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Montclair State University Foodscape Audit, 2019

**A Summary of Food Security of Students Within
the Campus Foodscape**

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 **Introduction**

This audit was authored for the Montclair State University Campus Community Garden, the Montclair State University chapter of the Food Recovery Network, and the Red Hawk Pantry, in order to provide guidance to these campus organizations in identifying and addressing student food needs. This audit provides necessary updates to the campus statistics on student food security, including the prevalence of student food insecurity and student perceptions of the campus foodscape.

To conduct the audit, students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey during the Spring 2019 Semester. The survey asked questions that were aimed at identifying food security during the duration of the Spring Semester, and during the duration of the prior Winter Session / Winter Recess Period. A total of 628 students responded throughout the course of the Spring '19 semester.

Please see the definitions used in the audit to refer to food security below. According to the USDA¹, the varying levels of food security are defined as the following:

High food security — Students had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food.

Marginal food security — Students had problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.

Low food security — Students reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.

Very low food security — At times during the semester, eating patterns of students were disrupted and food intake reduced because the respondent lacked money and other resources for food.

An individual that expresses high food security or marginal food security is considered to experience **food security**, or be **food secure**; an individual that expresses low food security or very low food insecurity is considered to experience **food insecurity**, or be **food insecure**.

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx>

Please note that some definition text has been adapted for this audit to better refer to a single student respondent, as compared to a household of more than one individual.

Student Food Security **During the Spring 2019 Semester**

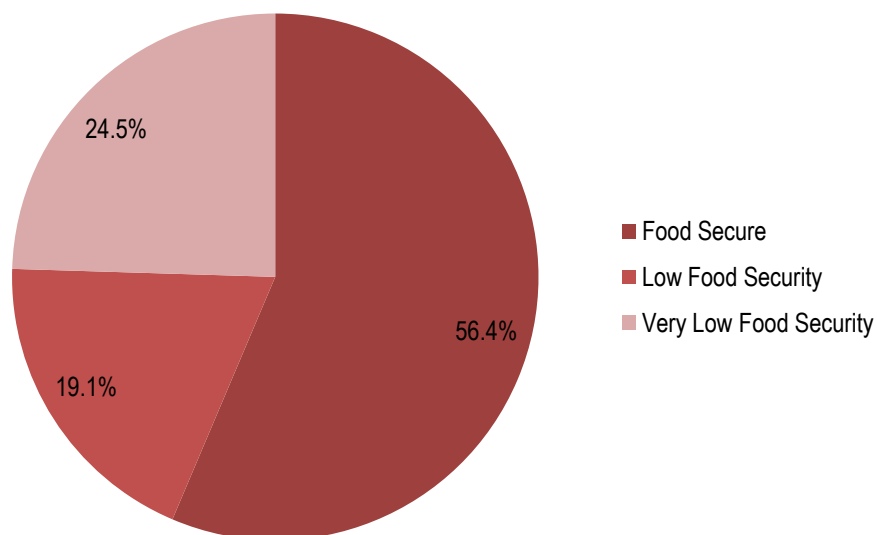
During the course of the Spring '19 Semester, 354 (56.4%) students were food secure.

Specifically, 243 (38.7%) students suggested having high food security and reported no issues with accessing food; 111 (17.7%) students suggested having marginal food security and reported at least one issue with accessing food, but are still considered to be food secure.

During the course of the Spring '19 Semester, 274 (43.6%) students were food insecure.

Specifically, 120 (19.1%) students suggested having low food security and reported reducing the quality of the food that they eat; 154 (24.5%) students suggested having very low food security and reported reducing the amount of food that they eat.

Figure 1. Spring 2019 Student Food Security (n = 628)



Student Food Security During the Winter 2018 Recess

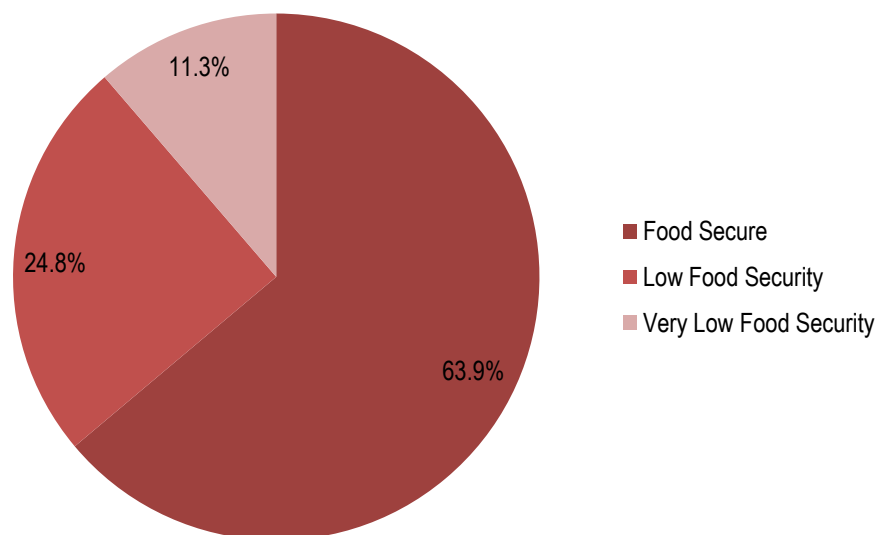
During the course of the Winter '18 Recess, 401 (63.9%) students were food secure.

Specifically, 245 (39.0%) students suggested having high food security and reported no issues with accessing food; 156 (24.8%) students suggested having marginal food security and reported at least one issue with accessing food, but is still considered to be food secure.

During the course of the Winter '18 Recess, 227 (36.1%) students were food insecure.

Specifically, 156 (24.8%) students suggested having low food security and reported reducing the quality of the food that they eat; 71 (11.3%) students suggested having very low food security and reported reducing the amount of food that they eat.

Figure 2. Winter 2018 Student Food Security (n = 628)



 **Key Takeaways**

Of the 628 students surveyed, 274 (43.6%) of them reported experiencing food insecurity during the Spring 2019 Semester.

Students experiencing food insecurity were more likely to be younger than their food secure peers. It is possible that younger college students have less experience in successfully navigating a foodscape on their own, compared to their older peers.

Students experiencing food insecurity were more likely to have exhausted their meal plans if they had purchased one, and meal plan exhaustion may be correlated with, or a potential indicator of, student food insecurity.

Similar to observations of other academic grade levels (i.e., K-12), academic performance is significantly reduced for students experiencing food insecurity.

The overall low rate of use of the Red Hawk Pantry requires further investigation, as only half of all respondents (54.6%) were aware that the service was available, and less than 1 in every 10 respondents had used the service (9.3%).

Students experiencing food insecurity reported having a more difficult time preparing meals to eat during the school day, purchasing meals off campus to eat on campus, and purchasing meals on campus. They also reported not having enough time to eat meals during the school day due to class schedules, and having to eat during class time.

Higher academic institutions are not invited, nor eligible, to participate in the Free / Reduced Price School Breakfast and Lunch programs; as a result these institutions do not receive any support to increase student access to meals, nor are the institutions required to follow the federal nutritional standards that come with program participation.

Students experiencing food insecurity were significantly more likely to report that the food available on campus was too expensive; they also reported a greater level of dissatisfaction with the quality and variety of foods available to purchase, compared to their food secure peers.

Student perceptions of the campus foodscape may be different based upon their level of food security, with students experiencing food insecurity having a more negative perception of the foodscape as a whole. Differences in other perceptions of the foodscape however, may suggest that there is a lower level of self-efficacy experienced among students experiencing food insecurity.

 **Conclusion**

The data suggest that presently over 4 in every 10 students who responded to the survey may be experiencing food insecurity during the academic semester, and that student food security may be worse for students during the academic semesters, when compared to their food security during the academic recess.

This audit sought to update and standardize the rudimentary data collected in 2016 prior to the opening of the Red Hawk Pantry. As a function of this standardization, results from the 2016 survey at Montclair State University may not be directly comparable to results from this 2019 survey, as different measurements were used; however, this data can be compared to other data using this standardized tool, and progress against this standardized baseline can now be measured.

Conservatively, if we are to count all respondents of the 2016 survey who indicated being in need of food at least once per month as food insecure, we might compare the 37% food insecurity prevalence in 2016 to 43.6% food insecurity prevalence in 2019. Conversely, we may more reliably compare persons who reported no food insecurity; 46% of respondents reported no problems with food access in 2016 as compared to 38.7% with no problems with food access in 2019. It may be difficult to determine if food insecurity has indeed gotten worse for students at Montclair State University, or if the data now just more accurately reflect the needs of our students.