16**
Food Cost	*"You can't get a good meal [on campus] for less than $10, which is I mean, unless you're going to a fast food place, but even then that's not healthy or some lower priced things are less accessible for someone who might not have a car like myself."* (19 y/o Asian female)	**14**
Stigma	*"And it's also a pride thing, I would say. It's this sense of embarrassment to have to go forward and ask or help. I know how open the school is, but it's also a personal thing for the individual. At least for me, it was definitely hard for me to reach out for these types of resources, even though I know that our school offers them. Just because of that sense of embarrassment, I just feel like, Oh, my gosh. Maybe I'm taking away a resource from someone else who needs it way more than I do. I do feel that sense of stigma sometimes."* (23 y/o Asian female)	**12**
Housing Situation	*"A lot of the people I'm surrounded by dorms have the, what is it called? The dining points, something like that. But when I do have some friends that are commuters like I am. It's definitely difficult when you come from a low income family. It's hard to want to eat, but at the same time have to worry about budgeting. Again, like I mentioned before, how there's only certain days where they do offer the free food, free meals and everything. It's not guaranteed every day that you're going to have a meal. But I do notice that a lot of people do bring their own food."* (20 y/o Latinx female)	**10**

***Table 3*: Top 7 most frequently occurring codes from the 2022-23 (n=15) and 2023-24 (n=6) academic year.**

Code	Exemplary Quotes	Frequency Count
Benson Food	*"Yeah. I will say being limited to Benson was an experience in itself. I feel like I was still kind of limited to certain options, just like not the healthiest options, stuff that I wouldn't really go for. I think it's hard. going off like the point system and getting only one plate versus like some schools have like the cafeteria system. I like to have different food groups, but it's hard when I only have a certain amount of points. I'm just gonna get the one meal. That might just be like a burger and fries when I'd rather have [something] like a side salad. But then I don't wanna buy a whole salad."(2022-23)* (21 y/o Black female)	**32**
Self Sufficiency	*"But yeah, there's sometimes I just create different dishes that Benson doesn't provide or SCU doesn't provide .And then also I'm super aware of the spices and just the, I guess, canned or packaged foods that they have in the cellar for you to buy. There have been times where I would want to make a dish that my mom would make or traditional to my culture, then so that I can use up my dining hall points. I'll go down there, I can find things, but then I can't, and I end up having to go to a Mexican supermarket or Safeway to supplement, I guess, what SCU lacks to offer."(2023-24)* (20 y/o Latinx female)	**34**
Ideal Food System	*"I think it would be not terribly different from how it is now, but there would just be a lot more affordable options, and probably an expansion of the Cellar too, with more affordable groceries and a more diverse selection of, like, whole foods and bulk foods that students can buy. And yeah, in terms of like, Benson prepared hot meals, I think simpler is better most of the time to address food insecurity. So there could be a lot more like high volume, cheap meals available to people, and it would be maybe easier for students to access a meal plan, because I know the huge benefit of that is, you don't have to pay tax on the meals you buy with the food plan or with the meal plan through mobile order. So just more students having access to meal plans and more cheap options at Benson to get just like a full, hardy lunch with, you know, a good protein source for like $6." (2022-23)* (20 y/o White male)	**26**
Housing Situation	*"I mostly got the apartment plan because it was cheaper because I couldn't afford the housing and the meal plan, the 2000, the basic one. But I really needed help paying for food because it was really expensive." (2023-24)* (20 y/o Latinx female)	**24**
Cultural	*"For instance, we have pizza that's Italian, burgers and sandwiches at Fire that's American, and then we have La Parilla*	**22**

Relevance	*which is bad Mexican food, and then we have a little bit that's supposed to be a mix of all foods. I mean, ehh… it seems more like versions of American foods, just that they don't put in Fire in my opinion. And then you have a bar and you have Pacific Rim, which like they do try with some of that Asian stuff and like ehh yeah… I mean I have a roommate who is a Japanese exchange student. She said she sees a lot more Korean or Chinese food emphasized at Pacific Rim, which is not really Japanese cuisine. One night they did do ramen, which she thought was kind of cool but it was not really tasting that good. Even when they do be on theme, they don't be having good quality. So like.. but the chefs can only do so much like honestly Bon Appetit is a terrible industry so yeah." (2022-23)* (21 y/o Latinx female)	
Food Cost	*"But similar to what I said before, since some stuff you might want is more expensive and like if it's $20 at Globe for one meal… um since that adds up, then you might not be able to eat 3 meals a day for instance. Because you're like- oh already spent like this amount of money and now I'm only at like 500 meal points and I still have like five weeks to go, so you're like how am I supposed to like eat, then what are you supposed to do on the weekends when you're here, especially if you don't live like close to home, so you can't necessarily go back." (2022-23)* (19 y/o Black female)	**17**
Ethics/Sustainability	*"No, I'm going for the cheapest option. I am too poor to think about social issues because quite frankly I don't have the money to make choices for the better/better attuned to social issues with food, sadly. I wish I had enough money where I could pay for the more ethical option, but the ethical options are always expensive." (2022-23)* (21 y/o Latinx female)	**16**

Discussion

Observed Patterns in Student Basic Needs Insecurity

We are observing a notable rise in student food insecurity in 2024 compared to 2023. Current levels are similar to those seen in 2022, indicating a concerning return to post-pandemic highs. A similar upward trend is being observed in housing insecurity among students, suggesting that both food and housing access remain persistent and growing challenges. Given the increased effort on the institutional level to address basic needs insecurity in the past year, this finding demonstrates external factors that may have contributed to the rise.

Possible Explanations for These Trends

Based on the interview, survey, and data on local food system, several key factors appear to be contributing to the increase in food and housing insecurity:

1. **Rising Costs of Living:** Students are facing significantly higher food and housing prices, making it more difficult to meet their basic needs, even when employed.

2. **Reduced Work Hours and Income:** According to the Basic Needs Coordinator, many students report a reduction in work hours due to broader federal funding cuts, impacting their ability to maintain stable incomes and afford essential expenses.
3. **Rising Food Cost**: Students interviewees mentioned increase in food cost on and off campus.

Future Projections

Changes in federal and local capacity to provide support may further exacerbate the gap in the surrounding food system. International students who do not qualify for SNAP benefits will likely experience the impact to a larger extent, compared to local students.

4. **Federal and State Budget Cuts:** Ongoing federal and state funding reductions are affecting a range of services and programs that previously supported students, compounding the challenges they face.
5. **Reduced Community Partner Capacity:** Local service providers such as Project Sentinel and Second Harvest Food Bank are also facing operational constraints. Project Sentinel, which provides housing rights advocacy and dispute resolution, has experienced increased demand and longer response times. Meanwhile, Second Harvest is operating at reduced capacity due to staff shortages, limited outreach, and a tighter budget.
6. **Potential Cuts to SNAP:** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) faces proposed federal cuts of at least $230 billion over the next ten years. This has raised concerns about future food access for low-income individuals, including students. Despite the rollback of many pandemic-era provisions, Second Harvest reported that the average number of people served in FY24 remains comparable to FY21, nearly double the pre-pandemic level, highlighting the sustained need in Santa Clara County.

Particularly Vulnerable Demographics

Research has shown that social capital disadvantages, isolation, and limited access to resources disproportionately affect first-generation and international students (Sarah et al., 2017). These barriers place them at higher risk for food insecurity, often due to lack of mutual aid networks, exposure to stigmatized conversations around food, and limited access to culturally appropriate food options. Consistent with the existing literature, our findings indicate that first-generation college students, international students, and low-income students experience elevated levels of food insecurity —a complex issue that warrants targeted attention from university administrators.

Regarding resource awareness, it is crucial to prioritize outreach to students who are most likely to benefit from available support systems. Compared to last year, resource awareness among food-insecure students in the non-first-generation population increased, while levels among first-generation students remained unchanged. This is particularly noteworthy given that the LEAD Scholars Program is known for its effective marketing and outreach to first-generation

students. The data suggest that the Basic Needs Program's new marketing strategies may be yielding positive results, especially within the broader student population.

Across all schools surveyed, graduate students consistently reported higher rates of both food and housing insecurity than their undergraduate peers. This disparity may be attributed to lower levels of financial support available to graduate students. All graduate student interviewees indicated they are financially independent, whereas most undergraduate respondents continue to receive support from financial aid and family contributions. This challenge is especially pronounced among international graduate students. These findings underscore the need for institutional leaders to prioritize expanded support for graduate and international students within basic needs initiatives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, our findings reflect a growing urgency to address basic needs insecurity among students, particularly those who are first-generation, international, graduate-level, or low-income. Rising food and housing costs, reduced access to public benefits, and limited institutional support have compounded existing inequities. While targeted outreach and new marketing strategies have shown some promising results, gaps remain, especially in reaching first-generation students and supporting graduate students facing financial independence. Moving forward, universities must adopt an intersectional approach that addresses structural barriers, invests in targeted interventions, and ensures that all students, regardless of background, have equitable access to essential resources.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Basic Needs Program

1. **Anticipate and Prepare for Increased Demand and Potential Funding Reductions:** Develop contingency plans to address the anticipated rise in student need, while preparing for potential cuts in federal and state funding.
2. **Institutionalize Transportation to Grocery Stores:** Provide sustained support for transportation initiatives that improve student access to grocery stores, such as institutionalizing the Associated Student Government-led program.
3. **Expand Peer-to-Peer Support Systems:** Increase investment in peer-led initiatives, such as the Basic Needs Ambassador Program, to enhance student engagement and awareness of available resources.
4. **Enhance Food Recovery and Access to Fresh Food:** Expand food recovery efforts by designating physical space for storage and distribution of recovered fresh food. Continue supporting and promoting platforms such as the SCU Free Food Alert to increase real-time food access.
5. **Improve Visibility and Awareness of Basic Needs Resources:** Expand access and visibility of the Basic Needs Program through multiple channels, including faculty syllabi statements, integration into student orientation programming, and regular training for faculty and staff.

6. **Implement Targeted Food Security Interventions:** Introduce initiatives such as a Special Meal Voucher system (one idea is to learn from Bon Appetit's system: Benson workers receive one non-accumulative $15 voucher on the day they work), mini food pantries across campus, and enhanced promotion of the SCU Free Food Alert system to directly address food insecurity.
7. **Improve Affordability and Access to Nutritious Food:** Implement strategies such as reducing meal prices at Benson, offering more flexible tiers in dining plan options, redistributing surplus food to students, and ensuring safe, standardized food handling for students with dietary restrictions.
8. **Enhance the Bronco Food Pantry:** Strengthen the Bronco Pantry by increasing options, relocating to a more central and visible location, and acquiring commercial refrigeration units to safely store fresh food.
9. **Conduct Targeted Outreach to Underserved Student Populations:** Implement focused outreach strategies for international students and other historically underserved demographics who may face distinct barriers to basic needs access.
10. **Collaborate with Established Programs to Improve Resource Awareness:** Partner with initiatives such as the LEAD Scholars Program to strengthen culturally responsive outreach and increase student awareness of available support services.
11. **Expand Housing Support Options:** Explore interventions such as subsidized on-campus housing during academic breaks, identifying emergency housing units, and improving access to off-campus housing resources.
12. **Establish Emergency Housing Capacity:** Identify and secure five on-campus rooms for emergency housing by the end of October 2025 to support students experiencing short-term housing instability.
13. **Increase Student Involvement in Policy Discussions:** Create a special advisory group or invite students with lived experience to join the Basic Needs Committee to ensure policies are student-informed and equity-driven.

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Appendix

Appendix A: **Basic Needs Annual Survey link here.**

Appendix B: Codebook used for the student interviews, with several themes.

PRELIMINARY LIST OF THEMES	CODE	DESCRIPTION
DEMOGRAPHICS		
EQUITY GAPS		
	International Student Experience	Interviewee provides insights on what it is like to be an international student
	International Demographic	Interviewee identifies themselves as an international student
	Graduate Student Experience	Interviewee provides insights on what it is like to be a graduate student
	Graduate Student Demographic	Interviewee identifies themselves as a graduate student
	Undergrad Student Experience	Interviewee provides insights on what it is like to be an undergraduate student
	Undergrad Demographic	Interviewee identifies as an undergraduate student
	Hispanic / Latinx	Interviewee identifies as Hispanic/Latinx
	African American / Black	Interviewee identifies as African American/Black
	Southeast Asian	Interviewee identifies as Southeast Asian
	White / Caucasian	Interviewee identifies as White/Caucasian
	Food Insecure	Interviewee identifies themselves as food insecure
	Male	Interviewee identifies as male
	Female	Interviewee identifies as female
	CAS	Interviewee identifies as a CAS student
	Engineering	Interviewee identifies as an Engineering student
	Psychology	Interviewee identifies as a School of Education and Counseling Psychology student

	LSB	Interviewee identifies as a Leavey School of Business student
FOOD SOVEREIGNTY		
	Self-Advocacy	Interviewee provides insights on what it's like to communicate their needs and wants to the university
	Cultural Relevancy	Interviewee provides insights on culturally relevant food.
	Ethics / Sustainability	Interviewee provides insights on how ethics and sustainability impact their food choices/access to food
	Self-Sufficiency	The interviewee provides insights into their experience with cooking for themselves, grocery shopping, and their knowledge of cooking techniques.
	Housing Security / Situation	Interviewee relates their level of food sovereignty or security to their housing situation.
	Health / Nutrition	Interviewee provides insights into the role that health and nutrition play in their food choices and access.
FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD ACCESS		
Food Security and Food Access	Food Security Definition	Interviewee defines food security
	Bronco Pantry	Interviewee mentions Bronco Pantry
	Food Costs	Interviewee mentions the cost of food on and off campus.
	Grocery Stores	Interviewee mentions their experience with grocery shopping, including store preferences, availability of preferred food, and getting to the store.
	Resource availability	Interviewee mentions their experience with the availability of food-related resources on or off campus.
	Resource awareness	Interviewee provides insights on the awareness of resources on campus and in the surrounding area, how they heard of these programs, how this information can be shared better, etc.
	Transportation	Interviewee provides insights on how transportation affects their food access
	Time / Energy Constraints	Interviewee mentions how lack of time and energy affects how they access food
MENTAL HEALTH / WELLNESS		

Mental Health / Wellness	Stigma	Interviewee provides insights on stigma, how it affects them, what it means to them, etc.
	Isolation / Community	Interviewee mentions experiences of isolation and/or community
	Coping Mechanisms	Interviewee describes a coping mechanism in relation to basic needs
	Social Relationships	Interviewee provides insights on how the relationships between students can improve food security, as well as how faculty can better communicate to and support students
	Family	Interviewee mentions their familial relationships
	Anxiety / Depression	Interviewee provides insights on how their relationship with food affects their anxiety / depression
	Academics / School Performance	Interviewee provides insight on school performance in relation to basic needs
STUDENT LIFE		
Student Life	Points System	Interviewee mentions the Benson points payment system
	Benson Food	Interviewee provides insights on food available at the dining hall
	Employment	Interviewee mentions anything related to student employment.
	Pandemic	The interviewee mentions something related to the pandemic
	Law School Experience	Interviewee mentions insights on being a student at the Law school and/or using SCU Law eats
SOLUTIONS		
	Increasing Food Access	Interviewee provides a potential solution for improving food access
	Better Marketing	The interviewee provides a potential solution for better marketing
	Mutual Aid	Interviewee mentions an experience or suggestion relating to mutual aid
	Ideal Food Systems	Interviewee provides insight into what their ideal food system at SCU would be like