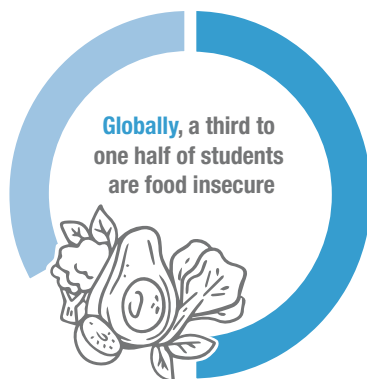


Food Insecurity and Mental Health

What is Food Insecurity?

The brain and body use an enormous amount of energy during the day, and we need fuel in the form of food to make them work. When that fuel isn't available, it can start to take a toll on us. **Food insecurity is defined as the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.** About 1 in 8 Canadians live in a household that's experienced some level of food insecurity.



Post-secondary students face a **unique set of circumstances**, including reduced income, knowledge of available resources, and access to those resources, making them more vulnerable to food insecurity. Globally, a third to one half of students are food insecure. Meanwhile, many students have normalized the experience of food insecurity in post-secondary education, and as a result are reluctant to reach out for help. In one study of American graduate students, **though 40% were classified as food insecure, only 17.7% of them considered themselves food insecure**, mirroring similar research that found that food insecure Canadian undergraduate students did not identify with their food insecure status. This suggests that many students could benefit from education on food insecurity.

Already **marginalized students** such as racialized students, 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and students with concerns about paying for school, are all more likely to experience short or long-term food insecurity. Black students are three times more likely to experience food insecurity than their non-Black peers, and early research suggests that Indigenous students are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity compared to the study's overall prevalence rate.



Impacts of Food Insecurity on Post-Secondary Students



Depression:

- Several studies have found that food insecurity is associated with depressed mood, and that the level of that depression is directly related to the level of insecurity.
- Depression in students may be related to feelings of deprivation and alienation from peers, as well as shame related to the use of emergency food assistance programs.



Stress:

- Across the globe, food insecurity brings with it a higher risk of stress. Among students this stress can look like tracking food resources so as not to run out and keeping apprised of events on campus where free or discounted food is being provided.



Poor Sleep

- Although post-secondary students have low quality sleep in general, food insecure students are more likely than their food secure peers to have poor sleep quality, including trouble falling and staying asleep.



Eating Disorders

- Emerging evidence suggests that food insecurity is associated with eating disorder symptoms, specifically along the bulimic spectrum, including binge-eating and other compensatory behaviours.



Concentration

- A lack of good quality food and its resulting hunger can impact students' ability to focus on their academic responsibilities, leading to lower grade point averages.



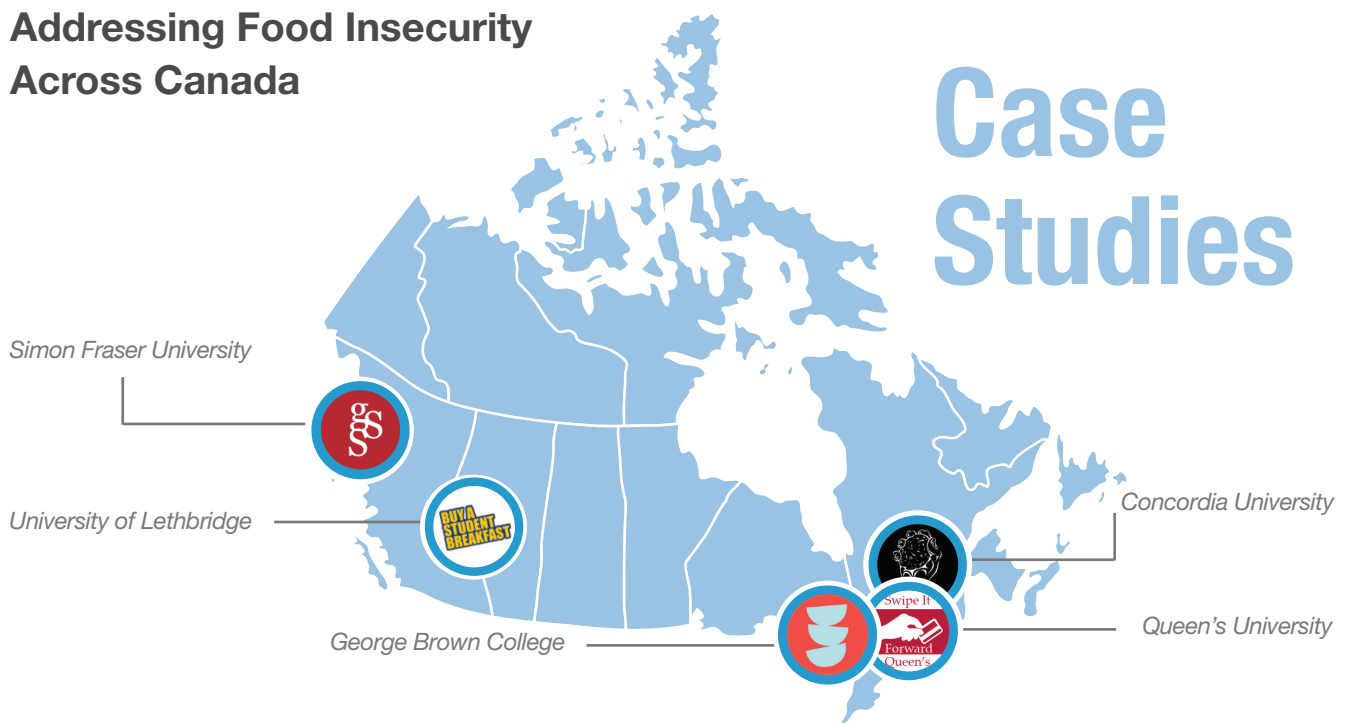
Anger Toward Institution

- Students may feel resentment towards their institution in response to a lack of good quality affordable food available on campus, and some may feel frustration with the lack of supports provided.



Addressing Food Insecurity Across Canada

Case Studies



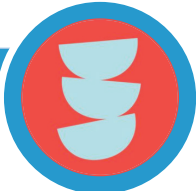
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC - Emergency Grocery Card

The Emergency Grocery Card program aims to assist graduate students with their groceries for the month, and has been running since at least 2014. This low-barrier program asks students to fill out a simple form online and provide proof that they are a student of the university, and then provides them with the option to choose between an e-card or a physical gift card. The program initially offered graduate students a \$50 grocery card once per term, however, **with the growing need seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and in an effort to adapt to students, they have increased their gift card amount to \$60** and are now offering this support up to twice per term, with the opportunity for more instances left up to the discretion of a dedicated committee. The program supported between 75 and 120 students per semester in 2021.



George Brown College, Toronto ON – Communal Lunch Project

The Communal Lunch Project is a 3-year research project, funded by National Sciences and Engineering Research Council's Community and College Social Innovation Fund. The project, which is grounded in both performance theory and food security theory, **examines the potential of campus food culture to support student well-being.** In pre-pandemic times, they broke down a recipe into manageable, affordable parts which each student participant prepared, to contribute to a grain bowl. Then they would meet on campus, wipe down a food court table, set it with a tablecloth and tealights, and share a meal. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, they built a website, joined Instagram, and began hosting cook-alongs on Zoom. They are currently working with Student Life and Residence Life teams as well as Student Unions at other institutions to deliver a regular virtual cook-along series using ingredients supplied by local food vendors. Student responses to the program have been **overwhelmingly positive.**



University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge AB – Buy a Student Breakfast



The Buy a Student Breakfast campaign aims to ensure students stay fed during the exam period and has been around since 2018. This innovative program encourages alumni of the university to purchase breakfast vouchers, at \$5 per voucher, **on behalf of students experiencing food insecurity**. Each breakfast voucher is redeemable for a breakfast sandwich and small coffee from one of two on-campus vendors. Vouchers are distributed at various campus locations on a first-come-first-served basis, though a number of them are provided to student support services for circulation to students who may be more acutely struggling. Since the start of the program, donors have purchased nearly **2500 breakfasts** for students. The initiative is well received by students but is also very well supported by the entire campus community.

Concordia University, Montreal QC – The People's Potato



The People's Potato is a vegan soup kitchen at Concordia University - a student-initiated project that was founded in 1999 to address student poverty and the lack of affordable food options on campus. They offer by donation meals every weekday during the fall and winter semesters, excluding holidays. Apart from serving food to an average of **500 students and community members daily**, the Potato maintains a vibrant educational program in the form of monthly **workshops**, and a **biweekly food bank**. The project is funded by a levy in student dues paid to the student union. Since its inception, the Potato kitchen has grown from a small volunteer-run collective to a workers' collective employing over 10 people.

Queen's University, Kingston ON – Swipe it Forward



In spring 2018, Queen's Student Affairs and Hospitality Services launched Swipe It Forward Queen's. This **peer-to-peer support** initiative gives students on the mandatory meal plan the option of donating one meal a week to the program (up to 5 per term) from the current week's meals. Students experiencing food insecurity can contact program partners across Student Affairs to access the program and up to 25 meals per term can be loaded on to their student card. These meals can be used in the dining halls or at retail food locations on campus. In recognition of the perceived stigma associated with food insecurity, the meals are like any other meal plan meals and when they are redeemed, no one knows the meals are from the program. To date, **4085 students on meal plans have donated 6011 meals**. 604 students have accessed the program, and 18223 meals have been loaded to their student cards; 14434 meals have been redeemed so far.

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