

# The State of Food Security at CUNY in 2020

AN ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 2020



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## CUNY Students Speak on Food Insecurity

*“It’s like I just spent my last \$20 on a MetroCard. How am I going to eat today?”*

*“I don’t know exactly where the food pantry is because I never asked.”*

*“I keep trying to apply for SNAP and always get denied.”*

*“I am an immigrant, but I can’t get food assistance. I can pay taxes but can’t get benefits that American citizens qualify for.”*

*“I worry about keeping food in my kids’ bellies.”*

*“I have no family in the United States and no one to turn to in times of emergency . After COVID, I lost my job more than a month ago and I haven’t had income ever since. I still have to pay living expenses and I’m worried I won’t be able to provide food for myself.”*

**On the cover:** (LEFT) Karla Ignacio served as a food security advocate at Hostos Community College. “You get out of the train station and all you see for miles is... junk food,” she explained. As a food security advocate, she helped her peers find food resources on her campus and in the community. (RIGHT) Transition Academy Food Program, Medgar Evers College.

# Introduction

CUNY provides tens of thousands of New Yorkers with the lifelong benefits of a college degree. For too many students, however, food insecurity and other unmet basic needs can undermine the promise of higher education, delaying graduation or contributing to dropout. Too often, students like those quoted on the previous page describe how food insecurity impedes their ability to succeed and remain in school. Too many students have to choose between having enough to eat and focusing on their education, having to decide whether to pay for a textbook, a MetroCard, or a meal. Despite widespread recognition of the health, economic and social benefits of a college education, CUNY and other universities miss opportunities to prevent student food insecurity.

This report seeks to provide key constituencies at CUNY—from its leaders, faculty, staff and students to City and State policymakers who fund CUNY—with the evidence to make informed decisions about promoting food security and academic success at CUNY. At the same time, the findings of this report show that CUNY can do more to assure that all of its students achieve food security. Achieving this goal starts with examining CUNY’s current efforts to reduce food insecurity.

The report was prepared by Healthy CUNY, a university-wide initiative to promote health for academic success, and the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice at Temple University, a research, action and policy center that works to meet the basic needs of college students for food, affordable housing, transportation, and childcare.

The report is based on eight sources of information collected by Healthy CUNY and Hope Center researchers over the last two years. These include:

1. 2018 Healthy CUNY Student Health Survey
2. 2018 Hope Center’s #RealCollege Survey at City University of New York (CUNY)
3. 2019 CUNY Environmental Scan of Food Security Resources on CUNY Campuses
4. 2019 Healthy CUNY Campus visits: Fall 2019
5. 2019 Interviews with Community Based Organizations Providing Food Security Programs at CUNY
6. 2020 Hope Center Survey of CUNY Food Pantries
7. 2020 CUNY Understanding Barriers to SNAP Utilization at CUNY Survey and Interviews
8. The 2020 CUNY Coronavirus Epidemic Impact Survey

This report seeks to contribute to a conversation at CUNY, within city and state governments, among philanthropic and civil society organizations and with students, voters and taxpayers about what each can do to make significant progress in ending food insecurity among CUNY students.

A copy of the full report is [available here](#).

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Waleek Boone, Transition Academy Director and volunteers distribute food at Medgar Evers College during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Key Findings

- CUNY students suffer from substantial levels of food insecurity.
- Food insecurity interferes with academic achievement and completion.
- Many students are unaware or unable to use CUNY food security programs.

### On food insecurity and its academic consequences

- The Healthy CUNY 2018 survey found that 15% of students reported that they were often or sometimes hungry in the last year—an estimated 34,000 students. Students from families with household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, Black, Latinx, and community college students were more likely to report hunger than their respective peers. The Hope Center #RealCollege 2018 CUNY survey, using the 18-item USDA Food Security survey, found that 48% of #RealCollege respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days. Compared to their food-secure peers, the Healthy CUNY 2018 survey found that students experiencing any food insecurity were 1.4 times more likely to experience academic problems during the last 12 months. Students who reported having gone hungry often or sometimes in the last 12 months were twice as likely to have failed out of a degree program as students who had not experienced hunger, and 21% of these students reported a GPA of less than or equal to 2.5. Almost one in twelve CUNY students—an estimated 21,000 CUNY undergraduates—reported that hunger or food insecurity had sometimes or often interfered with their school work in the last 12 months.
- The 2018 #RealCollege survey also showed that students who experienced basic needs insecurity and homelessness had lower grades than peers without these unmet needs.
- The Healthy CUNY survey on the Impact of COVID-19 on CUNY Students showed that levels of worry about running out of food because of lack of money were more than three times higher in 2020 than in the 2018 Healthy CUNY Survey. Seven percent (7%) of students (19,180 learners) said that lack of food has interfered with their school moderately or a lot in the last two weeks.

### On getting help for food insecurity

- Fewer than one in four CUNY students knows about the availability of food assistance on their campus, reports the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey, and only one in twelve uses this service. In comparison, almost half of CUNY students know about the availability of mental health services on their campus while only 6% use this service.
- The 2020 COVID-19 response survey showed that 6% of students reported using any food pantry in the past two weeks.
- Among food insecure students, the three most common reasons for not using such services were not knowing assistance was available, not thinking the student was eligible for this service, and not knowing where to get food assistance.
- According the 2018 Healthy CUNY survey, only 5.7% of undergraduate respondents reported receiving SNAP benefits in the past 12 months. Only 13% of students with household incomes less than \$30,000 per year were enrolled in SNAP.
- With a different sampling strategy, the 2018 #RealCollege Survey found that among food insecure students, 23% of community college and 17% of senior college students received SNAP benefits in the past 12 months.
- A survey of 529 students in March 2020 at five CUNY campuses with high proportions of students from low income households, found that 20% of students were enrolled in SNAP. One student said that SNAP “allows me to focus on school and not worry so much about how I will eat.”

# Summary of CUNY's Food System and Response to Food Insecurity

To address the problem of food insecurity at CUNY, the university and its food security community partners have developed a variety of programs and policies. To assist the Healthy CUNY and Hope Center research team to assess these services, we classified all programs into 5 categories, as shown below.

| CATEGORY  | TYPES OF PROGRAMS AT CUNY, FALL 2019  |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Programs that directly give students \$ or other tangible resources for food and other necessities</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency financial assistance</li> <li>• Child care centers</li> <li>• Food pantry on campus</li> <li>• Meal vouchers for on-campus and off-campus foods</li> <li>• Book subsidies or free books</li> <li>• Credit for life experience</li> <li>• Health Bucks distributed</li> </ul>   |
| <p>2 Programs that help students and families use resources better</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case management programs</li> <li>• Information about food assistance on website</li> <li>• Food pantry appointments available</li> </ul>  |
| <p>3 Programs that help students earn more, so they have more to spend on food and other necessities (does not include career readiness programs)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work study</li> </ul>  |
| <p>4 Programs that help students obtain and use public benefits</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eviction prevention programs</li> <li>• Case management programs</li> <li>• Information about food assistance on website</li> <li>• Tax prep counseling</li> <li>• SNAP enrollment assistance</li> <li>• Single Stop</li> <li>• Earned income tax credit promotion</li> <li>• Homeless liaison or office with single contact</li> </ul>  |
| <p>5 Programs that strengthen CUNY's capacity to provide resources to its campuses and students</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single Stop on campus</li> <li>• Academic advising</li> <li>• Case management programs (e.g., ASAP or other comprehensive student support programs).</li> <li>• Faculty professional development to build their capacity to recognize and assist students with food insecurity.</li> <li>• Partnerships with CBOs with on-campus presence</li> <li>• Campus homeless liaison or single point of contact</li> </ul> |



Our food pantry surveys and campus visits found that the variety and quality of services varied widely on campuses. Of the 20 distinct programs we identified listed in Table 1, seven were found on more than two-thirds of the campuses, eight on between one and two-thirds of the campuses and five on less than a third of the campuses. Community colleges had on average 15 programs per campus, four year schools 12.5 per campus, and graduate and professional programs 3.2 per campus, a distribution that in part reflects higher levels of need among community college students.

Campus food pantries provide immediate food assistance and can connect students with public benefits such as SNAP, while vouchers help subsidize food either purchased on campus or at off-campus vendors. These resources work in tandem with other student support initiatives that free up economic resources and facilitate access to the social safety net. Single Stop offices offer comprehensive social, legal and financial support, and several emergency grant programs help address temporary financial need. Together these outlets constitute the food system of CUNY, a *mélange* of providers that now report

to different CUNY administrative units and have varying social and economic commitments. Collectively, these entities are one major influence on students' ability to find food on campus and outside of it.

While 18 campuses have food pantries, food security experts have recently emphasized the limits of food pantries as a sole solution to food insecurity and the value of using food pantries as hubs to connect students to other needed services as well as distributors of food. Emerging strategies to address hunger on campus go beyond the food pantry. Some CUNY pantries have expanded their food pantry programs to provide food vouchers, fresh food and "grab and go" meals to meet immediate hunger on campus. Others have extended their programs to address other basic student needs such as housing and transportation.

CUNY offers at least 10 sources of emergency grants combined. Over 20 CUNY campuses offer the Carroll and Milton Petrie Student Emergency Grant Fund, which provides financial assistance for qualifying students experiencing a short-term financial crisis that may impede their ability to remain in school. Although emergency grants provide necessary immediate assistance to students in need, the level of support is not commensurate to student needs.

Single Stop, offered at all seven CUNY community colleges and at John Jay College, provides free social, legal and financial services to help students complete their degree. The program screens students for about 30 public benefit programs and connects them with those for which they are eligible. It takes a holistic approach to connecting students with services that promote individual well-being, academic success and degree completion. Some CUNY schools that do not operate Single Stop programs provide SNAP and other benefits enrollment assistance to their students through other programs such as food pantries. It should be noted, however, that CUNY ended its contract with Single Stop USA for all colleges in June 2020.

Finally, CUNY food security programs have partnerships with at least seven community-based organizations (CBOs). These organizations have joined CUNY in the fight to reduce food insecurity among its student body, providing valuable resources, connections, training, and expertise. Some CBOs have supported the creation of new campus infrastructure to address hunger. CUNY campus community partnerships help supplement existing resources directly—for example, by providing fresh produce, a mobile pantry or food vouchers. Some partnerships provide a source of technical expertise and assistance, such as with Grow NYC whose staff have provided training and technical assistance to CUNY schools on how to start a Fresh Food Box program at their respective campuses.

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# An Assessment of the Strengths and Weaknesses of CUNY's Food Security Programs

To inform the discussion on addressing food insecurity at CUNY, we convened the directors of CUNY's food pantries and Single Stop programs to generate a shared list of program strengths and weaknesses, shown below.

## ON THE ONE HAND ...

18 of 25 campuses now have food pantries ...

Meal vouchers are being piloted at 3 community colleges with City Council funding and a total of 17 campuses have some meal voucher programs and a Swipe Out Hunger program is being discussed at two other schools, showing innovation ...

8 campuses have Single Stop programs offering access to SNAP and other public benefits, as well as financial coaching, tax preparation, and legal assistance ...

23 campuses have emergency aid programs ...

Several community-based anti-hunger organizations (e.g. Food Bank for NYC, City Harvest, Grow NYC, and Green Bronx Machine) are contributing to CUNY food security initiatives ...

More than half of CUNY campuses have more than 10 programs to address food insecurity directly or indirectly ...

CUNY is utilizing several other innovative approaches to reduce time to degree and assist students with expenses including transportation ...

There have been two rigorous independent studies of food insecurity at CUNY and there is a strong culture of rigorous evaluation to assess program impact ...

New university leadership has made strong commitments to address food insecurity and recognizes that investments in food security can bring educational and economic benefits to CUNY and its students ...

CUNY is joining other leading urban higher education systems in calling on federal policymakers to provide more support to reduce food insecurity...

## ON THE OTHER HAND ...

... but most food pantries lack sufficient space, food, and staffing to meet demand, the university does not have quality standards that pantries are expected to meet, nor does it provide resources needed to consistently improve quality

... yet campus food service continues to be priced beyond students' ability to pay and the voucher program is reaching only a small proportion of food insecure students

... however, on-campus benefits programs are not offered at 17 campuses and there is no coordinated SNAP campaign to enroll eligible CUNY students in SNAP; many students still do not know about or use the Single Stop on their campus

... but emergency aid falls short of demand, face spending restrictions that limit impact, and impose administrative burdens for colleges and students is high; multiple emergency aid programs are often not coordinated

... yet the private sector is playing only a limited role in addressing campus food insecurity and their contributions are not coordinated.

... however, food security initiatives are often siloed and not coordinated, increasing administrative burden, and reducing efficacy and impact.

... but outreach is limited, and many students are unaware of programs on their campus.

... yet CUNY lacks a systematic plan for reducing food insecurity and measuring progress towards goals.

... however, CUNY does not have a point person for leading and coordinating food security initiatives, nor a designated university-wide task force to set and monitor goals; New York City and State have so far made only modest investments in reducing food insecurity at CUNY; and CUNY does not know how many students drop out or slow progress towards degree as a result of food insecurity.

... but these efforts have not engaged the powerful organizations of CUNY faculty, staff and students to maximize impact.

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## Recommendations

Today, many CUNY leaders, faculty, staff, and students have a new commitment to address food insecurity and want to take action to reduce it. How can the University make the transition from this situation to one where these constituencies act together to win meaningful new investments for food security from city, state and private contributions? A situation where multiple, now often siloed programs work in coordination to build on their accomplishments and to identify and fill

gaps in services? One where paid and volunteer faculty, staff and students work together to implement systematic and sustainable programs across the university? Where the university and its campuses monitor, document and celebrate concrete reductions in food insecurity? In short, how can we begin the steady march to making college food insecurity history, to become a university that has eliminated food insecurity, setting a model for the city and the nation?

We end this report with several practical recommendations for the next 12 months that we think can become the first steps on this journey:

1. Designate one person in the CUNY Central Office to serve as Director of Food Security and provide that person with the resources and authority to make steady and measurable progress in coordinating, integrating, establishing and monitoring standards for CUNY's food security work. To more fully coordinate the services and policies designed to meet students' basic needs, this position could be expanded to provide oversight and vision for those programs.
2. Create a university-wide *Task Force on Promoting Food Security* charged with developing, implementing and monitoring a plan to significantly reduce food insecurity at CUNY within three years. This Task Force could set priorities to address the issues described in this report.
3. Encourage each campus to establish a Task Force on Promoting Food Security to develop, in coordination with the university-wide task force, a comprehensive plan to make significant reductions in food insecurity on their campus. As CUNY reviews and strengthens other programs designed to meet other student basic needs, these campus groups can expand their role by helping to integrate these services with food security programs.
4. Establish a CUNY-wide Student and Faculty Food Security Advocates Training Program to equip a cadre of students and faculty with the knowledge, skills and credibility to mobilize their campuses and peers to take action to reduce food insecurity.
5. Seek new investments to promote food security at CUNY from the city, state, and federal governments and from philanthropy, and encourage faculty, staff and students to support new public policies that contribute to ending college food insecurity. While seeking new funding in the current economic and political climate will be challenging, several new public and philanthropic initiatives approved to address the COVID-19 epidemic provide a potential stream of funding.
6. Consult with campus and CUNY-wide Food Security Task Forces to develop an equitable plan for dividing new and existing food security resources with clear and achievable accountability measures.
7. Create a clear system with measures and procedures for documenting and assessing all CUNY's food security programs to report on progress, gaps and innovative practices.

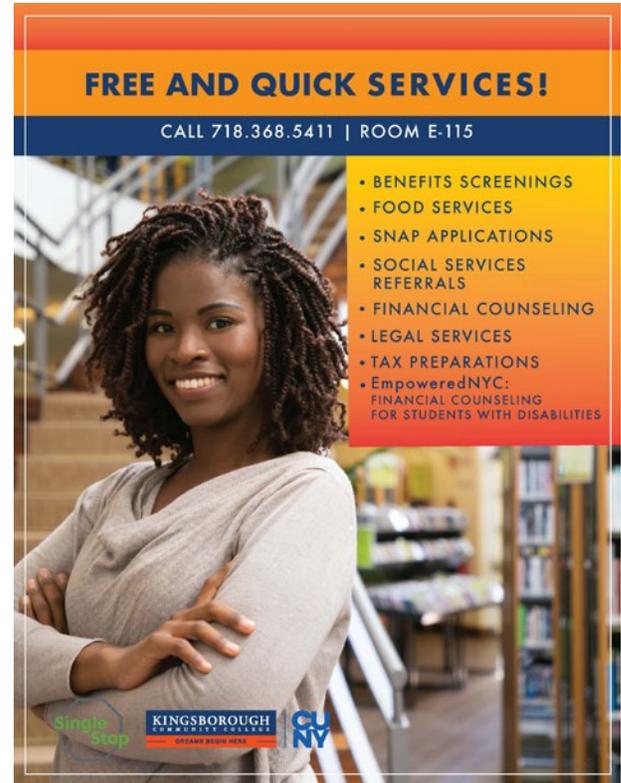
As well as developing, implementing and monitoring a coordinated, integrated and systematic approach to making significant reductions in food insecurity among its students, CUNY also has the opportunity to mobilize its students, faculty, staff, leadership and many external supporting constituencies to make reducing campus food insecurity a higher public priority. As the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disruption that it is causing continue, many elected officials are calling for reduced commitments to public programs. Such an approach would impose additional burdens on CUNY students and their families—and in the longer run on the taxpayers and citizens of New York. Cutting back programs that address college food insecurity will diminish one of New York City's strongest assets—healthy graduates with college degrees who contribute their skills, productivity and service to the city and the region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

CUNY students, researchers and leaders can also provide support for specific programmatic and policy changes that will help to reduce food insecurity. These efforts should:

- Ensure that every CUNY student who is eligible for SNAP is actually enrolled
- Eliminate the federal provision that excludes full-time students from SNAP enrollment even if they meet other eligibility requirements
- Advocate for continued city, state and federal rule changes to make it easier for college students to enroll in SNAP
- Use the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide additional support for college students facing food insecurity, whether or not these students have a Social Security Card
- Assist in transforming every CUNY food pantry and emergency food program into a hub that connects students to other needed services including SNAP enrollment, financial aid and emergency loans

Throughout its almost 175-year history, CUNY students, faculty, staff and leaders have played an important role in making our city a fairer, more decent place to study, live and work. By leveraging the new public attention on campus food insecurity and the new resources available to respond to COVID-19, the leaders of CUNY, supported by students, faculty, staff and elected officials, can forge a path towards ending food insecurity and hunger among its students. As New York City and State seek to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it has triggered, ensuring that CUNY students can achieve their full academic and health potential must be prioritized as a crucial part of that recovery. By taking action to realize these goals, we can write the next chapter in CUNY's lasting contributions to the people of New York City and State.



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